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THE POWER OF THE  
ISLAMIC SWORD IN  
NARRATING THE DEATH  
OF INDIAN BUDDHISM

Brahmanism beaten and battered by the Muslim invaders could look to the rulers for support and sustenance and get it. Buddhism beaten and battered by the Muslim invaders had no such hope. It was an uncared for orphan and it withered in the cold blast of the native rulers and was consumed in the fire lit up by the conquerors. (BHIMRAO AMBEDKAR)<sup>1</sup>

Scholarship on Buddhist and Muslim interactions has long featured a particular story about Islam's central role in Indian Buddhism's decline. This narrative can be summarized in a single sentence: iconoclastic Muslims invaded India, attacked Buddhist monasteries and institutions of higher learning, and in so doing destroyed the foothold of Buddhism on the subcontinent. It is hard to overstate the potency and prevalence of this story line. As Johan Elverskog has put it, "Whenever the topic of Buddhism and Islam is ever mentioned it almost invariably revolves around the Muslim destruction of the Dharma."<sup>2</sup> Modern academics often shy away from the more sensational descriptions of this alleged apocalyptic clash that characterized earlier, pop-

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Vasant Moon, ed., *Babasaheb Ambedkar, Writings and Speeches*, vol. 3 (Bombay: Department of Education, Government of Maharashtra, 1987), 232–33.

<sup>2</sup> Johan Elverskog, *Buddhism and Islam on the Silk Road* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010), 2.

ular thinking on the subject, as exemplified by the above quote by B. R. Ambedkar, a founding father of modern India and late-life convert to Buddhism. Nonetheless, the basic narrative that Islam killed South Asian Buddhism remains alive and well, such as in this quotation from a popular 2013 textbook on Buddhism: “From 986 CE, the Muslim Turks started raiding north-west India from Afghanistan, plundering western India early in the eleventh century. Forced conversions to Islam were made, and Buddhist images smashed, due to the Islamic dislike of ‘idolatry’. Indeed, in India, the Islamic term for an ‘idol’ became ‘*budd*’. By 1192, the Turks established rule over north India from Delhi. The north-eastern stronghold of Buddhism then fell, with the destruction of Nālandā university in 1198.”<sup>3</sup> Much about this account is historically dubious, and I reconsider throughout this essay the shaky evidentiary foundation for the clash-based story of Islam and Buddhism by revisiting Indo-Persian (and, to a lesser degree, Sanskrit and Tibetan) texts. In addition to questions of facticity, I take up here the power of the Islamic sword as a rhetorical, historiographical, and narrative device that wields considerable influence over many modern scholars and has impeded our ability to analyze what happened to Buddhism in India during the early second millennium CE. I do not offer an answer here to the question of what happened to Indian Buddhism.<sup>4</sup> Rather, I seek to analyze our assumptions about the decline of Buddhism in its homeland and thereby better position future scholars to free themselves from the ideological baggage that has hampered investigation of this topic for decades.

The demise of Indian Buddhism garners little scholarly agreement, except for its basic occurrence and Islam’s involvement. Put in broad terms, Buddhism ceased to be an active tradition across India between 1100 and 1300 CE. Some scholars have pointed to limited evidence that pockets of Buddhism survived in tucked-away corners of the subcontinent.<sup>5</sup> But overall there is widespread

<sup>3</sup> Peter Harvey, *An Introduction to Buddhism: Teachings, History and Practices*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 194. According to a survey run by Stephen C. Berkwitz in December 2014, about one-fifth of professors who teach an introduction to Buddhism course use Harvey’s *Introduction to Buddhism*. Stephen C. Berkwitz, “Textbook Buddhism: Introductory Books on the Buddhist Religion,” *Religion* (2015): 13.

<sup>4</sup> For recent attempts to answer this question, see D. C. Ahir, *Buddhism Declined in India: How and Why?* (Delhi: B. R. Publishing, 2005); Gail Omvedt, *Buddhism in India: Challenging Brahmanism and Caste* (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2003), 149–85; K. T. S. Sarao, *The Decline of Buddhism in India: A Fresh Perspective* (Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 2012); Giovanni Verardi, *Hardships and Downfall of Buddhism in India* (Delhi: Manohar, 2011).

<sup>5</sup> For example, Arthur McKeown analyzes the Indian Buddhist intellectual Shariputra, who lived from 1335 until 1426. See Arthur McKeown, “From Bodhgaya to Lhasa to Beijing: The Life and Times of Sariputra (c. 1335–1426), Last Abbot of Bodhgaya” (PhD diss., Harvard University, 2010). Kim and Pal discuss the 1446 illustrated *Kalachakra tantra* manuscript produced in a village in Bihar. Jinah Kim, *Receptacle of the Sacred: Illustrated Manuscripts and the Buddhist Book Cult in South Asia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013), 250; Prata-ditya Pal, “A New Document of Indian Painting,” *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of*

consensus that Buddhism went extinct or nearly extinct from South Asia in the early second millennium.<sup>6</sup> The second point on which there is general scholarly concurrence is that Islam had something to do with Indian Buddhism's Armageddon, especially the alleged sack of Nalanda by Muhammad bin Bakhtiyar Khalji in 1193 (or 1197 or 1198 or 1200 or 1202 or 1205 or 1206).<sup>7</sup> As Sankalia put it in his influential *University of Nalanda*, published in 1934 and still cited today, "The history of the end of Nalanda, hence, is, in a sense, the history of the extinction of Buddhism from the land of its birth."<sup>8</sup> Overall, scholars of Indian Buddhism have devoted limited sustained attention to the question of the tradition's decline in the past few decades. But when they address the topic in textbooks or in work on specific Buddhist sites, academics often bring out the trope of blood-thirsty, iconoclastic Islamic raiders as a key part of the story.<sup>9</sup>

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*Great Britain and Ireland* 3, no. 4 (1965): 103–11. Some Buddhists lived in Orissa and Bengal as late as the sixteenth century. Verardi, *Hardships and Downfall*, 378. See further references in McKeown, "From Bodhgaya to Lhasa to Beijing," 18 n. 33.

<sup>6</sup> As McKeown has noted, there have long been dissenters from this standard view, but they have "failed to have the impact their dissent warranted" ("From Bodhgaya to Lhasa to Beijing," 3).

<sup>7</sup> 1193 is the most common date, working on the assumption that Muhammad bin Bakhtiyar hit Nalanda shortly following the sack of Bihar Sharif dated to 1193 in Juzjani's *Tabaqat-i Nasiri*. Charles S. Prebish and Damien Keown give the date of Nalanda's destruction as 1197 (*Introducing Buddhism*, 2nd ed. [London: Routledge, 2010], 94). Also see S. R. Goyal, *Indian Buddhism after the Buddha* (Jodhpur: Kusumanjali Book World, 2003), 212; and Stephen Berkwitz, *South Asian Buddhism: A Survey* (New York: Routledge, 2010), 141. Harvey gives the date of 1198 (*Introduction to Buddhism*, 194), as does Donald W. Mitchell (*Buddhism: Introducing the Buddhist Experience*, 2nd ed. [New York: Oxford University Press, 2008], 158). Steven Darian puts the destruction at "around 1200" ("Buddhism in Bihar from the Eighth to the Twelfth Century with Special Reference to Nalanda," *Asiatische Studien* 25 [1971]: 346). Richard Eaton gives the date of circa 1202 ("Temple Desecration and Indo-Muslim States," in *Beyond Turk and Hindu: Rethinking Religious Identities in Islamicate South Asia*, ed. David Gilmartin and Bruce B. Lawrence [Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2000], table 10.1). Sankalia gives the date as 1205–6 (*The University of Nalanda* [Madras: B. G. Paul, 1934], 213). Some scholars simply give a range of dates. For example, Hartmut Scharfe says that Muhammad bin Bakhtiyar hit Nalanda between 1197 and 1206 (*Education in Ancient India* [Leiden: Brill, 2002], 150). The variety of dates indicates the lack of a clear historical record that Nalanda was sacked by Turkish raiders.

<sup>8</sup> Sankalia, *University of Nalanda*, 208.

<sup>9</sup> For example, Ahir, *Buddhism Declined in India*, 48–61; Berkwitz, *South Asian Buddhism*, 140–1; Cathy Cantwell, *Buddhism: The Basics* (New York: Routledge, 2010), 3 and 143; Goyal, *Indian Buddhism after the Buddha*, 212–13; Harvey, *Introduction to Buddhism*, 194–96; Mitchell, *Buddhism*, 158; Prebish and Keown, *Introducing Buddhism*, 94; Richard H. Robinson, Willard L. Johnson, Sandra A. Wawrytko, and Thanissaro Bhikkhu, *The Buddhist Religion: A Historical Introduction*, 4th ed. (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1997), 135–37; Kevin Trainor, *Buddhism: An Illustrated Guide* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 54; A. K. Warder, *Indian Buddhism*, 3rd ed. repr. (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 2004), 478–87; Alexander Wynne, *Buddhism: An Introduction* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2015), 175. There are also scholars who prefer to note the destruction of sites such as Nalanda without naming the agents of such destruction; e.g., John S. Strong, *Buddhisms: An Introduction* (London: Oneworld Publications, 2015), Appendix A, 391. Some overview textbooks decline to explicitly discuss what caused the end of Indian Buddhism and instead focus on tantra as "the final development

Historians have recognized for quite some time that the standard take on Buddhism's disappearance in South Asia and Islam's role therein is too simplistic. For instance, Marshall Hodgson wrote in 1977:

Probably Buddhism did not yield to Islam so much by direct conversion as by a more insidious route: the sources of recruitment to the relatively unaristocratic Buddhism—for instance, villagers coming into the cities and adopting a new allegiance to accord with their new status—turned now rather to Islam than to an outdated Buddhism. The record of the massacre of one monastery in Bengal, combined with the inherited Christian conception of Muslims as the devotees of the sword, has yielded the widely repeated statement that the Muslims violently “destroyed” Buddhism in India. Muslims were not friendly to it, but there is no evidence that they simply killed off all the Buddhists, or even all the Buddhist monks. It will take much active revision before such assessments of the role of Islam, based largely on unexamined preconceptions, are eliminated even from educated mentalities.<sup>10</sup>

I agree with Hodgson's assessment of the lack of evidence for the proposition that Islam killed off Indian Buddhists or Indian Buddhism and also with his contention that this narrative relies mainly on prejudices rather than facts. Here I take up Hodgson's call for “active revision” of the presumed destructive relationship between Islam and Buddhism by interrogating premodern and modern limiting preconceptions.

