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For Conquest and Governance: Legitimacy, Religion and Political Culture

Ecbar Shaugh [Emperor Akbar] . . . never denied [his mother] any thing but this, that shee demanded of him, that our Bible might be hanged about an asses necke and beaten about the towne of Agra, for that the Portugals . . . tyed [the Quran] about the necke of a dogge and beat the same dogge about the towne of Ormuz. But hee denied her request, saying that, if it were ill in the Portugals to doe so to the Alcoran, being it became not a King to requite ill with ill, for that the contempt of any religion was the contempt of God.

Thomas Coryat, English traveller to India, 1612–17.

Discussion of the legitimacy of regimes has somewhat recent origins in political theory, political sociology and even more so in history. In the context of the Mughal state, even as brief and speculative statements on the theme lie scattered in historiography, the problematic has rarely been constituted. This, in the face of frequent observations that the legitimacy of the Mughal state had survived long after the state itself lay in a shambles in the first half of the eighteenth century. The centring of the great rebellion of 1857 around the last Mughal ‘emperor’ Bahadur Shah Zafar, physically decrepit and surrounded by a territorial and political void, symbolizes the survival of Mughal legitimacy sharply and poignantly, for it cemented bonds between the rival groups that had all chipped away at the grand imperial structure to begin with.

To the extent that historians explored the nature of the medieval state, it had a singularly monocentric location on the significance of Islam in its functioning: Did the state constitute a theocracy? Answers spawned a range from an emphatic affirmation to a nuanced denial, each itself shaded by the historian's ideological location in the story of India's colonialization and its struggle for freedom which had brought the question of history centre-stage.

More recently, Stephen Blake has suggested a hypothesis that substitutes one monolocal construction for another: following Max Weber's lead, Blake has postulated a patrimonial-bureaucratic state in Mughal India. M. Athar Ali, Douglas Streusand and John F. Richards, too, have made astute comments on the nature of the state without substantively touching upon the question of legitimacy; as indeed has the long Introduction to the volume *The State in India: 1000–1700 A.D.*, edited by Hermann Kulke, with the same result.¹ Amina Okada has on the other hand sought out traces of the state's legitimacy in Mughal paintings and Urvashi Dalal in the layout of the city of Shahjahanabad.² Ebba Koch too has touched upon the problem in the context of Mughal art.³ In a regional context, Richard M. Eaton has, in his recent work, traced the outlines of the evolution of legitimacy in Bengal from its conquest by Bakhtiyar Khalji in AD 1204 to the eve of the British era; the outline evolves as the new state's assertion of its alien profile, with assimilation of the conqueror into the region's social and cultural milieu.⁴

However, in some ways the most imaginative exploration of the question of Mughal state's legitimacy was undertaken early in the twentieth century by Francis William Buckler, especially in an all-too-brief essay, 'The Oriental Despot'. Buckler looked upon Mughal sovereignty as 'corporate kingship' in which all the nobles were 'members' rather than servants – a shade of the concept of 'court society' that Norbert Elias was to develop later in the context of medieval French monarchy. The value

1 The essays by Blake and Ali were published in *Journal of Asian Studies*, 39, 1979: 77–94, and *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain & Ireland*, 1978: 38–49. These have been reproduced in H. Kulke, ed., *The State in India 1000–1700*, New Delhi, 1995. Douglas Streusand, *The Formation of the Mughal Empire*, New Delhi, 1989. John F. Richards, *The Mughal Empire*, Cambridge, UK, 1993, but especially his innovative essays, 'The Formulation of Imperial Authority under Akbar and Jahangir', in J. F. Richards, ed., *Kingship and Authority in South Asia*, Madison, 1978.

2 Amina Okada, *Imperial Mughal Painters: Indian Miniatures from the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*, tr. D. Dusinberre, Paris, 1992; Urvashi Dalal, 'Shahjahanabad: An Expression of Mughal State's Legitimacy', *Islamic Culture*, 74, 4, October 2000: 1–17.

3 Ebba Koch, *Mughal Art and Imperial Ideology: Collected Essays*, New Delhi, 2001.

4 Richard M. Eaton, *The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier, 1204–1760*, Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1993; New Delhi, 1997: 22–70.

of *khila't*, robe of honour, given by rulers to nobles and a few others, lay in its symbolism of ritually incorporating the recipient into the king's body, for the King would actually touch the robe with either his hand or his back before handing it out. Unfortunately, Buckler's writings did not receive the attention their original and provocative nature should have brought to them; only recently have these been put together and introduced to professional historians by M. N. Pearson.⁵

Whichever way one looks at these explorations, most have a single point location. On the other hand, it is perhaps possible to envision the Mughal state drawing sustenance from varied and varying sources of legitimacy, a legitimacy that is not given and frozen. Some of the sources could be perceived as relatively durable structures, others as somewhat more plastic, and still others as fleeting moments which yet leave a lasting impress on history.

Islam was one durable structure, for its presence at almost every level of the state's functioning was emphatic. We might explore its presence at three levels: intellectual, political and popular.

The medieval court histories understandably focused on events revolving around the ruler, his family, nobles, wars, administration, etc.; their authors were invariably courtiers. Often the titles of these chronicles themselves were suggestive: *Akbar Nama*, *Shah Jahan Nama*, *Alamgir Nama*: the story of Akbar, Shah Jahan, etc., although the story of the person was also the story of the court and indeed of the empire, for their equivalence in the perception of the courtier-historians was unambiguous.

The histories that were thus composed followed a format, with the singular exception of Abul Fazl, whom we shall encounter several times again. The book would open with a preface in praise of God, Allah, and the prophet of Islam, Muhammad. It would then endow the long sequence of the caliphs, successors of Muhammad, with encomiums, quietly taking a detour to the line of the past (Muslim) rulers of the land and terminating in the reign of the current ruler when the historian was at work. Clearly then, the history that was written was the history of the Muslim rule in India and the ruler's political descent was articulated in the exclusive lineage of Muhammad and the caliphs.

5 M. N. Pearson, ed., *Legitimacy and Symbols. The South Asian Writings of F. W. Buckler*, Michigan Papers on South and Southeast Asian Studies, The University of Michigan, no. 26, c.1985. More recently, Stewart Gordon has subjected the somewhat linear images sketched by Buckler to considerable and elegant nuancing. See his 'Robes of Honour: A "Transitional" Kingly Ceremony', *The Indian Economic and Social History Review*, 33, 3, 1996: 225-42; S. Gordon, ed., *Robes of Honour: Khil'at in Pre-Colonial and Colonial India*, New Delhi, 2003.

In large measure this was owing to the tradition of history-writing within which medieval Indian historians practised their craft. The perspectives of Islam determined the space and time that constituted the world and its history for them, a point touched upon in the introduction.

Abul Fazl, Akbar's courtier, historian, friend and fierce supporter, finished his massive and definitive work, the *Akbar Nama* and *Ain-i Akbari*, in the waning years of the sixteenth century; it marks a decisive and schematic departure from the predominant historiographical format, as it does in several other aspects of the construction of an alternative world view. The *Akbar Nama* opens with the praise of Allah, for sure, and then moves to Adam and traces Akbar's lineage from him as his fifty-third generation descendant. Very deliberately it dislocates historiographical axis from the groove of Islam and seeks to construct an alternative teleology of universal history – and not merely a world history – in which Akbar, his patron and idol, would not be contained within the frame of a sect of humanity, i.e. Islam; he is the heir not to Muhammad and the caliphs, but to Adam himself, the first human being, and thus the ruler of all humanity. There were other existing notions of the ruler of the universe too, for sure, such as the Shahinshah in pre-Islamic Iran and the Chakravartin in Hindu religio-political ambience, but their vision of universality coincided with territoriality; for Abul Fazl, the coincidence was with humanity instead.

But then Abul Fazl was exceptional. As indeed was Akbar. If we withdraw Abul Fazl from the scene for a while, the large number of histories that have survived to us follow the other, predominant pattern, with Islam as its frame of reference in narrating events where the court, the ruler and his nobles comprised their very core. If the intellectual and cultural ambience at the court bore the impress of Islam's considerable presence, the rulers themselves frequently invoked Islamic idiom and jargon to legitimize their actions. With some of them it might have been merely a politic manoeuvre; with others a measure of conviction, even vehemence, shaded a part of the exigency. But 'the waging of wars against *kafirs*' (infidels), 'elimination of *kufr* (infidelity) from the land' at the hands of the 'armies of Islam', etc., remained strongly expressed sentiments by most Mughal rulers, even as they revelled in life's merriment, so alien to the chilly puritanism of the zealot. Battles against non-Muslim opponents became *jihads* (holy wars) sometimes in, and at others irrespective of a context; prohibition of the construction of new temples, and, if constructed, their demolition, the demolition too of some very ancient temples and the construction of mosques in their place, the collection of *jiziya* from non-Muslims as the price of the freedom to adhere to their own religion in a Muslim state – all these, and several other acts, implemented with varying measures of coercion, marked the

assertion of conquering power, perceived and projected in an accentuated Islamic profile of the state.

Babur saw himself at times as a practising Muslim; his practice of Islam was however lightened by his search for the pleasures of the senses: wines, composing of some very sensual poetry, music, flowers and gardens, women, even a young boy at one time in his youth. He was not the type of the stuff that makes proselytizing and demolishing other people's places of worship one's life's aim. Yet, even as he had gained a relatively easy victory at Panipat in 1526 against Ibrahim Lodi, a Muslim of the Afghan stock, forever the butt of ridicule in the eyes of the more refined Mughals,⁶ the battle next year at Khanuwa was to be the decisive one for the opening up or the closure of space to achieve his ambitions in India. The eve of the battle had tensed up his nerves, with good reason: his opponent, Rana Sangram Singh ('the lion chief of battles') was a legendary war veteran, as yet unfamiliar with defeat, as folklore would have it; his army was terrifyingly larger than that of Babur. And then an astrologer, a Muslim at that, had forewarned the Mughal of the certainty of impending defeat if he went ahead with the battle. Astrological forecasts were often determinant interventions in the political or personal conduct of the Mughals. Loss of hope could so demoralize a warrior.

Babur found hope in the fold of Islam. His battle cry at Khanuwa was *jihad* against the infidel Rana. In a dramatic gesture of religious piety, he renounced the drinking of liquor and broke all his drinking vessels. The words in this part of his memoirs, the *Babur Nama*, where events leading up to and immediately following this battle are recorded, wear a very uncharacteristic hue of a holy warrior battling to cleanse the earth of infidelity, *kufri*.⁷ But this metamorphosis had a context.

Jahangir, on his part, was able to record only a small number of victories during his reign. Thus, every little one would appear grander to him than it did to history. One such precious victory was won at Kangra, the fortress on a hilltop in present-day Himachal Pradesh, not quite easy of access. Jahangir writes of the conquest in hyperbolic terms

6 Bayazid Bayat, a junior courtier of Humayun and Akbar and author of a memoir, observes of a youth: 'As he was young in years, was a fool and an Afghan...', *Tazkira-i Humayun wa Akbar*, ed. M. Hidayat Husain, Calcutta, 1941: 313.

7 Interestingly, after invoking Allah's help and grace, Babur, forever sensual, adds that 'Victory, the beautiful woman whose world adornment of waving tresses was embellished by *God will aid you with a mighty aid* [verse from the Quran], bestowed on us the good fortune that had been hidden behind a veil and made it a reality.' *Babur Nama*, English tr. A. S. Beveridge, Delhi, 1972 (first pub. 1922): 572. The sensuality of the metaphor 'beautiful woman with waving tresses' is in a manner enhanced by the invocation of God, whose 'mighty aid' undoubtedly added to her appeal. The pleasure of this sensuality thus also becomes sacred, sinless.

in his memoirs, the *Tuzuk-i Jahangiri*, and boasts of celebrating it by demolishing the temple of the Hindu goddess Durga, and constructing a mosque at the site. He also had a bull slaughtered in the fort, and carried out 'whatever was customary according to the religion of Islam'. The temple below the fort walls was, however, left untouched, though not unnoticed. Indeed, Jahangir speaks very fondly of it. Interestingly, even as Prince Khurram, later to become Emperor Shah Jahan, was the formal victor at Kangra, earlier attempts to conquer the fort had been led by Raja Bikramjit and Jauhar Mal, son of Raja Basu, among others. The fact that these high-ranking Hindu nobles were commissioned to reduce a fort, where victory was ultimately celebrated by demolishing a Hindu temple and erecting a mosque, lends a degree of irony to the enterprise, although it was far from unusual. Indeed, one strand of Muslim thought did emphasize 'a Hindu wielding the sword of Islam' as evidence of glorification of the faith.⁸

Yet Jahangir was not eager to demonstrate his devout Islamic profile, much less in opposition to *kufr*. Indeed, if there was one man in his empire for whom he had the most profound respect, it was a Hindu hermit, Yogi Jadrup, to whose hermitage he paid several visits and considered 'association with him a great privilege'. The Yogi too was effusive in his compliment to the emperor: 'In what language can I return thanks for the gift of God, that in the reign of such a just King I can be engaged in the worship of my own Deity in ease and contentment, and that from no quarter does the dust of discomposure settle on the skirt of my purpose?' Niccolao Manucci – the Italian traveller who came to India in 1656 hiding in the hold of a ship, and stayed on until his end in 1717 – observes of Jahangir that of all his subjects, he was kind to everyone except the Muslims. Indeed, this sentiment is repeated several times over in our sources. Shaikh Ahmad Sirhindi, a significant and influential theologian of Akbar's and Jahangir's time, lamented the deplorable state of Islam in India. His countrymen, he felt, set little store by the dogma of prophethood in general and that of Muhammad in particular. The law of God, which Muhammad had preached, was, in the Shaikh's view, no longer honoured in India and unbelief was openly propagated even in the Persian language. A Persian-language text composed in 1025 H./AD 1614, less than a decade after Akbar's death, records the written

8 Akbar's courtier and historian Abd al-Qadir Badauni cites Mulla Sheri to this effect in the context of Raja Man Singh fighting Rana Pratap of Chittor; *Muntakhab al-Tawarikh*, vol. II, ed. Captain W. N. Lees and Munshi Ahmad Ali, Calcutta, 1865: 233. Later on, Aurangzeb too referred to his great Hindu general Raja Jai Singh as the 'extender of Islam' (*mati al-Islam*). See M. A. Ansari, *Administrative Documents of Mughal India*, Delhi, 1984: 40.

instruction sent by Akbar to his son Danial, after appointing him Governor of the Deccan and Khandesh in 1601, that 'he should demolish the Jama mosque at Asir and raise a temple along the pattern of the Hindus and kafirs on its site'. The prince, though, wisely sidestepped the implementation of the order, notes the author. In a similar vein Jahangir's grandfather Humayun, too, had been accused of being anti-Muslim by a Sufi, Shaikh Abd al-Quddus Ganguhi. François Bernier, the celebrated French doctor who travelled to India in the mid-seventeenth century, announced that Jahangir 'died, as he had lived, destitute of all religion'. Manucci, also, tells the story of Jahangir's fondness for pork and wine growing more intense during the holy month of Ramazan – when devout Muslims observed strict fast from sunrise to sunset! Implored by the theologians to abstain from pork, at least, both in everyday life and more determinedly during the Ramazan, for if Christianity allowed its consumption, for Muslims it was a mortal sin, he resolved to turn to Christianity instead! He did not actually convert, but such was the casualness of his regard for Islam. He did, however, let three of his nephews, brother Danial's sons, actually turn Christian and there was a public procession through the streets of Agra to celebrate their baptism. The three were given Portuguese names: Tahmurs became Don Felipe; Baisangar, Don Carlos; and Hoshang, Don Henrique. Four years later, 'they had rejected the light and returned to their vomit', observes Maclagan in utter disgust. Sir Thomas Roe, King James I's ambassador to India during Jahangir's reign, also tells the story of two princes' conversion to Christianity only to enable Jahangir to demand a Portuguese wife for himself; on not obtaining one, 'the two Princes came to the Jesuits, and surrendered up their crosses and all other rites, professing they would be no longer Christians'. Simple explanations do carry blissful satisfaction.

Roe, however, reinforces the emperor's image of indifference towards Islam: 'His religione is of his owne invention; for hee envyes Mahomett and wisely sees noe reason why hee should not bee as great a prophett as hee and therefore proffesseth him selfe soe . . . Finally, all sorts of religions are wellcome and free, for the King is of none.' Other European observers confirm this perception, verging on vehemence. Terry, the English traveller, mentions that when the recitation of the *azan*, the call for prayers, began in the mosques in Agra his companion Coryat would go up to the turret and substitute "Hazrat Eesa ibn-Allah", "Christ the son of God" for "Mohammad Rasul-Allah". He would further add that Mahomet was an impostor; 'which bold attempt in many other parts of Asia, where Mahomet is more zealously professed, had forfeited his life with as much torture as tyrannie could invent. But here every man hath libertie to professe his owne religion freely, and for any restriction I ever

observed, to dispute against theirs with impunity.' The King 'does not like those that change their religion; hee himselfe beeing of none but his own making and therefore suffers all religions in his kingdom,' remarks Coryat.

Yet demolition of the temple at Kangra and its replacement by a mosque came easy as assertion of conquest of a fort that had escaped the might of his predecessors, above all, his father, with whom he had a complex love-hate relationship. That was his proud moment and he



Figure 1 Rembrandt, *Shah Jahan and His Son*. Although done just two years before the Emperor's dethronement and 'imprisonment' by his third son and successor Aurangzeb, the painting shows him and his son (Dara Shukoh?) at a much younger age. The very young Prince receives affection from his father, but also wears the grim adult responsibility on his face, reinforced by the crown-like turban on his head. It was unthinkable even for a Western artist to show the Emperor without the solar halo. © Rikjmsmuem.

celebrated it by highlighting his Islamic core. Religion, state and history merged here.

