

Islam and the Millennium in the Mughal Empire (1526-1705): An Essay in Political and Popular Imagination

Abstract:

It is well-known that the Mughal emperor Akbar (1556-1605) promoted his own religious cult called the *Din-i ilahi* (Divine Religion). Although this controversial event has been studied extensively, little attention has been paid to the fact that it occurred at the end of the first Islamic millennium. It was widely believed that religion and politics underwent a great convulsion at the end of a thousand year era, marked by the rise of a great messiah or world conqueror. Not only part of popular lore, the millennium was sustained by elite systems of knowledge. I propose to study the significance of millenarian forms of knowledge in the political and cultural history of the Mughal Empire (1526-1705). I aim to show that millenarianism was an important idiom of social communication and political debate, which bridged elite and popular discourses, and in which claims of power were made and unmade in early modern South Asia.