I am far from the first scholar to take issue with the “Islam killed Indian Buddhism” narrative, but my interests and interventions stand apart from earlier work in a few key ways. Several scholars have tried to undercut the assumption of a single-mindedly destructive relationship between Islam and Buddhism by drawing attention to little known interactions between medieval Buddhists and Muslims. Johan Elverskog's *Buddhism and Islam* is especially enlightening in this regard, but it ultimately takes us away from the question of what happened to Indian Buddhism circa 1200, a query in which I am invested. Scholars such as Jinah Kim and Arthur McKeown have presented new evidence about Indian Buddhist patronage and monks, respectively, in the early to mid-second millennium.<sup>11</sup> I cite the insightful work of both scholars here, but my lens is larger and more attuned to historiographic and narrative issues. The idea that Islam violently undercut Indian Buddhism cannot be overturned by new research alone because the theory does not rest

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of Indian Buddhism”; e.g., Rupert Gethin, *The Foundations of Buddhism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 268. As Berkwitz points out, Gethin's *Foundations of Buddhism* is a favorite textbook in introductory courses on Buddhism (“Textbook Buddhism,” 4).

<sup>10</sup> Marshall G. S. Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam*, vol. 2: *The Expansion of Islam in the Middle Periods* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974), 557.

<sup>11</sup> Kim, *Receptacle of the Sacred*; and McKeown, “From Bodhgaya to Lhasa to Beijing,” respectively.

on solid historical evidence in the first place. As Gregory Schopen wrote twenty-five years ago concerning why Buddhist studies scholars often privileged texts over archaeological evidence, “the choice made was, apparently, not based on an assessment of the two kinds of sources as historical witnesses, but on some other kind of an assumption.”<sup>12</sup> Analogous, powerful presuppositions are at work, I argue, in how many scholars account for Indian Buddhism’s demise at the hands of Islamic invaders.

The alleged relationship of destruction between two major world religions is compelling and persistent in modern scholarship for several reasons. A conflict-driven narrative is grounded in premodern Islamic chronicles and confirmed by Indian and Tibetan sources. Accordingly, there is a perceived historical basis—from both sides of the supposed clash—for this violent plotline. As I discuss below, the textual evidence is far thinner than most scholars realize, and it is irresponsible to present premodern Persian, Sanskrit, and Tibetan texts as clear statements of fact for a host of reasons. But it is tempting to sweep such issues under the rug, especially since most scholars of Indian Buddhism are not deeply familiar with the Indo-Persian work (and it is singular) that forms the core of this violent narrative. More troublingly, “Islam killed Indian Buddhism” is an alluring story that plays on contemporary prejudices about both religions. Additionally, while Islam is a poor factual explanation for the decline of Buddhism in South Asia on several counts, it nonetheless constitutes a convenient and, more or less, time-appropriate killer.

We currently lack a fully fleshed out alternative historical explanation for the (near) disappearance of Indian Buddhism circa 1200, and the best research to date suggests a complex web of causes. I list some of the likely factors in what follows, but I conclude the essay on a different note by offering a few suggestions for how to better frame the entire inquiry. To tip my hand, I propose that scholars should ask what happened to Buddhists rather than Buddhism in medieval India because the question is more precise and opens up cognitive space to consider the complex identities at play. Scholars also ought to be open to multiple narratives and moments of decline and should not begin with the assumption that another religion must be at fault for eliminating Indian Buddhism. In order to understand why these interventions are necessary and valuable, however, we must start by appreciating the historiographical and narrative force of the Islamic sword in scholarly and popular thinking on the decline of Indian Buddhism. Considering the different sources and narrative motivations at play positions us to better understand the challenges of recovering the reasons behind the fall of Indian Buddhism in the early

<sup>12</sup> Gregory Schopen, “Archaeology and Protestant Presuppositions in the Study of Indian Buddhism,” *History of Religions* 31, no. 1 (1991): 3–4.

second millennium and enables us to more accurately characterize premodern Buddhist-Muslim interactions moving forward.

#### A PERSISTENT HISTORICAL QUESTION

In part, the standby tale that Islam finished off Indian Buddhism lives on because it offers a clear causal explanation, however dubious, to an enduring historical question: What happened to Indian Buddhism? The Gautama Buddha died in northeastern India circa 411–400 BCE.<sup>13</sup> Buddhist teachings grew in prominence on the subcontinent for centuries, attracting state support from Gandharan rulers and the Mauryan and Gupta empires and amassing monastic and lay followers. One thousand years after the Gautama Buddha walked the earth, the Buddhist dharma encompassed several schools of thought, included an array of different practices, had spread far beyond India to other parts of Asia, inspired great works of literature and art, and enjoyed a robust philosophical tradition. The standard story of Indian Buddhism thereafter, especially after the sixth or seventh century CE, typically takes on a murky quality and often features a slow decline punctuated by devastating moments of violence.

The beginning of Indian Buddhism's atrophy is a subject of considerable disagreement among academics. Some scholars trace the roots of decay to the fall of the Gupta dynasty in the sixth century and the "new culture of military adventurism" that supposedly followed.<sup>14</sup> Others point to events in the seventh century CE, especially the rise of Shankaracarya, an Advaita Vedanta philosopher, and Hindu devotional traditions.<sup>15</sup> At least one scholar says that the Buddha himself prophesied the decay of the dharma (he said it would begin in the first century CE) and that rumors of impending decline swirled about seventh-century India.<sup>16</sup> Moving into the second millennium, some re-

<sup>13</sup> The date of 411–400 for the Gautama Buddha's death is a relatively recent adjustment. Paul Dundas, *The Jains*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2002), 24.

<sup>14</sup> Ronald Davidson, *Indian Esoteric Buddhism: A Social History of the Tantric Movement* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 74. Davidson based his analysis, in large part, on John Keegan's idea of war as a cultural activity in *A History of Warfare* (New York: Vintage, 1993). Verardi also emphasizes the role of persistent conflict, including violent conflict, in undercutting Indian Buddhism (*Hardships and Downfall*).

<sup>15</sup> For example, Robinson et al., *Buddhist Religion*, 134–35. Padmanabh Jaini raises the question of why Jain communities were not equally threatened by *bhakti* movements and suggests that Jains countered and coopted key *bhakti* figures and practices ("The Disappearance of Buddhism and the Survival of Jainism: A Study in Contrast," in *Studies in History of Buddhism: Papers Presented at the International Conference on the History of Buddhism at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, WIS, USA, August, 19–21, 1976*, ed. A. K. Narain [Delhi: B. R. Publishing, 1980]).

<sup>16</sup> Goyal, *Indian Buddhism after the Buddha*, 211; also note the same section (211–32) repeated in S. R. Goyal, *A History of Indian Buddhism* (Jodhpur: Kusumanjali Book World, 2002), bk. 2, 211–32.

searchers note declining patronage for Buddhist institutions following the overthrow of the Palas, a dynasty that ruled parts of north India from the eighth through the twelfth centuries.<sup>17</sup> In their heyday, the Palas supported major Buddhist sites; for example, they helped to build Vikramashila, Odantapuri, and Somapuri and patronized Nalanda.<sup>18</sup>

These proposed intellectual and political factors are hardly exclusive, and different scholars emphasize certain ideas above others. For example, McKeown has observed that “the declining popularity of the idea that the Muslim invasions destroyed Buddhism made the notion that Buddhism had become philosophically untenable more widespread.”<sup>19</sup> Even when scholars posit a preexisting decline of Indian Buddhism, however, they generally agree that Buddhist institutions and practices survived such blows (even if in a severely reduced form) on the subcontinent until the arrival of Muslim raiders and rulers circa 1200. Indeed, nearly all of the scholars that McKeown surveys (and McKeown himself) argue that “Muslim invasions” were “definitely a contributing factor” in the decline of Indian Buddhism.<sup>20</sup> Writing in 2002, Ronald Davidson articulates the suspected link between earlier decline and Muslim-led raids as follows: “Ultimately, medieval Buddhist systems became fatally wounded in the profoundly altered Indian culture that coalesced in the fractious aftermath of the founding of Muslim states in the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries.”<sup>21</sup>

While I question significant chunks of this narrative, especially Islam’s role in Indian Buddhism’s demise, I endorse the historiographical impulses that produced this story. It is a legitimate, even a pressing, historical project to search for the reasons behind the evaporation of Buddhist thought, institutions, practitioners, and practices from the tradition’s homeland in the early second millennium. As I discuss at the end of this essay, there are multiple problematic assumptions behind how we pose the question of Indian Buddhism’s waning. But, even if we concede that the historical query is poorly put, I concur with Ananya Vajpeyi, who has identified “one of the biggest historical puzzles” in studying India’s past to be “Why did Buddhism ‘die’ in India?”<sup>22</sup>

<sup>17</sup> For example, Robinson et al., *Buddhist Religion*, 135–36. Also see Wynne, *Buddhism*, 175.

<sup>18</sup> Romila Thapar, *Early India: From the Origins to AD 1300* (London: Penguin, 2003), 409. However, as Eaton notes, the Palas had shifted to supporting mainly Shaivites and Vaishnavites by the eleventh century (*The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier, 1204-1760* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993], 13). For another discussion of Pala land grants, see Sayantani Pal, “Religious Patronage in the Land Grant Charters of Early Bengal (Fifth to Thirteenth Century),” *Indian Historical Review* 41, no. 2 (2014): 185–205.

<sup>19</sup> McKeown, “From Bodhgaya to Lhasa to Beijing,” 17.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

<sup>21</sup> Davidson, *Indian Esoteric Buddhism*, 2. Filliozat made a similar claim (McKeown, “From Bodhgaya to Lhasa to Beijing,” 8).

<sup>22</sup> Ananya Vajpeyi, *Righteous Republic: The Political Foundations of Modern India* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012), 218.

Most well-documented reasons for the disappearance of religious traditions in other times and places do not fit the case of Indian Buddhism. For instance, Indian society did not collapse around 1200, and so the flagging of the Buddhist dharma in South Asia is unlike instances where a religion went extinct along with its entire supporting social infrastructure. Buddhism was not declared illegal in India, nor were Buddhists exiled from the subcontinent. Additionally, Buddhism did not fade away in many other places in premodern Asia and even took hold in some regions, such as Tibet, where it was introduced in the seventh and eighth centuries and was revitalized in the late tenth century.<sup>23</sup> Accordingly, the factors that prompted the dwindling of Indian Buddhism do not appear to have been entirely internal to the Buddhist tradition (if such a level of generalization is even useful). Last, and perhaps most potently, India has long housed many religious traditions, and no others of Buddhism's size and influence have declined to the point of near extinction on the subcontinent. In fact, smaller religions such as Jainism thrived throughout the second millennium CE and into the present day. Sikhism developed as a religious tradition during India's early modernity. Incredible religious diversity and the coexistence of multiple religious traditions are defining features of India that span the ancient, early modern, colonial, and modern periods. These factors increase the pressure on scholars to articulate a causal explanation for how Indian Buddhism largely ceased to exist eight hundred years ago.<sup>24</sup>

Islam has struck many people as a solid reason behind Buddhism's downfall in India for a host of reasons. In the remainder of this essay, I take up these elements and explicate their logic, the historiographical and intellectual flaws therein, and why they persist nonetheless in contemporary scholarship. In the final section of this essay, I return to the question of how we might pose more fruitful queries concerning the collapse of the Buddhist tradition in early second-millennium South Asia. I suggest a few key ways of reframing the question of what happened to Indian Buddhism that may better position future scholarship to account for multiple factors at play and move beyond the tired and largely ahistorical approach of blaming Islam.

