

Defining 'Islamic' Urbanity Through A Trans-Regional Frame

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Abstract

The word 'urbanity' literally means 'quality or state of being urban' where the criterion of urban economic and civic culture is assumed despite the general celebration of cultural uniqueness of urban centers. The narratives celebrating the uniqueness of urban centers since the ancient past till recent times could not get rid of the broad categorization of the urban models depending on their contextual networks of trade, mobility and culture. This paper attempts to explore whether the urban cultures in South Asia even preceding a global phenomenon like colonialism were actually reflecting an idea of urbanity where the urban culture, including planning and architecture reflected a trans-national model. This paper particularly concentrates on the medieval period when a pattern of urbanity took shape in this subcontinent under the influence of Islam, which could be explained by its particular idea of urban model, cultural exchange and vibrant trade networks.

Key words

urbanity, Islamic, trans-regional, South Asia

I. INTRODUCTION

The word “urbanity” literally means “quality or state of being urban” where the criterion of urban economic and civic culture is assumed despite the general celebration of cultural uniqueness of urban centers.¹ Since the publication of Lewis Mumford’s classic *The Culture of Cities* in 1938, urbanity, particularly urban culture, came to be interpreted in the frame of ‘world history’—although the epithet of the discipline was yet to become popular in the academic circuits.² This book pioneered in bringing the topic of urbanity or urban culture within the scope of global history of human experiences that could be explored under a comparative structure, where each experience of urban conditions like city planning, architectural patterns, urban administration and power structure could be evaluated in a comparative, transnational frame. This methodology of studying the history of urban culture underscores the relevance of urban features in trans-regional canvas, and, ultimately, reduces the dominance of studying history within a single locale or within a so-called national space. Despite this original contribution in putting the topic of urbanity on world frame, to my surprise, Mumford remains particularly silent about the urban pattern that existed in the so-called Islamic cities, especially during the medieval ages. Perhaps since the eleventh centuries the cities located in the area across the three continents in the so-called ‘*Dar-ul-Islam*’ or the Islamic world has been cited as the “other” to the modern European cities. The narratives underlining the stark contrast in comparing these two kinds of cities, as Richard Eaton observes, expressed “a worldview rigidly split into a we-they opposition.”³ In the early accounts, under the spell of the Islamic religious texts, described these cities as replications of the holy city of Medina where the Islamic community settled down around the holy mosque for congregation. A judge or the *Qazis* was also mentioned as a necessary element for the urban administration who has been seen

¹ *Merriam-Webster’s Dictionary*, reissue edition., s.v. “urban.”

² Lewis Mumford, *The Culture of Cities* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1938). Especially see its content page.

³ Richard M. Eaton, *Essays on Islam and Indian History* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2000), 10.

as the temporal head who could dispense his power as the Deputy of God on earth. By the time of the early modern period when European interactions with "Oriental" Islamic civilizations became more frequent, a stereotypical image of an Islamic city was already established amongst the western observers. Everywhere from Cordoba to Delhi a uniform model of Islamic urbanity were sought that completely ignored the temporal and spatial specificities of regional culture and economy. Despite Mumford's silence in discussing these cities in a separate category, this article would like to trace how the model of an Islamic urbanity has appeared as a distinct category in historical writings for medieval and pre-modern cities spread out in three different continents in historical scholarship.

I feel this historiographical survey is necessary, particularly in relation to the study of the regional variations within a transnational frame. As a practitioner of history dealing with South Asian urbanity, I would like to evaluate the relevance of this model in studying the precolonial cities in this region. By situating the precolonial urbanism in this area in transregional networks of trade, mobility and cultural as well as ideological exchanges and interactions, I would like to suggest how the so-called contemporary networks of the Islamic states and institutions had provided a vast canvas where the process of urbanization as well as urban culture was rather compelled to take up a trans-regional shape even before the advent of a global phenomenon like colonialism. However, in conclusion, I would like to assess whether this transregional pattern of the urbanity could really be interpreted as a model under world history framework.

II. STEREOTYPING ISLAMIC CITIES

There are ample evidences of homogenizing the socio-cultural atmosphere of the so-called Islamic civilizations in the European accounts since Renaissance. These travelers elaborated an ingrained similarity in Islamic society as well as in the political system in Islamic-governed civilizations that spread across almost

three different continents.⁴ A kind of stereotyping the so-called Islamic terrain was thus constructed by focusing on the Islamic oriental courts, harem and juridical system based on Islamic principles, which in other words, served as the complete contrast to what existed in Europe.⁵ Though these stereotyping were quite rampant in travel literature and polemical writings of the colonial administrators, the conscious scholarly research underscoring a monolithic model for Islamic urbanism did not happen before the early twentieth century. The Islamic city as a distinctive model of urbanity was first proposed by the European scholars operating within an Orientalist perspective, particularly in Britain and in France.

