

## Some remarks on Mughal sovereignty

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I had made a set of remarks on the nature of imperial sovereignty before the Industrial Age (i.e. before the 19<sup>th</sup> century) in general, using Mughal<sup>1</sup> sovereignty as a particular case. Here is a summary of those remarks:

- 1. What is an empire?** I had asked you what you thought distinguished an empire from the pre-Industrial world as a kind of state from the nation-states we inhabit today. It emerged from our discussion that a complex of at least three inter-related factors distinguished it from a nation-state: **a)** an empire was composed of several ethnic groups in relations of conflict and compromise with each other; that it was at any point in its history a particular conflicted stage in the developing relations between its constituent groups<sup>2</sup>. *And that b)* these constituent relations were unequal ones. *And that, furthermore, c)* this political inequality was never fundamentally questioned even if groups fought for greater powers because an empire was based on a source of norms for governance that valorized and instituted political inequality. This ‘source of norms for governance’ was what we termed a ‘constitution’. In this sense, we said that *an empire was a constitutionally unequal kind of state*. Notice that Shaikh Ahmad Sirhindi in the *Sources of Indian Traditions (Vol 1)* analogizes the relation of emperor to his empire -which is typically nothing less than the whole “world”- with the relation between the soul and the body: “The Sultan in relation

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<sup>1</sup> The term *Mughal* is a British one deriving from a British confusion with the Persian word for *Mongol* which is *Moghol*. The so-called Mughals called themselves the *Guṛkānīs* after their 14<sup>th</sup> century Central Asian ancestor Amīr Timūr Guṛkān. They accordingly also referred to themselves as *Al-e Tīmuriya* or The Lineage of Timur.

<sup>2</sup> For a classic theory of social relations in these terms of internal division, see the section entitled ‘Spirit’ in G.W.F. Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit*; translated by A.V. Miller; Oxford University Press 1977. Please bear in mind that all these remarks constitute my interpretations of various scholarship and that I alone bear responsibility for these views.

to the world is like the soul in relation to the body” (p.429); and that both the *Akhlaq-i Jalaḥī* and later Ab’ul Fazl, the emperor Akbar’s famous ideologue, analogize the hierarchy of the four classes of state officials to the order of natural elements of fire, air, water and earth (pp.431-433). What these naturalistic analogies for the hierarchy of government must be understood as attempting is to authorize the constitutional inequality characteristic of empires before the Industrial Age by assigning it a basis in nature. As such, this naturalistic basis for royal absolutism was a trait shared by many empires from roughly 1500 to 1800, empires that have come to be termed “early modern” to distinguish them from the colonial modernity that eclipsed this early modernity from the late 18<sup>th</sup> century onward<sup>3</sup>.

By way of illustration of such constitutional inequality we remarked on how the Mughal emperor remained right until 1857 the singular source of governmental legitimacy across most of South Asia. That is, even as the empire began to disintegrate because of a complex of reasons (central among them being the great agricultural prosperity the early Mughal rulers had made possible and the consequent empowerment of regional elites), not even the most powerful of regional leaders ever presumed to rule *as* Emperor himself. Rather, he (and we cited the example of Scindia, the 18<sup>th</sup> century Maratha leader who controlled Mughal Delhi)

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<sup>3</sup> I enumerated the characteristics of **the early modern** by noting that: **1.** it refers to the emergence of large and long-stable states like the Mughal, Safavid and Ottoman empires from roughly 1500 onward. **2.** A royal absolutism that made free with religious doctrine to suit its own purposes. In India a rift emerged between *dharmashastra* (theologically based Sanskrit jurisprudence) and *nītiśāstra* (discourses on statecraft) whereas the latter had previously been subordinate to the former. The Mughals reflected this emergent breaking free of statecraft from theology by the new emphasis placed in the education of their elites and in the dissemination of didactic texts on *akhlaqī* norms of governance that came to displace the juridical meanings of the terminology of theologically based Muslim jurisprudence or *shariā*. **3.** A prolonged period of conflict between sedentary and nomadic groups such as led to a new wave of urbanization across South and West Asia; an enhancement of agrarian productivity and a concomitant growth of populations. I remarked in passing that the violent settling of the Americas by Europeans must be understood as a phenomenon from this historical trend. **4.** The emergence of new literary and philosophical forms that codified a new consciousness of these political phenomena.