#### THE RHETORIC OF CONQUEST IN INDO-ISLAMIC CHRONICLES

The most robust evidence that Islam—specifically Turkish Muslim raiders—eradicated Indian Buddhism comes from premodern Indo-Islamic chronicles. Premodern Islamic texts hardly single out Buddhism or Buddhist institutions for attack. Rather, for premodern Perso-Islamic writers, the sacking, looting,

<sup>23</sup> Mitchell, *Buddhism*, 160–67.

<sup>24</sup> Buddhism was reinvigorated in India in the twentieth century by Dalit conversions, largely following the example of B. R. Ambedkar, one of India's founding fathers and a convert to Buddhism shortly before his death in 1956. I do not deal with this revival of Indian Buddhism here.

and destruction of non-Muslim Indian religious sites—whether Hindu, Buddhist, or Jain—was a poignant way of underscoring the power of Islamic rulers of the day. This rhetoric of glorifying attacks against non-Muslim Indians is common in Arabic and Persian poetry as well as in Islamicate court chronicles from the tenth century onward. Especially starting with Mahmud of Ghazna (d. 1030) in the early eleventh century, Islamic texts portray encounters with non-Muslims “not as defensive jihads in face of an urgent threat to Islam, but as aggressive and unprovoked assaults led by the formidable ghazi king.”<sup>25</sup> Islamic writers during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries embellished Mahmud of Ghazna’s damage to Indian religious sites, especially the temple-rich town of Somnath in Gujarat, and the wealth he obtained as a result.<sup>26</sup> The Indo-Islamic text crucial to the story of Indian Buddhism’s fall dates to the thirteenth century and must be responsibly read in this broader context of an inherited tradition in which exaggerated instances of idol-breaking and temple raids were popular tropes of praise.

The story of the fatal clash between Buddhism and Islam rests largely upon a single Persian-language chronicle: Minhaj-i Siraj Juzjani’s *Tabaqat-i Nasiri*. Juzjani was born into a learned family in Afghanistan, near Ghur, and moved to the subcontinent in the mid-1220s.<sup>27</sup> He completed his large history of the Islamic world in 1259–60 for the Sultan of Delhi Nasiruddin Mahmud Shah (r. 1246–66). The work begins with Adam, the first man, and covers events in Iran, Central Asia, and India. In addition to the genre expectations of iconoclastic rhetoric for Indo-Islamic court chronicles of this period, Juzjani was writing within the context of the Mongol invasion that disrupted life across much of Asia in the thirteenth century. Accordingly, as Ali Anooshahr has pointed out, Juzjani emphasizes the ruler’s prerogative to defend and enlarge the domain of Islam.<sup>28</sup>

Within his history of Islamic conquest, Minhaj-i Siraj Juzjani records an attack led by Muhammad bin Bakhtiyar Khalji on a monastery in Bihar, as he heard it from a man from Farghana (in modern-day Uzbekistan). This is a crucial tale for the “Islam killed Indian Buddhism” story, largely because it features Muhammad bin Bakhtiyar, the man who allegedly sacked Nalanda. The passage is worth quoting in full in a fresh translation:

[Muhammad bin Bakhtiyar Khalji] led an army toward Bihar and plundered that area. For a year or two he proceeded apace in those environs and region until he

<sup>25</sup> Ali Anooshahr, *The Ghazi Sultans and the Frontiers of Islam: A Comparative Study of the Late Medieval and Early Modern Periods* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 58.

<sup>26</sup> Romila Thapar, *Somanatha: The Many Voices of History* (New Delhi: Penguin, 2004), 54–59.

<sup>27</sup> Cynthia Talbot, *The Last Hindu Emperor: Prithviraj Chauhan and the Indian Past, 1200–2000* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 46.

<sup>28</sup> Anooshahr, *Ghazi Sultans*, 35.

organised an attack on a fortified city in Bihar.<sup>29</sup> Trustworthy narrators have relayed that he approached that Bihari fortress with two hundred well-armed cavalry and suddenly attacked. There were two brothers who were wise men from Farghana, Nizamuddin and Samsamuddin, who were in Muhammad-i Bakhtiyar's service. The author of these lines met Samsamuddin in Lakhnavati in 641 AH, and this account is from him. When they arrived at the fortified city and began the assault, these two wise brothers were among the army of ghazi soldiers. Then Muhammad-i Bakhtiyar threw himself against the back door of that fortified city with strength and courage, thereby conquering the fort and acquiring great plunder. Most of the inhabitants of that area were Brahmins with shaved heads. They were all killed. There were many books there. When that library came to the attention of the Muslims, they summoned those [Brahmins] in order to ask them to divulge the meaning of those books. But they had been slain. When [the Muslims] figured out [the meaning of those books], they learned that the fortified city and fort were a school and that *bihar* is the Hindui word for school.<sup>30</sup>

For nearly 150 years scholars have relied upon this episode in order to piece together the end of premodern Indian Buddhism. The story has appeared in two major English-language translations. First, Henry Elliot and John Dowson translated excerpts from the *Tabaqat-i Nasiri*, including the section on Muhammad bin Bakhtiyar Khalji, in the mid- to late nineteenth century as part of their *History of India as Told by Its Own Historians*.<sup>31</sup>

While Elliot and Dowson's *History of India* is still cited with alarming trust in contemporary scholarship, it is best understood as colonial propaganda. Elliot's preface to the first volume openly extols "the supremacy of the British [colonial] Government" over "Muhammadan" kings who emulate "the vices of a Caligula or a Commodus."<sup>32</sup> Dowson's preface to the second volume, which contains the excerpts from the *Tabaqat-i Nasiri*, advertises itself as featuring "a conspicuous and brilliant example of the strength and weakness, the crimes, vices, and occasional virtues of Musulman despotism."<sup>33</sup> Writing in

<sup>29</sup> I follow earlier translators in rendering this phrase, *hiṣār-i bihār*, as a fortified city in Bihar. However, it could also mean a "fortified *vihāra*," that is, a protected Buddhist monastery. The Sanskrit word *vihāra* is transliterated into Perso-Arabic script on the following page of Juzjani's work and appears, as one would expect, as *bihār*; Minhaj-i Siraj Juzjani, *Tabaqat-i Nasiri*, 2 vols., ed. W. Nassau Lees, Khadim Hosain, and 'Abd al-Hal (Calcutta: College Press, 1864), 1:148.

<sup>30</sup> Juzjani, *Tabaqat-i Nasiri*, 1:147–148 (translation is my own). Compare Raverty's translation in Minhaj-i Siraj Juzjani, *Tabakat-i-Nasiri*, 2 vols., trans. H. G. Raverty (London: Gilbert & Rivington, 1881), 1:551–52; note that Raverty adds the word "Hindu," which does not appear in the original Persian.

<sup>31</sup> Henry M. Elliot and John Dowson, *The History of India as Told by Its Own Historians*, vols. 1–2 (London: Trubner, 1867–69), 2:305–14.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 1:xx.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 2:v. For other scholarship on the problems with Elliot and Dowson's work, see, e.g., Shahpurshah Hormasji Hovalala, *Studies in Indo-Muslim History: A Critical Commentary on Elliot and Dowson's History of India as Told by Its Own Historians* (Bombay, 1939); Mohammad Habib, "Introduction," in Henry M. Elliot and John Dowson, *History of India as Told by Its Own*

1934, Sankalia cited Elliot and Dowson's excerpt of the *Tabaqat-i Nasiri* in his *University of Nalanda*, a work that is itself still cited.<sup>34</sup> Even in the third edition of his *Indian Buddhism*, first published in 2000, A. K. Warder quoted from Elliot and Dowson's *History of India*; K. T. S. Sarao cited this passage in Elliot and Dowson's translation in 2012.<sup>35</sup> A decade or two after the publication of excerpts from the *Tabaqat-i Nasiri* in Elliot and Dowson's *History of India*, Henry George Raverty translated Juzjani's history (more or less in full) into English.<sup>36</sup> Raverty's translation has earned accolades from some scholars, whereas others note that he garbles the original Persian of certain episodes.<sup>37</sup> Raverty's translation of Juzjani's history is the version most commonly used today.

Juzjani's story has also been disseminated through its repetition in scholarly and popular writings, often unattributed to Juzjani. A good example of the latter is Walter Hutchinson's illustrated *Story of the Nations*, published in Britain in the 1930s. Hutchinson commissioned illustrations for the work, including one labeled "The end of the Buddhist monks, A.D. 1193" (see fig. 1).<sup>38</sup> Clearly following Juzjani's chronicle, the description of the painting mentions the invasion by Muhammad bin Bakhtiyar and even includes the detail that the general and his men were unable to read Buddhist sacred texts. The image shows the raiders seated on horseback and puzzling over a manuscript, while the bodies of the monks who could have helped decipher the work litter the ground around them. The painting also contains other suggestive elements. A few structures glimmer in the background, perhaps invoking India's past glory, even while ivy and twisted branches begin to swallow up the crumbling walls of the just-sacked *vihara*.

Juzjani's narrative, which claims to record an attack on Brahmins, is not an obvious candidate for the core of the alleged clash-based relationship between Islam and Indian Buddhism. Indeed, interpretations of this passage are fraught with historiographical uncertainties. For starters, most interpreters understand Juzjani to be speaking about Buddhist monks when he writes about Brahmins in this passage.<sup>39</sup> Such a reading is certainly plausible, especially given the reference to shaved heads, but far from certain. A more formidable

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*Historians* (Aligarh: Cosmopolitan Publishers, 1952), 2:1–102; K. A. Nizami, *Supplement to Elliot & Dowson's History of India*, 2 vols. (Delhi: Idarah-i Adabiyat-i Delli, 1981).

<sup>34</sup> Sankalia, *University of Nalanda*, 207.

<sup>35</sup> Warder, *Indian Buddhism*, 478–80; Sarao, *Decline of Buddhism in India*, 157.

<sup>36</sup> Raverty, *Tabakat-i-Nasiri*.

