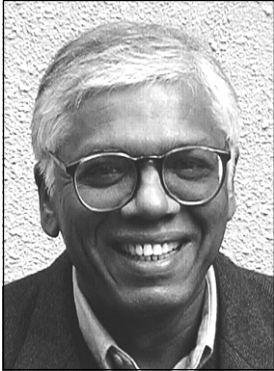


## Muzaffar Alam

# Learning at the Wiko



Muzaffar Alam, born in Sripur (West Bengal) in 1947. Educated at Deoband, Jamia Millia Islamia (Delhi), Aligarh Muslim University, and Jawaharlal Nehru University (New Delhi). I have taught at JNU since 1971, successively as Assistant Professor, Associate Professor, and then Professor of Medieval Indian History (since 1987). My main interests are in Mughal India and Indo-Islamic history more generally. Main Publications: *The Crisis of Empire in Mughal North India: Awadh and the Punjab, 1707–1748* (1986); (with Sanjay Subrahmanyam, eds.) *The Mughal State, 1526–1750* (1998); and (with Seema Alavi) *A European Experience of the Mughal Orient* (2001). – Address: 29 Dakshinapuram, JNU New Campus, New Mehrauli Road, New Delhi 110067, India.

Like all other invitees to the Wissenschaftskolleg, I too had made extensive plans for what I wanted to do while in Berlin. Unfortunately, in the last weeks before I was to leave Delhi, I had problems obtaining leave from my home university. So, I had to split my stay into two parts. The first was of two months, beginning in mid-October and ending just before Christmas. On this occasion, I was accompanied by my wife and stayed at the Villa Walther. The second stay was also of two months, from mid-May to mid-July, and this time I was alone and in the main building. In between these two stints, I went back and taught in Delhi for a semester. As a result of all this, I had to schedule my research anew and change the plans I had initially made.

On the first visit, I was able to pursue three projects. The first was to revise the S.G. Deuskar Lectures that I had given some time before in Calcutta, titled “Contending Meanings and Conflicting Roles: Shari’a and Language Under the Mughals”. I managed to make some progress on this by the time I left in December. I also took part in two sets of discussions. The first was within the Berlin Seminar of the working group “Modernity and Islam”, where I commented on one of the papers and also benefitted from the discus-

sions. I was also a member of the “Empires” group that Philippe Burrin had proposed. Here, we would meet to read and discuss different materials, and this enabled me to gain insights into the history of China and other imperial formations. I was also able to spend time with the Persian manuscripts at the Staatsbibliothek, thanks to the help of one of our colleagues at the Humboldt University, Dr. Annette Schmiedchen. I found some new texts relating to culture and religion in Mughal India and Central Asia, which helped me to refine the questions that I had been asking. I also hope to return one day to pursue the exploration of the Persian papers on eighteenth-century Bengal, which I explored in a preliminary way on this visit. These papers are among the most valuable that are to be found in the Staatsbibliothek for Indian history. The staff of the Wiko library helped me to locate a number of published texts in Persian and Arabic that I had wanted to consult for a long time. This phase was also enjoyable because my wife and I were able to make some new friends, besides enjoying the company of old friends. Mauricio Tenorio made a positive impression on us from the start with his informality, wit, humility and humour. We also became friends with Wang Hui, another neighbour from the Villa Walther.

On my return to Berlin in mid-May, things had changed but also remained the same. David Shulman was no longer there, but I could enjoy the company of a newer arrival, Partha Chatterjee. In the interim, while at Delhi, I had rethought my plans concerning the publication of the Deuskar lectures. I now decided it would be better to extend them over a wider scope and publish them as a book. This was partly the result of the new manuscripts and texts that I had read during my first Berlin stay. It was nice to return to Berlin after a phase in Delhi that had been totally occupied with university work, leaving me little time for research. I started further revisions on the text, and also started improving my limited skills on the computer. The new version of the manuscript came to centre on the “idioms of politics” in Mughal India, which was also the title of the seminar I planned to give in early July.