In a classic article published by William Marcais in 1928 Islam was introduced as an essentially “urban” religion and the first Islamic centers in Arab were introduced as largely founded by the urban bourgeoisie who could assemble weekly in the congregation at the Friday mosque.⁶ Thus the residential Muslims were posited against the Arab nomads, who could not be a part of the congregation because of their migratory life-style. In this article, quoting from Ibn Khaldun, William Marcais reached a definition of Islamic city where the mosque (*Jami*) as the place for Friday congregation, a market place (*Saq*), and a public bath (*Hammam*) were mentioned as essential features.⁷ In the 1940s William Marcais’ brother Georges Marcais continued to elaborate the so-called model of Islamic cities by pointing out its unique morphological pattern where ethnically segregated residential quarters and hierarchically ordered market areas featured the dominance of the Islamic elite class over the other co-religionists in a city-space. Providing an outline for the ideal Islamic city, he presented a detailed urban spatial pattern:

(the) centre was occupied by the great Mosque, the old political centre, the religious and intellectual centre of the city, where the courses were given to the students from the various schools. Near

⁴ Michael H. Fisher, introduction to *Visions of Mughal India: An Anthology of European Travel Writing*, ed. Fisher (London and New York: I. B. Tauris, 2007), viii.

⁵ Francois Berneir, “North India, Punjab and Kashmir 1664,” in *Ibid.*, 159.

⁶ William Marcais, “L’Islamisme et la vie urbaine,” in *L’Academie des inscriptions et Belles-lettres Competes Rendus* (Paris: Jan-March, 1928), 86-100.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 88.

the mosque, the religious centre, we find the furnishers of sacred items, the *suq* of candle-sellers, the merchants of incense and other perfumes. Near the mosque, the intellectual centre, we find also the bookstores, the bookbinders, and near the latter, the *suq* of merchants of leather and the slippers (*Babouche*)—makers which also use leather. This introduces us to the clothing and the commerce in cloth, which occupy so large a piece in the life of Islamic cities. The essential organ is a great market, a group of markets that carry a mysterious name *Qaicariya* . . . The *Qaicariya* is a secured place encircled by walls where foreign merchants, above all the Christians, come to display their cloth materials brought from the European countries. The *Qaicariya* is placed not far from the great mosque, as in Fez or in Marrakesh, is a vital centre for economic activities in the city. Beyond the commerce of textiles, of the jewelers, the makers of the hats, we find the makers of furniture and kitchen utensils . . . Further out are the blacksmiths . . . Approaching the gates one finds places for caravans . . . then sellers of provisions brought in from the countryside . . . In the quarters of the peripheries there are the quarters of dyers, tanners and almost outside the cities the potters.⁸

Marcais brother's articulation of Islamic cities became quite a popular model amongst the scholars in 1950s and 1960s. European Orientalists like Le Tourneau who worked on Fez, Jean Sauvaget who worked on the Syrian cities of Damascus and Aleppo, Gustave von Grunebaum and De Planhol all embraced this model and reiterated the centrality of mosque and market-place in urban morphology as well as in the urban culture in the Islamic cities.

De Planhol, for instance, pointing out the lack of a separate urban administrative body in the so-called Islamic cities, described them as a place for "irregularity and anarchy." He blamed the religion of Islam for these irregularities which, in his words, ". . . substitutes for solid unified collectivity, a shifting and inorganic assemblage of districts; its falls off and divides the face of the city."⁹ Thus while regularity and discipline was im-

⁸ Georges Marcais, "L'urbanisme Musulman," in *5e Congres de la Federation des Societies des Savantes du L'Afrique du Nord* (Algiers, 1940), 23-36.

⁹ Xavier de Planhol, *World of Islam: le monde islamique; essai de géographie religieuse* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1959), 36.

plied for the European cities, the chaos and anarchy came to be associated with the so-called Islamic cities.

However, Robert Brunschvig took a different stance in defining Islamic urbanity. Writing in 1947, Robert Brunschvig argues that it was the customary law, applied by the judges, yielded the type of physical pattern found in the cities of Islamic world. For this analysis he acknowledged the work of German scholar Otto Spies, which examined how “the rights of the neighbors,” particularly in planning, created segregation between the commercial and the residential areas, Islamic and non-Islamic residents, male and female members within a family space. In this work, he claimed that this segregation was laid out on the basis of tenets of Islam which defined neighborhood as well as urban community in the Islamic cities according to Shafi-i religious school.¹⁰ Thus, through Brunschvig’s definition, not only the centrality of mosque as the place for Islamic congregation, but a juridical design to maintain a hierarchical pattern within the Islamic society was included as a characteristic feature for Islamic urbanism.

Grunebaum in 1955 brought together the morphological and juridical definitions of Islamic urbanism and articulated a unitary model of Islamic city governed solely by Islamic religious code. This articulation reinforced the centrality of Islamic religion in determining the urban pattern that remained uniform and unchanged across the parameters of time and space.¹¹ Thus the static and uniform pattern of Islamic cities incapable for development and change perfectly merged with image of a typical Orientalist institution, which was also defined as eternal, unchanging because of the predominance of religion in the society.

Ironically, by the 1960s Grunebaum’s definition for so-called Islamic cities had been accepted not only by the European and western scholars, but also by the scholars in the so-called Islamic world. Arab and Islamic scholars like Ismail and Monier had accepted this model and narrated the history of Islamic city

¹⁰ Robert Brunschvig, *Urbanisme medieval et droit Musulman* (Paris: P. Geuthner, 1947), 127-55.

¹¹ G. E. von Grunebaum, “The Structure of the Muslim Town,” in *Islam: Essays in the Nature and Growth of a Cultural Tradition*, ed. von Grunebaum (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1961), 141-58.

as a unitary phenomenon. Influenced by Max Weber and Henri Pirenne's works, they described all the Islamic cities lying across the three continents as similar to that of the Arabic Islamic city model, which, of course, represented features completely distinctive, if not opposite to that of the European Christian cities.