<sup>37</sup> Compare S. A. A. Rizvi, *Wonder That Was India: 1200–1700* (Delhi: Rupa, 2001), xxv, and comment in Peter Jackson, *The Delhi Sultanate: A Political and Military History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 29 n. 29.

<sup>38</sup> Walter Hutchinson, *Hutchinson's Story of the Nations* (London: Hutchinson, 1934), 169.

<sup>39</sup> For example, Sankalia silently corrects the Brahmin/Buddhist error (*University of Nalanda*, 212).



*Painted specially for this work.*

THE END OF THE BUDDHIST MONKS, A.D. 1193.

By the time Muhammad Ghori overran Northern India and founded Muhammadan rule, the only princes still protecting Buddhism were the Palas of Bengal, whose capital was Bihar. One of the invading generals, Muhammad Bakhtiyar Khilji, boldly attacked Bihar with a few followers, whereon the Pala king fled and left the monks to their fate. Most of them were slaughtered, and Buddhism finally disappeared from India. Their sacred books, which no one left behind could read, much puzzled the conqueror from the West.

FIG. 1.—Illustration of “The end of the Buddhist monks, A.D. 1193,” in Walter Hutchinson’s *Story of the Nations*.

historiographical obstacle is Juzjani's source for this information. Juzjani confesses that he is relaying hearsay at this point in his history. While Juzjani identifies his narrator, Samsamuddin of Farghana, as a reliable witness, nonetheless, he is repeating a story that he heard fifty years after the fact and had not independently verified.

Last, we must make a leap of faith regarding the identity of Juzjani's "fortified city." Most modern scholars understand the fortified city in the above passage to be Bihar Sharif, including its associated monastery of Odantapuri (Uddandapura). Like the shift from Brahmins to Buddhists, this identification is reasonable but lacks concrete evidence. Indeed, the precise location of Odantapuri has not been established.<sup>40</sup> Historians sometime cite Taranatha, a Tibetan monk who lived in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, as further support for this identification. In his *History of Buddhism in India*, Taranatha notes that *turushka* (Muslim or Turkish) rulers destroyed Odantapuri as well as Vikramashila.<sup>41</sup> But Taranatha wrote in 1608, hundreds of years after these events.<sup>42</sup> Moreover, Taranatha gives information about Nalanda and other Buddhist sites in India that we know is incorrect.<sup>43</sup> Taranatha's views of Islamic raids in twelfth-century India were also perhaps colored by his local context of ongoing conflict in Tibet involving Mongol descendants. For example, Sultan Said Khan, a Muslim descendent of the Mongols, led a jihad against Lhasa in the 1530s, and Mongols attacked central Tibet on behalf of the Dalai Lama in the early 1600s.<sup>44</sup> Dharmasvamin, a Tibetan monk who visited India in 1234–36, arguably offers more reliable information than Taranatha regarding Turkish raids on Indian Buddhist sites. Dharmasvamin only mentions Odantapuri as the residence of the Turkish commander at the time of his visit.<sup>45</sup>

My point is not so much that the standard interpretation of Juzjani's story as concerning the sack of a Buddhist monastery at Odantapuri is historically shaky (although it is more tenuous than most scholars have cared to admit).

<sup>40</sup> Frederick M. Asher, *Nalanda: Situating the Great Monastery* (Mumbai: published by Radhika Sabavala for the Marg Foundation, 2015), 27.

<sup>41</sup> *Taranatha's History of Buddhism in India*, trans. Lama Chimpa and Alaka Chattopadhyaya, ed. Debiprasad Chattopadhyaya (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1990), 319. On establishing the location of Vikramashila, see Alexis Sanderson, "The Śaiva Age—the Rise and Dominance of Śaivism during the Early Medieval Period," in *Genesis and Development of Tantrism*, ed. Shingo Einoo (Tokyo: Institute of Oriental Culture, University of Tokyo, 2009), 88 n. 156.

<sup>42</sup> Preface to *Taranatha's History of Buddhism in India*, xxiii. Taranatha claimed to rely on three Sanskrit sources, none of which are extant (Sanderson, "Śaiva Age," 89–90).

<sup>43</sup> Taranatha says that Nalanda was founded by Ashoka (*Taranatha's History of Buddhism in India*, 101), whereas a Gupta origin is more likely according to Darian, "Buddhism in Bihar," 344–45. Sanderson notes some of Taranatha's other errors concerning, for example, Somapuri, Trikatuka, and Odantapuri ("Śaiva Age," 90–96).

<sup>44</sup> Elverskog, *Buddhism and Islam*, 175–79, 218.

<sup>45</sup> *Biography of Dharmasvāmin (Chag lo tsa-ba Chos-rje-dpal), a Tibetan Monk Pilgrim*, trans. George Roerich (Patna: K. P. Jayaswal Research Institute, 1959), 93.

Rather, more crucially for my purposes, scholars have rarely bothered to outline the interpretative measures required to arrive at this narrative, much less problematized them. When taken as a whole, Juzjani's story can be made to fit a preconceived narrative about Muslims sacking Odantapuri, but the text itself does not furnish the details required to construct this specific story.

In addition to the interpretive acrobatics needed to read this episode from Juzjani as an attack on Odantapuri, there are substantial reasons to doubt the strict veracity of assaults on non-Muslim religious sites as recorded in the *Tabaqat-i Nasiri*. Premodern Islamic texts regularly exaggerate raids on Indian religious sites and their impacts, as I discuss above. Juzjani's narration of this incident bears some of the hallmarks of this rhetorical style. In particular, his attestation that the raiders killed every single person present at the site and only afterward sought to identify what sort of place they had sacked smacks of hyperbole. And yet, some modern thinkers have taken Juzjani and other Indo-Islamic sources at their word on this point, such as Peter Harvey, who notes that after "Muslim invasions," "The *Saṅgha* thus died out in most areas, and could not be revived without existing monks to ordain new ones."<sup>46</sup> Muhammad bin Bakhtiyar's feats also attracted aggrandizement among later writers, such as Ghulam Hussain Salim, who wrote in his *Riyaz al-Salatin* (1788) that Muhammad bin Bakhtiyar Khalji destroyed Hindu temples after his conquest of Bengal in 1204 (contemporary evidence suggests no such actions).<sup>47</sup> Such rhetorical flourishes tell us a great deal about premodern Islamic culture but little about historical military feats and their potential impact on Indian Buddhists.

Despite scholars proffering compelling evidence for the theatrical tendencies of Indo-Islamic chronicles, many continue to be drawn to the idea that these documents are one-dimensionally factual. The reason for this tendency is twofold. First, Indo-Islamic chronicles appear factually similar to premodern Western histories in their citation of names, dates, people, and real-world events. Second, more problematically, admitting that these so-called "chronicles" are sometimes more literary than historical potentially places the entire exercise of premodern Indian history in jeopardy. To put it bluntly, aside from Indo-Islamic chronicles, written historical records from premodern India are thin. Sanskrit and vernacular texts present deep historiographical problems, and we have yet to even recognize many of the most pertinent sources in these languages. Beyond texts we are left largely with brief inscriptions and archaeological evidence, which are discounted by many Buddhist studies scholars.<sup>48</sup>

<sup>46</sup> Harvey, *Introduction to Buddhism*, 196. Verardi also appears to take this point literally, although he reads the passage as trying to explain that Muhammad bin Bakhtiyar was not responsible for the massacre (*Hardships and Downfall*, 362–63).

<sup>47</sup> Eaton, "Temple Desecration," 278 n. 34.

<sup>48</sup> Schopen, "Archaeology and Protestant Presuppositions."

We could (and should) use sophisticated hermeneutical tactics for reading Persian-medium chronicles, but many modern scholars remain ill-equipped to deal with literary aspects of premodern texts. Despite the long-standing recognition of the literary nature of written historical sources, led by Hayden White, many prefer to act as if such works are objective factual accounts. It is easier to pretend that Islamic chronicles are straightforward histories, rather than complex documents that we need to parse with an array of critical literary tools.

#### THE SPECIAL PLACE OF NALANDA

Even if we follow scholarly opinion and accept the modified reading of Juzjani's story (and Taranatha's confirmation) that Muhammad bin Bakhtiyar decimated a Buddhist site in Bihar, the jump to destroying Nalanda requires further steps. Nalanda was a well-known monastery and center of Buddhist learning in India for centuries before the advent of Islamic raids. The Chinese traveler Xuanzang (i.e., Hsuan Tsang, d. 664) visited Nalanda in the seventh century to study Buddhist doctrines and philosophy.<sup>49</sup> Another slightly later Chinese monk, Yijing (635–713), similarly described a robust curriculum of learning at Nalanda.<sup>50</sup> Xuanzang dated the founding of Nalanda to shortly after the death of the Gautama Buddha, although the site likely dates from Gupta rule several hundred years later.<sup>51</sup> By the early thirteenth century, Nalanda appears to have fallen on hard times. For instance, Taranatha reports that by the time of King Ramapala (whose date is unclear, but prior to Turkish raids), Nalanda shared a head teacher with Vikramashila, another monastery in the area.<sup>52</sup> Few inscriptions survive that record support for Nalanda in the twelfth century, which suggests a severe drop off in patronage.<sup>53</sup> Nonetheless, for most modern scholars,

<sup>49</sup> Xuanzang/Hsuan Tsang wrote about his time at Nalanda in a text penned in the first half of the seventh century. As Asher has pointed out, even readers in the eighth century did not see this account as a travelogue. Today, we access Xuanzang's account through Samuel Beal's English translation, which is itself dated and mediated through a French translation of the original Chinese (Asher, *Nalanda*, 31–33). Abhishek Amar also draws attention to the problem with taking Xuanzang as an "authentic historical document" in "Buddhist Responses to Brāhmaṇa Challenges in Medieval India: Bodhgayā and Gayā," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 3rd ser., 22, no. 1 (2012): 158. On how Xuanzang even heard about Nalanda, which was not so famous at the time, see Kuwayama Shoshin, "How Xuanzang Learned about Nalanda," *China Report* 48, nos. 1–2 (2012): 61–88.

<sup>50</sup> Ronald James Dziwenka, "The Last Light of Indian Buddhism—the Monk Zhikong in 14th Century China and Korea" (PhD diss., University of Arizona, 2010), 89.

<sup>51</sup> Xuanzeng, *Si-Yu-Ki: Buddhist Records of the Western World: Translated from the Chinese of Hiuen Tsiang (A.D. 629)*, trans. Samuel Beal, 2 vols. (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co., 1906), 2:167–68.

<sup>52</sup> Asher, *Nalanda*, 131; *Taranatha's History of Buddhism in India*, 313.

<sup>53</sup> Asher, *Nalanda*, 131. One exception is the "Nalanda inscription of Vipulasrimitra," which dates to the early twelfth century and seems to record a monastery built at Nalanda. *Epigraphia*

Nalanda was the center of Buddhist learning in India, and so the destruction of Nalanda is required to pronounce the death of Indian Buddhism.

