



Hall of a Thousand Columns

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Born in 1304, Ibn Battutah left his native Tangier as a young scholar of law; over the 30 years that followed he visited most of the known world between Morocco and China. In this enchanting travelogue, Tim Mackintosh-Smith retraces one leg of the Moroccan's journey: the dizzy ladders and terrifying snakes of his Indian career as a judge and hermit, courtier and prisoner, ambassador and castaway. From the plains of Hindustan to the plateaus of the Deccan and the lost ports of Malabar, an India far off the beaten path of Taj and Raj—glittering and grotesque but genuine—is revealed here.

Hall of a Thousand Columns Details

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From Reader Review Hall of a Thousand Columns for online ebook

Elizabeth says

I wanted to like this book a lot better than I did. Travels with a Tangerine: A Journey in the Footnotes of Ibn Battutah is absolutely phenomenal and one of my all-time favorites. And this installment has a lot of the same charms—as ever, Mackintosh-Smith is quick to relate a hilarious story, to make an obscure-but-pleasing reference. Much to my delight, he never hesitates to make the shift, in his own words, from chic to s***. But for some reason it didn't have the same drive and energy I found in the original. Still worth a read, though.

Andrea Leber says

Interesting book, but I found the author's contempt for Hinduism disturbing. However, as Mackintosh himself writes, "the Indian shelves of my own library are meagre". Maybe his perspective isn't that surprising given his background and country of residence, Yemen. A slightly less biased approach might have benefited the story.

Alex Tilley says

Not as vibrant as "travels with a tangerine"; a little dry. Perhaps because he spends most of his time accounting for what of Ibn Battuta travels he doesn't find in the modern day. Not so surprising after 700 years.

Sundeep Mallya says

Ibn Batutah, the famous fourteenth century traveller, left an extensive travelogue of his travels. However, by his own account, he was writing out of memory, since his notes of his travels were lost on his return journey as were all the treasures and memorabilia he had collected over the 30 years of his travels. The author of this book, retraces, IB's journey, or rather parts of it (and not always in the same direction!).

Unlike kings and emperors who left many monuments, inscriptions etc of their lives, there are not many traces left of the traveller's journey through India. The author tries to find some of the faint echoes of IB's journey. He tries to find the places that IB mentioned in his writings and also tries to find out if there are any cultural memories of that journey or that time in the societies of current times. Wondrously enough, the author does find some tantalizing connections (though tenuous in nature and not exactly what would qualify as proof). For e.g. a sweet-meat made by the famous Ghanewala has a name that sounds the same as one introduced to the then king, Muhammad Shah, by the traveller Ibn Batutah!!

The book is about the author's own travels and the reader is expected perhaps to know enough about the history of the period to make the connections. So most readers might draw a blank. Also the author has a writing style that may be considered a bit in-the-face, which I found a bit annoying (but may possibly be

enjoyable to some readers). I also expect that readers from India may find the tone of the book a tad disrespectful to their culture.

N R says

Very witty writing; many hidden allusions that make you read the sentence a second time.

Interesting subject, retracing Ibn Battuta's travels in India and discovering how accurate or how exaggerated his accounts are.

Alan Fricker says

Makes me want to return to the first book again soon. A great travelling companion

Meo says

Another book which took a long time to read: in this case, it was not a chore but a pleasure. Tim Mackintosh-Smith travels through India, searching for fragments, signs and stories in modern times which echo those seen and recorded four hundred years ago by Moroccan traveller Ibn Battutah. IB spent many years in India, some of the time as a legal advisor to a mad Sultan, other times as an exile and – at the end – trying to travel to China on the Sultan's behalf. Drifting lazily through this book, taking in the descriptions of rural India and comparisons with IB's travels transports one to a different place. Only a couple of pages towards the end, which overlay the difficult political situation inject a note of discord. Any fan of travel writing or of India would be satisfied with this book.

Daren says

Following on from his *Travels with a Tangerine: A Journey in the Footnotes of Ibn Battutah*, this second installment deals with Ibn Battutah's travels in India.