III. REDEFINING ISLAMIC CITIES SINCE 1960S

A kind of sophistication was, however, inserted into these researches by Ira Lapidus when he undertook his work on the Mamluk cities of Damascus, Cairo, and Aleppo in the late 1960s for his *The Muslim Cities in the Later Middle Ages*. Instead of relying on Islam as the only regulating body in a monolithic urban society, he argued that the urban society here was divided between various power groups and the interactions between these groups actually regulated the functions of the city. According to Lapidus, these groups included secular power groups like military elites, local notables (even pre-Islamic urban elites), and merchants along side with the religious groups like the *Ulamas*.¹² Though this study displaced Islam as the only regulating body in charting out urban morphology as well as social organization, its emphasis on the power struggle between the power groups within the city space reasserts the absence of municipal bodies in urban administrations in these cities which concretize its "otherness" from that of the so-called European parallels.

This revision in perspective in viewing Islamic cities as well as civilization coincided with the changing notions of history during the post-World War period when it became fashionable in most of the European and American universities to carry out historical studies not within the civilizational frames, but rather in societal frames. Instead of viewing every Islamic city across the three continents as solely guided by the Quranic tenets and Arabo-Islamic practices the new perspective, as Richard Eaton has observed, "broke down the (Islamic world) into a diffuse plu-

¹² Ira M. Lapidus, *Muslim Cities in the Later Middle Ages* (Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1967), 63.

ality of communities that differed vastly over time and space.”¹³ According to Richard Eaton, this shift in approach could be linked to the *Annales* school’s understandings of History as a discipline as it shifted the focus of the principal object of the historical studies from the elite literate classes, whose milieu the classical texts usually reflect, to those many other communities whom Eric Wolf has called the “people without history.” He also mentions that this change in perspective challenges the monopoly of textual sources for studying the Islamic civilization and hence pointed out the undue importance of the Islamic literate elites in conveying the normative social analysis of the Islamic society as well as the urban spaces.

In a colloquium held at Oxford University in 1965, under the initiative of Albert Hourani and S. M. Stern the unitary idea called Islamic city was brought under question. Many of the contributors argued in favor of geo-political influences in guiding the urban pattern of the so-called Islamic cities that originated and developed across a vast space over a certain period of time. Some features such as segregation between the Islamic community in power and the non-Islamic communities held as one of the principle characteristics of the Islamic urban pattern was proved to be a “pre-modern,” “medieval” rather than Islamic phenomenon as it existed even in the European Christian medieval towns in these new researches. Thus the earlier Orientalist reading where medieval Arabic urban pattern and structure were hailed as the only model for so-called Islamic cities across the continents was, for the first time, put under question. The myth of uniform model of the Islamic cities was also challenged.

Under the influence of these new researches critical reading of the earlier Orientalist texts were also surfaced. Janet L. Abu-Lughod pointed out that the use of word *Qaicariya* or *Babouche* implied Marcais’ over-reliance on his North African urban factual references in conceiving this transregional model. In her article published in 1987, Abu-Lughod thus criticized this model as being regional from the very start rather than a prism that could include the varieties of cities governed by the Islamic rulers

¹³ Eaton, *Essays on Islam*, 12.

across the three continents.¹⁴ Historians like Nezar Alsayyad have also criticized this tendency to read Islamic urbanism within a monolithic category based upon only the Arabo-Islamic data. They also saw an ulterior motive of essentializing a monolithic model of Islamic city following a similar trend of defining medieval European cities under a single category. Alsayyad made the Orientalist readings of Islamic civilizations responsible for this kind of definition.¹⁵ Under this kind of researches the focus now shifted to explore how the so-called Islamic cities could absorb the culture of the terrain and could pass it on to the other parts of the world through its "Islamic networks."

IV. ISLAM AND ISLAMIC URBANITY IN WORLD FRAME

In 1974 Marshall Hodgson came out with his *The Venture of Islam* which decisively challenged the notion of Arabic core of Islamic civilization. He instead insisted on studying Islamic history as an alternative prism of a global phenomenon that stretched from Mediterranean basin to China where the diverse socio-economic and political culture and belief system came together and flourished as a world system. He argues that since the destruction of the Baghdad and caliphate in 1258 CE, Muslims had lost their central political focus and the fragmentation of the administrative and political zones in the later period gave boost to the cultural florescence and a belief system that grew among the peoples living in the further corners of the Islamic cities and civilizations in Asia and Africa. This argument also brought back the focus on Islamic cities as well as the civilization under the scope of world history frame. Referring to the models in world history, he accused the dominant trend in world history where it has always traced the idea of cultural diffusionism that could be

¹⁴ Janet L. Abu-Lughod, "The Islamic City: Historic Myth, Islamic Essence, and Contemporary Relevance," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 19, no. 2 (May 1987): 155-76.