Many historians and Buddhist studies scholars have assumed that, after hitting Bihar Sharif, Muhammad bin Bakhtiyar went on to sack Nalanda and that the monks there fled or were killed. As Frederick Asher has recently noted, no premodern writer ever claims that there was a Muslim-led assault on Nalanda.<sup>54</sup> However, scholars have overwhelmingly assumed that the attack took place regardless. They further presume that Muhammad bin Bakhtiyar destroyed Nalanda's library (working on the supposition that Nalanda had an extensive library at this point in time).<sup>55</sup> Some historians seem to identify Juzjani's narration of the attack on a fortified city in Bihar to in fact be about Nalanda, which would make for a tighter narrative but is not supported within the Persian text.<sup>56</sup> More commonly, scholars argue—by reasoning rather than based on specific textual evidence—that Muhammad bin Bakhtiyar likely sacked multiple places in Bihar and that Nalanda must have been on that list.

Within either reading of Muhammad bin Bakhtiyar's presumed sack of Nalanda, scholarly and popular opinion alike posit that this event was a fatal blow for Indian Buddhism. Take, for example, the following account by Amartya Sen, a world-renowned economist known for his forays into Indian history. In 2015 Sen penned an op-ed piece concerning the controversy surrounding his decision to step down as chancellor of the new Nalanda University, founded in 2010. Seemingly transferring details from Juzjani's account to a presumed attack on Nalanda and drawing loosely on Tibetan sources, Sen wrote:

After more than seven hundred years of successful teaching, Nalanda was destroyed in the 1190s by invading armies from West Asia, which also demolished the other universities in Bihar. The first attack, it is widely believed, was led by the ruthless Turkic conqueror Bakhtiyar Khilji, whose armies devastated many cities and settlements in North India. All the teachers and monks in Nalanda were killed and much of the campus was razed to the ground. Special care was taken to demolish the beautiful statues of Buddha and other Buddhist figures that were spread across the campus. The library—a nine-story building containing thousands of manuscripts—is reputed to have burned for three days.<sup>57</sup>

*Indica*, ed. Hirananda Sastri, K. N. Dikshit, and N. P. Chakravarti (Delhi: Archaeological Survey of India, 1931–32), 21:97–101; also cited in McKeown, “From Bodhgaya to Lhasa to Beijing,” 16 n. 30.

<sup>54</sup> Asher, *Nalanda*, 27.

<sup>55</sup> Asher points out the assumption about both the existence of Nalanda's library at this point in time and its destruction (*Nalanda*, 27).

<sup>56</sup> For example, Satish Chandra, *Medieval India: From Sultanat to the Mughals (1206–1526)*, 2 vols. (Delhi: Har-Anand Publications, 1997), 1:41. Note, however, that Satish Chandra points out “several difficulties” in accepting parts of Juzjani's narrative (42–43).

<sup>57</sup> Amartya Sen, “India: A Stormy Revival of an International University,” *New York Review of Books*, August 13, 2015.

Sen declines to mention that Muhammad bin Bakhtiyar was Muslim, perhaps in a nod to our ignorance about the religious makeup of his troops and the interpretive problems of labeling his raids as “Islamic.”<sup>58</sup> But Sen dwells on the violence and alleged animosity of Muhammad bin Bakhtiyar, describing the Turk as “ruthless” and a “conqueror,” and noting the “special care” taken regarding the iconoclastic destruction of Buddhist images. The core story of aggression and the crucial sack of Nalanda, resulting in the death of a religion, stands strong.

Few historians would have written Sen’s account, but they too have been reluctant to let go of the presumption that Turkish raiders must hold some responsibility for the decline of Indian Buddhism. For example, even the few scholars who have more recently recognized the surprisingly thin historical basis for assuming that Muhammad bin Bakhtiyar attacked Nalanda have fallen short of questioning the underlying assumption that this man was responsible for the monastery’s fall. For example, Frederick Asher argues in his 2015 book, *Nalanda*, that Muhammad bin Bakhtiyar’s raids “destabilized the region” and cut off patronage networks. Thus, in Asher’s words, “So even if there was no direct attack on Nalanda, the monastery almost certainly suffered irretrievably from this invasion.”<sup>59</sup> During his life Muhammad bin Bakhtiyar bolstered an image of himself and his overlord, Muhammad Ghori, as fierce destroyers. For example, in 1204–5, he had gold coins struck that bore an image of Muhammad Ghori riding a galloping horse and wielding a mace, accompanied by the Sanskrit phrase “on the conquest of Bengal” (*gauda vijaye*).<sup>60</sup> But only circumstantial evidence suggests a connection between Muhammad bin Bakhtiyar’s warring and Nalanda.

In fact, the date of Nalanda’s closing does not coincide with Muhammad bin Bakhtiyar’s presumed raid. Tibetan sources attest that Nalanda remained open well into the thirteenth century. Dharmasvamin, a Tibetan monk who visited India between 1234 and 1236, includes an entire section on Nalanda in his travelogue.<sup>61</sup> Dharmasvamin mentions that *turushkas* (Muslims) harmed temples in the recent past and that a band of raiders passed through Nalanda while he was there. Nonetheless, he says, monks still lived at Nalanda, and Dharmasvamin spent several months studying under one of them.<sup>62</sup> A Tibetan source from the eighteenth century records that “after the Turushka raiders had made incursions in Nālandā,” a nine-storied library known as Ratnodadhi (Ocean

<sup>58</sup> Asher, *Nalanda*, 131.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 28, also see 131.

<sup>60</sup> Eaton, *Rise of Islam*, 33–34.

<sup>61</sup> *Biography of Dharmasvāmin*, 90–97.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 90–95.

of Jewels) was still standing and was used by a population of monks.<sup>63</sup> Dhyana-bhadra, an Indian monk, was sent to Nalanda to study for over a decade with Vinayabhadra during the mid- to late thirteenth century before traveling to Sri Lanka.<sup>64</sup> Cingalaraja, a ruler in Bengal, and his queen supported repairs to several temples and monasteries at Nalanda in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.<sup>65</sup> In short, Nalanda survived any attacks by Muhammad bin Bakhtiyar or other Islamicate raiders, and the institution also survived the proposed devastating effect of such military activities on the region. Local Buddhist rulers also outlived such raids and continued to rule parts of the area in the thirteenth century.<sup>66</sup> Elsewhere in India, such as Bengal, we find evidence for royal patronage of Buddhist monasteries into the early thirteenth century.<sup>67</sup>

#### A BUDDHIST STORY: ISLAM IN THE KALACHAKRA

An antagonistic and ultimately fatal narrative of interactions between pre-modern Islam and Indian Buddhism also emerges from the Buddhist tradition in the *Kalachakratāntra* (Tantra of the Wheel of Time). The *Kalachakratāntra* was composed in Sanskrit in the first few decades of the eleventh century and translated into Tibetan sixty years later.<sup>68</sup> The work does not offer specifics about sites and raiders. Indeed, the text predates Muhammad bin Bakhtiyar Khalji and his attack parties by more than a century and has a strong mythical bent. But the work provides important indications that Buddhists perceived certain Muslims as a threat. Perhaps more crucially for my purposes, the *Kalachakratāntra*'s views on Islam echoed through later Ti-

<sup>63</sup> Kim, *Receptacle of the Sacred*, 6. The same account is cited in Sankalia, *University of Nalanda*, 208; and Mahamahopadhyaya Satis Chandra Vidyabhusana, *A History of Indian Logic (Ancient, Mediaeval and Modern Schools)* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1921), 516.

<sup>64</sup> Arthur Waley, "New Light on Buddhism in Medieval India," *Melanges Chinois et Bouddhiques* 1 (1931–32): 361. Much of our information on Dhyana-bhadra's life, including his early study at Nalanda, comes from the fourteenth-century writer Yi Saek. On Yi Saek, see Dziwenka, "Last Light of Indian Buddhism," 47–50; for a direct quotation on Dhyana-bhadra's study at Nalanda, see 77. On the difficulty of establishing Dhyana-bhadra's birth date, see Dziwenka, "Last Light of Indian Buddhism," 78–88.

<sup>65</sup> Scharfe, *Education in Ancient India*, 150–51.

<sup>66</sup> *Biography of Dharmasvāmin* (Altekar's introduction), xiv–xvi; Elverskog, *Buddhism and Islam*, 2.

<sup>67</sup> Pal, "Religious Patronage in the Land Grant Charters," 203.

<sup>68</sup> On the *Kalachakratāntra*'s representation of Islam, see John Newman, "Islam in the Kālacakra Tantra," *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 21, no. 2 (1998): 311–71; Elverskog, *Buddhism and Islam*, 97–103; Alexander Berzin, "A Buddhist View of Islam," in *Islam and Inter-faith Relations: The Gerald Weisfeld Lectures*, ed. Lloyd Ridgeon and Perry Schmidt-Leukel (London: SCM Press, 2006), 225–51; Helmut H. R. Hoffman, "Kālacakra Studies 1: Manichaeism, Christianity, and Islam in the Kālacakra Tantra," *Central Asiatic Journal* 13, no. 1 (1969): 52–73. On the Kalachakra tradition generally, see John Newman, "A Brief History of Kalachakra," in Geshe Lhundub Sopa, Roger Jackson, and John Newman, *The Wheel of Time: The Kalachakra in Context* (Madison, WI: Deer Park Books, 1985), 51–90.

betan works that dealt with Islam, such as Taranatha's *History of Buddhism in India*.<sup>69</sup>

The *Kalachakratantra* is one of the few Sanskrit texts to explicitly discuss Islam as a religion, although it remains uncertain what branch of Muslims the author(s) encountered. One verse gives a list of eight prophets: Adam, Noah, Ibrahim, Moses, Jesus, the White-Clad, Muhammad, and the Mahdi.<sup>70</sup> This list is associated with a still-unidentified branch of Islam, perhaps a group similar to the Ismailis or the Mubayyida.<sup>71</sup> For my purposes, what is most interesting is how the *Kalachakratantra* disparages these Muslim figures. All are described as demons (*asura*) and barbarians (*mleccha*), and the first three are said to belong to the family of Danava demons (*danubhugajakule*).