The first third of the book takes place in Delhi, there Battutah spent 7 years as a Judge, and was then made an Ambassador to China, so he sets off again on a journey. Through Uttar Pradesh, then Madhya Pradesh, before doubling back to Gujarat. The author follows this route, then when Battutah sailed via Goa to Kerala, from where they departed for China, the author goes direct to Mangalore, and takes the Malabar Express to Kerala, and works his way north, reversing the journey.

It is a detailed account of his journey, researching each step, looking for surviving evidence of Battutah's writings. It follows much the same written style as the previous book, but perhaps just doesn't quite catch the imagination in the same way. Still a great book, I look forward to the third installment.

Anna Brunskill says

It's taken me forever to get round to reading this follow-up travelogue from Tim Mackintosh-Smith, the

author of the marvellous *Travels With A Tangerine*, but I'm so glad I did. The author has a beautiful way with language, as well as a dry sense of humour and a knack of observing the little details that bring a rich, vibrant quality to his tales. I found this book harder going than his travels round Arabia and the Levant; I rather suspect this was the case both for the author and for Ibn Battutah himself. Nonetheless, well worth the read - an illuminating, humorous book that is different from the average travelogue.

John says

Author certainly has a way with words - puns that might be come off as "over the top" from others work brilliantly here! Terrific overview of current, and historical India, but, I'd recommend reading *Tangerine* first (if possible) for context.

Sajith Kumar says

Making history was a favourite pastime of Indian rulers, but writing it was never even a hobby. As the Hindu rulers fell one by one against the invading Islamic might, things changed. Muslim nobles and courtiers produced journals and panegyrics of their patrons. This was a period in which travelers through the land recorded their observations. Ibn Battutah (1304 – 69) was a noted Moroccan religious scholar and world traveler, who visited India during the reign of Muhammed Shah Tughluq and stayed in the country for eight years beginning in 1333. He was made a religious judge by Tughluq, but soon lost his favour. When at last he regained it, the assignment was to serve as ambassador to the Chinese emperor's court. He travelled from Delhi, via Aligarh to the Gujarat coast. He covered the western coast in a flotilla and reached Calicut. Not content with the idea of staying put in a port town, he sailed the entire Kerala coast up and down. Back in Calicut again, his ships and the sovereign's gifts to China were lost in a storm from which ibn Battutah escaped as he was attending Friday prayers in a mosque on the shore. Afraid to go back to Delhi, he did some island hopping and visited China and Indonesia eventually.

Tim Mackintosh-Smith is a British author who has settled in Yemen. He is a well known writer, traveler and lecturer. In this book, he retraces the footsteps of ibn Battutah, whose name he shortens to IB, which adds intimacy for the medieval traveler on the readers' minds. He is accompanied by Martin Yeoman, illustrator of the book, who is also a painter, draughtsman, sculptor and etcher. The duo virtually lives in the Indian countryside, assimilating personal interactions with local scholars. He finds ready acceptance among Islamic scholars with his mastery of the Arabic language and literature. The title of the book is derived from the exaggerated description of Muhammed Shah Tuguluq's famed audience chamber, in which he received the traveler.

Ibn Battutah spent several years of his Indian sojourn at the court of Muhammed ibn Tughluq, called zalim (the tyrant) by his hapless subjects. The author lets out IB's narration only selectively, but whatever is available paints a scary picture of the tyrant. Religious scholars commanded respect from all, but even they were not immune from the whims and fury of the ruler. We read about a Muslim saint who disobeyed Tughluq forcibly fed excrement for hours and then beheaded. When he transferred the capital from Delhi to Daulatabad in Deccan, a few chose not to go there. They were inflicted with model punishment. One was blown from the mouth of a cannon and a blind man was dragged by horse to the new capital city. When it arrived there 40 days later, only a part of the leg by which the poor guy was secured to the horse remained in place. Such was the cruelty of this sultan, which was excessive even by medieval standards. Slavery was

widespread in the sultanate with the full sanction of religion. The price of a pre-pubescent slave girl quoted in the book is about half of a goat and about a quarter of a cow. Conquests in the country ensured a continuous supply of men and women in the ranks of slaves with the additional burden of sexual servitude on the latter. The author identifies the genre of tyrants like Muhammed Shah by the sheer force with which the throne was held up and he was no different in caliber than Ahmed Shah Masoud, the former warlord of Afghanistan. Muhammed Shah distrusted Muslims of Indian origin and filled the nobility with people invited from all across the Islamic world. That was the reason why the traveler ibn Battutah was appointed as the religious judge of the Maliki sect. Nobles from the entire Islamic world flocked to Delhi like moths to a candle.