The court chronicle of Shah Jahan, the *Shah Jahan Nama*, makes a point of describing his forces as the armies of Islam, and repeatedly refers to his acts as being undertaken for the glorification of Islam. Even so there are few events on record where the Emperor dramatized his Islamic identity. This was left to his third son and successor Aurangzeb, who, more than any of his ancestors, brought Islam centre-stage in state affairs. Islam moved him emotionally and he perceived its clearest manifestation in relentless antagonism with *kufir*. 'My heart burns with anger when I look at a *kafir* in prosperity,' he had exclaimed. The long historiographical tradition established on a firm footing by Sir Jadu Nath Sarkar, envisioning Aurangzeb as the indefatigable zealot whose ambition was to turn the Mughal state into an indubitably Islamic institution, still finds an echo in John F. Richards. The Emperor was, remarks Richards, 'free to fulfil his Islamic vision of the Mughal empire . . . [which] was his ultimate goal'.⁹ Aurangzeb could also source the justice of his imprisonment of his father and the killing of his brothers, for the capture of the throne, to his concern for Islam and their neglect of it. The concern found expression in his general command to demolish temples of the Hindus and at times erect mosques on their debris. This included the temples at Kasi (Varanasi) and Mathura and several others.

Popular perception, too, commonly identified the state with Islam. The *Guru Granth Sahib*, scripture of the Sikhs, also revered by the Hindus in Panjab, speaks of the state as Muslim without ambiguity and without hostility, as a matter of fact. Devotional literature composed in regional languages in India's medieval centuries also refers to the state as Turk or Turkish, used as a synonym for Muslim. The Muslim Sufi saints, on their part, were content to think of the state as Islamic, for whose security and longevity they could mobilize their immense popular appeal with a clear conscience as the occasion arose.

Yet, to reconsider the old question, was the state indeed the state of Islamic theocracy? We might set two criteria to establish the characteristics of a theocracy, Islamic in this case. First, the state, ruling on behalf of a denominational god, would endeavour to use all its power for the conversion of its subjects to Islam and would eliminate all traces of

9 J. N. Sarkar, *History of Aurangzeb*, 5 vols, but especially vol. III, Calcutta, 1928; J. F. Richards, *The Mughal Empire*: 172. See also I. H. Qureshi, *Ulema in Politics*, Karachi, 1974, where the thrust of the argument simply is that Akbar had weakened the foundations of the Mughal empire by diluting the purity of Islam and it was Aurangzeb as ruler and the orthodox Ulema who sought to check this distasteful development. A book written for the faithful by a faithful, with no space for critical enquiry.

non-Islamic presence from its territories; it would, in other words, constantly engage in transforming the contested land, *dar al-harb* into *dar al-Islam*, land of Islam. Second, only the jurisdiction of *sharia*, Islamic law, would prevail irrespective of the religious affiliation of any of its subjects, the kind of state that came to be established in some of the Arab regions, today's Saudi Arabia, for example.

On the demolition of Hindu temples, as an act of state policy, the evidence is varied though rich. Babur visited several temples in Gwalior and even as he ordered the demolition of 'naked idols' (erotic sculptures) on one temple, he also records his 'joy' at seeing some other 'idol-houses'. Bayazid Biyat, Humayun's personal attendant, commissioned to write his memoirs by Akbar, notes that he, Bayazid, had converted a temple into a mosque and a theological school, *madrasa*, in the presence of Todar Mal, the highly respected, orthodox Hindu minister of Akbar. Akbar assigned two villages for the maintenance of the *madrasa*. During Akbar's reign, too, the zealot Hussain Khan Tukriya was out to demolish rich temples. He had set his heart on the gold idols in the Doab region between the rivers Ganga and Yamuna. 'He had all his life coveted this place and kept his eyes set upon it as a mine of gold and silver imagining in his guileless heart . . . visions of golden and silver idol-temples and bricks of gold and silver.' Clearly, visions of lucre were seldom far from his desire to earn religious merit. Historian Abd al-Qadir Badauni also records during Akbar's reign that in Nagarkot, near Kangra, on one occasion 200 cows were slaughtered, many Hindus killed and a temple was demolished by the Muslim soldiers while they were under the command of Raja Birbal, 'who fancied himself a saint (*pir*) among the Hindus'. A while later, Akbar seems to have made amends for it and sent a golden umbrella to cover the idol.¹⁰ He also allowed the reconversion of a mosque to a Hindu temple, which had earlier been demolished, and a mosque had been built on its debris at Kurukshetra, the site of the legendary war of Mahabharata and thus one of the major pilgrimage sites for the Hindus. Father Monserrate's Christian heart was warmed by the Muslims' destruction of Hindu idol temples, but the Muslims did not seem to have done enough, for 'the carelessness of these same Musalmans has on the other hand allowed [Hindu ritual] sacrifices to be publicly performed, incense to be offered, oil and perfumes to be poured out, the ground to be sprinkled with flowers . . . either amongst the ruins of these old temples or elsewhere – any fragment of an idol is to be found'.

Jahangir made some rude remarks about 'the worthless religion of the Hindus' when he learnt of the construction at Ajmer of a temple 'of great

10 S. R. Sharma cites a local tradition to this effect, *Religious Policy of the Mughal Emperors*, New Delhi, 1972 (first pub. 1940): 37.

magnificence on which 100,000 rupees had been spent' by Rana Shankar, 'in my kingdom among the great nobles'. It was not the magnificence of the temple that the Emperor found distasteful; it was the image of a boar – sacred to the Hindus as one of Vishnu's 10 avatars and abominable to the Muslims for being filthy and a religious anathema – that was the cause of his irritation. The image was destroyed and thrown into a tank, although the temple itself seems to have been spared. However, if the Durga temple at Kangra Fort had to give way to a mosque after being defiled by the slaughter of a bull, the temple of Goddess Bhawani just below the fort was left untouched. Also left untouched was the Jwalamukhi temple in the neighbourhood, after testing the priests' claim that the fire there was divine and eternal and could not be extinguished by water. Indeed, Jahangir allowed not only repairs to it, but also extensions. The fort episode was to signify the registering of an extremely difficult victory. S. R. Sharma, the old school historian of the Mughals' religious policy, observes that 'These exceptions apart, Jahangir usually followed the path shown by his father.' It is interesting to note that some of the Hindu shrines in Kangra and Mathura 'continued to attract a large number of Muslim pilgrims besides their Hindu votaries'.¹¹ The matter-of-fact statements in Jahangir's memoirs that 'Various professors of every religion and creed have taken up their abode in the city', and 'Many religions and sects flourish in India', strongly reinforce the observation of the absence of proselytising zeal as an attribute of the state's functioning.

Shah Jahan was, however, a little less tolerant of the infidels' assertion of their faith. It was reported to him that many new temples had either been constructed recently or were in the process of construction. While the *sharia* might allow the continued existence of ancient places of worship of other religions under the regime of a Muslim ruler, construction of new ones challenged the very core of the Islamic state. Shah Jahan wasn't the one to ignore this challenge. He ordered that 'whatsoever idol-temples had been recently built be razed to the ground. Accordingly... it was reported from the province of Allahabad that 70 had been demolished in Banaras alone.' In Kashmir, however, he ordered the demolition of an ancient temple at Anantnag and renamed the town Islamabad, although there was no particular provocation for either action. At Orchha in modern Madhya Pradesh, the Rajput Raja had rebelled; on arriving there the Emperor ordered the demolition of the temple built by the Raja's father 'at great expense'.

The temple at Mathura was demolished in 1670, under Aurangzeb's command. 'In a short time by the exertions of his officers, the demolition of this strong foundation of infidelity was accomplished, and on its site a

11 Ibid.: 84.

grand mosque was erected. . . . The name of Mathura was changed to Islamabad,' observes Saqi Mustaid Khan, chronicler of Aurangzeb's reign. A decade later, Abu Turab, who had been sent to Amber in Rajasthan to demolish temples there, returned to the court and reported that he had pulled down 66 temples. A year earlier, Khan-i Jahan Bahadur returned from Jodhpur, having demolished temples and carrying with him, in the chronicler's hyperbolic language, 'cartloads of idols', and had audience with the emperor, who praised him highly. The demolition of the Vishwanath Temple at Varanasi has on the other hand been recorded rather casually: 'It was reported that according to the emperor's command his officers had demolished the temple of Viswanath at Kashi.' Similarly casual is the report on the demolition of the temple at Malarna in Rajasthan. Following a summary narration of appointments, etc., the following occurs: 'Salih Bahadur, mace-bearer, was sent to demolish the temple at Malarna.' Elsewhere a suggestion of temple demolition as punitive action is implied. Thus, 'Darab Khan was sent with a strong force to chastise the Rajputs of Khandela and demolish the great temple there.' On yet other occasions, the zeal for keeping one's faith secure from the contaminating influence of the 'other', i.e. infidelity, but failing to do so, led to the angry reaction of demolitions. It was learnt that in Multan and Thatta in Sind, and especially at Varanasi, Brahmins attracted a large number of Muslims to their discourses. Aurangzeb, in utter disgust, ordered the governors of all these provinces 'to demolish the schools and temples of the infidels and with utmost urgency put down the teaching and the public practices of these religious misbelievers'.

Moved as Aurangzeb was by excessive religious zeal, which for him implied attempts to demolish temples of the non-believers in the land ruled by a pious and orthodox Muslim ruler, the number of temples destroyed by him probably exceeds the number desecrated by any other ruler in medieval India. Yet it was far beyond even his capacity to do what would perhaps have given him great joy: to wipe out infidelity from the land of which he was the master. The Italian traveller Manucci recorded the emperor's failure on this count with a touch of irony:

In this realm of India, although King Aurangzeb destroyed numerous temples, there does not thereby fail to be many left at different places, both in his empire and in the territories subject to the tributary Princes. All of them are thronged with worshippers; even those that are destroyed are still venerated by the Hindus and visited for the offering of arms.

The French traveller Thevenot, too, attests to the existence of a large number of temples in Ahmedabad during the reign of Aurangzeb, even as

the Emperor demolished 'the chief of these temples' and converted it into a grand congregational mosque. Indeed, even while Aurangzeb was exhibiting his religious bigotry by going on a temple demolition spree, he was also financing the maintenance of several other Hindu temples and hermitages (*maths*).¹² Religious zeal must yield to demands of the state. In the end, as recently recorded in Richard Eaton's careful tabulation, some 80 temples were demolished between 1192 and 1760 (15 in Aurangzeb's reign) and he compares this figure with the claim of 60,000 demolitions, advanced rather nonchalantly by 'Hindu nationalist' propagandists,¹³ although even in that camp professional historians are slightly more moderate.

There is some inverse evidence too of the demolition of mosques by the Hindus, and conversion of these into temples. Sher Shah, the Afghan ruler who had snatched the Mughal empire from the hands of Humayun in 1540, is reported to have vowed to punish the Hindu *zamindars*, who, 'after destroying the mosques and places of worship of the Mussalmans converted them into places for idol-worship and have entered into the quarters of Dehli and Malwa'. There is an earlier story, relating to the first third of the thirteenth century, told by Muhammad Ufi. In the port-city of Cambay in Gujarat, the Parsis 'instigated the infidels to attack the Musulmans, and the minaret [atop a mosque] was destroyed, the mosque burnt and eighty Musulmans were killed'. Some of the Muslims reported the incident to the Hindu ruler, who personally went out to investigate the matter and found it true. The ruler had the mosque restored to its old state, saying it was 'his duty to see that all his subjects were afforded such protection as would enable them to live in peace'. In Akbar's time, the eminent Islamic theologian Shaikh Ahmad Sirhindi complained that:

The infidels are demolishing mosques and are building their own places of worship in their stead. In Thanesar in the Kurukhet [Kurukshetra] tank there was a mosque and the shrine of a saint. Both these have been destroyed by the infidels and in their place they now have a big temple. Again, the infidels perform their rituals and religious practices freely while the Muslims find themselves helpless and are unable to execute ordinances of the *sharia*. On the day of *Ekadashi* [eleventh day after moonrise] when

12 The Bombay scholar Jnan Chandra's celebrated articles in *Pakistan Historical Society Journal*, between October 1957 and April 1959, draw historians' attention to many documents of Aurangzeb announcing or renewing the grant of land for the maintenance of several Hindu and Jain temples. K. K. Datta's *Some Firmans, Sanads and Parwanas (1578-1802)*, Patna, 1962, also reproduces several such documents.

13 R. M. Eaton, 'Temple Desecration and Indo-Muslim States', in his *Essays on Islam and Indian History*, New Delhi, 2000, esp. 128-31. Eaton is legitimately suspicious of figures of temple destruction given in medieval documents, for these would often inflate the numbers to please the zealous emperors.

Hindus abstain from eating and drinking, they see to it that the Muslims also do not cook, sell or buy anything in the towns. On the contrary, in the month of Ramzan [the month of fast for Muslims], they cook and sell breads in the bazars openly.

Shah Jahan is on record, too, for having seized seven mosques 'from their unlawful proprietors' who had 'violently seized and appropriated' them for their own use in Panjab.

Auranzeb himself, in a letter, refers to one of his most eminent Rajput nobles, Jaswant Singh of Jodhpur, with whom he always had an ambivalent relationship, as 'the infidel who has destroyed mosques and built idol-temples in their stead'. The letter is dated a good two decades before the Raja's death in 1679, when the emperor's dispute with his successors began. Evidence also exists of the demolition of some churches in Agra and Lahore during Shah Jahan's reign, before as well as after his conflict with Christians at Hugli in Bengal.

If places of worship of the Hindus and Christians could not be eliminated from the medieval Indian state's domain, the conversion of Hindus to Islam under its aegis also speaks of an ambivalent endeavour. One Muslim dynasty after another had ruled over varying parts of what we know as India today, for nearly five and a half centuries, and several times a dynasty's reach extended to most of the land. The degree of centralization of administrative and economic power, beginning with the regime of the Delhi Sultanate, reached the high water mark under the Mughals, especially by the mid-seventeenth century. The key instrument that worked towards this achievement was the *mansabdari* system, formally created by Akbar, but which had evolved from the preceding *iqta* system that had served the Sultans of Delhi for over three centuries. Yet, at the end of those medieval centuries and after the lapse of another two of British rule, the Muslim population in the Indian subcontinent was below a quarter of the total.¹⁴ If the general impression formed by Bishop Heber in 1826, confirmed by Edward Thornton's *Gazetteer* of 1854, was that the ratio of the Muslim:Hindu populace was 1:6, i.e. the Muslim population at 16 per cent, the steep climb of the ratio to 1:4, or just touching 25 per cent, seems to have occurred in the rather brief

14 In 1941, according to the last census before India's partition, the Muslims comprised 24.3 per cent of the total population, with Hindus accounting for 69.5 per cent. Kingsley Davis, *The Population of India and Pakistan*, New York, 1951 (1968 reprint): 196. J. N. Datta had slightly earlier estimated the ratio on the same date at 23.81 per cent in his 'Proportion of Muhammadans in India Through Centuries', *Modern Review*, vol. 78, Jan. 1948: 33. In 1901 the ratio stood at 22.14 per cent; Kingsley Davis: 179.

period from the second half of the nineteenth century and afterwards when the British regime was firmly ensconced here!¹⁵

More striking is the pattern of demographic distribution of Muslims in the subcontinent. Their heaviest concentration occurs in two regions: in the west in the lands that now comprise Pakistan and in the east, in present-day Bangladesh, the two accounting for more than half the Indian Muslim population in 1941, located in 76 of the 435 districts in that year.¹⁶ The next heavy density of Muslim population occurs in Kashmir Valley in the north, and on a much smaller scale towards the southern tip in the small Malappuram district of the Malabar area of the present-day Indian state of Kerala. If these comprise the geographical peripheries of the subcontinent, during medieval centuries they constituted the state's political peripheries inasmuch as the reach of the Muslim state in these regions was either constantly in dispute, or sporadic and ephemeral, or, as in Kerala, beyond its ken. Kashmir Valley, on the other hand, had turned to Islam in a long and slow social process, starting almost coterminously with the establishment of the local Muslim state there. The decisive role in Kashmir's conversion to Islam was played by the incorporation of Islam into the Rishi tradition (the Rishi *silsilah*) at the hands of a string of Muslim Rishis, the most outstanding among them being Shaikh Nuruddin Nand Rishi of Charar-i Sharif (1379–1442). The state in Kashmir was virtually sidelined in the process.¹⁷ Indeed, Sultan Shihab al-Din (r.1354–73), when advised by his Hindu minister Udaysri to melt the brass image of the Buddha and mint coins out of the metal, was furious. 'Past generations', observed the Sultan angrily, 'have set up images to obtain fame and even merit and you propose to demolish them. Some have obtained renown by setting up images of gods, others by worshipping them; some by maintaining them and others by demolishing them. How great is the enormity of such a deed!' Clearly then, in medieval India, there is considerable divergence between regions with a high density of Muslim population, and regions with a high density of Muslim state's authority. Indeed, there seems to be an inverse relationship between the concentration of political and administrative power on the one hand and the regional density of Muslim population on the other.

15 K. S. Lal gives various estimates of the ratio of the Muslims to the total Indian population in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries; see his *Indian Muslims: Who are They?*, New Delhi, 1990: 89–90.

16 Kingsley Davis, *The Population of India and Pakistan*: 196.

17 See the authoritative study by M. Ishaq Khan, *Kashmir's Transition to Islam: The Role of Muslim Rishis (Fifteenth to Eighteenth Centuries)*, New Delhi, 1994.