Some verses in the *Kalachakratantra* also contain subtler and more pointed criticisms. For example, the verse on the eight prophets styles Muhammad as Madhumati, which could mean “honey mind” but could also mean “wino” or “drunkard.”<sup>72</sup> This method of adapting Arabic and, later, Persian names and words to have meaning in Sanskrit would become a common practice in subsequent decades.<sup>73</sup> But there is a harsh edge in adjusting Muhammad's name to accuse him of hypocrisy regarding the Quranic injunction against alcohol consumption. The *Kalachakratantra* repeats this thinly veiled criticism in other verses and also calls Muhammad by the slightly improved name Madhupati (wine-master).<sup>74</sup> The verse on the eight prophets has a similar approach regarding the Mahdi, who is described—depending on how one breaks the Sanskrit text—as either the destroyer (*mathani*) or the one to be destroyed (*mathaniya*).<sup>75</sup>

<sup>69</sup> Ronit Yoeli-Tlalim, “Islam and Tibet: Cultural Interactions—an Introduction,” in *Islam and Tibet: Interactions along the Musk Routes*, ed. Anna Akasoy, Charles Burnett, and Ronit Yoeli-Tlalim (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010), 13–14.

<sup>70</sup> *A Critical Edition of the Śrī Kālacakratantra-Rāja (collated with the Tibetan version)*, ed. Biswanath Banerjee (Calcutta: Asiatic Society, 1993), 39, verse 153 (my translation). For translations and comparison with the Tibetan version, see Newman, “Islam in the Kālacakra Tantra,” 320 and 352; Hoffman, “Kālacakra Studies,” 56–57.

<sup>71</sup> Elverskog, *Buddhism and Islam*, 98.

<sup>72</sup> For a reading of *madhumati* as “honey mind,” see Hoffman, “Kālacakra Studies,” 57; and Matthew Kapstein, “Just Where on Jambudvīpa Are We? New Geographical Knowledge and Old Cosmological Schemes in 18th Century Tibet,” in *Forms of Knowledge in Early Modern Asia: Explorations in the Intellectual History of India and Tibet, 1500–1800*, ed. Sheldon Pollock (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 343; for a reading of *madhumati* as “wino,” see Newman, “Islam in the Kālacakra Tantra,” 333.

<sup>73</sup> Later, more positive or at least neutral examples include Sanskrit *sūtratrāṇa* (chief protector) or *sūratrāṇa* (protector of the gods) for Persian *sultān*, and Sanskrit *sphuramāna* (a thing that goes forth) for Persian *farmān*. Audrey Truschke, *Culture of Encounters: Sanskrit at the Mughal Court* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 66.

<sup>74</sup> Newman, “Islam in the Kālacakra Tantra,” 333.

<sup>75</sup> Compare Hoffman, “Kālacakra Studies,” 56–57, and Newman, “Islam in the Kālacakra Tantra,” 352.

In addition to maligning Muslim religious figures, other verses in the *Kalachakratantra* characterize Muslim practices, such as eating habits, as both abhorrent and un-Islamic. For example, one passage emphasizes the range of meats that Muslims consume and their cooking practices in language designed to evoke disgust: “The [barbarians (*mleccha*)] slaughter camels, horses, and cows, and then cook the flesh and blood together just a little. Then they mix together beef, quicksilver, ghee and pungent spices, and rice and vegetables. Once cooked over the fire with forest fruits, men then eat it with relish and drink bird eggs. That, O King, is the place of demons (*asura*).”<sup>76</sup> Crucial to grasping the impact of this passage is that Muslims generally proscribe the consumption of blood and slaughter animals in such a way that blood does not contaminate the meat. Thus, this verse simultaneously argues that violence is embodied in the Islamic practice of slaughtering and consuming animals and that Muslims break their own taboos in the process.<sup>77</sup> In order to level such criticisms, the author(s) of the *Kalachakratantra* were likely familiar with basic Islamic beliefs and practices.

The *Kalachakratantra* prophesies that the rise of the “Muslim dharma” (*mlecchadharmā*) will result in an apocalyptic war against Buddhists. Specifically, 1800 years after the founding of Islam, Muslim forces will rise up and mount a fierce but ultimately failed assault on the mythical Buddhist kingdom of Shambhala.<sup>78</sup> Premodern commentators of the *Kalachakratantra* interpreted this myth as indicating an inner battle rather than a physical one.<sup>79</sup> But nonetheless, this vision seems, in the words of Johan Elverskog, “clearly a response to contemporary realities in northwest India.”<sup>80</sup> This pre-saged defeat of Islam is perhaps invoked by the name “one to be destroyed” (*mathaniya*) for the Mahdi, the final Muslim prophet. Such prophecies indicate another possible source of the presumption that these two religious traditions were engaged in a fatal struggle, especially in the Tibetan tradition.

#### DEBILITATED BUDDHISM

Many scholars have proposed that by the time of Turkish-led raids in Bihar in the early thirteenth century, Indian Buddhism was already a shell of its

<sup>76</sup> *Critical Edition of the Śrī Kālacakratantra-Rāja*, 39, verse 154 (my translation). Also see Newman, “Islam in the Kālacakra Tantra,” 352; Hoffman, “Kālacakra Studies,” 65. For other translations, see Newman, “Islam in the Kālacakra Tantra,” 319 and Hoffman, “Kālacakra Studies,” 66.

<sup>77</sup> For other mentions of Muslim eating habits in the *Kalachakratantra*, see, e.g., Newman, “Islam in the Kālacakra Tantra,” 340.

<sup>78</sup> Berzin, “Buddhist View of Islam,” 240; Alexander Berzin, “Holy Wars in Buddhism and Islam: The Myth of Shambhala” (2006), <http://studybuddhism.com/en/advanced-studies/history-culture/buddhism-islam/holy-wars-in-buddhism-and-islam>.

<sup>79</sup> Berzin, “Buddhist View of Islam,” 240–41.

<sup>80</sup> Elverskog, *Buddhism and Islam*, 98.

former self. This cluster of arguments posits that Buddhism had lost ground on multiple fronts—which shift depending on the thinker and time period—over the previous few centuries or perhaps even the previous millennium. I am less interested here in the veracity of specific events and claims, although many fall short in terms of their historical backing and persuasive power. Rather, I am more intrigued by how these arguments, especially concerning monastic-centered Buddhism, have been deployed by modern scholars in order to imagine Indian Buddhism as feeble enough to be destroyed by a handful of raiders.

Many twentieth-century scholars saw Indian Buddhism's decline as the result, in part, of internal transformations. For example, some argued for the moral decay of Indian Buddhism as it incorporated tantric practices and then corroded from within.<sup>81</sup> In a parallel track, some thinkers suggested that certain Mahayana practices made Buddhism susceptible to being absorbed within Hinduism.<sup>82</sup> Neither of these theories grapples with historical examples that seem to disrupt the proposed causality (tantric practices arguably helped Shaivism to thrive in medieval India, and the Buddhist sangha in medieval Bihar aggressively appropriated Hindu gods).<sup>83</sup> But both found articulation, although in a dissatisfied tone, in Jean Filliozat's *L'Inde classique*, published in 1953.<sup>84</sup> Also popular among a previous generation of scholars was the idea of seeing Buddhism's decline in terms of its social function. For instance, D. D. Kosambi argued that Indian Buddhism "inevitably faded away" when its most useful aspects were coopted by Brahmins, who were better positioned to reach common people.<sup>85</sup> The fatalism and universalism that undergird Kosambi's argument have come under increasing fire, however, as scholars struggle to come to terms with the immense diversity that characterizes Buddhist history in different times and places.

While moral corruption and Marxist social theories are largely out of fashion these days, the notions that Indian Buddhism was internally corrupt and that Brahmins posed a potent threat to Buddhists both have strong echoes in more recent theories that assert medieval Indian Buddhism's waning intellectual power. Some of these arguments assert a possible overemphasis on monks in medieval Indian Buddhism, at the expense of the laity. For instance, religious studies scholars and historians alike have suggested that Buddhism

<sup>81</sup> For example, Sankalia, *University of Nalanda*, 210. One also sees this idea cited more recently; e.g., Kanai Lal Hazra, *Rise and Decline of Buddhism in India* (Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers, 1995), 382–85. Compare Mitchell, *Buddhism*, 154–57.

<sup>82</sup> Jaini, "Disappearance of Buddhism," 86–88.

<sup>83</sup> On both points, see Amar, "Buddhist Responses to Brahmana Challenges," 158–59, 174–82.

<sup>84</sup> McKeown, "From Bodhgaya to Lhasa to Beijing," 7–8.

<sup>85</sup> D. D. Kosambi, "The Decline of Buddhism in India," *Times of India*, May 24, 1956.

became too obsessed with philosophy and so monks “began to lose touch with the world outside the cloister,” which alienated the laity.<sup>86</sup>

Several other ideas, some of them contradictory, concerning relations between Buddhist monks and laypeople also filter into the notion of a debilitated Indian Buddhism. Some scholars contend that many medieval Indian Buddhists migrated east and north, which nearly eliminated the Buddhist laity and their accompanying support of monastic life.<sup>87</sup> For others, the Indian Buddhist laity was decimated by conversions to “devotional Hinduism.”<sup>88</sup> Through the centuries, monks were not especially cognizant of the needs of the laity, some have alleged, and they even failed to produce a manual of conduct for lay Buddhists until the eleventh century.<sup>89</sup> Alternatively, scholars have drawn attention to lay support for Mahayana Buddhist art and practices into the early second millennium CE.<sup>90</sup> One scholar has even argued that the Mahayana tradition was overly responsive to the demands of the Indian laity and that this “demand-based development strategy perhaps sacrificed this tradition’s distinctive character and ultimately led to its absorption into other religious traditions.”<sup>91</sup> A myriad of assumptions about the laity, monks, and their mutual reliance run through these disparate propositions. Such ideas, at least in their current state, provide a poor basis for explaining the supposed feebleness of medieval Indian Buddhism.

Scholars tend to be more united when they suggest that Hindu attacks of various sorts weakened Indian Buddhism. For instance, many argue that Hindu thinkers applied intellectual pressure to Buddhist followers and Buddhist thought.<sup>92</sup> Buddhists were also subject to periodic military assaults by Hindu rulers. For example, Xuanzang testifies that Mihirakula, a sixth-century Hun king and a Shaivite, found the Buddhist dharma wanting and so destroyed

<sup>86</sup> Prebish and Keown, *Introducing Buddhism*, 94. For more detail on the argument that Indian Buddhist monks ignored the laity, see the discussion in André Wink, *Al-Hind: The Making of the Indo-Islamic World*, vol. 2: *The Slave Kings and the Islamic Conquest, 11th–13th Centuries* (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 335–51.

<sup>87</sup> Elverskog, *Buddhism and Islam*, 131.

<sup>88</sup> Mitchell, *Buddhism*, 158.

<sup>89</sup> Vinay Lal, “Buddhism’s Disappearance from India” (2006), <https://www.sscnet.ucla.edu/southasia/Religions/paths/BuddhismDisappear.doc>. As Padmanabh Jaini points out, Jains, by contrast, produced around fifty texts on lay conduct (“Disappearance of Buddhism,” 84).

