Summing up

It would be presumptuous to claim to have arrived at any definite conclusion at this stage. Our aim therefore is to recapitulate and summarize below some of the main points of the preceding chapters. We examined the view that the period of the Afghan rule witnessed the disintegration of the “centralized” political structure of the Delhi Sultanate resulting in a general crisis. We also took note of the suggestion that this disintegration was caused by the “tribal” or “centrifugal” character of Afghan polity. Contrary to the notion that Afghan polity was tribal in nature, and that a decentralized-tribal polity is incompatible with peace and stability, we found that rather than merely depending upon tribal lineages and customs, the Afghan rulers drew on the universal tropes of kingship for the articulation of their power. Further, though we refrained from ascribing any distinct model to the Afghan polity, the details of governance recorded by the medieval authorities point to a kind of ‘welfare monarchy’ in the period. Sixteenth century accounts have portrayed the Afghan kings as ideal rulers, whose welfare mechanism, personal piety and madad-i-ma‘āsh grants to holy-men were much celebrated. These accounts cannot be dismissed as mere imaginations of the Afghan historians, for the non-Afghan writers have also presented largely the same picture of the period. It may be said that they were influenced by the progress and achievements of Akbar, but were yet in search of an ideal ruler. These historians may then have projected backward in time some of the later developments.

However, Malik Muḥammad Ḫārisī’s eulogy for the rule of Sher Shāh, particularly for his munificence, generosity and concern for justice militates against such an assumption. We noticed that public weal was an important feature of the Afghan political discourse. The rulers were sensitive to the aspirations of the people
and kept in touch with the general social conditions through charitable endeavours, in particular in times of drought and scarcity. In this connection, reference may be made to the arrangement of public kitchen (langar) by the king – a social service which was particularly associated with the sufi establishments. Significantly, the sufis of the period attribute supernatural power to their contemporary kings. We noticed several anecdotes bearing on the miraculous power of the Afghan kings. Needless to say that they were also seen as the shadow of God on earth. Further, reports of bestowal of kingship to rulers by sufi shaikhs abound in our sources. In a curious inversion of roles, a leading sufi of the period chose to address the king as “shaikh”. Thus the king combined in himself the qualities of a philanthropic ruler and a thaumaturgic sufi. In fact he was supposed to possess some of the divine attributes as well.

Many of these issues which are very important for a more informed understanding of the historical processes tend to recede into background when we exaggerate Akbar’s achievement beyond a point. Though scholars like S. Nurul Hasan and I.H. Siddiqui have highlighted their significance, the study of medieval Indian history continues to suffer from what Muzaffar Alam and Sanjay Subrahmanyam term as the “play of light and shade”. While there is an over-emphasis on Akbar and Aurangzeb the early phase of the Mughal polity, the first half of the seventeenth century and the period after 1707 remain nearly neglected, indifference to the pre-Mughal period, particularly the fifteenth century regional sultanates apart.1 In highlighting the Mughal non-sectarian policies, it is assumed, for instance, that it was Akbar who first encouraged the Rajputs and the other non-Muslim groups to join the imperial service. Clearly such an approach amounted to disregarding the earlier liberal

attempts at broadening the base of the state apparatus. Indeed the Mughal liberal policy formed part of a process to which their predecessors, the Afghan rulers had made significant contributions.

The Rajput question offered two options to the Afghans. The first was to aim at a direct and uniform rule throughout Hindustan. This would call for the extirpation of the indigenous chieftains which in turn implied large-scale loss of soldiers. The other option was to make these chieftains accept their suzerainty and allow them to run the local administration on the condition that it will be closely supervised by the governors appointed by the Afghan king. This arrangement was useful on several counts. Acceptance of the Afghan paramountcy meant expansion of Afghan power in Rajput strongholds without much resistance as well as a kind of undisturbed flow of revenues from the countryside. Further, the military support of the Rajput allies could also enhance the prospects of conquest and control of new/hostile regions. The Afghan rulers found this more viable. Their policy towards the Rajputs was thus aimed primarily at incorporating them in their imperial projects.

