

THE COMPOSITION OF THE MUGHAL NOBILITY

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Abstract

The Mughal Empire at its zenith commanded resources unprecedented in Indian history and covered almost the entire subcontinent. From 1556 to 1707, during the heyday of its fabulous wealth and glory, the Mughal Empire was a fairly efficient and centralized organization, with a vast complex of personnel, money, and information dedicated to the service of the emperor and his nobility.

Much of the empire's expansion during that period was attributable to India's growing commercial and cultural contact with the outside world. The 16th and 17th centuries brought the establishment and expansion of European and non-European trading organizations in the subcontinent, principally for the procurement of Indian goods in demand abroad. Indian regions drew close to each other by means of an enhanced overland and coastal trading network, significantly augmenting the internal surplus of precious metals. With expanded connections to the wider world came also new ideologies and technologies to challenge and enrich the imperial edifice. The empire itself, however, was a purely Indian historical experience. Mughal culture blended Perso-Islamic and regional Indian elements into a distinctive but variegated whole. Although by the early 18th century the regions had begun to reassert their independent positions, Mughal manners and ideals

outlasted imperial central authority. The imperial centre, in fact, came to be controlled by the regions. The trajectory of the Mughal Empire over roughly its first two centuries (1526–1748) thus provides a fascinating illustration of premodern state building in the Indian subcontinent. The individual abilities and achievements of the early Mughals—Bābur, Humāyūn, and later Akbar—largely charted this course. Bābur and Humāyūn struggled against heavy odds to create the Mughal domain, whereas Akbar, besides consolidating and expanding its frontiers, provided the theoretical framework for a truly Indian state. Picking up the thread of experimentation from the intervening Sūr dynasty (1540–56), Akbar attacked narrow-mindedness and bigotry, absorbed Hindus in the high ranks of the nobility, and encouraged the tradition of ruling through the local Hindu landed elites. This tradition continued until the very end of the Mughal Empire, despite the fact that some of Akbar's successors, notably Aurangzeb (1658–1707), had to concede to contrary forces.

Paper Identification



Introduction

Within the first three decades of Akbar's reign, the imperial elite had grown enormously. As the Central Asian nobles had generally been nurtured on the Turko-Mongol tradition of sharing power with the royalty—an arrangement incompatible with Akbar's ambition of structuring the Mughal centralism around himself—the emperor's principal goal was to reduce their strength and influence. The emperor encouraged new elements to join his service, and Iranians came to form an important block of the Mughal nobility. Akbar also looked for new men of Indian background. Indian Afghans, being the principal opponents of the Mughals, were obviously to be kept at a distance, but the Sayyids of Baraha, the Bukhārī Sayyids, and the Kambūs among the Indian Muslims were specially favoured for high military and civil positions.

More significant was the recruitment of Hindu Rajput leaders into the Mughal nobility. This was a major step, even if not completely new in Indo-Islamic history, leading to a standard pattern of relationship between the Mughal autocracy and the local despotism. Each Rajput chief, along with his sons and close relatives, received high rank, pay, perquisites, and an assurance that they could retain their age-old customs, rituals, and beliefs as Hindu warriors. In return, the Rajputs not only publicly expressed their allegiance but also offered active military service to the Mughals and, if called upon to do so, willingly gave daughters in marriage to the emperor or his sons. The Rajput chiefs retained control over their ancestral holdings (watan jāgīrs) and additionally, in return for their services, often received land assignments outside their homelands (tankhwa jāgīrs) in the empire. The Mughal emperor, however, asserted his right as a "paramount." He treated the Rajput chiefs as zamindars (landholders), not as rulers. Like all local zamindars, they paid tribute, submitted to the Mughals, and received a patent of office. Akbar thus obtained a wide base for Mughal power among thousands of Rajput

warriors who controlled large and small parcels of the countryside throughout much of his empire.

The Mughal nobility came to comprise mainly the Central Asians (Tūrānīs), Iranians (Irānīs), Afghans, Indian Muslims of diverse subgroups, and Rajputs. Both historical circumstances and a planned imperial policy contributed to the integration of this complex and heterogeneous ruling class into a single imperial service. The emperor saw to it that no single ethnic or religious group was large enough to challenge his supreme authority.

Organization of the nobility and the army

In order to organize his civil and military personnel, Akbar devised a system of ranks, or *manṣabs*, based on the "decimal" system of army organization used by the early Delhi sultans and the Mongols. The *manṣabdārs* (rank holders) were numerically graded from commanders of 10 to commanders of 5,000. Although they fell under the jurisdiction of the *mīr bakhshī*, each owed direct subordination to the emperor.