¹⁵ Nezar Alsayyad, "The Study of Islamic Urbanism: An Historiographical Essay," *Built Environment* 22, no. 2, Islamic Architecture and Urbanism (1996): 91-97.

easily assimilable to European civilizations.¹⁶ In his posthumously published book, titled *Rethinking World History: Essays on Europe, Islam and the World History*, he categorically pointed out the absence of a hemispheric interregional societal approach to the studies of world history, which he feared, could ultimately restrict the scope of the world history.¹⁷ He urged that a study on the framework of mutual borrowing and influences among organizationally independent civilizations would help to overcome this “Westernism” and would be able to establish the widely sought-after world-wide pattern of history. In this context, Hodgson emphasized on the study of Islamic civilization and culture as a phenomenon of transregionality and multiculturalism that could enhance the study of world history beyond the national space.¹⁸ This was indeed a remarkable departure in viewing Islamic civilization because, for ages, Islamic world was generally viewed as a closed zone where mutual borrowing or cultural interactions with the other regions was hardly ever mentioned. Following his sympathetic and comprehensive study of Islamic civilization, in the edited volume by N. Levtzion, *Conversion to Islam* (1979), the contributing scholars explain the Islamization process not as an imposition but as assimilation where the stereotypical centrality of Mecca as the center of Islamic society and culture came under challenge.¹⁹ This shift in perspective thus dramatically changed the way in which the scholars think not only about Islam but also about the cities and civilizations under the Islamic influences. This change in perspective also led to study cities as locales within Islamic trade and cultural networks.

Thus by the late seventies Hodgson’s formulations along with the work on world-system by Immanuel Wallerstien initiated a fresh approach in seeking patterns of world history through

¹⁶ See Hodgson’s letter to John Voll in 1961, in *Rethinking World History: Essays on Europe, Islam and World History*, ed. Edmund Burke III. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 91-94.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 92.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, xv.

¹⁹ Nehemia Levtzion, “Towards Comparative Study of Islamization,” in *Conversion to Islam*, ed. Nehemia Levtzion (London: Holmes and Meiers, 1979), 1-23.

exploring linkages in non-Western world.²⁰ However, following Wallerstien, researches on trade networks rather than cultural patterns within the so-called Islamic world became more fashionable.

V. SOUTH ASIA AND ISLAM AS A *WORLD SYSTEM*

Scholars like Ravi A Palat, Kenneth Barr, James Matson, Vinay Bal, and Nesar Ahmed have sought for a similar model of world system existing around the Indian oceans during the between 1600 CE and 1750 CE.²¹ According to Palat, "the establishment of the Delhi Sultanate around thirteenth century CE set in motion the series of economic and political processes that led to the emergence of a South Asian world economy by the early seventeenth century."²² They interpreted this trans-regionality as based on economic linkages that set up a zone of economic networks which "involves an integration of the production processes in hierarchical divisions of labor within an inter-state system" around the Indian oceans. This geographical area has been cited as where the so-called Islamic empires interacted.²³ The overt emphasis on trading networks in these studies led to an interpretation of the transregional interactions in solely economic terms where intellectual and cultural linkages did not come into the limelight. Thus the apparent similarity of culture, particularly represented in urban lifestyle which have been pointed out by so many observers belonging inside or outside the region, have not received an adequate attention in these studies.

²⁰ See Immanuel Wallerstein, *The Modern World System*, 4 vols. (New York: Academic Press, 1974), 2:77.

²¹ Ravi A. Palat et al., "The Incorporation and Peripheralization of South Asia, 1600-1950," *Review* 10, no. 1 (Summer 1986): 171-208.

²² *Ibid.*, 173-76.

²³ *Ibid.*, 174.

VI. THE NOTIONS OF ISLAMIC URBANITY AND SOUTH ASIAN ISLAMIC CITIES

Where Islamic cities of the South Asian region are concerned, the historical researches through world history prism are indeed very limited. Although most of the South Asian territory had been defined as integral to the *Dar-ul-Islam* or the Land of Islam since the fourteenth century, the cities in the region were often not defined as a typical example of Islamic urban center. The French traveler Bernier, who visited India during the reign of the Mughal emperor Shahjahan in the sixteenth century, described the urban space in a different way. Instead of the distinctive model of Islamic city, based on North African/Arab example where the epicenter of the town was occupied by the mosque, Bernier described the imperial cities in the region as firmly centered around the royal palace structures. Not only the European travelers but also the indigenous writings pointed out this distinctive feature for the South Asian Islamic cities. In Shahjahanabad, for example, the epicenter of the city was marked by the royal fortress which was equated with the heaven itself. Quoting from Amir Khusrau, Muhammad Waris described this fortress during the days of Shahjahan as “If there is a paradise on the face of the earth. It is this, it is this, it is this.”²⁴

Despite the predominance of the royal power over the religious authorities in these cities, Pelsaert who visited Agra during the height of the Mughal rule complained of its limited space for bazaars and other commercial activities, which was otherwise so prevalent in other Mughal cities like Lahore, Burhanpur or Ahmedabad.²⁵ The centrality of power, often military power deterred Bernier to use the epithet of “city” or “urban centre” for these places. He called these centers as “royal camps,” rather than the cities.²⁶ This view was repeated by Marx who also ana-

²⁴ Muhammad Waris, *Padshah Nama*, fol.406, *Persian Manuscript Collection*, add. 6556, British Museum, London.

²⁵ Francisco Pelsaert, *Jahangir's India: The Remonstrantie of Francisco Pelsaert*, trans. W. H. Moreland and P. Geyl (Cambridge: W. Heffer and Sons, 1925), 18.