Figure 2 Akbar's figure looms large over the canvas as it does in history. The imperial presence is emphasized by Akbar's very being rather than any overt symbols of royalty. Seems to illustrate the Sanskrit concept of *Yug-Purush*, maker of the age, which is also the purport of Abul Fazl's *Akbar Nama* project. © The British Library (Add. Or. 1039).

The motivations that led (or did not lead) to conversions were understandably extremely varied. Akbar offered life to his first major adversary, Himu, and his 80-year-old father if they accepted Islam after defeat at the battle at Panipat in 1556. Himu was a Hindu of the trading caste who had risen high in state during the interregnum in early Mughal rule in India, when Humayun, Akbar's father and the second ruler of the dynasty in India, had suffered humiliation, defeat and exile at the hands of the Afghan upstart Sher Shah. It was in the reign of Sher Shah's second successor, Adil Shah, that Humayun was able to return and reclaim his lost empire, if only for a few months, before he tumbled down the staircase of his library and life ebbed out of him. Akbar, all of 13 years, thus ascended the throne of an 'empire', in dimensions less than a petty district. The battle at Panipat was therefore significant beyond the number of severed heads, and the victory gave his self-confidence a boost that was to characterize the rest of his time in life and on the throne.

Himu, however, spurned the offer with contempt as his father had done, with stirring words, although without hostility to Islam. Himu had, in fact, taken a vow of converting to Islam if ever he were able to defeat the Mughals. If the old father had declined conversion because he was unfamiliar with the religion, for Himu conversion under duress would be a sin, but voluntary conversion was tantamount to thanksgiving in the wake of victory. Both of them were put to the sword, the father by Pir Muhammad Khan, an important noble of Akbar's early years as ruler, and the son by Akbar himself. Decades later, the memory of the slaying of a fallen adversary troubled him, and Abul Fazl therefore portrays the slaying as entirely symbolic in that Akbar had merely touched Himu's neck with the steel. Perhaps even in that moment of victory, Akbar did not have his heart in treating it as 'the first war against *kafirs*'.

Jahangir, on ascending the throne late in 1605, issued 12 edicts; among them was an admonition to *amirs*, high nobles, especially in the border areas, against forcing Islam on any of the subjects of the empire. If anything, conversion was to be treated as an imperial prerogative. The admonition implied temptation on the *amirs*' part to let their religious zeal loose in far-off territories where quiet accretion to their power came easier. It also implied the ruler's disapproval of mass conversions by his officials: conversions were to reflect discretion rather than zeal of the state.

Jahangir himself mentions a couple of cases of conversion of Princes without giving details. One convert was a descendant of the brother of Puran Mal, once ruler of Kalinjar, whom Sher Shah had defeated in 1545, though the Afghan King himself died of a rebound of his artillery shot. Jahangir tells us that his *mansab*, rank in state's military-

cum-bureaucratic hierarchy, was raised from 1000/200 to 3000/2000,¹⁸ a very impressive rise, and a possible reason for conversion. Another, Ruh-Afzun, a Prince of the Kharagpur ruling family in Bihar and in imperial service since his youth, 'having been honoured by admission to Islam, was made Raja of the province of his father, Raja Sangram'. There is just a trace of family dispute over succession here, in which Ruh-Afzun perhaps swung the balance through conversion. On the other hand, in 1609, the fourth year of Jahangir's reign, Islam Khan, Governor of Bengal, effected a punitive transfer of an officer of his army contingent for converting the son of a defeated Hindu Raja before employing him in his service; the governor's action was applauded by 'the other officers'.

A learned Brahmin of the Deccan, however, turned to Islam entirely for reasons of intellectual conviction. He had been appointed to help Mulla Abd al-Qadir Badauni, a rather surcharged Muslim theologian of Akbar's court, to translate the *Atharva Veda* from Sanskrit into Persian. Many precepts in the ancient Hindu scripture struck the Brahmin for their proximity to Islam; this and a few other linguistic coincidences convinced him of the verity of Islam's claim to be the ultimate truth and led him into its fold, Badauni tells us and thanks God for it. Another Brahmin also converted, although we are not told why. Nizam al-Din Ahmad, Paymaster General, *Bakhsbi*, of Akbar's reign and a historian, tells us of one Shaikh Abd Allah Badauni, originally a Hindu. He was reading *Gulistan*, the text of Iran's classical poet Shaikh Sa'adi, one that deals with life's foibles. When he came across the name of Muhammad, he enquired of his teacher about the Prophet. The teacher expatiated on some of the virtues of Muhammad and the young pupil 'was exalted with the honour of accepting Islam'. A ruler of Kashmir, before its conquest by Akbar in 1586, Rinjan by name, had taken to Islam 'through intimacy and association' with his Muslim minister, Shah Mir.

Bir Singh Bundela, a Rajput of eminence, had been a loyal supporter and friend of Jahangir from his tumultuous princely days. As Jahangir ascended the throne, Bir Singh was happily ensconced in his home state of Orchha in Bundelkhand at the north-western tip of Madhya Pradesh, just touching the boundaries of Uttar Pradesh. The relations between the next two generations on either side turned a little sour. Bir Singh's son Jujhar Singh rebelled and was pursued relentlessly. He was captured and killed in the end, but his sons were spared their lives on condition of accepting Islam. The wives and daughters of deceased rebels were sent to wait upon the ladies of the palace. Another young son, too, was converted, and his guardians were promised their lives on the same

18 On the *mansabdari* system, see glossary.

condition, 'but from their innate vileness they spurned the offer and met their fate', i.e. death.

In Kashmir, conversions are usually reported as results either of triumph vis-à-vis the Brahmins in religious disputation or performance of miracles by the saints. The latter is indeed a frequently cited formula in effecting conversions to other religions as well.¹⁹ The persistence of Hindu mores, rituals and ceremonies under the upper layer of Islam has been a feature of converts in most of these regions and a good many of these still survive intact, although not surprisingly with considerable regional variations. At Rajour in Kashmir, the Hindu converts to Islam 'still have the marks of the age of ignorance', laments Jahangir. 'One of these is that just as some Hindu women burn themselves along with their husbands' bodies, so these women are put into the grave along with their (dead) husbands.' If that was bad enough, Jahangir observes further on that 'Setting aside the infidels whose custom is the worship of idols, crowds upon crowds of the people of Islam, traversing long distances, bring their offerings and pray to the black stone.'²⁰ On the other hand, Badauni had also noted the excessive zeal of recent Hindu converts to Islam.

The story of reverse conversion from Islam to the Hindu faith continues well into Shah Jahan's reign. At Bhimbar in Kashmir, in the seventh year of his reign, he learnt of the convenient arrangement between the Hindus and the Muslims that if the daughter of one community was married to the son of another, her death should end in the cremation or burial that accorded with the faith of her husband rather than according to her own faith. This minor concession to male superordination within the family structure flew in the face of the Islamic precept of marriage being legal only upon conversion of the non-Muslim partner to Islam. However, so widespread was the practice that upon inquiry 5,000 such marriages were discovered in one locality, Jogu, alone. Similar complaints were heard in Panjab. Shah Jahan did seek to enforce the Shariat and prohibit such intercommunity marriages and by

19 For miracle as an instrument of conversion to Christianity in the Middle Ages, Aron Gurevich, *Medieval Popular Culture: Problems of Belief and Perception*, tr. János M. Bak and Paul A. Hollingsworth, Cambridge, UK, 1988. In the Indian context, Fr. Fernão Guerreiro also narrates incidents of conversion to Christianity following performance of miracles, especially miraculous cures of chronic patients. See his *Jahangir and the Jesuits*, Eng. tr. C. H. Payne, New Delhi, 1997 (first pub. 1930): 41–2.

20 *Tuzuk-i Jahangiri*, Eng. tr. Alexander Rogers, New Delhi, 1989 (first pub. 1909–14), vol. II: 180–1 and 224. The Italian Niccolao Manucci had similarly observed the persistence of many pre-Christian rituals among the neo-Christians in Tanjore and Malabar; Manucci, *Storia do Mogor*, vol. III, Eng. tr. Willliam Irvine, New Delhi, 1981 (first pub. 1907): 294–351, and vol. IV: 358–9.

converting the Hindu members of such families to Islam, but by the tenth year he had perhaps realized that the force of social energy was greater than that of the state and seems to have resigned himself to the prevalence of the practice.

From the sixteenth century on many Europeans had settled in Hugli, near modern Kolkata, had turned their habitat into a fortress and converted local people to Christianity, also treated as *kufir* in Islam, albeit with a somewhat more muted hostility in theology than in history. Nicolas Withington speaks of 'a verye fayer church in Agra buylth them by the Kinge and a howse allsoe' built by Jahangir for the Jesuits. The Jesuits also received a handsome daily allowance from the King. 'They have licence to turne as manye to Christianitie as they can, and they have allreddy converted manye; but (alas) it is for money's sake, for the Jesuits give them 3d. a daye.' The conversions, however, involved no change of heart: When the Jesuits were unable to pay them, they announced that they were withdrawing from Christianity.

This could work the other way round too. Withington again tells us several stories of conversions and reconversions for pragmatic considerations, where the monetary allowance was a greater attraction than salvation of the soul. One Robert Johnson, passing through the 'Deccanes countrye' (Ahmednagar?) was persuaded to convert to Islam by another Englishman who had turned Muslim. Which he did and was circumcised. The King (of the Deccan) was pleased and gave him an allowance of 7s., 6d. per day. Eight days later he died. On hearing of the allowance, 'another of our companie called Robert Trullye' arrived in the Deccan and offered to convert, an offer 'kyndlye accepted by the Kinge. So Trullye was circumcized and had a new name given him and greate allowance given him by the Kinge, with whom hee continued.' Trullye had a companion, a German, who too offered to convert and have himself circumcised. But then it was discovered that he had already been through the process while in Persia and was just trying to grab the king's allowance, which was denied to him. So he returned to Agra and became Christian again.

Yet another Englishman, Robert Claxton, on hearing of the allowance that Trullye had received on conversion, arrived there and converted too. However, he seems to have set his sight higher than the king's generosity; he returned to Surat, pretending to be penitent and penniless, collected some 40 odd pounds of money, and disappeared again to the Deccan to partake of the king's allowance. 'So there is with the Kinge of Deccane fower [four] Englishmen which are turned Moores.'

Shah Jahan dispatched one Qasim Khan to deal with the troublesome Europeans around Hugli and he returned with some 400 of them as prisoners. A few of them saved themselves by taking to Islam, others

were left to die or were enslaved. Later on some more Europeans, settled further to the east in Bengal, were also converted, although no further details are known. Shah Jahan appointed a superintendent for the new converts.

Of all the Mughal rulers, one could expect Aurangzeb to put energy, conviction and state power into converting vast masses of infidels in India. Significantly, there is very scant evidence to this effect, even as 'popular Hindu and Sikh tradition ascribes mass conversion to Aurangzeb's reign', remarks S.R. Sharma, and adds, 'Of course it has heightened the colours in the picture.'²¹ The Italian Niccolao Manucci does observe that some Hindus and Christians became Muslim at Aurangzeb's behest to win promotion in the official hierarchy or obtain employment there, or else to earn some money on the sly, but he leaves it as an impressionistic observation without details.

Several cases of tactical and casual conversions are on record too. A Raja, Kishan Singh (of an unspecified region, perhaps in central India), wished to replace his father as the ruler of his state and, to win Aurangzeb's approval, offered to convert. The Emperor appeared pleased and transferred some imperial troops to assist him. However, his mother's help proved more economical: she got rid of his father by the simpler device of mixing poison with his food. On learning this, Kishan Singh slit the throats of all Muslim royal soldiers in the camp, and whose services had now become dispensable, and fled. The Emperor appointed Mukhtar Khan, Governor of Ujjain, to suppress the Raja but the Khan himself was killed along with his son. Also in central India, again involving a dispute between a Raja and his son Ratan Singh, the latter converted to Islam and adopted the name of Islam Khan for himself and Islampur for his state, Rampur. However, a later Rajasthani chronicler, Shyamal Das, astutely observes that he took care to behave as a Muslim in Muslim company and a Hindu Rajput while amidst Rajputs.

During the reign of Aurangzeb again one Udairaj Munshi, accountant in the employ of Rustam Khan Bahadur Zafar Jang Dakkani, on his master's death took service with Raja Jai Singh, eminent Rajput figure in Aurangzeb's court, and ultimately gained his confidence. As the Raja died politically broken-hearted and in somewhat suspicious circumstances, the Munshi feared being implicated, went over to Daud Khan, Governor of Burhanpur, and 'embraced the religion of Islam', which convinced the Rajputs of his guilt. They were keen to hold him to account for it but he managed to avoid giving them a chance.

Interestingly, the number of cases of conversion as a subterfuge for some gain or other keeps pace with the increasingly aggressive Muslim

21 S. R. Sharma, *Religious Policy*: 206

profile of the state. Yet, on all accounts, the actual material benefits that flowed into the hands of converts for reason of conversion are far from impressive.²² Manucci notes succinctly the regret of three Rajas over the loss of their faith but the gain of scarce else. ‘Three of these rajahs’, he observes with a touch of the caustic, ‘became Mahomedans owing to the great promises made to them by Aurangzeb. But after they had been circumcised, he seized their territories, and has given them the little [read title] of “noble” in his kingdom; but with this he leaves them very little to live upon.’

Thevenot tells us of a Christian woman’s conversion for being able ‘to live licentiously’; clearly his Christian heart had not taken kindly to the change of religion. However, earlier in the reign of Jahangir, Fr Guerreiro was aghast to observe that ‘There were in Cambaya some Armenians who were living sinfully with some Moorish women whom they kept in their houses. The Father pointed out to them the depravity of their conduct, and remonstrated with them to such good purpose that the women became Christians and were married to the Armenians according to the law of the Church.’ On the other hand, a Portuguese gentleman in Bijapur wished to turn Muslim for love of a Muslim woman, but was refused permission by Aurangzeb, who too might have looked upon it as a pretext for ‘licentiousness’. Akbar had also disallowed women’s conversion to marry Muslim lovers; they were to be forcibly removed from their husbands and restored to their natal families. That conviction rather than convenience should guide the change of ancestral religion was perhaps the ruling principle; if it showed a high regard for the nobility of religion, it also moderated excessive zeal for the spread of Islam.

Aurangzeb did, however, induce a Hindu scribe to turn to Islam as punishment short of execution after he had had killed his sister’s paramour, a Muslim eunuch, when the affair became public. Another Hindu scribe, Chandi Das, needed no persuasion to convert. It happened that he felt haunted by a ghost (*jinn*) in the town of Aurangabad during Aurangzeb’s reign. For a long year he lay in bed, all medical treatment proving ineffective. A friend visited him and advised him to engage in constant (Muslim) prayer in lieu of medicine. Chandi Das took the advice and experienced a swift recovery. The efficacy of the prayer convinced him of the verity of Islam and so he turned to it. He was given the name Muhammad Hadi (by Aurangzeb) and later on the title of Kamwar

22 S. Inayat Zaidi and Sunita Zaidi, ‘Conversion to Islam and Formation of Castes in Medieval Rajasthan’ in A. J. Qaisar and S. P. Verma, eds, *Art and Culture*, Jaipur, 1993: 36–7.

Khan. He is the author of *Tazkirat al-Salatin-i Chaghtha*, a general history of the Mughal period down to 1724.²³

Among Mughal measures of administrative control, one of the most important was the appointment of *waqai-navis*, news reporters, in every part of the empire. The reporters were expected to bring directly to the emperor's notice details of each and every event within their territorial jurisdiction. Contained in these reports were incidents of conversion of some Hindu women in Ajmer, in Rajasthan, in the twenty-first year of Aurangzeb's reign. This was the year when a decisive shift to a more assertive Muslim identity of the state was in the offing, with Rajasthan as the prime locale of this assertion. Two of the reports are brief and matter-of-fact: One woman, Rupli (a Hindu name), who was the mistress of a Muslim, 'received the honour of conversion to Islam with a view to getting married after a while'. Another unnamed woman also 'brought honour upon herself with conversion'. The Qazi, Hamid, suggested conversion to her husband who declined. On this ground, the Qazi took this woman into his custody so that, after the lapse of the obligatory period of three months (*iddat*), he could marry her off to a Muslim.

A third case is slightly less plain. In the twenty-first regnal year again, one Ganga Ram, resident of Ajmer, lodged a complaint that Muhammad Alam of the *pargana* Dindwana had killed his son-in-law without reason and had taken his daughter, the slain man's wife, into his own custody. The two, Alam and the lady, were brought before the (Muslim) *faujdar*, administrator, of the region and Alam was asked to explain his conduct. The man, said Alam, had died of illness and the woman sought to burn herself with her husband's corpse. He dissuaded her from committing the act of sati and suggested conversion to Islam, which had no provision for this horrendous practice. She accepted the suggestion, and, on thus freeing her from the clutches of Hinduism, he allowed her to go wherever she wished. However, no man would cast a glance at her in view of the fact that her body had eruptions of leprosy all over. This was checked and found true. Her father nevertheless persisted in pursuing his complaint. The matter was thus sent to the Emperor for adjudication.

The casual nature of the proceedings of conversion in these reports is remarkable, when one would have expected some hyperbole. Similarly casual is the report of the conversion of Mulraj, a Rajput, 'who entered into the glory of Islam and became known as Abdullah'. For sure, casual references to cases of conversion to Islam are not the only form of recording them; equally frequently there is an aura of celebration when such conversion is put on record. There is, too, constant suspicion of the

23 The major manuscript of the text is located at Khuda Bakhsh Library, Patna. Asia Publishing House, New Delhi, published its latter part, edited by Muzaffar Alam, in 1980.

inadequacy of neo-converts' break from their old faith and commitment to the new. Sultan Firuz Shah (r. 1351–88) had expressed these doubts, as did Babur, Jahangir and the Muslim theologian of the eighteenth century, Shah Waliullah.