<sup>90</sup> For example, Michael Willis, “Avalokiteśvara of the Six Syllables: Locating the Practice of the ‘Great Vehicle’ in the Landscape of Central India,” *Bulletin of the Asia Institute*, n.s., 23 (2009): 221–29.

<sup>91</sup> Kim, *Receptacle of the Sacred*, 269–70.

<sup>92</sup> For example, Ahir, Omvedt, and Verardi argue, in different ways, that Brahmanical pressure and attacks were largely responsible for Buddhism’s decline. Respectively, Ahir, *Buddhism Declined in India*; Omvedt, *Buddhism in India*, 168–74; and Verardi, *Hardships and Downfall*.

Buddhist stupas and killed both monks and lay followers in Kashmir.<sup>93</sup> Kalhana, a twelfth-century Sanskrit chronicler, confirmed Mihirakula's penchant for destruction and slaughter.<sup>94</sup> More generally, as early as the fifth century, the Chinese traveler Faxian suggests Indian Buddhism was on the wane.<sup>95</sup> Subsequent travelers, including Xuanzang in the seventh century, likewise attest to depopulated monasteries and the strength of Hindu traditions.<sup>96</sup>

The notion of an enfeebled medieval Indian Buddhism, confined largely to fragile monastic institutions, can be used to replace the "Islam killed Indian Buddhism" narrative, but, more commonly, it is marshaled to undergird it. For example, R. C. Mitra put it thus in a passage that Hazra cites approvingly in his 1995 book on Indian Buddhism: "The monasteries had been the nerve centres of Buddhism, and with their collapse, communal life was unhinged and abruptly terminated. Their very concentration had made the monasteries easier targets of attack than the Hindu temples and sacred places, which must have provoked equal fury of the Moslems."<sup>97</sup> In short, the thinking goes, Indian Buddhism circa 1200 was not a full-fledged religion but merely the shadow of one, which explains why it could be so easily demolished by a few military strikes. More recently, a few scholars have cited this coalescence of factors in order to downplay the role of Islam. For example, as K. T. S. Sarao had recently written, "the Arab and Turkish onslaught on Buddhist institutions may have worked at the most only as a *coup de grâce* in some parts of India."<sup>98</sup>

The idea that medieval Indian Buddhism was concentrated in monasteries elucidates why the Nalanda narrative is key to many modern explanations of the tradition's demise. By the time Muhammad bin Bakhtiyar arrived in Bihar, (in the eyes of many scholars) vulnerable places like Nalanda were the only thing left of Indian Buddhism to be destroyed. As Prebish and Keown put it in their 2010 edition of *Introducing Buddhism*, "Unlike Hinduism, which has always had roots at the village level, Buddhism became concentrated in a few key institutions of higher learning. This proved to be its undoing when Muslim raiding parties began to enter India in increasing numbers from the tenth century."<sup>99</sup> Even within this mix of extenuating factors, however, many thinkers continue to emphasize the crucial role played by Turkish assaults, especially in introductory textbooks. For example, Peter Harvey's *Introduction*

<sup>93</sup> Romila Thapar, "Cultural Transaction and Early India: Tradition and Patronage," *Social Scientist* 15, no. 165 (1987): 10–11; Xuanzang, *Si-Yu-Ki*, 1:167–72.

<sup>94</sup> Kalhana, *Kalhana's Rajatarangini: A Chronicle of the Kings of Kashmir*, 3 vols., trans. and ed. M. A. Stein (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1989), vol. 1, bk. 1, verses 289–324.

<sup>95</sup> Hazra, *Rise and Decline of Buddhism in India*, 371.

<sup>96</sup> Lal, "Buddhism's Disappearance from India"; Hazra, *Rise and Decline of Buddhism in India*, 371–77; Omvedt, *Buddhism in India*, 150–60.

<sup>97</sup> Cited approvingly in Hazra, *Rise and Decline of Buddhism in India*, 392.

<sup>98</sup> Sarao, *Decline of Buddhism in India*, 251.

<sup>99</sup> Prebish and Keown, *Introducing Buddhism*, 94.

to *Buddhism*, revised in 2013, lists tantric practices and “Hindu hostility” among the causes of Buddhism’s decline in India but reserves the fatal assault for Islam, proclaiming that “Muslim invasions were the worst blow.”<sup>100</sup> Setting aside the persistent recourse to Islam as the killer, the proposition that South Asian Buddhism had been on the downward swing for centuries contains major drawbacks in terms of its argumentative logic and evidentiary backing.

Most thinkers posit that the concentration of Indian Buddhism in monastic centers, part of the process of decay, happened over the course of hundreds of years. This prolonged time frame echoes that of Gibbons in his *Fall of the Roman Empire*, a process that allegedly unfolded over more than one thousand years. Such arguments rest heavy on the trope of decline, especially modern assumptions about what constitutes vitality in a tradition, and are nakedly teleological. In addition, arguments for elite medieval Indian Buddhism rely unabashedly on elite evidence, such as texts and inscriptions. Even these elite forms of evidence do not always support a vision of monastic Buddhism. For example, Kim has written about how the Buddhist book cult thrived among lay Indian Buddhists in the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries.<sup>101</sup> According to Kim, village-based lay patronage and production replaced an earlier model that featured monastic sites of book production (and largely monastic and royal patronage) around the middle of the twelfth century, before Muhammad bin Bakhtiyar’s raids.<sup>102</sup> But there is also a larger problem that “elite Buddhism” may reflect the types of evidence that Indologists consult and perhaps the types of evidence that are available more than the historical reality of medieval India.

#### THE STORIES WE TELL

Medieval textual evidence alone, even given its misuse as candid fact, cannot entirely account for the strength of the modern supposition that Islam brought an end to the once diverse and thriving tradition of Indian Buddhism. Contemporary prejudices about both Islam and Buddhism (and, to a lesser degree, Hinduism) as religions also play into the formulation of an antagonistic relationship between these two traditions. Popular discourse in the twenty-first-century West widely assumes that Islam is a violent, aggressive force and Buddhism a peaceful faith with little means of defense. Such ideas date back to the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, when Western thinkers first formulated views of these two traditions under the rubric

<sup>100</sup> Harvey, *Introduction to Buddhism*, 195 and 196, respectively.

<sup>101</sup> Kim, *Receptacle of the Sacred*, chap. 6.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*, 221, 251–53.

of world religions.<sup>103</sup> Contemporary scholars typically shy away from such sweeping generalizations, and religious studies thinkers also generally reject the proposition that religious traditions possess any unchanging core as analytically bogus. More specifically, some have pointed out that Buddhists have often demonstrated a capacity for violence on par with followers of other traditions and have even justified murder within Buddhist thought.<sup>104</sup> But contemporary biases about specific religions nevertheless crop up in many textbook accounts of the fall of Indian Buddhism.

For example, A. K. Warder, a leading scholar of Buddhism until his death in 2013, wrote a summary of Indian Buddhism that was first published in 1970 and has been reprinted several times. The final section of his book is boldly titled “The Spirit of Destruction” and details the end of Indian Buddhism at the hands of Islam. He opens the section with more than two pages of quotes from Islamicate chronicles, including Juzjani’s account of sacking Bihar Sharif, that purport to record the destruction of Hindu, Buddhist, and Jain holy sites.<sup>105</sup> Warder’s presentation of these texts suggests that these Persian sources can be read without any context or interpretive framework, as statements of pure fact. He freely mixes sources written over the span of six hundred years and tales about Islamic rulers and raiders from roughly the same stretch of time. Warder does not need to explicitly state his underlying argument that Islam is a monolithic tradition. Regarding Islam’s alleged violent edge, Warder makes the *prima facie* false statement: “It is hardly necessary to emphasise the thoroughness with which the older religions have been obliterated in practically every country where Muslims have ruled for any length of time.”<sup>106</sup> A few pages later, Warder admits that he has no explanation for why Brahmanism (his word) survived the Islamic onslaught while Buddhism fell, but he proclaims as relevant that “Buddhism has always been a philosophy and religion of peace in all senses of that word.”<sup>107</sup>

Few recent works have displayed such blatant biases regarding Islam and Buddhism, but several staples of Warder’s approach are endemic to the field. For example, Warder cites various Persian texts on temple destructions without specifying what temples (or even what religious traditions) are being targeted. A similarly blasé attitude toward detail arises in other overviews of

<sup>103</sup> For a detailed discussion, see Tomoko Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions, or, How European Universalism Was Preserved in the Language of Pluralism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), chaps. 4 and 6. Also see references in Johan Elverskog, “Ritual Theory across the Buddhist-Muslim Divide in Late Imperial China,” in *Islam and Tibet: Interactions along the Musk Routes*, ed. Anna Akasoy, Charles Burnett, and Ronit Yoeli-Tlalim (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011), 294 n. 4.

<sup>104</sup> Bernard Faure, *Unmasking Buddhism* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 94–99.

<sup>105</sup> Warder, *Indian Buddhism*, 478–80.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*, 480.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*, 484.

Indian Buddhism that are commonly used in undergraduate courses. For example, a December 2014 survey of subscribers to the H-Buddhism Listserv indicated that 14 percent of respondents used Prebish and Keown's *Introducing Buddhism* (2010) in survey courses on Buddhism.<sup>108</sup> Prebish and Keown wrote in their section on the end of Indian Buddhism that "the Turkic general Mahmud Shabuddin Ghori sacked Nālandā in 1197 and Vikramaśīla in 1203, burning their libraries and destroying priceless literary and artistic treasures."<sup>109</sup> In reality, Mahmud Shabuddin Ghori (better known as Muhammad Ghori) never set foot in Bihar; the raids were carried out by other parties. Getting the facts straight is hardly relevant to a project propped up, in part, by pre-set judgments about specific religious traditions.

Warder's broader notion that violence is intrinsic to Islam is on display, both vividly and subtly, in many overview works on Buddhism that are commonly assigned in introductory courses and relied upon by scholars. For example, writing in 1997, Robinson and his cowriters cannot believe that Bodhgaya and other holy Buddhist sites survived the Muslim onslaught, saying that such events occurred "miraculously."<sup>110</sup> Prebish and Keown deem "similar" the attitude that led Muslim raiders to destroy Buddhist icons circa 1200 and the Taliban to blow up the colossal Buddha statues at Bamiyan in 2001.<sup>111</sup> Even scholars who have moved away from such inflammatory statements continue to think with the idea that Islam and Buddhism are polar opposites. For example, Cathy Cantwell brings up Islam and Christianity a few times in her book, *Buddhism: The Basics* (2010), as foils for understanding Buddhism. For Cantwell, Christianity is often similar to Buddhism, whereas Islam is Buddhism's inverse.<sup>112</sup>

In addition to appealing to popular views of the diametrically opposed cores of Buddhism versus Islam, the tale of one religion being wiped away by iconoclasm has other narrative charms. The story has a gripping villain (Muhammad bin Bakhtiyar) and relatable victims (peaceful monks). The postulation that Islam, specifically Muhammad bin Bakhtiyar and his raiding parties, killed Indian Buddhism is compelling in most respects, except its historical truth-value. The more realistic, honest story line about the potential

<sup>108</sup> Berkwitz, "Textbook Buddhism," 9.