The *manṣabdārs* were generally paid in nonhereditary and transferable *jāgīrs* (assignments of land from which they could collect revenues). Over their *jāgīrs*, as distinct from those areas reserved for the emperor (*khālīṣah*) and his personal army (*aḥādīs*), the assignees (*jāgīrdārs*) normally had no magisterial or military authority. Akbar's insistence on a regular check of the *manṣabdārs'* soldiers and their horses signified his desire for a reasonable correlation between his income and obligations. Most *jāgīrdārs* except the lowest-ranking ones collected the taxes through their personal agents, who were assisted by the local moneylenders and currency dealers in remitting collections by means of private bills of exchange rather than cash shipments.

Revenue system

A remarkable feature of the Mughal system under Akbar was his revenue administration, developed largely under the supervision of his famed Hindu minister Todar Mal. Akbar's efforts to develop a

revenue schedule both convenient to the peasants and sufficiently profitable to the state took some two decades to implement. In 1580 he obtained the previous 10 years' local revenue statistics, detailing productivity and price fluctuations, and averaged the produce of different crops and their prices. He also evolved a permanent schedule circle by grouping together the districts having homogeneous agricultural conditions. For measuring land area, he abandoned the use of hemp rope in favour of a more definitive method using lengths of bamboo joined with iron rings. The revenue, fixed according to the continuity of cultivation and quality of soil, ranged from one-third to one-half of production value and was payable in copper coin (dāms). The peasants thus had to enter the market and sell their produce in order to meet the assessment. This system, called *zabt*, was applied in northern India and in Malwa and parts of Gujarat. The earlier practices (e.g., crop sharing), however, also were in vogue in the empire. The new system encouraged rapid economic expansion. Moneylenders and grain dealers became increasingly active in the countryside.

Fiscal administration

All economic matters fell under the jurisdiction of the vizier, assisted principally by three ministers to look separately after the crown lands, the salary drafts and *jāgīrs*, and the records of fiscal transactions. At almost all levels, the revenue and financial administration was run by a cadre of technically proficient officials and clerks drawn mainly from Hindu service castes—Kayasthas and Khatri.

More significantly, in local and land revenue administration, Akbar secured support from the dominant rural groups. With the exception of the villages held directly by the peasants, where the community paid the revenue, his officials dealt with the leaders of the communities and the superior landrights holders (*zamindars*). The *zamindar*, as one of the most important intermediaries, collected the

revenue from the peasants and paid it to the treasury, keeping a portion to himself against his services and *zamindari* claim over the land.

Coinage

Akbar reformed Mughal currency to make it one of the best known of its time. The new regime possessed a fully functioning trimetallic (silver, copper, and gold) currency, with an open minting system in which anyone willing to pay the minting charges could bring metal or old or foreign coin to the mint and have it struck. All monetary exchanges, however, were expressed in copper coins in Akbar's time. In the 17th century, following the silver influx from the New World, silver rupee with new fractional denominations replaced the copper coin as a common medium of circulation. Akbar's aim was to establish a uniform coinage throughout his empire; some coins of the old regime and regional kingdoms also continued.

Evolution of a nonsectarian state

Mughal society was predominantly non-Muslim. Akbar therefore had not simply to maintain his status as a Muslim ruler but also to be liberal enough to elicit active support from non-Muslims. For that purpose, he had to deal first with the Muslim theologians and lawyers ('*ulamā*') who, in the face of Brahmanic resilience, were rightly concerned with the community's identity and resisted any effort that could encourage a broader notion of political participation. Akbar began his drive by abolishing both the *jizyah* and the practice of forcibly converting prisoners of war to Islam and by encouraging Hindus as his principal confidants and policy makers. To legitimize his nonsectarian policies, he issued in 1579 a public edict (*maḥẓar*) declaring his right to be the supreme arbiter in Muslim religious matters—above the body of Muslim religious scholars and jurists. He had by then also undertaken a number of stern measures to reform the administration of religious grants, which were now available to learned and pious men of all religions, not just Islam.

The mahzār was proclaimed in the wake of lengthy discussions that Akbar had held with Muslim divines in his famous religious assembly 'Ibādat-Khāneh, at Fatehpur Sikri. He soon became dissatisfied with what he considered the shallowness of Muslim learned men and threw open the meetings to non-Muslim religious experts, including Hindu pandits, Jain and Christian missionaries, and Parsi priests. A comparative study of religions convinced Akbar that there was truth in all of them but that no one of them possessed absolute truth. He therefore disestablished Islam as the religion of the state and adopted a theory of rulership as a divine illumination incorporating the acceptance of all, irrespective of creed or sect. He repealed discriminatory laws against non-Muslims and amended the personal laws of both Muslims and Hindus so as to provide as many common laws as possible. While Muslim judicial courts were allowed as before, the decision of the Hindu village pancayats also was recognized. The emperor created a new order commonly called the Dīn-e Ilāhī ("Divine Faith"), which was modeled on the Muslim mystical Sufi brotherhood. The new order had its own initiation ceremony and rules of conduct to ensure complete devotion to the emperor; otherwise, members were permitted to retain their diverse religious beliefs and practices. It was devised with the object of forging the diverse groups in the service of the state into one cohesive political community.