²⁶ Francois Bernier, *Travels in the Mogul Empire, 1656-68*, ed. Archibald Constable (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1934), 245-47.

lyzed pre-modern Islamic cities as military camps.²⁷ Max Weber too toed this line of argument when he observes that neither of the criteria that he sought for in an urban community, that is dependent on predominantly trade and commerce with a strong presence of merchant associations and partial autonomy, did exist in the Mughal cities. Thus he concludes that while the European cities in early modern period had evolved to be independent corporate units, breaking down the ties of clan, families and villages, in the Orient, in contrast, family ties and countryside connections continued its hold over the cities.²⁸

In recent times, Stephen Blake is of opinion that the overwhelming importance of the royal authority was a remarkable feature of the capital cities of the patrimonial bureaucratic nature of the state. Thus not completely denouncing Max Weber's analysis of the pre-colonial Islamic state's patrimonial nature, he made a significant departure from this analysis by establishing a novel model of cities, which unlike the cities of Europe, was personal, familial in nature and was guided by the overwhelming ambitions of the patrimonial-bureaucratic emperors.²⁹

VII. ISLAMIC NETWORKS AND SOUTH ASIAN ISLAMIC CITIES

But these were not the only models of the Islamic cities in the region. Christopher Bayly pointed out that apart from these sovereign, administrative centers or *Shahr*, small market towns (*qasbas*) and fixed bazaar towns (*ganjs*) existed and flourished especially during the twilight days of the great Mughal cities in the eighteenth century.³⁰ However, writing in 1968, Hamida Naqvi was of the opinion that these cities as the centers of commerce were not of the eighteenth century origin, but co-existed

²⁷ Karl Marx, *Pre-Capitalist Economic Formations*, ed. E. J. Hobsbawm, trans. Jack Cohen (New York: International Publishers, 1965), 77-78.

²⁸ See Max Weber, *The City*, trans. and ed. D. Martindale and G. Neuwirth (New York: The Free Press, 1958), 66-69, 80-81.

²⁹ Stephen Blake, *Shahjahanabad: The Sovereign City in Mughal India, 1639-1739* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), xii-xiv.

³⁰ Christopher A. Bayly, *Rulers, Townsmen and Bazaars: North Indian Society in the Age of British Expansion 1770-1870* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 110-11.

and thrived side by side with the great cities even during the height of the Mughal period.³¹

Perhaps the Pirenne's thesis that became so influential during the early twentieth century in understanding the urban growth with the wake of Islam provided a new impetus to review the precolonial cities as the commercial hub in the region. This initiated a phase of resurgent interest in analyzing the precolonial urban centers as the locale of long distance trade amongst the South Asian historians working on the medieval and precolonial phases as early as in the 1930s and the 1940s. These studies located the urban centers within a network of Islamic zone of control which spread well beyond the scope of a single nation or an empire.

Dr. K. M. Ashraf pointed out the reconstructive role played by the urban centers, Delhi, Cambay and Deogir's role in commodity production as well as in trade which almost mirrored the Pirenne's hypothesis of Islamic cities as the centre of long distance trade and commerce.³² Quoting from the narrative of Khwaja Nizam Al-din Ahmed, the historian from the times of Emperor Akbar, where he pointed out that there were 'about three thousand and two hundred towns within the limit of the empire' of which a large number were the centers of the long distance trade, Ashraf too attempted to study the process of urbanization in relation to trade and commerce during the so-called Islamic rule in the subcontinent.³³ Recently, historian Heitzman has termed many of these cities on long-distance trade networks located in the coastal areas as the "emporium towns" whose origin he traced back to the pre-Islamic days when vibrant trading activities emerged during the first millennium CE around the Indian Ocean zone. But he too agreed that a new boost to these commercial activities of the coastal emporiums was added when the zone including the cities came under the so-called Islamic network. This network, he claims, had con-

³¹ Hamida Khatoon Naqvi, *Urban Centres and Industries in Upper India* (Bombay: Asia Publishing House, 1968), 21.

³² K. M. Ashraf, *Life and Conditions of the People of Hindustan* (New Delhi: Munshiram Monoharlal, 1970), 124-25.

³³ Khwaja Nizam al-Din Ahmed, *The Tabaqat-i- Akbari*, ed. Beni Prasad, trans. Brajendranath De (Calcutta: Calcutta University Press, 1937), 811.

nected Hormuz with Malacca, if not the Mediterranean with Cathay.³⁴ The gravity of trade during the Mughal period could be discerned by the example of the port-city of Surat, where a separate post of a port officer or *Mutasaddi* was introduced in addition to that of a city administrator or *Killadar* who was given the responsibility of defense of the city. But the overwhelming importance of trade was quite apparent by the nature of appointment where the *Mutasaddis* were recruited from the higher rank cadets of the *mansabdari* system while the *Killadars* were drawn from the local elites who earned not more than Rs. 100,00 from the four *parganas* attached to Surat.³⁵ Not only in the coastal areas, a significant number of cities emerged and thrived along the overland trade routes with Safavid Persian and central Asian Uzbek-Turani network.³⁶

However, Dr. Ashraf suggested that the civic amenities provided by the emerging Islamic settlements in the subcontinent were responsible for a new phase of urbanization. He pointed out a thorough change in urban architecture followed the Islamic invasion and altered the face of the pre-Islamic settlements such as Delhi. He pointed out that spacious mosques, domes, gateways, and arches were added to the pre-Islamic cities and its defense and water supply issues were prioritized to ensure a comfortable urban living.³⁷ Thus the cities were analyzed not only as royal camps or trading post, but also an area where secured and comfortable living with defense and water supply was ensured. This observation was indeed a departure from the dominant way of looking at the Islamic city where the urban community is generally presumed to reflect a religious congregation with little idea of urban facilities.