Fr. Guerreiro mentions instances of the conversion of some Muslims and Hindus to the faith of Christ during Jahangir's reign. One of them, an old man, native of Basra, 'begged the Fathers to make him a Christian', and then insisted that his conversion remain a dead secret. The reason given by the Father for this paradox appears rather laboured: 'so evil-minded are the Moors [Muslims] that he would have been unable to live with those of his house, had they known that he was a Christian.' In Agra, according to the Father's testimony, 'about twenty people had been baptised'. Sir Thomas Roe, who was also located at Agra at the same time, is sceptical of any true conversions to the Christian faith. 'I cannot fynd', he says with a sense of finality, 'by good search that ther is one Christian really and orderly converted, nor makes the profession, except some few that have become baptised for mony.'

It would thus appear somewhat of an excess to argue that the Muslim state in medieval India carried the burden of eradicating infidelity from the lands it conquered and governed, that it was the exclusive agency of religious conversion, and use of force by it was the main instrument of effecting the change. Scarce as the evidence is, it is far too varied to sustain that conclusion. It would also imply that the state exercised its utmost power in areas where its presence was least impressive and neglected what, by theocratic logic, would be its primary obligation in the region that constituted the heart of its territories, for all of five centuries and a half, i.e. Delhi, UP, Bihar, where the Muslim population has never surpassed the range of 15 per cent. The map of the Muslim population's distribution in the subcontinent seriously undermines the logic of the state as the exclusive, or even the primary, agency of conversion to Islam in medieval India.

It could perhaps be argued that strong resistance to conversion by the Hindus of medieval India should explain their overwhelming survival through the travails of all those tortuous centuries. We could thus expect a considerable amount of conflict, even violence, on the issue and consequently a large body of historical and literary documentation on both sides of the religious fence, to tell each version of the long-drawn story. A small window does open once in a while to give us impressions of motivations. Akbar observes with a touch of regret that 'we by fear and force compelled many believers in the Brahmin religion to adopt the faith of our ancestors'. Abul Fazl has, towards the concluding part of the *Ain*, recorded 'The Sayings of His Majesty'. Among them is a repetition of the above confession, now tinged with a sense of shame: 'Formerly I used

force upon men to conform to my faith and deemed it Islam. As my knowledge grew, I felt ashamed of my deed. Not being a Muslim myself, it was unfair to compel others to become such. What constancy might one expect from those converted under duress?’

These, however, still remain occasional glimpses and history generally is remarkably reticent on this score. Thus, even as the Muslim population in the subcontinent comprises the world’s largest single concentration, the story of its conversion to Islam remains virtually unexplored, primarily for lack of even suggestive data, barring a few scattered references. The data that we do encounter at the state level relate to individuals and families converting to Islam; most of these point to conversion by those politically significant persons who had committed what in the eyes of the state constituted an act of defiance or dereliction of duty, or an entire range of offences covered in the generic term rebellion, *fitna*. S. R. Sharma assiduously collected information on conversions and is able to enumerate less than 200 converts during Aurangzeb’s reign. Of these, some come from the bottom rungs of society, with a willingness to convert for petty pecuniary benefits, while others could be traced to higher social and official echelons.²⁴ He also notes that the emperor’s proselytizing zeal became manifest only from 1666, the eighth regnal year.

Conversion to Islam at the hands of the state was projected as a punishment to those found guilty of some crime or other. The most common punishment in serious offences of this nature led the person to the gallows; occasionally, however, either in view of his creditable past services or a still notable balance of utility as the ruler saw it, he was offered pardon if he were to forsake his religion to turn to Islam. As far as the state was concerned, conversion to Islam under its aegis was in most cases a punishment of the second order for what in its perception constituted very serious crimes. Akbar’s lamentful observation perhaps refers to this type of conversion. We come across extremely rare cases where loyal non-Muslim officers of state were induced to change their religion and even fewer cases of common subjects being offered lures for converting. Missionary zeal for proselytization was not an attribute of the medieval Indian state, even in the midst of varying degrees of each ruler’s attachment to Islam.

Interestingly, there is also testimony to reverse conversion of Muslims to Hinduism, as well as reconversion of Muslims to their former Hindu religion, both unthinkable in a state of Islamic orthodoxy. Mahmud bin Amir Ali Balkhi, a central Asian traveller in Jahangir’s reign, was horrified to see a group of 23 Muslims in Banaras (Varanasi) who had deserted

24 S. R. Sharma, *Religious Policy*: 203–13.

their religion and turned Hindu, having fallen in love with Hindu women. 'For some time I held their company and questioned them about their mistaken way. They pointed towards the sky and put their fingers at their foreheads. By this gesture I understood that they attributed it to Providence.' Zain al-Abidin, very liberal pre-Mughal ruler of Kashmir (r. 1420–70), formally permitted return to the Hindu faith by converted Muslims. Social gratitude for it was expressed in a story that gained currency that a Hindu recluse had transferred his soul into the body of the dying ruler. Akbar too, in his forty-fifth regnal year, proclaimed that a Hindu converted against his will at any age could 'return to the religion of his forefathers'. Eminent fifteenth-century saint-poet Chaitanya reconverted the Muslim governor of Orissa; he also converted a group of Pathans, men from the rugged north-western region of the subcontinent settled in the east, who were not Hindus in the first instance, even as Hinduism is not a proselytizing religion. They earned the sobriquet of 'Pathan Vaisnavas'.²⁵ Shah Jahan's face-off vis-à-vis theologians had been feeble than his grandfather's and he had forbidden withdrawal from the fold of Islam; even so reconversion went on apace, usually of Muslim women married to Hindu men but also of Muslim husbands of Hindu women. Another source of reconversion was the sale of Muslim slaves to Hindus, although such a transaction was held by theologians to be contrary to the *shariat*. After the tenth regnal year, the Emperor seems to have reconciled himself to the futility of state intervention in prohibiting reconversion. A Hindu saint Kalyan Bhati travelled to Iran, converted to Islam, returned home and to Hinduism. The Persian language text of the seventeenth century, *Dabistan-i Mazahib*, implies the existence of a pervasive phenomenon of reconversion at all levels and mentions, among others, two high nobles of the imperial court – Mirza Salih and Mirza Haidar – who were thus persuaded to change their religion a second time. At the mass level, Shah Jahan discovered that in the Bhimbar region of Kashmir it was common for Muslim girls to marry Hindu boys, but, instead of the boys converting to Islam, the Muslim girls were being persuaded to turn to the Hindu religion. The Sikh Guru Hargobind reconverted a large number and the *Dabistan* records this with an unusual trace of hyperbole: 'Not a Muslim was left between the hills of Kiratpur in Panjab and the frontiers of Tibet and Khotan.'

It is interesting to turn to the second criterion of an Islamic theocracy: *sharia* as the exclusive form of jurisprudence. Such was clearly not the

25 Krishna Das Kaviraj, *Madhya Lila: Chaitnaya-charitamrita*, Eng. tr. J. N. Sarkar, New Delhi, 1988, as *Chaitanya's Life and Teachings*: 149–50 and 169–70. The tr. was first published in Calcutta in 1913 as *Chaitanya: His Pilgrimages and Teachings*.

case; *sharia* was not the only basis of the administration of law by the state. Criminal offences invited punishment in accordance with the *sharia*, for sure. But civil law, which concerns an overwhelming part of life for all subjects of state except the infinitesimal number with a record of crime, was far from uniform and each community of subjects was governed by its own religio-legal codes. Thus marriage, family life, property, and its inheritance, among the Hindus followed the Hindu religious codes and among Zoroastrian Parsis theirs, and so too with the Christians and the Sikhs, the Jains and the Buddhists. The vast numbers of tribal groups were still outside the fold of denominational religions and their civil life was self-governing, scarcely subject to extraneous jurisdictional controls.

Nevertheless, Islam had a strong presence in the operative categories of the medieval Indian state and was a significant source of its legitimacy for the greater part of India's medieval centuries. Of course, Islam did mean different things to different people. If Shaikh Ahmad Sirhindi's and Mulla Abd al-Qadir Badauni's hearts bled at seeing the dilution of Islam's orthodoxy, the same orthodoxy also came in for popular lampooning. Ja'afar Zatalli was one of the earliest poets of the Urdu language, composing some extremely 'obscene', i.e. sexually explicit poetry in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. In one of his less 'obscene' poems, 'The Problem that a Maulavi Discussed with his Wife', orthodoxy comes in for some delightful lampooning. The poet, in a superbly fluent composition, goes on to tell the story of a young Maulavi, Islamic theologian, who had announced with conviction to the young lady that a man's sexual intercourse with his wife equalled the winning of religious merit earned from killing a *kafir*. Having said that, the matter slipped from his mind. When a few days had passed and there was no sign of the killing of a *kafir*, the restless lady decided to remind the Maulavi of the need to practise what one preached and to induce him to earn high religious merit without further delay. Thus reminded, the devout man waited for the day to pass and, as the night fell, waged a veritable *jihad* on an army of *kafirs*; the wife of course was delighted.

Aurangzeb was understandably horrified that, during his pious reign, such sacrilegious acts as gambling and drinking in the Sufi shrines should be committed – and that by Muslims under the eye of his second son Muazzam. Gambling had taken place at an unspecified shrine by a state official, and drinking at the shrine of one of the holiest figures in the history of Indian Sufism, Gesu Daraz ('the long haired').

Aurangzeb, indeed, had a lot more to worry about: the erosion of his world of orthodox values, which had no space for a drink, celebration of the arrival of spring, music and conviviality in general. His Mullas prevailed upon him to proclaim the law banning liquor-drinking by

women. Since the days of Babur, the women had grown quite accustomed to the consumption of a variety of intoxicants, such as opium, *bhang* (an intoxicating herb), nutmeg and other drugs, and the earlier ban on these at the outset of Aurangzeb's reign had had little impact. Indeed, the womenfolk took delight in circumventing the ban on the cute plea that it was meant exclusively for the men.

When his sister Jahan Ara heard of the renewed affirmation of the ban, she invited wives of the *qazis* to her apartment and served them enough liquor to leave them tipsy and unconscious. She then invited Aurangzeb to see the legitimacy of the *qazis*' demand and the real state of things for himself. She also delivered a homily to her brother to see that the learned men of Islam put their own house in order before setting out to do the same to others. 'Thus was appeased the storm that had been raised against women,' observes Manucci, never one to let go of a juicy bit of gossip. Manucci also attests to the fondness for the best of wines and heavy drinking by Jahan Ara herself, her younger sister Raushan Ara, and Udaipuri Mahal, Aurangzeb's favourite wife. Aurangzeb spoke to his vizir Jafar Khan to persuade him to give up drinking; the vizir made excuses of being old and infirm, justifying his evening cup as a source of energy. 'Wine could make the poor rich, the blind to see, the fragile robust and the cripple whole,' said the vizir. The Emperor felt helpless against these powerful arguments. Edward Norris, English ambassador to the court of Aurangzeb towards the closing years of his reign, mentions that the emperor's *qazi* requested him for a bottle of English liquor on the sly and this was duly dispatched to him.

These quiet erosions apart, there was no getting away from the presence of Islam as a source of the state's legitimacy for most of its duration, barring a phase in Akbar's reign. However, if Islam was one source of its legitimacy, there were several others besides and these were constantly expansive. Although the most significant expansion was in the construction of the ideology of paternalism, a completely new and growing ensemble of sources of legitimacy began to evolve. The conceptual architecture of this legitimacy was without doubt the creation of Abul Fazl. His endeavour synthesizes elements from the vast landscape of evolving political practices, conscious and unconscious social ethos, a mosaic of religious and secular streams and their strands, positing of an alternative reconstitution of history, and the construction of 'harmony' as the encompassing ideological frame that would remain the keystone of the Mughal state's legitimacy and its posthumous legacy. Abul Fazl's five revisions of his massive work and his exceedingly painstaking choice of each word attest to the deliberation that marks his endeavour; yet several influences nuance the grand structure through silent intrusion. In his structure there is a deliberate distancing from the use of any terminology

and idiom associated with the theology and history of Islam, made more emphatic through silence. Even the mention of Muhammad's name is usually avoided, except as part of a quotation. Indeed, reference to Islam itself is substituted by a phrase of Abul Fazl's own coinage: '*Ahmadi kaish*, the sect of Ahmad (Muhammad)'. Clearly, the phrase not only conceptually distances Abul Fazl from any association, or even proximity to Islam, it also carries a slightly belittling overtone set against Islam's ambition of being a universal religion. And even as Abul Fazl refers to Hindu nobles or rulers at times with strong disapproval, at others with approbation in the course of his narrative, he never uses the term *kafir* for them. Indeed, in a scintillating inversion of meaning, he propounds that the absence of belief in Islam does not comprise *kufri*; on the contrary, it rests on the belief that there is only one path of submission to God even as He manifests himself in all directions.²⁶

Comparing Babur's and Abul Fazl's versions of the battle of Khanuwa between Babur and Rana Sangram Singh makes an interesting exercise. If, on the eve of the battle and afterwards, Babur turns a fanatic Muslim in his narration, Abul Fazl, even as he remains very hostile to the Rana, avoids any term suggestive of religious dogma. The only time a religious element enters his account is when he records the chronogram of victory – *fath-i badshah-i Islam*, 'victory of the ruler of Islam' – but then he was merely quoting the chronogram. This is the only piece excerpted by him from Babur's vituperatively worded *Fath Nama*, the 'Proclamation of Victory', which had been drafted by the emperor's *Sadr*, chief religious official, Shaikh Zain. Abul Fazl, on his part, even avoids a reference to Babur's oath of abstinence from liquor on the eve of the battle, with his long and highly charged denominational harangue to his men. His account of the second battle of Panipat, where Akbar faced his first major opponent Himu, is full of abuse for Himu, but nowhere is he referred to as a Hindu, much less a *kafir*.

Abul Fazl constructs the theory of sovereignty with several interrelated constituents. The tracing of Akbar's descent from Adam instead of Muhammad establishes his universal, human, in lieu of Islamic, lineage. Strongly embedded in this construction was the teleological vision in which Akbar's person and his reign appear as the fulfilment of human history – an inevitable divine destiny. In the narrative, there is a quiet welcome of the accidental death of Humayun as a sign of the approaching sublimation of human history, i.e. enthronement of his son Akbar. The divinity of Akbar's person forms the core of this notion of sover-

26 S. A. A. Rizvi, '*Munajat* (Invocation to God) of Shaykh Abu'l Fazl Allami (1551–1602)', in Iqtidar Husain Siddiqui, ed., *Medieval India: Essays in Intellectual Thought and Culture*, vol. I, New Delhi, 2003: 128.

eignty. There is frequent, if deliberately understated, suggestion of prophethood in Akbar's being, a suggestion the Emperor himself never found displeasing.²⁷ Yet, even as Abul Fazl posits a dichotomy between universalist religiosity derived from all of humanity's common God, Allah, and denominational religions – including, and above all, Islam, with its own partisan conception of God, Allah – the quiet incorporation of the suggestion of prophethood in Akbar's person and the implicit inevitability of the fulfilment of divine mission are elements pointing towards Islam as the source of this vision. The teleology of the mission, too, implies a finality in Akbar's appearance for its fulfilment, a notion central to Islam in the context of Muhammad's prophethood.²⁸ Akbar is visualized also as 'the Perfect Man' (*Insan-i Kamil*), a complex concept primarily developed by the great mystic thinker, Ibn al-Arabi, for his millenary appearance on earth at God's command. Muhammad, for Ibn al-Arabi was the exemplary Perfect Man;²⁹ Akbar was for Abul Fazl.

But contrary to the Islam vs *kufir* dichotomy, where perpetual conflict until the eventual subjugation of infidelity to faith was implicated, Abul Fazl's emphasis was on universality of the perspective of sovereignty with the establishment of social harmony as its missionary goal. Akbar's own measures had been moving his polity in the direction of 'universal peace'

27 Akbar is said to have smiled at his birth as Zoroaster had done, and even spoke some words, as Christ had done. See Abul Fazl, *Akbar Nama* (AN), vol. I, Maulavi Abd al-Rahim, ed., Calcutta, 1878: 44. For reference to Zoroaster, *Akbar Nama*, vol. I, Eng. tr. H. Beveridge, New Delhi, 1989 (first pub. 1902): 132 n.2; Abul Fazl, *Ain-i Akbari* (Ain), Eng. tr. H. Blochmann, vol. I, 172 and n. 2. Akbar was rather fond of comparison with Jesus, AN, I (tr.): 33 and n.1. Mulla Sheri, Akbar's courtier, renowned for his devastating one-liners as much as for his Islamic orthodoxy, put it succinctly: 'This year His Majesty has laid claim to being the Prophet; next year, if God wills, he will become God himself'; Badauni, *Muntakhab*, II: 309. Rafiuddin Ibrahim Shirazi, an Iranian visitor to Akbar's court, makes the same point: 'He nursed a grievance against the Holy Prophet on account of his being the last of the prophets. Otherwise, he could have claimed the position of a prophet for himself without facing opposition.' See his *Tazkirat al-Muluk*, ff. 231b-232a, in I. A. Khan, 'The *Tazkirat ul-Muluk* by Rafiuddin Ibrahim Shirazi: As a Source on the History of Akbar's Reign', *Studies in History*, 2, 1, 1980: 41-55.

28 Even the 'illiteracy' of Akbar is largely Abul Fazl's construction to establish the 'divinity' of his knowledge and wisdom; it remotely mimics Muhammad who too was illiterate.