Akbar in historical perspective

By 1600 the Mughals in India had achieved a fairly austere and efficient state system, for which Akbar's genius deserves much credit. However, the Mughal system must be studied in the context of broad historical developments of the 16th and 17th centuries. Long before Akbar's schemes, Sher Shah of Sūr's short-lived reforms had included demand for cash payment from the peasants, surveys of agricultural lands and of crops grown, and a reliable, standardized, and high-quality coinage. The Sūr ruler insisted on a

uniform rate for the entire empire, which was certainly a major flaw in contrast to Akbar's consideration for regional variations. It is striking, however, that the chief zabṭ territories under Akbar were largely made up of the provinces already controlled by Sher Shah.

Another major development of Sher Shah's brief period—namely, the building of a network of roads to improve the connections already started by Bābur between Hindustan and the great trading routes extending into central and western Asia via Kabul and Kandahār—foreshadowed in a measure the later imperial edifice and economy. By laying a road between Sonargaon (in Bengal) and Attock (near present-day Rawalpindi, Pakistan), the Sūr ruler had made a first attempt at bringing the economy of Bengal into closer contact with that of northern India. The expansion under Akbar followed in logical sequence what had already occurred. The network based on Sher Shah's routes had extended considerably by 1600. Agra came to be linked not only to Burhanpur but also to Cambay, Surat, and Ahmedabad. Lahore and Multan were now the gateway to Kabul as well as to the ports of the mouth of the Indus. The link with Sonargaon became a far more secure control over the ports of Bengal. Many other changes initiated in the late 16th century were to be consolidated only later, in conjunction with further political unification.

The empire in the 17th century

The Mughal Empire in the 17th century continued its conquest and territorial expansion, with a dramatic increase in the numbers, resources, and responsibilities of the Mughal nobles and manṣabdārs. There were also attempts at tightening imperial control over the local society and economy. The critical relationship between the imperial authority and the zamindars was regularized and generally institutionalized through thousands of sanads (patents) issued by the emperor and his agents. These centralizing measures imposed increasing demands upon both the Mughal officials and the local magnates and therefore generated tensions

expressed in various forms of resistance. The century witnessed the rule of the three greatest Mughal emperors: Jahāngīr (ruled 1605–27), Shah Jahān (1628–58), and Aurangzeb (1658–1707). The reigns of Jahāngīr and Shah Jahān are noted for political stability, brisk economic activity, excellence in painting, and magnificent architecture. The empire under Aurangzeb attained its greatest geographic reach; however, the period also saw the unmistakable symptoms of Mughal decline.

Political unification and the establishment of law and order over extensive areas, together with extensive foreign trade and the ostentatious lifestyles of the Mughal elites, encouraged the emergence of large centres of commerce and crafts. Lahore, Delhi, Agra, and Ahmedabad, linked by roads and waterways to other important towns and the key seaports, were among the leading cities of the world at the time. The Mughal system of taxation had expanded both the degree of monetization and commodity production, which in turn promoted a network of grain markets (mandīs), bazaars, and small fortified towns (qaṣbahs), supplied by a highly differentiated peasantry in the countryside.

Increasing use of money was illustrated, in the first place, by the growing use of bills of exchange (hundīs) to transfer revenue to the centre from the provinces and the consequent meshing of the fiscal system with the financial network of the money changers (ṣarrāfs; commonly rendered shroff in English) and, second, by the increasing interest of and even direct participation by the Mughal nobles and the emperor in trade. Thatta, Lahore, Hugli, and Surat were great centres for such activity in the 1640s and '50s. The emperor owned the shipping fleets, and the governors advanced funds to merchants from state treasuries and the mints.

The shift in the attitude toward trade in the course of the 17th century owed a good deal to the growing Iranian influence in the Mughal court. The Iranians had a long tradition of combining political power and trade.

Shah 'Abbās I had espoused greater state control of commerce. Because the contemporary Muslim empires—including the Mughals, the Ṣafavids, and the Ottomans—were conscious of one another as competitors, mutual borrowings and emulations were more frequent than the chroniclers would indicate.

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