The extensive discussions during my second stay were of great importance for the new directions in my thinking. Narayana Rao led me in the direction of thinking of fresh subjects, such as the role of the scribes and literati in Indo-Persian culture. With Partha Chatterjee, I had long discussions about the early colonial period and the nature of the eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century transitions. We also spent one Saturday in the month of June talking about “early modernity” with a guest, Reinhart Schulze, whom Navid

Kermani had invited. Listening to colleagues working on Mexico, China, and the Islamic world was a real eye-opener in many respects.

The point of departure for this was Mauricio Tenorio's Tuesday seminar, which had raised many basic questions on the nature of historiography. We could also see the conceptual divide that separated some of our colleagues, who worked in "central" fields, from those of us who were in the so-called "periphery". Of the other Tuesday presentations, one of the most interesting for me personally was that of Navid Kermani on the *Musibat Nama* of Attar. Unfortunately, I was not able to hear some of the other papers that were presented between January and April, but I got the gist of some of them from informal discussions. Some colleagues like Sue Marchand and Wang Hui were even kind enough to supply me with copies of their papers.

After my own seminar, I had many interesting reactions from colleagues, especially the Islamologists. I had tried to argue in my presentation that in Mughal and pre-Mughal India, there were significant attempts to reinterpret basic concepts (including some concepts that are sometimes given a purely theological content), in order to facilitate political management in a complex and multi-religious society. This came as surprise perhaps to those colleagues who had assumed that such attempts could only be found in the political theory of early modern Europe. Some of our friends working on the Islamic world were intrigued by the materials I presented, especially Jacques Waardenburg, with whom I had warm discussions afterwards. One of the most learned of the Islamologists in the Wiko this year, Muhammad Hashim Kamali, had also addressed some of these questions in a contemporary context, by using materials relating to jurisprudence. Our approaches were complementary, though he may still consider the Mughal experience as exceptional or even aberrant. Dale Eickelmann also made some useful comparative remarks on early modern Arab Islam.

In terms of research, this second stay enabled me to plan and complete an extensive collaborative essay with Sanjay Subrahmanyan on the Mughal poet Faizi's long *masnawi* on the story of Nal and Daman. We also began work on the memoirs of the Mughal prince Mirza Azfari, which we hope to resume at a later date. We made some progress on our larger joint project on Indo-Persian travel-accounts. A visit to Munich enabled us to discuss these writings with other colleagues, and we were also invited to Bamberg to speak on Mughal history. So I managed to see a little bit of Germany besides Berlin.

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One of the most interesting aspects of the Wiko was our interaction with the biologists. The two seminars on bats by Uli Schnitzler and Cynthia Moss were truly fascinating, both in terms of the materials and the style of presentation. I had never thought I would receive an education on such subjects at this stage of my life. I had always thought that scientists were concerned only with their own specialized areas, but I realised that the interest of several of our colleagues extended far beyond. I should mention in particular Schnitzler's fascination with classical music and Amitabh Joshi's passion for Urdu poetry.

So even though my stay in the Wiko was too brief for my liking, I gained a lot from old and new friends. I learned to appreciate the gentle approach and encouragement of David Shulman and the moral support (not to mention the food) provided by Sanjay Subrahmanyam. There were many informal and formal academic discussions that I will remember while at the Weiße Villa or elsewhere. Not least of all interactions was with the charming Professor Henry, who made an impression on all of us with his calm determination under a smiling exterior.

All of this was made possible by the help extended by the staff, who patiently accommodated all my changes in programme. I would particularly like to mention Petra Sonnenberg among the computer staff, Andrea Friedrich, Christine von Arnim, and of course Barbara Sanders, besides the ever-helpful library staff. The warm presence of the kitchen staff and especially Katarzyna Speder was also a great comfort.