would seek the Mughal Emperor's *permission* to do as he pleased, being ultimately content with the official status of a tribute-paying underling (*zamīndār*) even if he was far more powerful in reality. We must regard this as spectacular proof of our thesis that an empire was a constitutionally unequal kind of state in the sense that its polity collectively recognized and subscribed to its norms for governance.

**2. Akhlaq:** In the case of the Mughal Empire, this source of governmental norms lay in a corpus of texts- a corpus whose increasing importance, production and circulation in Mughal *madrāsas* (schools) leads me to ask whether it became a genre- called *akhlaq*. *Akhlaq* referred to a discourse of royal ethics. These were compendia of anecdotes that, often quarrying from each other, offered the Mughal prince exemplary cases of royal behavior from the historical and apocryphal past, arranging these anecdotes under headings like 'On Being Lenient in the Administration of Justice', 'On How to Present Yourself to Ambassadors', 'On the Necessity of Spies', 'On the Conduct of War' and so forth. A central *akhlaqi* value was the equitable dispensation of justice by the King amongst the empire's many groups and easily access to such justice. This conception of sovereign power historically derived from late Byzantine and, thence, Greek ideals of political power that analogized the body of the empire or polity with the biological body to advocate a harmonious distribution of humors. This *akhlaqi* tradition of political thought had remained a minor tradition within the Muslim world until the devastation of the urban Muslim civilizations of the Iranian plateau by non-Muslim Mongol nomads during the mid 13<sup>th</sup> century. It was this encounter with non-Muslim overlords that compelled Muslim intellectuals to devise conceptions of state and ideals of sovereignty that would take account of the possibility of large non-Muslim populations that could not

satisfactorily be taken account of by the old category of *protected peoples* or the *zimmi*. Akhlāqi norms of governance were a result of this renewal of political thought. Akhlāqi texts probably began to circulate in western India from the early 16<sup>th</sup> century, entering by way of Gujarat. Recent scholarship has shown that these texts came to acquire a place of privilege in Mughal elementary schools (*madrasas*) where not only Muslim but also Hindus of the *Kāyastha* and *Khatri* castes- as also often of Brahmin and other castes- studied<sup>4</sup>. What is crucial to bear in mind is that the kings and nobles who acted on these norms did so *in the name* of the *shariā*'. Whereas the *shariā*' had thus far mainly designated a corpus of Muslim jurisprudence, it now came to be appropriated as a label by Mughal rulers to refer to akhlāqi rather than juridical norms of governance. This displacement of the meanings of the word *shariā*' is what allows us to argue that if relations between Muslims and Hindus were largely harmonious and even richly creative (witness the many artistic traditions of painting and music that resulted from the coming together of Persian and Indian aesthetics) under Mughal dispensations it was not because Islamic norms of governance compromised with themselves out of banal pragmatism, not in other words because India was an exception to the rule of Muslim imperialism, but because *the rule of Muslim imperialism itself changed to include what might otherwise have been exceptions elsewhere in the Muslim world*.

- 3. The normative nature of Mughal sovereignty:** Try and imagine, if you can, a state such as the Mughal empire where from the 16<sup>th</sup> century till 1857 the vast majority of its people never saw the emperor; only heard occasional ceremonial mention of his name at Friday

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<sup>4</sup> See *The Languages of Political Islam in India: 1200-1800* by Muzaffar Alam; Permanent Black 2004. Esp. pages 26-69. Kāyastha and Khatri refer to the two major Hindu caste groupings that increasingly came to staff the bureaucracies of the Mughal Empire from the mid 16<sup>th</sup> century onwards. By the 18<sup>th</sup> century these Hindus had become renowned for their literary and rhetorical skills in Persian.