29 Abul Fazl in fact synthesizes several streams to create the idea of Akbar as the Perfect Man. He 'blends the philosophy of Farabi with the mystic ideologies of Ibn Arabi and Jili for the justification of his theory that Akbar was the Perfect Man', S. A. A. Rizvi, *Religious and Intellectual History of the Muslims in Akbar's Reign*, New Delhi, 1975: 356-7. The notion of the Perfect Man raised the Emperor above denominational identity marks of Hindu and Muslim. Akbar had also been declared to be the *sahib-i zaman*, (Master of the Age), 'who would eradicate all differences among the seventy-two sects of Islam and the Hindus', and many Muslim theologians, Maulanas, brought forward proof that Akbar's appearance as the *sahib-i zaman* had long been predicted. Badauni, *Muntakhab*, II: 286-7.

(lit. 'absolute peace', *sulh kul*). Besides the abolition of discriminatory taxes against the Hindus in his early years as ruler, by about 1579 Akbar had recomposed the higher echelons of his nobility in a manner that ensured that no single group constituted more than a quarter of the entire nobility. This was a radical transformation from the debut of his reign, when the nobles were more or less equally divided between the Turanis from his own ancestral land in central Asia, and Iranis, with a slight edge for the former.³⁰ Midway through his reign Akbar had ensured that no group would be in a position to dominate the others – a pragmatic step towards the realization of 'absolute peace' in the distribution of political resources. Even as the social and ethnic composition of the Mughal nobility kept mutating during subsequent reigns, this principle remained the keystone of the Mughal polity. But then much more than exigent measures were involved in the polity's evolution; a view of the world, a vision of history was involved.

Alien conquest and rule in India had been part of its remote and recent history and integral to the evolution of its culture and civilization over centuries; the Muslim conquest beginning with the last decade of the twelfth century was a link in that chain. While Islam, as a young and energetic proselytizing religion, gave a distinctive identity to the rulers, governance evolved through a sharing of power and resources between the victors and the vanquished elites – an uneasy combination of tension and harmony, but one in which change of religion was neither a condition nor a guarantee of access to power. Islam did assert itself as the enveloping presence as the all-too-important idiom of conquest and governance, but in terms of state measures its assertion was at best episodic, anecdotal. Sultan Alauddin Khalji (r.1296–1316) put it most succinctly. Concerned to establish his credentials as a good Muslim ruler, he asked a theologian and was informed that all the measures he took for maintaining the flamboyant dignity of his person and the state were contrary to the injunctions of the *sharia*, and that his primary and much neglected obligation was to convert the infidels to Islam by inflicting humiliation on those who declined conversion. He retorted that he did what he thought was in the best interests of the state without caring if his actions conformed to or defied Islam's tenets. Indeed, at one stage, slightly fatigued by his mundane kingly duties, he thought up a scheme to establish a new religion and attain immortality – clearly to rival Islam and Muhammad – on the plea that if the prophet of Islam had been able

30 See Iqtidar Alam Khan's classic essay, 'The Nobility under Akbar and the Development of his Religious Policy, 1560–80', *Journal of Royal Asiatic Society*, 1968, parts 1 and 2, reproduced in Richard M. Eaton, ed., *India's Economic Traditions, 1711–1750*, New Delhi, 2003: 120–32.

to do so with the help of four companions, he too was blessed with such a company! Subdued rivalry with Muhammad was to recur among some of the Mughal rulers later. Sultan Firuz Shah was the only ruler of the Sultanate of Delhi (1206–1526) who showed distinct, if moderate, inclination towards enforcing some of the *sharia's* prescriptions through the institutions of the state.

Then, Islam sat lightly on the Mughals. Their conversion to it was rather recent and it had not succeeded in eradicating pre-Islamic pagan beliefs and practices, which had quietly become intertwined with the new faith and had mellowed its puritanical stridency. Babur mentions several persons, including his father, who were as pious in their faith as they were fond of the cup of wine, without noticing any incompatibility between the two, although Islamic orthodoxy would frown upon even the smell of liquor. Sultan Ahmad Mirza, his uncle, 'was a True Believer, pure in the Faith; five times daily, without fail, he recited the Prayers... Once settled down to drink, he would drink for 20 or 30 days at a stretch; once risen, would not drink again for another 20 or 30 days.' His own guardian and tutor, Baba Quli, 'prayed not; he kept no fasts.' Sultan Husain Mirza was, in Babur's eyes, 'a great ruler. He could not perform the Prayers on account of trouble in the joints and kept no fasts.' He could, however, find no equally compelling reason to turn away a glass of wine. 'During the forty years of his rule in Khurasan, there may not have been a single day on which he did not drink after the mid-day Prayer; earlier than that, however, he did not drink.' Nothing much seems to have changed for the next couple of generations. Bayazid Biyat narrates the story of the Qazis of Mandrawal in Afghanistan, who never failed to bring along liquor and 'its accompaniments' as gifts whenever they went to see state officials. And the eminent Maulana Matrabi ('Epicurean Theologian!') of Samarqand, home of the Indian Mughals, reported to Jahangir with a sense of delight that 'in Samarqand... no one spends a moment without a drink of wine'. He narrated a charming story of a tug of war between the theologians seeking to ban, or at least restrict, drinking during the days of *Nauruz* (Persian New Year) celebrations and the revellers insisting on their cup, with the censors losing out in the end. This polytonal history of the Muslim ruling class in India found space in Abul Fazl's conception of sovereignty.

In imaging Akbar as the personification and symbol of divinity, Abul Fazl was treading a well-beaten path, for the conception of divine sovereign has traces in several early and medieval polities, including Islam.³¹ However, in India's medieval centuries, the history of the rulers' claim to

31 See for a scintillating treatment of the subject Aziz al-Azmeh, *Muslim Kingship. Power and the Sacred in Muslim, Christian and Pagan Polities*, London/New York, 1997.

divinity is rather sporadic. Sultan Balban (r.1266–86) had claimed the title of *Zil Allah*, Shadow of God, if only to put a veil on his origin as a slave-boy; and Sultan Muhammad bin Tughlaq too had engraved the title on his coins, although there is little other evidence of his use of it, suggesting a lack of emphasis. It was to be revived by Akbar nearly three centuries later. However, in delineating Akbar's divinity, Abul Fazl was not merely repeating an old idiom. In focusing on the divine origin of Akbar, he was, in pursuit of the dichotomy between universal religiosity and denominational religions, seeking distance from the parameters set by Islam. The metaphor of light dominates his conceptualization of divinity, and the Sun in turn dominates the metaphor of light. Divine light permeates Akbar's very being. It is the light of the Sun. 'Nursling of divine light' (*nur parwarda-i izdi*) is his favourite phrase for Akbar, at one place yielding to 'divine light in human form'. At yet another place Akbar's and the Sun's light simultaneously 'shed lustre on the exalted house'.³² It is hard to excel Abul Fazl's mastery in creating ambiguous and permeable verbal images as the backdrop for the emergence of one solid icon: that of Akbar's universal divinity.

For, indeed, light is celebrated in several cultural milieus. In Islam itself, God is conceived of as an immense light. Thus, when Sultan Balban claimed the status of being God's shadow he took care to place a heavy veil before his face in the court, lest even the shadow of the powerful light blind an onlooker. The term for light is *nur* in Arabic, from where it has travelled into the Persian language. In the imaging of imageless God as *nur*, the term acquires a strong association with Islam. But then Abul Fazl's emphasis on light as the manifestation of divinity incorporates but does not coincide with the Islamic hue. Hence he seeks out a pre-Islamic Persian term for it: *farr* is the preferred term. *Farr-i Izdi*, to be precise, divine light, traceable to the Sasanid imaging of the King in ancient Iran. In Iran itself *Farr-i Izdi* has a long history. The Avesta vision has space for a *Farr-i Kiyani*, in effect a *Farr-i Irani*, to assert the eminence and grandeur of Iran among civilizations; this gave way to *Farr-i Izdi*, celebrated, among other works, in Firdausi's epic, *Shah Nama*. *Zil Allah*, shadow of God, was to come with Islam.

Farr has an ambiguous space for *nur*, but it also has space for the Sun as the chief source of light, along with fire. There are innumerable references in our sources to Akbar's growing devotion to the Sun, especially in the form in which it is worshipped by the Hindus, and reciting its

32 *Nur-i Akbar wa nayyar-i azam ba bait al-sharf partaw-i saadat andakht*. Abul Fazl makes a pun twice over in framing this phrase: *Nur-i Akbar* is both the great light (the Sun) and the light of Akbar; *bait al-sharf* is both the sign of the zodiac and the exalted mansion, here a metaphor for Akbar's empire.

1,001 Sanskrit names. The Sun was also a 'powerful symbol in ancient Persian Zoroastrianism and its view of a polarized and dark universe; solar images were affixed to Sasanian emblems of sovereignty such as crowns, sceptres and royal daises.'³³ The Sun and fire in turn bring into *Farr-i Izdi*, divine light, links with several other religio-cultural landscapes: Hindu, where Sun-worship is a very important feature and fire has a high ritual sanctity; pre-Islamic Egyptian culture, where the Pharaohs are proclaimed as the children of the Sun, *Amun-Ra*; Ancient Mesopotamia, Zoroastrianism, and, not least, paganism. Then, illumination of the soul through unreserved devotion to God and the *Pir*, the spiritual master, is the central moment of the Sufi doctrine: human beings, born into dark ignorance of the real significance of life, mired in the search for temporal success and therefore unmindful of the hidden real meaning of the universe, grow out of the apparent to the real through the illumined path of spiritual attainment. Abul Fazl admits the influence of the Ishraqi, Eastern, School of Philosophy in Iran, especially the Sufi doctrines of Suhrawardi Maqtul, in interpreting the meanings of illumination. He places repeated emphasis on Akbar as the spiritual guide of his subjects and the relationship between the *Pir* and his disciple, *murid*, was replicated by the Emperor in the creation of a new order of faith, the Din-i Ilahi, in which Abul Fazl was amongst the first, and few, to enrol. His preoccupation with light as the symbol of divinity and with Akbar as its manifestation is so intense that, following his elder brother the poet Faizi's suggestion, he turns sceptical of the felicity of the earlier title for the emperor, *Zil Allah*, shadow of God, for how could one so luminous be a mere shadow, even if it be of God! Akbar indeed was the emanation of God's light, not His shadow. It was Akbar's divinity which marked him out as the real and the true King from the whole chain of preceding rulers, and Abul Fazl constantly plays with the dichotomy of the true and the false, the real and the apparent, the hidden and the perceptible, all terms and dichotomies derived from Sufi discourse.

The depiction of the solar halo behind every Mughal sovereign and prince, in Mughal miniature as a distinctive mark, however, dates from Jahangir onwards. Akbar himself had turned a devotee of the Sun, beginning his day with *Surya Namaskar*, salutation to the rising sun, an important Yogic practice. Abul Fazl also constantly refers to the shine on and between Akbar's eyebrows. This too has Yogic origins where a bright light is supposed to burn constantly between the eyebrows. Sun worship had also been introduced into his harem. Akbar even had the verse in praise of the Sun by the poet Faizi inscribed on the biggest gold coin of

33 Colin Paul Mitchell, *Sir Thomas Roe and the Mughal Empire*, Karachi, 2000: 120.

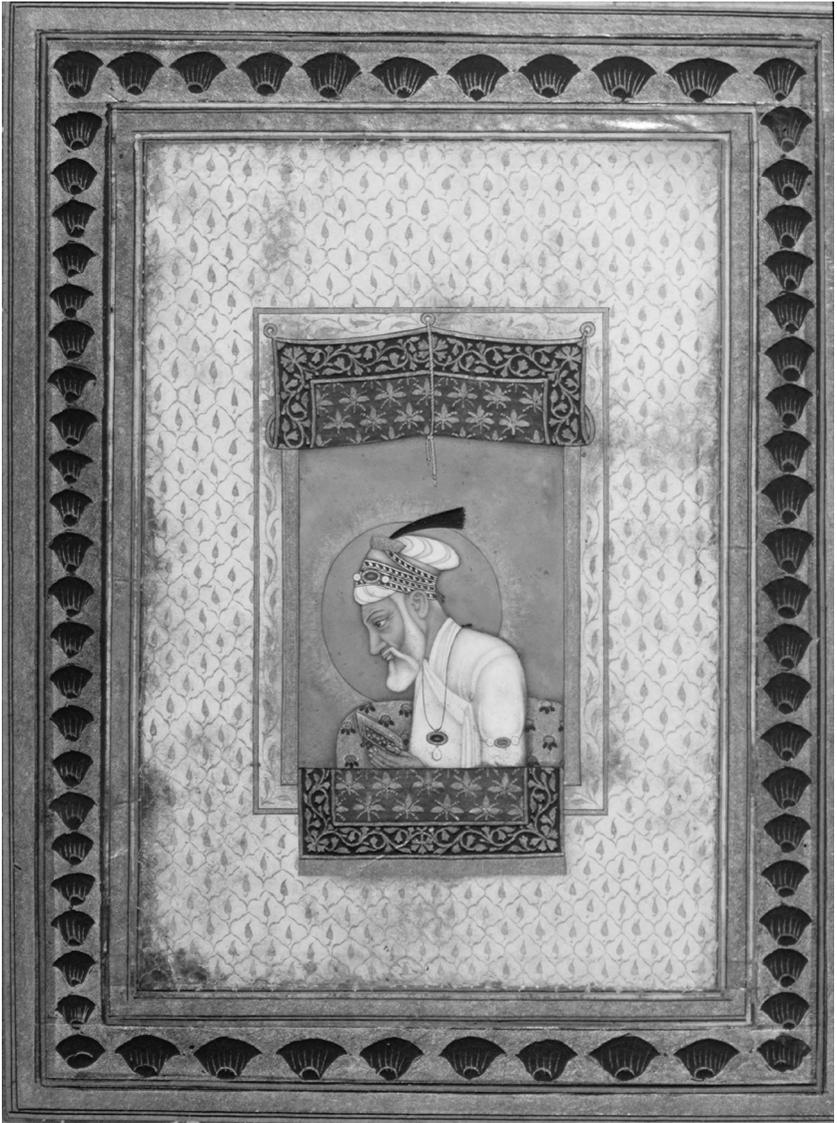


Figure 3 Aurangzeb in the last year of his life, here depicted as turning his eyes away from the world and immersing himself in the holy task of reading the Quran; yet the accoutrements of royalty, the bejewelled turban, but especially the highlighted solar halo, also form part of his presence. The common adage of saint in the form of king seems to be the motif. © The British Library (J.2.2.).

his reign, weighing about 1,200 grams. Jahangir had adopted Nur al-Din (Light of the Faith) as his name on accession to the throne for two reasons: that Nur had association with the Sun and that Indian sages had ages ago predicted that one Nur al-Din would succeed Akbar. The 46 magnificent illustrations of the *Padshah Nama*, in the Queen's library at Windsor Palace, open with an exquisite representation of the Sun on two pages.³⁴ Aurangzeb himself is said to have coined the following chronogram of his accession to the throne: *Aftab-i Alamtab*, the world-illuminating Sun, and one superb Mughal miniature depicts him in his old age, the Quran held reverentially in both hands and a very prominent solar halo bringing his profile into relief. The image of the Sun on Mughal standards had become an imperial prerogative. Aurangzeb's son, and his great-grandfather's namesake, Prince Akbar, still remembered the significance attached to *farr* and named his own son Muhammad Faridun Farr.

Akbar's divinity also manifests itself in the association of miraculous powers with his person – his breath or touch could cure ailments: 'Not a day passes but people bring cups of water to him beseeching him to breathe upon it... A chopped off tongue was thus cured by Akbar's miraculous powers'; springs would sprout forth in the desert with a strike of his stick; long droughts would end as he offered a prayer and rain came pouring down. He could even stop the downpour. Once the Ganga was in flood due to heavy rain. Akbar plunged his elephant into it and 'impossible as it was to cross that murderous river, due to the miraculous personality of His Majesty the swelling ocean gave a passage to that mine of holiness'.³⁵ Even European travellers did not fail to record the association of miracles with Akbar. Jerome Xavier noted of him thus: 'He works miracles through healing of the sick by means of water in which he washes his feet. Women make vows to him for the restoration of health to their children.' Coryat, however, was a trifle less credulous and made no effort to conceal his scepticism: 'Eckbar Shaugh had learned all kinds of sorcery.' These attributes of thaumaturgy, 'the royal touch' and performance of miracles, are derivatives of folklore. They had also been assimilated into Islam, Christianity and Buddhism, even as all these religious systems expressed strong disapproval of the association of miraculous energies with any human being, other than Christ, Muhammad or the Buddha. There was much that was common between folklore and the Mughal court culture.

34 All these Mughal miniatures have been reproduced in Milo C. Beach and Ebba Koch, eds, *King of the World*, London, 1997.

35 Clearly reminds one of Moses. The transformation of the river into an ocean, *bahr*, reinforces the suggestion.

The divinity of sovereignty clearly defied any restraints on its power and authority. Of his several classifications of human beings in different contexts, Abul Fazl divides one of them into three groups: The noblest souls are those whose loyalty to the king, Akbar, is absolute, unquestioning and undemanding, a virtue in itself; placed below them are ones whose display of loyalty is on a par with tangible gain, 'who made a traffic of their service'. The worst never show any sign of loyalty. 'Rebellion', 'rebelliousness' and their synonyms are the most damning language of abuse in medieval court literature; defeating rebels becomes 'a cleansing operation'. For Abul Fazl, the rebellious are not merely the ones who defied imperial authority; even those like Rana Sangram Singh and Mahmud in Bihar, who refused to surrender to Mughal conquering power, were rebels; they defied the divine destiny manifest in history's teleology. Unlike the double-edged Chinese conception of the Mandate of Heaven as the source of the ruler's or dynasty's legitimacy, in which the ruler too is forever on trial before his subjects and signs of the withdrawal of the mandate are set out with considerable clarity, Abul Fazl's normative structure of the sovereign's absolute power is linear rather than rounded, devoid of a countervailing balance. Yet this absolute power is nuanced with a broad and strong vision of the king's responsibility towards his subjects.