The Afghan kings were in conflict only with those who challenged, or refused to acknowledge, their power. Generally, they showed a liberal and reconciliatory attitude towards the non-Muslims. Their relationship with the Rajputs was marked by an honourable alliance of dominance and subordination, recognizing duly the status of the latter as rulers of their respective territories. This alliance was often cemented through a wedlock between an Afghan king/prince and a Rajput princess. A logical sequel of this alliance was that a number of the Rajput chiefs fought against Bābur alongwith the Afghans during the early phase of his invasion and conquest of Hindustan. They continued to offer resistance to the Mughals later through the Afghan “pretender” Sultān Maḥmūd. The period of Sher Shāh’s conflict with
Humāyūn witnessed the Rajputs settling scores with each other and generally resorting to an ambivalent attitude towards the two. However, complaints of their capturing territories previously under the control of Muslims were also not uncommon. Once the issue of the *badshāhat* of Hindustan was settled, the Rajputs, barring a few, acknowledged the suzerainty of the Sūr king. In fact, non-Muslims in the service of the Afghans could be noticed from a very early period. Later, Hemyu’s elevation to the status of chief commander of the Sūr army speaks volumes of the extent and nature of the integration of non-Muslims in the Afghan imperial project. The extent to which this alliance was effective may further be seen in the fact that Akbar’s early encounter with the Rajputs was due to the latters’ support to the Afghans. Also, the degree to which they identified with the Afghans may be seen in their claim that Sher Shāh was the son of a Rajput mother. Indeed, instances of marriage between Afghan nobles and non-Muslim women were not unusual.

With all this were also promoted the conditions of religious syncretism and cultural synthesis. The sufis of the period played a prominent role in this process. Infact as K.A. Nizami and S.A.A. Rizvi have shown in their voluminous writings the sufis of the earlier period, that is, the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, had laid a firm ground for a tolerant attitude towards the non-Muslims. The sufis had also influenced state policy in a bid to ensure that it was at least not in total contravention of the *sharīʿat*. Ideally, though the need to implement the *sharīʿat* as the state law was expressed on and off, its limitations were appreciated as well. We have referred above to a large number of anecdotes of the sufis’ conflict and collaboration with the kings and the nobles. They point to the different ways in which the sufis intervened in contemporary politics. Many of them are said to have settled in centres of political influence under the Afghan kings. They accepted land and cash grants from the rulers,
and prayed for their victory over their foes, *kuffār* or Muslims. Some of the sufis contributed to the consolidation of Afghan power in the newly conquered territories, some others participated even in the military campaigns. Most of the kings, members of the royal family and courtiers were actually disciples of one or the other sufi shaikhs. A number of sufis also had matrimonial alliances with the royal families.

There were, however, the cases of fight between the sufis and the kings, which emanated generally from the sufis’ assertion of authority over a given *wilāyat*. The ruler took such assertion as an encroachment upon his power and territorial jurisdiction. The belief in the shaikh’s ability to grant kingship, his image of a healer of the sick and protector of the people furnished him with enormous power in his *wilāyat*. The shaikh’s indifference towards court rituals, his occasional refusal to allow the ruler to visit his hospice, and his influence over the courtiers and soldiers who constituted the power base of the monarch, was a threat to the political power. In cases of conflict between royal and sufi claims to authority, the *‘ulamā* sided with the king and raised the question of violation of the *shari‘at* by the shaikh in such matters as listening to music, and refusing to attend the congregational prayers. The shaikh, in turn, condemned the *‘ulamā* on occasion even as the “inhabitants of hell”. In most of the cases of such encounters, the shaikh is shown to have come out victorious, either by establishing his superior knowledge of the *shari‘at*, or by resorting to their spiritual powers.