In the 1950s, Muhammad Habib, on the other hand, interpreted the urban growth in the post-Turkish invasion as the marker of a social mobility where the change in political power ensured the ascendance of the so-called Hindu lower classes who

³⁴ James Heitzman, *The City in South Asia* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 81-85.

³⁵ Ashin Dasgupta, "The Merchants of Surat 1700-50," in *Elites in South Asia*, ed. Edmund Leach and S. N. Mukherjee (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), 202.

³⁶ Stephen Frederic Dale, *Indian Merchants and Eurasian Trade, 1600-1750* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 4-5.

³⁷ Ashraf, *Life and Conditions of the People of Hindustan*, 129.

did not have an entry to the cities in pre-Turkish period.³⁸ But the Turks were not seen as the blind-followers of Arabo-Islamic legacy as the hold of Khilafat had already weakened when the Ghurid invasion took place. In the urban architecture, for example, Muhammad Habib indicated the primacy of the minarets rather than mosques as the symbol of power.³⁹ Analyzing the urban facilities of the north Indian cities like Delhi and Badaun, he put focus on the privileges like water-supply and education along with the markets and walled enclaves for defense which attracted people from the rural areas as well as from abroad especially during the political turbulence in central Asia. Though he played down the Arabo-Islamic urban influences in the making of Delhi as the new centre of power, he mentioned the deep impact of the series of migrations from the neighboring Azam during the Mongol invasions which not only brought in the Persian urban traditions to the Indian soil but also put Delhi in the map of *Dar-ul-Islam* as Hazrat Delhi, comparable only to the great Islamic urban centers like Baghdad or Isfahan.⁴⁰

Thus the linkages between the Islamic cities of central and South Asia came into the academic discussions which, unfortunately, did not enjoy as much attention as the Arabic-Islamic cities and associated trade networks in western academia. The academia, particularly in west was yet to study the urban networks of Persia, Central Asia or even Ottoman cities as part of Islamic cities. Persian cities too till that time were studied as a separate category of Shi'ite Islamic urbanity while for the Ottoman cities, the pre-Islamic Hellenistic traditions were much explored rather than its so-called Islamic characteristics. During the Soviet era the central Asian cities, very closely related to Indian cities through trade and cultural networks, were essentially studied as examples of "feudal cities" or "medieval cities" rather than Islamic cities, often positing them as 'the other' to that of European Russian examples.⁴¹ In this academic environment, studying me-

³⁸ Muhammad Habib, "The Urban Revolution in Northern India," in *Introduction to Elliot and Dow's, History of India as Told by Its Own Historians*, 2 vols. (Aligarh: Cosmopolitan Publishers, 1952), 2:36-38.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 2:37.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 2:38.

⁴¹ Alsayyad, "The Study of Islamic Urbanism," 91-97.

dieval cities in India through a different paradigm of Islamic network was, of course, a commendable task. Thus, when in 1965 Rafique Jairazbhoy proposed his explanation of urbanization in medieval South Asia following the Arabo-Islamic model, there were indeed very few takers in the sub-continent because of the predominance of this kind of economy-based urban studies.⁴²

VIII. THE REGIONAL TURN: REDEFINING MEDIEVAL CITIES

In the 1970s, however, more empirical study of urban expansions during the medieval ages was initiated by Irfan Habib, which put back the focus of urban growth to its rural hinterland. Thus the local factors including agrarian surplus, pre-Islamic trade and production systems and the system of power-sharing with the indigenous elites were taken up more seriously rather than the dependence on only external networks of trade linkages. The emphasis on the local issues such as agrarian growth or the alliances with non-Muslim Rajput chieftains in foundations of the cities in northern India ultimately characterized a unique form of urbanity in medieval Indian cities.⁴³ This stress on locality, of course, reduced the emphasis on external trans-regional aspects of Islamic networks, but also pointed out importance of the pre-Islamic legacy of urban elements that continued in these cities.

This kind of interpretation actually founded the way to investigate the non-Islamic local legacies in making the urban centers during the so-called Islamic period. Describing the urban plan of Shahjahanabad built by the Mughal emperor Shahjahan, Stephan Blake pointed out the influences of ancient Hindu architectural text, *Vastu Sastras* in laying out the important roads, gates and conjunctions in the city.⁴⁴ Thus a continuity in urban patterns from the pre-Islamic times to the so-called Islamic period came under survey in Indian history. Historians like Heitzman also pointed out the social and morphological similarity between the pre-Islamic Hindu cities and the Islamic cities by

⁴² *Ibid.*, 94.

⁴³ Irfan Habib, "Technological Changes and Society: 13th and 14th Centuries" (Presidential Address presented at the Indian History Congress, India, 1969), 153-94.