The author travels through Muslim India. He is in search of places built by sultans, their graves and other memorabilia. In this sense, a similarity may be established with William Dalrymple's works. The occupations, concerns and worries of the Indian Muslim community are expressed by the people the travelers meet on the way. Irfan Habib, the noted Islamist historian of Aligarh Muslim University suggests that central rule had failed in India ages ago as it still does. In this era of demanding more decentralization and devolution of powers, the historian's remark is way off the mark. The author is surprised at the fact that many inmates of the Aligarh University cheer the Australians in a cricket match against India! The reason for doing so was that the fascists would take over in case India wins! Even die hard religious fanatics masquerade as leftists in this university. Mackintosh-Smith returns the grooming he received there with the remark that 'he could see why the staff of Aligarh, most of whom Muslims, all of whom have brains, were worried by the BJP and its saffron flag'. But this stark separation and victimization claimed by the Muslim elite is not visible in the villages. There, the Hindus routinely visit Islamic holy places and revere sufis and pirs as they do sanyasis. The Muslim conjurors depicted in another part of the book use the image of Kali to pay respects.

Mackintosh-Smith's visit to the South coincided with the Godhra riots of 2002, which might be one reason why he was denied permission to visit Anjidiv near Goa, which IB had visited and met a mysterious yogi, but the place was since taken over by the Indian navy to construct a naval base. Though the conclusions reached by the author upon visiting places or meeting descendants of the people mentioned by IB may seem farfetched, it is pleasurable for readers to enjoy the supposed charm of finding a thread unbroken in the past seven centuries or so. Everywhere he visits, the author is reminded of the syncretism of the land's assimilating spirit. He comments that 'India as a whole had a habit of sliding in and out of that borderland between faith and faith, creed and conjury'.

The book is, however, not easy to read. Mackintosh-Smith had used a little too much eloquence for a work of this kind. His adroitness in finding synonyms in its multitudes baffles the readers as does his penchant for using colloquial terms liberally. The work's overarching sense of humour is sometimes eclipsed by this play of words. The author's observation is sharp and noteworthy. He describes Malabar (Kerala) as a vast inhabited garden and expresses rage at the Portuguese for destroying the maritime prosperity of the land. Regarding sati, the age-old Indian custom of widow burning, he remarks that 'it was a custom religiously followed by a few, toed halfheartedly by rather more, sidestepped by many and ignored by most'. The book is adorned with hand sketches by Martin Yeoman and sports a fine index, but curiously, no Notes.

The book is recommended.

Vivian says

I live in Egypt, but picked this book up because of a recent trip to India. I was quickly hooked on both Ibn Battutah and Tim MacIntosh Smith. Every Egyptian I have mentioned this to knows of Ibn Battutah, regardless of their economic or educational level. Delving into another culture is endless, even when you live in it. Highly recommended.

Widhi says

Ibnu Batutta... a traveler.. wisdom seeker..but probably not your average nomadic backpacker...probably the first well known travel blogger of the ancient world :P

"to read is to travel"

Tiffany says

I love the idea behind this trilogy, just not the execution. That will not stop me from reading the third and final book because I truly am interested in Ibn Battutah. I just find Mackintosh-Smith's writing really really boring.

Joe says

Now the “Hall of a Thousand Turds”! The palace of the book’s title has become an al fresco lavatory (or was in the early 1990s when it was written). Mackintosh Smith continues his journey in the footsteps of the 14th century traveller Ibn Battutah. Here he is in India in an often Quixotic search for fragments (usually architectural and cultural) relating to Ibn Battutah’s passing. It’s also very much a travelogue about modern India. A learned book without being difficult or stuffy and the gags and anecdotes come thick and fast. Thoroughly enjoyable.