The history of legitimization of conquest of territories in India's medieval centuries is not terribly complex. Sultan Mahmud of Ghazni had tactfully combined his love of plunder with religious zeal. Later rulers did not seek justification of conquest except in terms of conquest itself. Zia al-Din Barani, historian and theoretician of the state in the fourteenth century, envisioned both conquest and governance as an exercise of terror by the king; conquest of territories was a manifestation of the king's virility. Babur claimed to have conquered India because 'it belonged to my ancestor', a Turk. Indeed, he repeatedly asserts that he pictured the region as his for this reason and thus ordered his soldiers not to harass the people during their marches, for they were already his subjects, entitled to protection.

For Akbar, however, the reference point of conquest lay in establishing peace, justice, and relieving the subjects of a territory of the oppression of the existing ruler. 'Sympathy for and relief of the oppressed are the attributes of a true king,' observes Abul Fazl, as he narrates Akbar's resolve to conquer Malwa. His arrival there 'opens the gates of justice and benevolence'. Indeed, God sometimes deprives some territories of just rulers, as he did in Malwa, so that 'the truthful sovereigns' conquer these. He, Akbar, annexes Gujarat to throw 'the shadow of justice over the province'; he dreams of imparting repose and justice to the Bengalis; he decides on conquering Bihar and Bengal to rescue the suffering

peasantry from oppressive rulers, and his conquest of Kashmir was for removing tyranny. In contrast, for Aurangzeb, the conquest of Hyderabad was legitimized in terms of Islam having been marginalized while Hinduism and Shi'ism were allowed to flourish.

Abul Fazl envisions the sovereign essentially as paterfamilias, even as power is envisaged as absolute. Everything that the ruler does, every gift or *mansab* or reward bestowed by him upon his nobles, Princes or subjects is a favour; nothing is gained by anyone as a matter of right. On the other hand, Abul Fazl binds the ruler with bestowing paternal care to his subjects. 'Subjects are a trust from God' seems to be Abul Fazl's favourite phrase for the king, as also the metaphors of 'shepherd', 'gardener', 'physician'. The 'King as father' motif is of course almost universal and has an ancient history with a vast regional and civilizational spread, from Buddhist to Greco-Roman, ancient Egyptian, Assyrian and biblical. In his portrayal of the relationship between the sovereign and his subjects as emphatically paternalistic, if Abul Fazl was not being original, he was nevertheless effecting a shift of focus in his own context.

Enumeration of the requisite qualities of a ruler have understandably been of central concern to medieval political thought. For Zia al-Din Barani, strong determination to conquer and govern nearly exhausted these qualities; for Babur, good governance implied that the town walls be solid, subjects be thriving, provisions be in store and the treasury be full. But the running thread in Abul Fazl's several discussions of kingship is the composite of 'a paternal love towards his subjects', 'the priceless jewel of justice' and fair play, and observance of 'absolute peace', *sulh kul*, without discrimination; other conditions vary with the context, at times out of step with one another. There is a grander vision to Abul Fazl's conception of sovereignty than enumerating a king's qualities: The 'true' King must understand the 'spirit of the age' (*mizaj-i zamana, mizaj-i ruzgar*).

Kingship is a gift of God, and until many thousand grand requisites have been gathered together in an individual, the great gift does not emanate from His court. Merely one's lineage, collection of wealth and the assembling of a mob are not enough for this rare dignity. . . . And on coming to the exalted status if he did not establish absolute peace (*sulh kul*) for all time and did not regard all groups of humanity and all religious sects with the single eye of favour and benevolence, – and not be the mother to some and step-mother to others, – he will not become worthy of the exalted dignity.

Universalism and paternalism, then, constitute 'the spirit of the age' that manifests itself in the attributes of the true King. For him, conquest

and governance are more than mundane activity; they are a form of worship of God. Abul Fazl is aware of the conceptual departure he is effecting, for in the 'normal' perception conquest of territories and divine worship are an established dichotomy; but then the 'normal' perception is indicative of the short-sightedness and superficiality of minds that are unable to see the hidden meaning of things. Abul Fazl brings us back here, as he does ever so frequently, to the Sufi counterpositioning of the apparent and the real meanings of phenomena, the real always hidden, revealed only to an elect few, and the superior of the two for its spiritual associations.

The king's absolute power then gets circumscribed by the responsibility to establish absolute peace among his subjects through the practice of non-discrimination, and to bring about tranquillity and prosperity through paternalistic care. The insistence on harmony as the ideological underpinning of the state introduces a bilateral endeavour inasmuch as it is not predicated upon unilateral submission. It also limits the King by setting out his responsibilities towards his subjects, the responsibilities of being paterfamilias. If therefore Abul Fazl demands complete submission of the subjects to the sovereign's command, he also limits the sovereign's discretion by constantly reminding him of his paternalist role. Perhaps the most frequently used pair of terms in Mughal historical literature is 'soldiers and peasantry', whose care redeems the state. Whereas in the *Babur Nama* such care gets recorded as a noble sentiment and the Emperor passes strict instructions to his soldiers to bring no harm to the fields while on the march, and while the state generally did intervene in myriad ways to alleviate climactic suffering of the peasantry, with Abul Fazl it forms the centrepiece of his grand legitimization of divine monarchy by introducing an element of reciprocity into it, an element that survived even as other elements, Islam for one, suffered fluctuating fortunes. Muhammad Baqir Najm-i Sani, a high-ranking noble of Jahangir's reign, in a text in the genre of the Mirror of Princes, titled *Mau'iza-i Jahangiri*, puts it feelingly: 'A just ruler is the refuge to the oppressed and the holder of the hands of the fallen.' If the bazaar gossip lampooned Shah Jahan's assiduously cultivated image of impeccable decorum, unimpeachable dignity and undying love for his wife Mumtaz Mahal, it nevertheless looked upon him and cherished him 'more like a father than a King'.³⁶ Akbar takes his normative role as the father of his

36 Such is the picture we receive of Shah Jahan from the court chronicles of his reign, such as *Padshah Nama*, *Amal-i Salih* and *Shah Jahan Nama*, besides one of perfect harmony among members of his family. When the evidence of tension nearly overwhelms the portrayal of equanimity, the balance in the picture gets disturbed, although even there the language is usually very muted and storms in interpersonal relations are portrayed as slightly unpleasant gusts of wind. European travellers like François Bernier, Jean-Baptiste

subjects almost literally. ‘Had I become wise earlier,’ he observes, ‘I would have taken no woman from my kingdom into the seraglio, for subjects have the status of one’s children.’ Indeed, even the royal hunt – apparently for excursion and game – was in reality an exercise in collecting authentic information about the condition of the subjects and to give them free access to the royal ear, assures a text of Shah Jahan’s court.

Aurangzeb’s dream in the initial stages of his reign was to see an India where Islam held supremacy; he also wished to see a prosperous India without beggars. Upon his accession, an old teacher of his turned up at the court in expectation of rich rewards; instead, Aurangzeb lambasted him for inadequately preparing him for kingly duties. ‘There can surely be but one opinion among you learned men’, the newly enthroned Emperor thundered, ‘as to the obligation imposed upon a sovereign, in seasons of difficulty and danger, to hazard his life, and, if necessary, to die sword in hand in defence of the people committed to his care. And yet this good and considerate man would fain persuade me that the public weal ought to cause me no solicitude; that in devising means to promote it, I should never pass a sleepless night, nor spare a single day from the pursuit of some low and sensual gratification.’

The regret that Aurangzeb ultimately carried into his grave was that he could not bestow as much care on the peasantry as would have redeemed a worthy ruler. Hours before he died, he opened his treasury to pay the soldiers their long-overdue salaries; he would have found it hard to carry this guilt along, too. Bahadur Shah Zafar, the last of the Mughal rulers and a poet of considerable merit in Urdu, the language which had risen from the marketplace to the court, gave expression to his failure as ruler thus:

I bring no light to anyone’s eye
Nor solace to any heart

In imperial vision justice, prosperity of the subjects and the absence of fear were the objects of governance. The vision of the absence of fear finds representation in several forms: many Mughal miniatures depict

Tavernier and Niccolao Manucci, on the other hand, record scandalous goings-on in the court and the harem, in all of which Shah Jahan stood at the centre, stories they had picked up from the bazaar with a degree of relish, for these reinforced their image of ‘the other’. Clearly, the court and the bazaar were constructing contrasting images of the Emperor, the imperial family and the high nobility. If the court was reinforcing the distance between ‘us’ and ‘them’, between the ruling elite and the subjects, the bazaar was bridging the gap by lampooning the highest in the land. Yet, the one image that touched Tavernier and John Francis Careri most was that Shah Jahan ‘reigned less an Emperor over his subjects than as a father of a family over his house and children’, Jean-Baptiste Tavernier, *Travels in India*, Eng. tr. V. Ball, ed. William Crooke, vol. I, New Delhi, 1977: 260, and Careri, *Indian Travels of Thevenot and Careri*, S. N. Sen, ed., New Delhi, 1949: 222.

lions and cows or lambs sitting side by side under the imperial throne.³⁷ There are several recorded instances of emperors going out incognito to assess for themselves the actual conditions in which their subjects lived. Ritual assurance of everyone – young or old, male or female, rich or poor – feeling secure walking around even at night, is repeatedly encountered in court literature. In the paintings, infrequently as the common folk are depicted, they carry an aura of prosperity that reflects how the Emperor would like to see them under his regime. There are innumerable references to compensation from the imperial treasury for damage caused to crops when the army was on the march.

In conceptualizing the ruler's power as absolute, but tempered with justice, paternalistic generosity and the spirit of forgiveness, Abul Fazl was in tune with the subjects' vision. For such was the conception of God, perceived by them in the image of the King with all the paraphernalia of the court, the soldiery, the accountants, even the dancers, in contemporary popular literature. God's power over human beings in this image was absolute; yet he was generous, kind and forgiving. If Abul Fazl had written in the Indian vernaculars, he would have been easily comprehensible to the villagers and townspeople who had heard their saint-poets sing in the language that was their own.

The notion of *paterfamilias* also finds expression in another form: governance through the metaphor of 'the family', which remains the dominant metaphor. Humayun had been witness to several misdeeds of Qurjah Khan, who, in his opinion, clearly deserved death. The emperor's supporters drew out their swords and one of them placed his sword on the Khan's neck. But the sword was withdrawn on Humayun's instruction, who remarked that the man's beard had grown grey and that he, Humayun, had once spoken of him as father, *pidr*. Akbar had in his childhood learnt to address Bairam Khan as *Baba*, father, and continued to do so even after becoming King. He also so addressed Munim Khan, the next Khan-i Khanan. Jahangir gave the high title of Khan-i Jahan to 'my son', *farzand*, Salabat Khan. Shah Jahan addressed Asaf Khan as *Ammu* (Uncle), 'making him the envied of all'. Aurangzeb too, after his accession to the throne, continued to address Mir Jumla, his indefatigable supporter, as *Baba*, as he did Raja Jai Singh on at least one occasion.

This form of address implicates an interesting nominal inversion of the normative state hierarchy: in the state the Emperor is supreme and

37 Ebba Koch attributes the repeated appearance of this motif in Mughal art forms to the influence of the *Royal Polyglot Bible*, published in Antwerp between 1568 and 1572 and brought by the Jesuits to the Mughal court in 1580. The engraving lithographed on the title page reproduced the motif and from then onwards, in Koch's view, it became a running theme for the Mughal Emperors in their search for the portrayal of ideal kingship. See Ebba Koch, *Mughal Art and Imperial Ideology*, New Delhi, 2001.

everyone remains subordinate to him, as his ‘slave’, *banda*; but in the family hierarchy, *Baba*, the father, stands above the son and it is the son who is subordinate. The most powerful of Mughal emperors engaged in this inversion, in a court where every little gesture and word wore layers of symbolic meanings. In the show of respect to their elders, a quiet recognition of the centrality of the category of the family in state functioning was embedded.

One of the most coveted honorifics in the court was that of *farzand*, son, and the conferring of it by the Emperor on any noble never failed to get into histories. Akbar, Jahangir and other emperors used this term of endearment to signify a close personal bond between them and the recipient – which also raised the latter’s status in the eyes of other courtiers. *Koka*, foster-brother, was another indicator of high status in the family and the court. ‘A river of milk binds me to Aziz,’ Akbar had remarked movingly on his relationship with his *koka*, son of Jiji Anaga. Once a nursing woman, not necessarily from the higher echelons of the court society, had given her milk to a Prince who grew up to be emperor, she became a surrogate mother, *anaga*, for all time, and was treated like one. On two occasions Akbar as Emperor shaved off his head and moustaches as a ritual of mourning for a close relation: on the death of his favourite foster-mother Jiji Anaga, and then following the death of his own mother Mariam Makani. *Koka*, the foster-mother’s son, became part of the imperial family, too, and rose high in state hierarchy. Mirza Aziz Koka, son of Jiji Anaga, had, along with Raja Man Singh, risen to the highest rank allowed to a noble in Akbar’s reign, below only that of a Prince of the royal blood. He had been awarded the title of Khan-i Azam (the Great Khan) by Akbar. His daughter was married to the emperor’s grandson, Salim’s son Khusrau. When Khusrau rebelled against his father, Jahangir found the Mirza implicated, and he lost royal favour and his *jagir* – part of the risk of proximity to powers that be. Incidentally, Man Singh too had earned the title of *farzand* (son) from Akbar. Indeed, foster-mothers’ husbands (*atakaha*) also climbed high on the ladder of his Majesty’s favours, virtually as members of the royal family. Shams al-Din Ataka, Jiji Anaga’s husband and Aziz Koka’s father, was the empire’s *vakil*, highest official, when he was murdered by another *koka* of Akbar, Adham Khan, son of Maham Anaga. Bayazid Biyat records a fascinating conversation between Akbar and his second Khan-i Khanan, Munim Khan. Anxious for reassurance on how he was faring as ruler, the young Emperor enquired of the Khan what people said of him.

May my Emperor live a hundred and twenty years [the Khan replied],
people speak very highly of you for killing Adham Khan for the murder

of [Shams al-Din] Ataka and Muazzam for the murder of the daughter of Bibi Fatima. They consider it justice, true and proper. His Majesty then remarked that 'he had done other things that were even better; it was strange that people did not speak of those. Or is it that you know of it but keep it to yourself for my sake?' The Khan-i Khanan replied: How was it possible that he knew of something but kept it from his Majesty? [The Emperor] said among the other things that he had mentioned was that he had brought a whole lot of Atakas from Lahore and, like the constellation of the Bear, spread them around in Hindustan allotting to each a jagir in different corners.

Even 'honorary' membership of the imperial family went a long way.

Much later, when Shah Jahan's eldest son Dara Shukoh was on the run, with his brother Aurangzeb's soldiers in hot pursuit, his favourite wife Nadira Begum sought loyalty and support from a Rajput warrior, Raja Sarup Singh, by addressing him as her son, whom she looked upon in place of Sulaiman Shukoh, her real son. 'Then she did a thing never done before in the Mogul's empire – that is to say, she offered him water to drink with which she had washed her breasts, not having milk in them, as a confirmation of her words. He drank with the greatest acceptance and swore he would ever be true and never fail in his duties of a son.' Sanctity of the mother-son relationship would make betrayal unthinkable for anyone, especially for a Rajput who would normatively fling his life away at the altar of the pledged word without a moment's demur. This Rajput, however, lost no time in betraying her in return for some money.

There are several paintings of Jahangir that depict an imaginary meeting with Iranian King Shah Abbas I, in some of which the inscribed legend describes him as *biradaram*, my brother, and he installed a portrait of the Shah in the gallery of paintings of the imperial Mughal family, along with his own, right opposite Humayun's and Akbar's. 'My brother' is the term Jahangir also keeps using for the Shah in his memoirs. After the Shah detached Qandahar from the Mughal empire in 1622, *biradaram* was ruefully dropped from any further reference to him. He was no longer a member of the family; he was just another ruler in the neighbourhood! Muhammad Baqir expresses the equation of the empire and the family in a slightly more picturesque idiom: The empire is like a beloved, beautiful and elegant, and has to be won over and nurtured like a bride, with love.

Considerations of family honour at the court, and imperial levels, also governed a large part of political activity. Indeed, the entire historiography of medieval India, of Mughal India in particular, narrates the events of the court (and therefore of the empire) with the imperial family as its axis, though with the female half slightly in the shade. The normative projection of the imperial family in the court chronicles –

extraordinary, well ordered, generous yet aloof, and of course great patron of the arts – constituted the quintessential characteristics of the state. The basic social unit thus acquired a governing presence at the highest level of the state. In writing the history of one, the historians were simultaneously writing the history of the other. The legitimacy of the state lay in the manifest working of these characteristics; its working would have made sense in every family home.

Mughal court chronicles from the *Akbar Nama* onwards seem to depict the ruler, Princes, the royal family and others in a format: The Emperor is usually spoken of in very grandiose terms, Princes just a little less so; their behaviour is generally marked by equanimity, generosity and dignity. Very rarely, and only when it turns inescapable, interpersonal tensions within the imperial family are opened to the reader's gaze. Thus fathers and sons, brothers, sisters and cousins all live in harmony in the chronicles except when harmony is shattered all too visibly. Embedded in this format is an expression of eternity; the person of the King and the Princes changes, but their conduct, mores, even disposition, are in a large measure standardized and follow the impersonal, normative eternal format of kingship, princehood and so on. The task for the chroniclers was to convey the singularities of each individual among the chief *dramatis personae*, within the format of the standard, the normative, the eternal.