⁴⁴ Blake, *Shahjahanabad*, 29.

their centrality to temple or mosque structures. Even the popular Sufi influences which often opposed the tenets of Q'uranic Islam was taken into account while discussing the urban morphology of this area. Analyzing the urban planning of the seventeenth century sovereign city of Shahjahanabad, Stephan Blake observes the ideological influence of Sufism rather than the Arabo-Islamic tenets. According to him the city planning reflected the Sufistic idea of cosmology in physical environment where “the central bazaar (the backbone) began at the palace (the head), grew towards the Jami’ Masjid (the heart) and continued to the city-gate. The smaller streets inserted themselves into the body proper ribs and the vital organs—bath houses, schools, sarais, bakeries, water cisterns, tea houses, and shops- developed in proximity to the skeletal centre.”⁴⁵

However, the medieval cities in South Asia could never become the ideal city if we judge it by the criteria laid out in any of the traditional scriptures. In fact, as Christopher Bayly has pointed out, Indian cities by definition could never achieve the parameters of an “ideal city” as per both the Hindu and the Islamic scriptures. For Hindus, the ideal “nagara” was essentially a temple-centric sanctified area where *dharma* is prevailed, but in many medieval town planning where traditional Hindu Vastu Shastra was consulted, the epicentric position of the temple was often occupied by the royal palace. On the other hand, according to the tenets of Islam, the city was essentially “the flower of earthly existence” where the mosque, the running water for purity, the learned *qazi* to settle the disputes and Sultan to protect *umma* were the features to ensure the pious life for the believers, which was almost untenable in the heterogeneous, cosmopolitan compositions of the cities in Asia during this period.⁴⁶ Thus the major cities in this region during this period were far from being “ideal” from any religious point of view.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 33-35.

⁴⁶ C. A. Bayly, “Delhi and Other Cities of North India during the ‘Twilight,’” in *Delhi through the Ages: Selected Essays in Urban History, Culture, and Society*, ed. R. E. Frykenberg (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1993), 123.

IX. HOW 'ISLAMIC' WERE THE SOUTH ASIAN MEDIEVAL CITIES?

Thus the researches on urban centers in South Asia took a secular stance rather than exploring the features consulting Islamic tenets. In this environment economic history proved to be the dominant trend in academic investigations particularly during the 1960s and the 1970s. Writing in 1968, Hamida Naqvi presented a detailed account of urban growth in north India during Mughal period which she suggested could happen because of the active state patronage in commercial and trading activities across the region. This interpretation linked the urban centers of Cambay, Surat, Thatta, and Hoogly with Kabul and the cities of central Asia and Persia through trade network. It also pointed out the existence of an integrated market for craft and commodity production for ceramics, brass and other metal objects across the region.⁴⁷

Janet Abu Lughod also argues in favor of an urban trade network since thirteenth century that included a wide area of north India, Afghanistan, central Asia, Persia and parts of Mongolia. But unlike Immanuel Wallerstein, she does not agree to put these areas under a "world system" because she argues that unlike the world system this area did not entail integrated production networks but to trading networks.⁴⁸ Naming the network as Asian rather than Islamic, Andre Gunder Frank has also categorized this area under one zone of a vibrant economic and monetary network that included the Ottoman, Safavid, and Mughal empires and held the key to the world system before the sixteenth century when western Europe replaced it by its control over the Latin American silver.⁴⁹

In western academia, however, an affinity in religio-cultural activities within this region was also sought in contemporary scholarships, particularly centered on Sufism, art, and architectural traditions. Writing about the architectural influences of the Mughal period, Catherine B. Asher pointed out the significant

⁴⁷ Naqvi, *Urban Centres and Industries in Upper India*, 54.

⁴⁸ Janet Abu-Lughod, *Before European Hegemony: The World System, 1250-1350* (London: Oxford University Press, 1991), 152.

⁴⁹ Andre Gunder Frank, *ReOrient: Global Economy in the Asian Age* (London: University of California Press, 1998), 84.

Arabo-Persian tradition that continued during the Sultanate period and was later mixed with the rich indigenous Indian traditions and ultimately made the stunning features of Mughal architecture possible. But despite these influences, Asher described Mughal architecture as the true heir of the Timurid Iranian architecture. Following the long-standing Iranian tradition, Mughals too adapted garden, symbolic to paradise in their architectural forms. Apart from the palaces and mausoleums, the cities too were planned with gardens, pools and pavilions which became a distinguished pattern for the cities from Samarkand to Golconda.⁵⁰ However, garden as a feature for urban beautification was integral part of urban-planning throughout the Islamic world though the style differed from Ottoman to Safavid or Mughals. But it was considered to be the place for contemplation, serving as the oasis amidst of the urban chaos where the shady trees provided the relief from the heat which was accepted to be the purpose of the gardens throughout the Islamic world.⁵¹

Very recently Nile Green has explored a trans-region network of Sufism which not only founded the pilgrimage centers across a wide area but, sometimes, also posited an alternative source of authority in urban centers.⁵² Tracing the expansion of Sufism, Green is of the opinion that by 1500 CE Sufism in practice and tradition made its presence felt in western parts of the so-called Islamic world as far as of Spain and Morocco to Bengal, the eastern most borders of the Indian peninsula. During this period, particularly after the Mongol occupation of Baghdad and Khorasan, the newly conquered territories of Islam in the east became the refuge of both the urban Islamic scholarly classes and the Sufi families who became the central figures in founding urban centers amongst the newly converts in the frontier regions of Islam.⁵³ Bruce B. Lawrence has pointed out the immense historical significance of Nizamuddin Awaliya's presence in foundation of the city of Delhi during the early Sultanate period. He became the "Chirag-e-Delhi," the light of Delhi, who commanded

⁵⁰ Johas Benzion Lehrman, *Earthly Paradise: Garden and Courtyard in Islam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), 15-16.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 31.