Our sources also record a large number of tales of miraculous combats between the sufi shaikhs and their opponents, including the non-Muslim religious leaders. The shaikh’s authority was established only after he scored victory in these contests. While due recognition is given to the wondrous powers of such non-Muslim mystics as the *yogis*, the shaikh’s triumph over his rivals proved his superior spiritual
stature and often led to the conversion of his opponent to Islam. Reports of conversion by a shaikh brought him immense prestige and authority in his wilāyat. Images of the sufi shaikhs as disseminators of Islam were thus built. These images were, however, not uncontested. The ʿulamā were the least impressed with the achievements of sufic Islam. They tried continuously to establish their own reading of the sharīʿat as the sole legitimate way of life. The movement of Saiyid Muḥammad of Jaunpur, which we have briefly alluded to, was one such attempt. Though the movement was crushed by the rulers, it did contribute its own share to the religious setting of the period.

Much before our period, Islam’s interaction with the local religio-cultural traditions had prepared the ground for syncretism and synthesis. The doctrine of wahdat-ul-wajīd had brought the sufis close to certain streams of non-Muslim thought. During our period amongst the votaries of the doctrine was the leading Chishti shaikh, ʿAbdul Quddūs Gangohti. It may also be noted that during this period some of the sufis also found much to learn from the Indian mystic traditions. Saiyid Muhammad Ghauṣ Gwāliorī, a noted Sāṭṭārī shaikh, popularized yogic practices in sufi circles. He also drew attention to the similarities in the spiritual terminologies of Muslims and Hindus. Conversely, non-Muslim religious traditions also began to be shaped by the principles of Islam as represented by the sufis. This is clearly visible in Kabir’s and Nānak’s preachings, in particular in their emphasis on monotheism. The contribution of the sufis to the growth and development of vernacular literature and devotional music is also equally noteworthy. The growth of vernacular literature may have been retarded with the advent of the Mughals who patronized Persian as the language of the empire.2 However, the view that the process of integration of Hindu

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and Muslim cultures was destroyed by Akbar’s interference in religious matters is untenable. The degree to which the Rajputs and the Afghans had come closer in upholding their “common” cause is very well reflected in the fact that the Rajputs often sided with the Afghans in their fight against the Mughals.

There are more than one explanation of Humāyūn’s defeat at the hands of the Afghans in the two battles fought successively in Chausa and Qannauj, and the subsequent flight of the Mughals to Persia. The contemporary chroniclers, as they were unable to explain the defeat of the powerful Mughals, generally attribute Sher Shāh’s success to the hand of God. Another favourite explanation of the Mughal defeat, found in the sixteenth centuries Mughal chronicles, is the “treachery” of the “wretched” Afghans. Some modern scholars also have accepted this explanation rather uncritically. Yet another reading of the period traces Humāyūn’s problems to the Mongol theory of kingship, which envisaged the division of the kingdom amongst the sons of the deceased king. It is further suggested that Humāyūn’s position was weakened by the rebellions of his brothers. All these explanations ignore the brilliant qualities of Sher Shāh as a military commander. Sher Shāh comes out as an unmatched mobilizer of the available resources. He recruited not simply the professional Afghan soldiers, but organized for his purpose the entire “qaum” of the Afghans settled in Hindustan. For these Afghans the establishment of the Mughal rule had meant redundancy and migration. Besides, there was widespread hostility against the Mughal invaders who had not only defeated the Afghan and Rajput armies, but also had indulged in large-scale plunder. Sher Shāh exploited all these factors in leading the riposte against the Mughals. We have illustrated in detail how his rivals

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contending for the mantle of leader of the Afghans, and on a larger scale, for organizing a campaign against Mughal rule were eliminated from the scene. Unfortunately for the Afghans, Sher Shāh died in an accident before re-establishing the Afghan kingdom on a firm footing. The Mughals returned with a vengeance to condemn the Afghans as the dangerous "other." Though by the end of Akbar's reign the Afghans had reconciled to the Mughal rule, their marginalisation continued throughout the Mughal period, and consequently in the historiography of medieval India as well.