Paradoxically, this format was laid down by Abul Fazl in the *Akbar Nama*. Paradoxical because Abul Fazl was so obsessed with the personal eminence of Akbar that his entire world view revolved around him. Perhaps for this reason Abul Fazl sought to elevate Akbar to superhuman status. Akbar was not merely a human individual for Abul Fazl, but the personified fulfilment of a divine mission. Akbar thus established a standard, a format for monarchy, to which each person, each monarch had to seek to approximate himself. The subsequent Mughal historians emulate, if never entirely, this aspect of Abul Fazl's formidable, though implicit, straitjacketing of historiography. It is only in an occasional 'informal' work of history, such as Mulla Abd al-Qadir Badauni's *Muntakhab al-Tawarikh*, that the straitjacket is abandoned, and a far more human history emerges. But then Badauni wrote the *Muntakhab* precisely as a reaction to, as a rebuttal of the *Akbar Nama*.

Then there are the travellers' accounts, gathered from the bazaars as much as from court circles, that depict court figures in all their myriad hues. If Abul Fazl created a historiographical format, clearly historians of the Delhi Sultanate could not have written their works within it. The individual figures much more emphatically in the chronicles of the Delhi Sultanate than in the *Akbar Nama* and after – the individual ruler's psyche, disposition, idiosyncrasies, strengths and failings are far more

prominent in the narratives of the Sultanate. The chronicles of this period place no emphasis on the eternity of the rule of their masters either.

The diverse elements drawn from varied sources – and not always consciously – are woven by Abul Fazl into a coherent fabric of the state's legitimacy that is sustained above all by 'the intoxicating wine of harmony'. The repeated emphasis on harmony, and the absence of discrimination on the basis of religious or sectarian identities,³⁸ both acknowledges the history of the state's practice of discrimination and posits a visionary ideal of its eradication, a vision that Akbar during his time as Emperor sought to formulate and realize in a large measure. 'As the world's lord exercises sway over it on the principle of *sulh kul*, absolute peace,' declares Abul Fazl, 'every group of people can live in accordance with its own doctrine without apprehension, and everyone can worship God after his own fashion.' Abul Fazl's passion for harmony turns into an obsession. Harmony is not merely a good policy; it is indeed a form of worship, the best tribute he could pay to a phenomenon. In 'the hideousness of discord and the beauty of concord' Abul Fazl perceives an aesthetic quality. *Sulh kul* is 'a four-squared garden of concord' – a compliment to both the four-cornered Sufi cap that represents the world's entirety and the beauty of the square gardens the Mughals had brought to India.

In many significant ways harmony as social and cultural ethos had been an important aspect of popular religious movements among both the Hindus and the Muslims, movements, known as Bhakti, devotional, and Sufi, mystical, during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. If harmony as ethos amounted to a passive 'tolerance' of all religions and sects, in its travel upwards to the level of the state, it was constituted by Akbar and Abul Fazl into an active ideological paradigm. For them, *sulh kul* allowed freedom of worship; there was no space in it for abusing the form of worship of another. 'Mulla Ahmad Thattavi', records Abul Fazl with strong disapproval, 'was a firm adherent of the Imami [Shia] doctrine and had a long tongue [i.e. constantly talked of it], continually bringing forth discourse about Sunnis and Shias. Given to despicable speech, he hit the lowest depth.'

Deeply immersed in the notion of universalism and harmony is the vision of a social order. The very minutely detailed rules and regulations

38 The absence of discrimination as state policy is traced back to the *Yasa-i Chingizi*, the edicts of Chingiz Khan, by Alauddin Ata Juwaini. The *Yasa* required the ruler 'to consider all sects as one and not to distinguish one from another'. It was thus that Chingiz Khan 'eschewed bigotry and preference of one faith over another, placing some above others', Juwaini, *Tarikh-i Jahangusha*, vol. I., ed. Mirza Muhammad, London, 1912: 18–19, cited in Iqtidar Alam Khan, 'Akbar's Personality traits and World Outlook – A Critical Reappraisal', in Irfan Habib, ed., *Akbar and His Age*, New Delhi, 1997: 81.

of etiquette which governed court proceedings point to an obsessive preoccupation with order, for the court was the microcosmic encapsulation of society, a theme to which we turn in the next chapter. The sovereign's primary responsibility appears to have been the prevention of upheavals in society. In Abul Fazl's formulation, 'If the majesty of royalty did not exist, how would various disturbances subside?', the intense urgency is hard to miss. Among the principles of governance enunciated at one of several places, 'having regard to the ranks of mankind and the preservation of their honour' is juxtaposed to 'the observing of absolute peace'. Indeed, so pervasive is the consciousness of hierarchy that order of precedence is established even for the imperial horses and, when a cheetah leapt a distance of 25 yards, Akbar raised his *mansab* and ordered that a drum be beaten ahead of the animal, a rare privilege even for high *mansabdars*.

But the order is not based on closure. Indeed, the repeated emphasis on merit, that is personal rather than hereditary or owing to social position, or owing for that matter to recommendation, is surprising in the medieval context, attuned as we are to looking at personal merit as entirely a modern phenomenon. 'May merit have an open market,' Abul Fazl observes. He is particularly partial to the use of the market as a metaphor in virtually every kind of context. The insistence on merit as an inherently individual quality and the metaphor of the market, where each commodity normatively establishes its value according to its innate worth, is an interesting contrast to Zia Barani, for whom merit is exclusive to high status (or the high born, as he designates them) and any sign of merit in a low-born person can only be a deception. 'His Majesty', says Abul Fazl of Akbar, 'respected merit, not recommendation', nor genealogy, for he 'encourages everything which is excellent and knows the value of talent, honours people of various classes with appointments in the ranks of the army, and raises them from the position of a common soldier to the dignity of a grandee.' Akbar himself advised his son Danial: 'Judge the nobility of any one's being and great lineage from the essence of his merit, and not from the pedigree of his ancestors or greatness of the seed.'

But a look at the network of relationship among the Mughal nobles of various ranks would forcefully point to a very high proportion originating in a limited number of families.³⁹ Indeed, a cherished privilege came

39 Several works comprising brief biographies of Mughal nobles were compiled in Mughal India. Shah Nawaz Khan's three-volume *Maasir al-Umra* is the most detailed among them, finished in about 1780. For a modern version, see M. Athar Ali, *The Apparatus of Empire: Awards of Ranks, Offices and Titles to the Mughal Nobility, 1574-1658*, New Delhi, 1985.

to be attached to being a *khanazad*, a 'house-born'. The social order then was structured along the principle of hierarchy, but with space and flexibility for meritorious individuals, devoid of inherited status. The history of the Mughal ruling class has numerous examples of individuals with nondescript origins making it to high ranks.

Norbert Elias has thoughtfully reminded us that awe-inspiring cultural grandeur in any medieval regime has more than an aesthetic quality to it; it is, in the absence of modern institutional structures, a source of the regime's legitimacy. A similar insight was implied in Abul Fazl's statement: 'when the veil of reverence had been torn, they became rebellious'. Awe, reverence, inspires compliance as long as it lasts. Multifarious experimentation and creativity in the sphere of culture on a grand scale was one of the most significant and durable moments of Mughal history in India, the term Mughal virtually becoming synonymous with cultural grandeur. Embedded in the awesome grandeur of scale and aesthetic quality is the assumption of eternity of the regime. 'As long as the sun and the moon last' was a standard phrase in Mughal documents alienating lands in charity that signified the assumption of the regime's durability. The assumption of eternity was also central to the vision that became manifest in the great monuments – forts, mosques and tombs. They were built, as it were, to last forever. The Mughals generally, and Akbar ever more than others, were saturated with a sense of history, for the number of histories commissioned, and the preparations made for these during the Mughal period far exceed those in any other span of political time in India's pre-colonial past. Abul Fazl, as the great master of the craft, deliberately focused on change in a way that took him to the very origin of humanity, Adam himself. Yet all history, all change, came to a dead stop as its teleological mission reached fulfilment, i.e. the reign of Akbar. After Akbar there was eternity.

This structure of legitimacy was not devoid of some space for variation of individual emphasis, temper and choice. The coincidence between state, history and the person of the Emperor was close in most medieval polities, as it was in the Mughal state. Had the Mughal rulers heard of Louis XIV's exclamation, '*l'Etat, c'est moi!*', they wouldn't have needed to search for its meaning. And so when Francis William Buckler expatiates on the notion that the person of the Mughal Emperor filled the entire space of the empire, he was drawing upon the near universality of the notion, although he seemed to project it as specific to the Mughals. Indeed, Mughals often perceived themselves as conquerors of the world, the titles they gave themselves on accession spoke of this grandiose presumption: Jahangir (capturer of the world), Shah Jahan (king of the world), Alamgir (same as Jahangir). In the traveller Careri's perception, Aurangzeb believed that he was lord of three-quarters of the world

and emphasized it symbolically. 'For this reason' observes Careri acutely, 'he carry'd as his peculiar Ensign a Golden-Globe, and had it in his Seal; and always tore off one corner of the Paper he wrote on, to express that the fourth part of the World was not his.' Even a small, almost pitiable figure in the pantheon of the Mughal emperors, Shah Alam II, who had been blinded and rendered a virtual pensioner of the East India Company, would still style himself as the King of the world.

Within the empire, the ruler adopted several modes to fill the space with his presence. Travelling to many parts of his dominion accompanied by the court's accoutrements was one. Wherever the Emperor went his entire court and its layout and rituals, palace, army, treasury and clerks were replicated in exact details, as if to emphasize that he was present everywhere. The notion of a moving rather than a fixed capital is thus nearer the Mughal reality. If he sent out a *farman* to any part of the empire, the recipient was required to accord it ritual respect and obeisance as if he were receiving it at the court. The *farman* was an extension of His Majesty in person. The robe of honour, granted to several persons almost every day for one reason or another, was cherished because the Emperor had touched it with his hand or his back; the honour of receiving it rose manifold if he had actually worn it. If the *Shah Jahan Nama* observes that the emperor's personal glory 'filled the palace and the realm', Bernier noted of the same ruler that even his illness filled his dominions.

This allowed considerable space for the play of individual idiosyncrasies. A subtle movement of energy and shifts of personal predilections were forever at play: from Babur's love of things sensual and his delight at being perceived as a recluse, *qalandar*, one unattached to worldly possessions, to Akbar's experimentation with constructing a mighty empire based on absolute peace, with clearly laid-down principles and rules of governance, and his joy at being projected by Abul Fazl as an ascetic rather than a king, to Aurangzeb's Islamic puritanism that led him to ban both music and history-writing from his court.

But then legitimacy is not quite legitimate unless it is so perceived by the eyes of the subjects. Is there a way of locating the subjects' response to the elaborate construction of legitimacy? Medieval societies did not record subjects' voices as carefully as they did the rulers', and the handicap of this silence is therefore severe. We do however have some suggestive genres of evidence which enable us to faintly hear those ignored voices: popular religious literature, folktales and bazaar gossip.

In popular religious literature, the Bhakti literature, already briefly encountered above, known for its emphasis on each one's personal devotion to God, who too is personalized, kingship is socialized by visualizing God in the king's image: powerful but kind. This is also a

literature of protest against social inequities such as caste, and oppression unleashed by state's officials, usually petty ones in the village. Yet their conception of state and the social order is one in which each one adheres to the normative bounds, *maryada*. The ideal King is immensely powerful and prevents the transgression of these bounds by anyone, above all by himself. It is thus that in the second half of the sixteenth century, contemporaneously with Akbar's reign, utopia was projected on to the mythical past when the legendary Ram suffered great privation in order to conform to the call of social obligations, and in the end establish his kingdom, *Ram rajya*, where each one would equally adhere to his/her status obligations. It was a conception that Abul Fazl would have found hard to quarrel with.

Of folk tales, the most widely circulated ones were Akbar-Birbal stories. Birbal was a courtier of the emperor, honoured with the high title of 'Raja', having risen from being a rank commoner; hence, easy folk identification with him. His reputation for quick wit, repartee and simple solutions to apparently tough problems is not without historical grounding; it was thus easy to transform him in these tales into the archetypal jester who outwits the king, the priest and all the high, the mighty and the intelligent in the end.⁴⁰ Birbal is always a friendly adversary of Akbar in a contest of wits; it is the fictitious Mulla-do-piazza – a 'two-onion-theologian', clearly a fantasy name – who is the foe and whom he takes particular delight in outwitting. Going by the curses and abuses historian Mulla Abd al-Qadir Badauni loads on Birbal even after his death, one might suspect that he, the Mulla, was perhaps the model for the fictitious character. The stories seek to reproduce a simplified enactment of Akbar's court ambience in which Akbar and Birbal are on one side and the orthodox Mulla on the other, even as Birbal the commoner frequently gets the better of Akbar the king, an essential component of folktales. There is an owning of Akbar as a friend, one you could make fun of.

There is owning of Akbar in other modes too. In Rajasthani literature he is celebrated as the incarnation of Ram and Krishna, Hindu mythological gods, and also referred to as Lakshmana, Ram's brother, and Arjuna, a central figure in the Hindu epic, the *Mahabharata*. Narottam, a medieval Rajasthani poet, cannot stop admiring him as an incarnation of Partha, Arjuna, and even places him in the age gone by, the *dwapar* age, that preceded the current age in the four-age cyclic rhythm of the

40 C. M. Naim has done some path-breaking research on the theme of Akbar-Birbal stories, the element of historicity in them and their significance, in 'Popular Jokes and Political History: The Case of Akbar, Birbal and Mulla Do-Piyaza', *The Economic and Political Weekly*, 17 June 1995: 1456–64.

Hindu concept of *yuga*. The poet declares that Akbar ‘loves the Hindus and has a feeling of alienation towards the Turks (Muslims); he does not feel close to them’. He concludes with vehemence that ‘Akbar’s is a Hindu Raj. Who will call it Muslim Raj?’ The Jains of Gujarat too look upon him with great courtesy and intimacy.⁴¹

There is also an owing of several other Mughal emperors. Manucci narrates a story that had probably been in circulation in the bazaars nearly a century and a half before he recorded it. Babur had been ruling with the sage counsel of one Rangil Das and the empire flourished. The counsellor’s rise in the emperor’s estimate led to jealousy in other nobles’ hearts, a conspiracy and his dismissal. Devoid of good advice, Babur’s rule began to flounder. Babur then realized his error, but, unaware of Rangil Das’s whereabouts, he set up an impossible task, knowing that his former counsellor alone would find a solution. So it came to be; Babur located and reinstated his man and the empire began to flourish again.

Manucci swears in his account that every minute bit of information he has recorded has been thoroughly screened for its verity; presumably this story too was a veritable historical fact for him. But, besides the total absence of other evidence bearing out any part of the story, it is in any case in the classic genre of folk tales where the King himself is a knave but rules well with the help of good counsel; then there is jealousy, dismissal, loss of contact, recovery of the counsellor through the setting up of an impossible task, and so on. However, even as Babur perceives and projects himself in the *Babur Nama* as the conqueror of India, as indeed do all court chronicles and official and unofficial histories, it is precisely the image of Babur as conqueror that is absent in this tale. The fact that Rangil Das is a clearly Hindu name but no mention is made of this points to the easy acceptance of Babur’s rule, and gives it indigenous roots in folk vision quietly, unobtrusively.

41 B. L. Bhadani, ‘The Profile of Akbar in Contemporary Rajasthani Literature’, *Social Scientist*, 20, 9–10, 1992: 46–53, and Shirin Mehta, ‘Akbar as Reflected in Contemporary Jain Literature in Gujarat’, *ibid.*: 54–60. Indeed, the Mughal Emperor as such often came to be equated in Rajput society with Ram. See Norman P. Ziegler’s stimulating essay, ‘Some Notes on Rajput Loyalties During the Mughal Period’, in John F. Richards, ed., *Kingship and Authority in South Asia*, Madison, 1978: 278. Ziegler cites the impeccable authority of the seventeenth-century bard of Rajasthan, Nainsi, for this statement. Kum Kum Sangari has very sensitively dealt with the theme in ‘Tracing Akbar: Hagiographies, Popular Narrative, Traditions and the Subject of Conversion’, in Neera Chandoke, ed., *Mapping Histories: Essays Presented to Ravinder Kumar*, New Delhi, 2000: 61–103. See also Narottam, *Man Charit Raso*, cited in V. S. Bhatnagar, ‘The Impact of Akbar’s Religious Policy as reflected in the Literary and Archival Sources’, Manohar Singh Ranawat, ed., *Princely Historian*, Commemoration volume of Maharajkumar Dr Raghubir Singh, Jaipur, 1994: 468.

Tales of this and of many other sorts abounded in the villages, transmitted orally through generations, and in the town bazaars from where European travellers picked them up and recorded them, often as historical facts. Manucci's account in particular is teeming with stories, all with a clear folk tale flavour, about nearly all great Mughals except Aurangzeb. In most of the tales, the ruler turns out to be either a knave or a Solomon-like dispenser of justice. Often, his personal foibles and idiosyncrasies, invariably amusing, and his attributes of a commoner rather than of a King are the high points of the stories. The bazaar gossip especially delighted in puncturing the pretensions of the high and the mighty, including the king.