⁵² Nile Green, *Global Sufi* (Malden, Mass.: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 126.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 70-73.

respect from both the Islamic elites and the non-elite newly converts of the region.⁵⁴

In the aspect of language too, the bilingual system of secular court and religious order created an interesting matrix where Arabic remained the language for religion, particularly of Quran while Turkish and later Persian came to be regarded as the languages of the cultured/civilized urban elite. Many Persian genres such as *Masnavi*, *Rubayi* style of literatures dominated the urban literary scene. Satish Chandra has mentioned the Persian genre describing the decline/decadence of city life known as *Shahr-Asob* was very much integral to the urban cultures of the eighteenth century Mughal as well as in Safavid imperial cities.⁵⁵ Thus, as M. Athar Ali conceived, these three empires with their much shared experiences in language, art, aesthetics and religious philosophy were often a part of a single cultural network which somewhat remained distant from the technological and scientific development that Europe experienced from seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.⁵⁶ He in fact traced the decline of the so-called Islamic world when this network stopped its expansion because of the growing insularity that ultimately checked the inner flow of commercial and cultural exchanges and proved to be less inclusive than the western European core.

X. CONCLUSION

It is a fact that even during the colonialism many pre-modern so-called Islamic cities could retain its character as distinctive from that of other colonial cities. Visiting India recently, Janet L Abu-Lughod has observed a 'semiotic difference' between the so-called Islamic and non-Islamic areas of modern north Indian cities.⁵⁷ Though she refutes the unitary model of Islamic urbanity, she acknowledged the relevance of the traditional trans-regional

⁵⁴ Bruce B. Lawrence, "The Earliest Chishtiya and Shaikh Nizam Ud-Din Awaliya," in *Delhi through the Ages*, 32-56.

⁵⁵ Satish Chandra, "Some Aspects of Urbanisation in Medieval India," in *The City in Indian History*, ed. Indu Banga (New Delhi: Manohar Publications, 1991), 81-86.

⁵⁶ M. A. Ali, "Recent Theories of Eighteenth Century India," *Indian Historical Review* 13, (1987): 102-10.

⁵⁷ Abu-Lughod, "The Islamic City," 155-76.

urban economic, social and cultural linkages in shaping this unique urbanity in India. It was probably the spread of Islam that founded this network, and thus the pattern of urbanity that originated in this environment had been 'shaped by Islam' rather "determined by Islam." Following Abu-Lughod it can be said that despite the difference in urban experiences created by the diversities of the localities, a broad matrix of socio-economic and cultural interaction created an environment where a shared culture of Islamic network an alternative form of urbanity did exist.

However, whether these linkages, largely rooted in the trading and cultural ties, could be equated to a world system is still not very clear. Recently Sanjay Subrahmanyam has doubted the use of the term "world system" based on economic exchanges for this south Asian zone by mentioning the inappropriateness of the term as defined by Fernand Braudel.⁵⁸ According to Braudel this word signifies "a well-defined economic area under the influence of a central place or a central region (with) a functional and possibly hierarchical relationship between the centre and the peripheral areas." In that respect, Subrahmanyam enquires, which should be called the central place or the central region of this area? The question in identifying the core area is also integral to another uncomfortable question about the hierarchical relationship between the centre and the periphery. According to Subrahmanyam, this zone, geographically speaking, does not include only one empire but more than three sovereign empires which made the question of dominance between the core and the periphery more complex.⁵⁹ Similarly, the urbanity which developed in the South Asian region because of the presence of Islam did not centered around a city primus like Baghdad or Khorasan which did function as the source of legitimacy like the seat of Khalifate in the Arabo-Islamic world, but presented a variety of urban cultures with a significant influence of Islamicate cultures, mixed with of course, the local variants. Thus the influence of Islam in defining this urbanity was there, though the replication of a single model though out the region

⁵⁸ See Sanjay Subrahmanyam, "'World-Economies' and South Asia: A Skeptical Note," *Review* 12, no.1 (Winter 1989): 141-48.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

could be still questioned. But despite the variations, the historians working on these urban centers often cannot ignore the "substantially interrelated questions" that explores its trans-regional character.⁶⁰ In fact, this kind of enquiry recently brought in this region under the scope of the multi-volume work edited by Salma Khadra Jayyusi, Renata Holod, Attilio Pertoccioli and Andre Raymond titled *The City in the Islamic World*. This work has attempted to explore larger global pattern/patterns by meticulously studying the individual cases of urbanism and growth patterns in these cities under the broader frame of Islam and its interactions with variety of regional and trans-regional urban cultures.⁶¹ Here in the survey the urban networks, rather than a trans-regional idea of an Islamic city model has been held as the unifying element of the so-called Islamic urbanism, that ultimately reiterates the importance of the world history as the frame of enquiry.

⁶⁰ Hodgson, *Rethinking World History*, 252-53.

⁶¹ S. K. Jayyusi, A. Hold, A. Petruccioli, and A. Raymond, *The City in the Islamic World*, 2 vols. (Brill Academic Pub, 2008.).