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Introduction

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These papers were originally presented at the retirement conference for Prof. John F. Richards, which was held at Duke University on September 29–30, 2006. The conference, entitled 'Expanding Frontiers in South Asian and World History', brought together students, colleagues and associates of Prof. Richards to discuss themes that have marked Richards's work as a historian in an academic career of almost 40 years. These themes focused on 'frontiers' in multiple contexts, all relating to Richards's work: frontiers and state building; frontiers and environmental change; cultural frontiers; frontiers, trade and drugs; and frontiers and world history.

Richards's academic work began with his study of Mughal administration on the Deccan frontier in Golconda in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. His first book, *Mughal Administration in Golconda* (1975), which grew out of his doctoral dissertation, introduced two themes that were to run through much of his later work. The first was a focus on the frontier as a key arena for understanding the processes of state building. Relations between state bureaucracy and local actors, including regional warrior elites, were central to Richards's story. Second, and perhaps even more important for the long-term trajectory of his interests, Richards emphasized the importance of state institutions and finance to the Mughal system. State institutions were something that Richards took very seriously, and if these ultimately failed to cement Mughal rule in Golconda, the fault can be attributed to various failed policies pursued by the individual Mughal rulers.

Richards later developed this view of the Mughal Empire more fully in numerous articles, and perhaps most importantly, in his synthesis of Mughal history written for the New Cambridge History of India series, of which he was an editor (*The Mughal Empire*, 1993). In debates between those who have emphasized the negotiated patrimonial form of the Mughal empire and those who have stressed its relatively

centralized bureaucratic and fiscal institutions, Richards has tended to be a strong advocate of the latter position. Although recognizing the older roots of Mughal forms of cultural authority and loyalty—and the empire's decentralized and patrimonial elements—Richards has been a leader in emphasizing the importance of new forms of state institutions as the defining feature of the Mughal polity. A concern with state finance and administration during the Mughal era (and most recently during the British colonial period as well) has thus been an ongoing preoccupation of his scholarly work.

Perhaps most importantly, however, Richards has seen these new forms as not simply South Asian, but as evidence of South Asia's participation in the broader, worldwide processes of transformation marking the early modern period. He has been forceful in rejecting the common Indian periodization that consigns Mughal history to a 'medieval' past contrasted with the 'modern' colonial period. As Richards argued most persuasively in a 1997 article in the *Journal of World History,* the early modern period was one marked by rapid changes on a worldwide scale, and in these changes, Mughal India fully shared. Many of these changes were products of an expanding global economy. But as Richards emphasized, these were not a product simply of expanding global interconnections (or of European-based capitalism), but of the deployments of new forms of state power on a worldwide scale, producing new forms of exploitation of land and nature in this period. Richards's emphasis in his earlier work on the importance of Mughal state institutions thus led in his later work to a broader emphasis on the importance of new forms of state authority in defining more generally the worldwide transformations of the early modern era.

These emphases were most evident in Richards's massive study of the environmental transformations of the early modern world, *The Unending Frontier* (2003). Here we can see most clearly Richards's concern for placing the development of the state in a world historical context. The expansion of early modern capitalist societies in Europe is a critical element in Richards's story, an expansion that led to unprecedented levels of demand for commodities and pressures on the natural environment. But central to Richards's argument is his connecting this to new forms of state power that had emerged from a 'shared evolutionary progress in human organization' and had pushed state capacities in multiple areas of the world to new thresholds of growth. Critical institutions in Richards's story, such as the triumph of new forms of property rights, were thus a product not only of new economic pressures, but also of new technologies of state power.

The effects of these early modern transformations were, of course, nowhere more visible than on multiple frontiers—frontiers of state power, frontiers of expanding settlement, frontiers of cultural and ethnic interaction, and frontiers of trade. As in much of Richards's work, whether on bandits or drugs, the frontier was a critical arena in which the transformations marking new forms of economic organization, commodity trade, land settlement and state authority intersected. Central to these processes, of course, were the specificities of the varying milieus in which they occurred. Richards's work has, from the beginning, been marked by a combination of concern for large-scale global processes, and for the detailed specificities of each historical case. The papers that follow have attempted to capture the range of interests and approaches that have marked John Richards's career.