<sup>109</sup> Prebish and Keown, *Introducing Buddhism*, 94.

<sup>110</sup> Robinson et. al., *Buddhist Religion*, 136. Compare Strong, who says that Bodhgaya was destroyed along with Nalanda (*Buddhisms*, 391).

<sup>111</sup> Prebish and Keown, *Introducing Buddhism*, 94.

<sup>112</sup> Cantwell, *Buddhism*, 76; cf. references to Christianity on 20, 45, and 163. Berkwitz also notes Cantwell's "frequent comparisons to other religions such as Islam and Christianity" ("Textbook Buddhism," 11). Compare to the approach of Wynne who points out similarities between Buddhism and Islam (and Christianity) as well as differences (*Buddhism*, 1–2 and 78) and that of Gail Omvedt who portrays Buddhism and Islam as sharing many overarching characteristics (*Buddhism in India*, 175).

impact of Muhammad bin Bakhtiyar's attacks on Indian Buddhist sites runs as follows. Muhammad bin Bakhtiyar Khalji and his raiders hit some non-Muslim targets in Bihar, likely including Buddhist sites such as Odantapuri and perhaps Nalanda, and did some damage. But the raids were not cataclysmic for all monastic centers, and Nalanda continued to operate for decades (perhaps even centuries) afterward. Lay Buddhist practices also seem to have continued into the thirteenth century in the area. Nalanda and other Buddhist institutions in the region eventually closed due to lack of interest and support, stemming from larger social and religious changes in premodern North India that are still under-researched and poorly understood. We are not sure exactly when that happened.

Between these two tales, the one told by Juzjani and many modern scholars and popular writers is far more exciting and also appeals to a basic human desire, on display perhaps nowhere more than in the discipline of history, to find concrete agency and causality. The more nuanced narrative is far more grounded in solid analysis, but it is vague and a bit bland. One finds variations on this second narrative in select scholarly monographs and dissertations, but it rarely gets a broader hearing in textbooks much less popular discourse. In short, many people keep repeating the "Islam killed Indian Buddhism" narrative, in part, because the real story is still so murky.

#### CONCLUSION

The decline of Indian Buddhism is often depicted as a great loss for the subcontinent. For example, talking about the raids of "Muslim Turks," Robinson and his cowriters lament, "Because the universities had been the repositories not only of Buddhist traditions but also of secular arts and sciences, their annihilation was a devastating blow to Indian culture as a whole."<sup>113</sup> Specific manuscripts and individuals perished in Turkish raids on Buddhist sites. But one gets the sense that Robinson and his coauthors mean to bereave a deeper, almost civilizational loss. A similar sense of large-scale injury comes through in the language of other authors as well, such as Warder's "Spirit of Destruction," Amartya Sen's "thousands of manuscripts" that "burned for three days," and the persistent recourse of many scholars to Islamic iconoclasm.<sup>114</sup> Such mournful attitudes contain unhelpful assumptions about what is pertinent and vibrant within Indian culture (Buddhism) and what is foreign and destructive (Islam). Such thinking, even when toned down by scholarly convention, prevents scholars from fruitfully investigating the end (or near end) of Indian Buddhism

<sup>113</sup> Robinson et al., *Buddhist Religion*, 135.

<sup>114</sup> For example, Prebish and Keown underscore the vast extent of this perceived harm by asserting that, after being hit by Turks, "The great library of Nālandā is said to have smoldered for six months" (*Introducing Buddhism*, 94).

in the early second millennium, a project that could also benefit from several additional adjustments.

Instead of analyzing “Indian Buddhism,” we are better off talking about Indian Buddhists. This small semantic change represents a significant conceptual shift. When we talk about whether or not Islam killed off Indian Buddhism, we discuss a story about traditions rather than people. In fact, the historiographical question of what happened to Indian Buddhism is really a query about what happened to the people who practiced Indian Buddhism. Why do we not find many such individuals after circa 1200? Or do such individuals survive, and we have failed to properly identify them? Were Buddhists really all slaughtered by raiders led by Muhammad bin Bakhtiyar Khalji? If they were not all killed by Turks, then why did Indians no longer find it important or compelling to incorporate Buddhist ideas and practices into their lives? Taking up this last question, some have suggested that many Buddhists converted to Islam in order to escape the Hindu caste system.<sup>115</sup> The idea that caste motivated Indians to adopt Islam lacks evidence.<sup>116</sup> Nonetheless, based on manuscript colophons, it seems that lay Buddhists in medieval eastern India were well integrated into the caste system.<sup>117</sup> So when we talk about “Indian Buddhists,” how exactly do we define such individuals and their complex relationships with other religious traditions and social conventions? Exploring textured religious and social identities may well yield promising venues of inquiry.

Talking about specific Buddhists may also focus scholarly attention in productive ways. Was Buddhism really an Indian tradition writ large in the early second millennium? Was it ever such a thing? It is perhaps more useful to ask what happened to specific Buddhist communities in specific parts of the subcontinent. Such an approach has served scholars well in dealing with other instances of “decline” on the subcontinent. For example, Sheldon Pollock has taken up the challenge of trying to make sense of what is often termed “the death of Sanskrit,” meaning how “the capacity of Sanskrit thought to make history had vanished.”<sup>118</sup> Pollock’s answer is, in brief, it’s complicated, and that we can pinpoint no single moment of collapse but rather need to accommodate multiple historical cases and rhythms into the narrative of how Sanskrit ceased to be a living tradition. While Pollock’s death of Sanskrit thesis has proven (and was designed to be) controversial, it has been enormously productive for the field. For Indian Buddhism, making the questions and an-

<sup>115</sup> Verardi, *Hardships and Downfall*, 379 referring to quotes on 53–54.

<sup>116</sup> Richard Eaton discusses the lack of evidence that Indian converts to Islam were motivated by social mobility and escape from the caste system in “Shrines, Cultivators, and Muslim ‘Conversion’ in Punjab and Bengal, 1300–1700,” *Medieval History Journal* 12, no. 2 (2009): 193–244.

<sup>117</sup> Kim, *Receptacle for the Sacred*, 238–39.

<sup>118</sup> Sheldon Pollock, “The Death of Sanskrit,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 43, no. 2 (2001): 392–426, quote at 394.

swers more specific and people-focused may help scholars do away with the unfounded presumption that there is a single life cycle to Indian Buddhism as a tradition.

In addition to talking about specific people rather than abstract traditions and being open to multiple vectors of decline, we ought to be more critical about assuming that another religion must have played a decisive role in Buddhism's decline on the subcontinent. The fallacy here is that because Buddhism, a religion, is the subject of inquiry, scholars have long assumed that another religion must be involved in its demolition. Some, such as William Theodore de Bary, have even argued that the spread of Islam was dependent upon demolishing Indian Buddhism, writing, "It is noteworthy that Islam had its greatest success in those parts of India where Buddhism had been strongest, in the Northwest, and in Bengal."<sup>119</sup> This suggestion is undergirded by a distinctly Protestant assumption that people belong to a single religion.<sup>120</sup> Moreover, Muslims did not require the elimination of any other Indian religious traditions in order to gain a foothold on the subcontinent. And so, perhaps things outside of Islam prompted and hastened a decline in the number of Indian Buddhists. Some scholars have suggested that Hinduism was a more active agent in this regard than Islam, an argument that follows a strikingly similar pattern in that one religion is held responsible for the demise of another.<sup>121</sup> More promising is the notion that Islamic peoples may well have played a role in the shrinking numbers of Indian Buddhists, but not as Muslims per se. Aside from their religion, Islamic groups brought new ways of ruling, fresh social norms and orders, and an array of other political and social changes to India in the second millennium. Perhaps social and political shifts, rather than anything religious, were causal factors in the decline in South Asian Buddhists.

Another important corrective is to continue seeking out alternative ways that Buddhists and Muslims interacted before, during, and after the alleged disappearance of Indian Buddhism. For example, Jinah Kim, an art historian, has recently argued in the context of talking about the Buddhist book cult in medieval India that survived until the fifteenth century: "Everything Buddhist did not disappear due to the impact of violent destruction caused by the arrival of Islamic forces."<sup>122</sup> McKeown has discussed a recorded debate between a Muslim thinker and a Buddhist intellectual in the early fifteenth century.<sup>123</sup>

<sup>119</sup> William Theodore de Bary, ed., *The Buddhist Tradition: In India, China and Japan* (New York: Modern Library, 1972), 117. This idea is echoed by others, including Verardi in *Hardships and Downfall*, 379.

<sup>120</sup> For another way that Protestant assumptions have shaped Buddhist studies, see Schopen, "Archaeology and Protestant Presuppositions."

<sup>121</sup> Most notably, Verardi, *Hardships and Downfall*.

<sup>122</sup> Kim, *Receptacle of the Sacred*, 264.

<sup>123</sup> McKeown, "From Bodhgaya to Lhasa to Beijing," 221–25.

Elverskog has written about how Muslims and Buddhists engaged on the silk roads as traders, allies, and as patrons and seekers of patronage between the eighth and nineteenth centuries.<sup>124</sup> Especially interesting for thinking about the question of whether Muslims were always antagonistic toward Indian Buddhism, Elverskog talks about Buddhist rulers operating under Muslim overlords as early as the eighth century (an arrangement still witnessed in Bihar in the thirteenth century).<sup>125</sup> These venues of research, while promising, ultimately take us away from the question of what happened to Indian Buddhists.

It is a reasonable historical question to try to explain the decline (or multiple moments of decline) of Indian Buddhists and the tradition in which they participated. Here I have taken a first step of describing and thereby partially disarming the historiographical vigor of the Islamic sword in this narrative. However, in order to progress further on the path of challenging our assumptions about the alleged violent relationship between medieval Islam and Indian Buddhism, we need other sorts of explanations for why the number of Indian Buddhists dwindled. Those explanations will have to grapple with the formidable challenges of telling a less compelling story and arguing for a nuanced reading of Indo-Islamic chronicles and Sanskrit and Tibetan sources. But a solid first step is to ask what happened to Indian Buddhists, be open to more layered answers, and seriously interrogate the presumption that our explanation must begin and end with religion.

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<sup>124</sup> Elverskog, *Buddhism and Islam*.

<sup>125</sup> *Ibid.*, 49–50.