Two alternative world views seem to be in contest here: the court histories portrayed the emperor, the royal family and high nobles as governed by perfect decorum and correctness, even if at times it was infringed and earned severe punishment. This image created a very long distance between the elites and the subjects, who were thus implicitly characterized as ordinary, even stupid, and unfamiliar with the finesse of high culture. Folk tales and bazaar gossip, on the other hand, inverted the imagery and revelled in the stupidities and scandals of the elites. The chroniclers' superhuman figures thus get humanized in the bazaar and the village *chaupal*,⁴² and the distance between the stereotypes of human beings at the court and the village minimized. 'As human beings they are also like us, even though they be the rulers and we the subjects,' the *chaupal* and the bazaar seemed to be saying. Social acceptance, too, was implied in the minimizing of the distance.

Only when the court brought affairs to the brink by foregrounding any one element of the polity, resulting in exclusion rather than inclusion of the others, did the reaction in the bazaar also verge on rejection. Akbar's experimentation with a state informed by the ideology of universal paternalism, rather than the conquering zeal of a religion, cohered well with the social ethos. Aurangzeb's reference point increasingly turned to Islam, which was to destroy that coherence; the resultant tensions rent it apart. The contrast is one of the most significant chapters, not merely in the political history of the Mughal empire, but in social history as well. By its very definition, the foregrounding of Islam could not be the agency of achieving coherence in a multi-religious society, with a multi-religious court, for it implied subjugation, even humiliation, of the non-Muslims. Significantly, there are remarkably few folktales and gossip centred on Aurangzeb. On the other hand, it is during his regime that François Bernier records the growth of a Hindu tradition that envisioned liber-

42 A kind of community centre in the village where menfolk gather after the day's work to exchange stories, gossip and information.

ation from Muslim tyranny; and Manucci for once records what he specifically refers to as ‘a very well-known tale’ that ‘after the death of King Aurangzeb the line of Taimur-i-lang’s descendants will cease to rule’ and narrates ‘a fable’: Timur as a camel-herd encounters a *faqir*, a Muslim renouncer, who promises him an empire in return for food. Timur obtains food for him and the *faqir* then covers him with his cloak and spans his posterior with his hand. After eleven strokes, Timur throws off the cloak. The *faqir* remarks that if he had taken more strokes, his dynasty would have lasted longer, but now its rule would cease with the eleventh descendant. Aurangzeb was that eleventh descendant. The ‘fable’ was clearly concocted near or after Aurangzeb’s death and interestingly both the giving and taking away of the empire to Timur and his 11 descendants was done by a Muslim *faqir*, even as the tale was ‘commonly said by all the Hindus’.

With the very strong feeling of belonging to India, a sense of ‘conquest’ still remained in imperial Mughal consciousness. If Babur always had it in his heart ‘to possess Hindustan’ and had claimed the territory from Ibrahim Lodi as his ancestral property, Jahangir has no hesitation in describing his great-grandfather’s descent on India as ‘invasion’. The notion of Islam’s conquest of India, common enough in much of medieval Indian historiography, does not entirely escape even the careful choice of words by Abul Fazl: ‘Since the first appearance of Islam, when great rulers conquered India’ is his preamble to the narration of the conquest of Garha Katanga in central India by Akbar. In the entire text of the *Akbar Nama* and the *Ain-i Akbari*, Abul Fazl meticulously avoids virtually any references to Muhammad or to any part of the history or jargon of Islam, and lets a momentous event like the completion of the first millennium of Islam pass without notice; yet, in the draft of Akbar’s letter to the ruler of Turan, prepared by him, appeal is made unambiguously to the recipient’s Islamic sentiment:

Places and lands, even the boundaries of which, from the time of the rise of the sun of Islam till the present moment, had not been trod by the horse-hoofs of world-conquering Princes and where the swords of obedience-enforcing emperors had never flashed, have [now] become the dwelling-places and lands of the faithful. And the churches and places of worship of the infidels and heretics (lit. deserters, *khazlan*) have turned into mosques and holy shrines for the possessors of true knowledge. Allah be praised!

The expediency of seeking help from Abdullah and thus speaking to him in the language he would appreciate had priority over the making of a philosophical statement. However, in his letter to Shah Abbas of Iran, felicitating him on his accession to the throne, Akbar allows himself full play on the concept of *sulh kul*.

The sentiment of looking back at central Asia as ‘our ancestral lands’ never quite receded from the hearts of the Mughal emperors. Babur, as a first-generation migrant from central Asia, was understandably nostalgic about any reminder of ‘home’. In the midst of the march for a battle, the sight of ‘the wonderfully delicate melon’ from Nasukh sends him into raptures, and he finds the mountains of Farghana and Mughulistan ‘beyond comparison’. In 1528–9, virtually the last year of his life, he was still hoping to return to ‘those parts’ and at this emotional juncture a melon was brought to him. ‘To cut it and eat it affected me strangely; I was all tears.’ Akbar too affirms his intention to conquer ‘ancestral territory’ and include it in his empire, and wished to appoint Prince Salim to take charge of the campaign. The Prince, however, had other things on his mind. It was only when he became Emperor that he remembered that ‘the conquest of Transoxiana was always in the pure mind of my revered father’, and, since this did not come about owing to varied circumstances, Jahangir himself was keen to start on the mission to recover ‘my hereditary territories’. On the ground, however, nothing happened. A while later we can still hear him having made up ‘my exalted mind to the conquest of Mawra an Nahr (Transoxiana) which was the hereditary kingdom of my ancestors’ by leaving one of his sons to look after India. Nothing happened this time either. The adjective ‘our ancestral lands’ for Balkh, Badakhshan, Khurasan, Kabul and Herat continues to recur in later reigns of Shah Jahan and Aurangzeb, and Turkish, along with other languages, continued to be spoken within the family until around the mid-eighteenth century. Mostly, however, nostalgia found expression in attempts to conquer some of those lands, rather than in returning to them or even developing anything more than formal diplomatic contacts with their rulers.

There was a strong sense of identification with India, too, from the second Emperor onwards. Babur had conquered India and established his empire here as a second option, forced out of his own homeland by political adversaries, often his close relatives. When Humayun, exiled from India, was the guest of the Shah of Iran at a dinner in Khurasan, arranged in an enclosure of tents put up in the Indian fashion, the Shah’s sister Sultanam asked Hamida Banu, Humayun’s young wife, whether India too had colourful umbrellas, *chatr*, and cupolas, *taq*, like the ones on display there. The young lady seems to have been touched to the quick and, even though she was a guest at the dinner, responded with a trace of irritation: ‘If Khurasan is equal to two grains, *dang*, India is equal to four. Whatever one can find in two grains is bound to be better in four.’ The *Ain-i Akbari* makes several assertions attesting to India’s superiority over Iran and sometimes Turan: in the amount of revenues collected in the three realms, the refining of bullion, goldsmithy, in the superiority of

Indian camels to those of Iran, and of the parity and even superiority of Indian horses to the ones from the Arab lands. The romance of Indian monsoons becomes an obsession even with dry-as-dust historians like Abul Fazl, and the Sanskrit word for it, *vrishtikal*, becomes part of the common literary vocabulary, colloquialized as *bishkal*. For Faizi, India was a land of love par excellence, and for Badauni, it was ‘a bride’. When the great Persian poet Hafiz Shirazi ran down India in favour of Iran, in a verse, Mushfiqi Bukhari, poet in Akbar’s court, responded sharply by praising Indian flora and fauna in his verse. Saib, the Persian poet, having migrated to India, finds everything Indian far higher in calibre than anything of renown in Iraq (at times used as synonym for Iran).⁴³

More than everything that is renowned in the country of Iraq
The satiated land of Hind has turned Saib into its great admirer

and again

How do I refrain from praising Hind, for even its dark ash
Has wrapped the flame of my renown in the garment of grace

Jahangir thought Indian flowers were the best in the world and talks fondly of the beauty of red lotuses, the poetry and music that is centred on them and Indians’ attachment to these flowers, including that of the legendary musician Miyan Tan Sen. Nadira Begum, wife of Dara Shukoh, keeping him company in his darkest days after his defeat and relentless pursuit by Aurangzeb in the War of Succession, died of exhaustion on the north-western outskirts of India’s borders. Her last plea to her husband was to bury her body in the soil of her native Hindustan. Dara had in his married life ignored several of his wife’s pleas, but he could not do so to her dying wish and, in one version, saw to the burial in Lahore, even as he took grave personal risks in doing so.

Viewed from the foot of the imperial throne, the conquest of territories within India was tantamount to the spreading of justice and tranquillity in those lands. There was too a strong sense of the civilizing mission, especially in Akbar. Abul Fazl describes every region subjugated by the Emperor as accomplishment of a civilizing endeavour, although the terms he used for it are varied. ‘The lofty genius was perpetually attending to the inhabiting of countries, the cultivation of the hearts and the giving of justice to the oppressed.’ ‘Those savages of the desert of self-adornment’ – officers of the Gujarat army and administration – were left in the care of Hakim Ain al-Mulk, presumably to receive lessons in civilization.

43 I am extremely grateful to Dr Yunus Jaffrey for bringing these verses to my notice.

Man Singh was commissioned 'to chastise the Tarikis' (Afghan rebels on the north-west frontier); the commission was carried out and 'Zabulistan was rehabilitated (*abadi paziraf*)', i.e. was civilized. Kashmir too was civilized thus, as was the *suba*, province, of Allahabad. At one stage Akbar felt concerned about civilizing the Europeans too, described by Abul Fazl as 'an assemblage of savages' (*guruh-i wahshi*), and made enquiries about the state of their customs, although he seems to have left it at that. Shah Jahan's chronicler, Inayat Khan, also records the emperor's concern about the poverty of civilized life in Kashmir and the need to bring to the region high levels of 'the fragrance of learning'. Thanks to the Mughal conquest, 'by intercourse with the people in the royal camp . . . they have now for the most part become conversant with the Persian language and can even boast of talented scholars, poets, calligraphers and musicians in abundance'.

Down the line, Emperor Shah Alam II did what his more eminent predecessors would have found abhorrent: wrote raucously ribald poetry about banter between a father and the mother-in-law of his offspring, both taken as stereotypes. *Nadirat-i Shabi* is not great poetry, but it is fun poetry. More importantly, it is poetry of the very Indian earth, very earthy, teeming with sexual innuendoes. And if Bahadur Shah Zafar, the last of the Mughal emperors, had no history of conquest and governance, he is yet an eminent figure as poet of the Urdu language.

Interestingly, even as the metaphor of 'the bride', to be caressed and loved, is on rare occasions used for territories open to conquest and governance,⁴⁴ there is no instance of a religious identification of 'the bride' as 'the other' in court literature. Nowhere is the territory referred to as the Hindu bride to be conquered and subjugated by the virile Muslim warrior.

However, more often than territory, the association of honour with women stands on firmer ground. Essentially perceived as a chivalrous attribute – even when a female like Rani Durga Vati of Garha Katanga in the tribal areas of Madhya Pradesh propounded the notion in preferring to die fighting Akbar's forces than surrendering⁴⁵ – among its many associations was the chastity of the female body, constructed entirely in

44 Baqir, *Mau'iza-i Jahangiri*, ed. Sajida Alvi, New York, 1989: 151: 'Fortunate rulers bring within the embrace of fulfillment their desire for the virgin of dominion.'

45 AN, II: 212. Jaswant Singh, among the most eminent of Shah Jahan's and Aurangzeb's nobles, fought valiantly against the combined forces of Murad and Aurangzeb during the War of Succession among Shah Jahan's four sons and was forced to retreat. On hearing this, his chief Queen closed the gates of the fort and would not let the Raja enter his home. Until the very end, she never forgave him for the loss of honour on the battlefield. Manucci, I (1907), 1981: 249–50; also Bernier, *Travels in the Mogul Empire*, Eng. tr. Archibald Constable, New Delhi, 1972 (first pub. 1891): 40–1, for essentially the same story.

sexual terms. Men would consider it of no consequence to kill their womenfolk with their own hands rather than let them fall in the hands of their foe, whether Hindu or Muslim. Following his second and final defeat at Kannauj at the hands of his arch rival Sher Khan, in 1540, Humayun confessed to his brother Hindal: 'In the earlier disturbance, Aqiqa Bibi [his daughter] had disappeared and I suffered from everlasting regret why I had not killed her myself' [lest she fall into the enemy's hands], a sentiment that his brother entirely endorsed. Raja Puran Mal of Kalinjar, when surrounded by Sher Khan, beheaded his 'beloved' wife Ratnavali, 'who composed beautiful verses in Hindi', and asked his followers to do the same to their women. Adham Khan, Akbar's foster-brother and general, vanquished Baz Bahadur, Muslim ruler of Malwa and 'took possession of all his wealth and property, his dancing girls, concubines and female slaves and sent people to search for Rupmati', his Hindu wife. But Rupmati poisoned herself out of love and fidelity for Baz Bahadur, and 'carried her honour to the hidden chamber of annihilation'. In Shah Jahan's time, one of his highest nobles, Khan-i Jahan Lodi, rebelled and was hotly pursued. 'Due to fierce pride', notes *Shah Jahan Nama*, 'the desperate Afghans put to the sword many of their own women and children and other female relatives and maid servants, although others of them were captured.'

Honour embodied in women's chastity stood above any other identity or value. Rustam was a *mansabdar* of 500 in Shah Jahan's reign. His aunt had been 'taken into Shah Jahan's *harem*', an ambiguous phrase sometimes used for marriage, at others for the status of a concubine or a mere inmate. To vindicate *his* 'honour', Rustam killed the lady. Annoyed at the death of a beautiful woman and the challenge to his own discretion, the Emperor ordered Rustam's execution. A while later, he had second thoughts and pardoned the offender, adding another 200 to his *mansab*.

Even as these desperate acts reflected the chivalrous values of first investing the female body with the notion of honour and then assuming the role of its defenders, they also pointed to the male ego that stood over and above religious and sectarian identities.

In the end, with all the institutional safeguards for stability and durability of the empire, it was patronage on the part of the Emperor and loyalty on that of the nobles that became the cornerstone of the empire's functioning. The 'patronage and loyalty' syndrome was strong and fragile at the same time: strong enough to dispel any challenge to the rule of the Mughal dynasty over two long centuries; fragile enough to be filled with tension and rebellions by the most powerful nobles against their masters, and of course by Princes against their emperor-fathers. From Humayun's time onwards, Mughal history was witness to great turbulence within the ruling class, whether in the form of rebellious

brothers, sons or high nobles. Indeed, it is hard to encounter an individual at the higher strata of the class of *amirs*, nobles, immune to insecurities of fortune even under the same monarch and as a near certainty under his successor; it is equally hard to come across one who had not been 'forgiven' by the Emperor and his privileges not restored. 'Accepting excuses and forgiving faults' becomes almost an ideological anchor of the Mughal state, as an aspect of its moderation. In return, the ruler expected loyalty.

Even as the institutional structure of power, authority and governance evolved in the empire, allowing a fair degree of assurance of continuing fortune to old 'servants' in the midst of its somewhat wide swings, and even as it allowed entry to diverse new elements, its reliance on the individual loyalty of each *mansabdar* to the person sitting on the throne as much as to the throne itself introduced grave infirmities. Akbar sought to command personal loyalty through the medium of the Din-i Ilahi; all its regulations reinforced the notion of unqualified loyalty to him, which should override all other identities and solidarities. If loyalty became the cornerstone of the system, patronage and punishment were the only mode of ensuring it. Its durability was at best transient and its fragility all too evident. The highest placed nobles – through whose agency conquest and governance were mediated and the network of loyalty knit – were also the most vulnerable.

Loyalty became exceedingly fluid when Princes or high nobles rebelled against the rulers; a realignment and redefinition of loyalty gained momentum immediately. And, again, when the revolt either succeeded or failed, old loyalties and oaths became problematic. Relations had to be re-established, but with a new element of suspicion on both sides. Neither patronage, nor loyalty, nor of course the structure of authority could eliminate those tense moments, the unforeseen turns that in one fell swoop could bring the high and mighty crashing down, from which some rose again, and others became part of the debris. There were virtually no guarantees in life. Since loyalty was constructed as the binding thread that was entirely personal between the King and his 'servants', the slightest tension in the bond could cast doubt on the person's loyalty itself, demonstrating its fragility. By the same logic, the doubt in turn liberated the 'servant' from the bond and in his eyes at least legitimized his rebellion.

Nothing brought the infirmities of the system to the surface as much as the dramatic events of the War of Succession between 1656 and 1658 among Shah Jahan's four sons. It is hard to excel the tragic denouement of these events even in imagination. In those traumatic months almost everything went topsy-turvy: loyalties changed, memories of past obligations lapsed, treachery enacted without the slightest demur, the solemnly

pledged word on the Quran by the most orthodox Muslim, Aurangzeb, violated, imperial commands ignored, confidences betrayed. Not an element of tragic drama of the highest calibre was missing.

Yet, once the trauma was over, and the *dramatis personae* had changed roles, the structure was re-established, and a semblance of order was restored. So too with the family as a source of stability, as well as its fragility. If the continuing existence of the Mughal family was the surest guarantee of the empire's durability, and was the predominant metaphor for the Mughal court society, it is the imperial family that also chiefly disrupted its smooth functioning. Akbar was content with carving out a magnificent empire and a court order conforming to his grand vision; but it was his sons who brought him the tragic realization of the fragility of filial bonds and the need for the ruler to be on constant vigil. Humayun was forever troubled by his three brothers for as long as he sat on the throne. From Akbar on, each Emperor had to face various kinds of challenges and threats from their sons. Yet, again and again, the Emperors and their sons reverted to filial ties as the theatre of possible solutions. Even as Aurangzeb had reigned for 48 of his 50 years, he still felt threatened by his once favourite but later rebellious son Akbar, who had found shelter in Iran; the Emperor sought to resolve the tension through a demonstrative paternal affection.

It is this intersection between order and chaos, mutually generative, that comprises the totality of Mughal history.