sermons in mosques (if they were Muslim, which most were not) when they paid their taxes to the local Mughal collector who, moving armed with men from the local Mughal garrison, did his job in the emperor's name; or read (if they could, which most could not) his name on the coins that circulated. I described to you how Mughal authority was sustained across time and space by a code of behavior for its courtiers<sup>5</sup>. These courtiers (of Uzbek, Iranian, Rajput and other ethnic backgrounds) formed an elite corps of officers who were bound by loyalty to the person of the Mughal emperor because they had been raised as children within the precincts of the Emperor's palace or royal encampment. In Persian such an officer was called a *khaṅā-zaḍ*. *Khaṅā* means *house*, in this case the imperial household; and *zaḍ* is a suffix meaning *offspring*. While these *offspring of the royal encampment* were not biological offspring of the Emperor, they were perceived and perceived themselves as imperial slaves who, because of their education in *akhlāqī* values that centrally included a reverence for the Emperor, would defend his sovereignty to the death. As such they did not constitute more than a few hundred at most and commanded vast armies in the localities they governed. Their immediate subordinates respected them for their proximity to the Emperor but little if any of their *akhlāqī* values permeated the populations they governed.

Why is this a significant set of observations? Its significance lies in how it helps you appreciate that *the non-interventionist or minimally interventionist character* of Mughal sovereignty allowed for:

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<sup>5</sup> See 'The Formulation of Imperial Authority Under Akbar and Jehangir' by J.F. Richards in *The Mughal State 1526-1750*; eds. Muzaffar Alam and Sanjay Subrahmanyam; Oxford University Press 1998. pp. 126-167. Although ten years old, this edited volume represents an excellent conspectus of the genres of Mughal historiography produced over the last fifty odd years.

**a) great ethnic diversity:** witness that the regional states that arose as the Empire weakened in the 18<sup>th</sup> century- these regional elites having been empowered over the previous two centuries by the great wealth generated by successful Mughal agrarian policies- were ones in which ethnic groups like the Sīkhs, Rohillā Afghāns, and Nishāpūrī Shīa Nawābs had captured state power in their respective areas;

**b) pietistic movements largely independent of the state:** While some major Hindu sects successfully petitioned the Mughal emperor for grants of tax-free land, thus integrating a relation with government into their sectarian life; and while occasional and elite Mughal curiosity took the form of many Persian translations of the *Sriṃad Bhāgwatam* (or the *Bhāgwat Purāna* that is the chief Sanskrit narrative source of the god Krishna's life and thus became especially central to Vaishnavite devotionalism that flowered under Mughal dispensations), the everyday piety of the vast majority of people remained barely touched by the Mughal court.

**c) aesthetic diversity:** while imperial Mughal painting and architecture interacted in its aesthetics with equivalently elite art in the Rajput and other North Indian kingdoms as well as with the European painting it was exposed to by Jesuits and visiting Europeans, it largely left untouched the devotional aesthetics of mystical poetry across India, the regional traditions of painting and architecture and so forth.

Imagine how profoundly different this barely interventionist sovereignty is to that of our modern governments! A British friend of mine once remarked that the reason her teeth were in excellent condition was that as a child she'd been the beneficiary of a British government welfare scheme that had ensured that children of a certain age got dental check-ups and braces for free. What does it tell you about modern sovereignty when it controls the dental

health of its subjects? I think it shows you how modern sovereignty takes the form of *the micro-management of the life of its subject populations*<sup>6</sup>. And here we mean *life* in the sense of biological life (as in the phrase *Life Sciences*). Think of governmental health schemes for millions of citizens, and of how this governmental ability to manage the *life* of its citizenry is always matched with an ability to annihilate entire populations in an instant with bombs, an ability to impose death as extensively and minutely as life. I am hoping this will help you appreciate by contrast the disparate nature of political sovereignty in the pre-industrial world, in the Mughal Empire for instance.

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<sup>6</sup> The most famous contemporary formulation of this idea- the idea of *the bio-political*- may be found in Michel Foucault's *The History of Sexuality: an Introduction*; Vintage Books 1998.