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‘The wrath of God’: legitimization and limits of Mughal military violence in early modern South Asia

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In 1568, an army under the command of the third Mughal emperor Jalaluddin Muhammad Akbar (r. 1556–1605) stormed the fort of Chitor in western India after a prolonged siege of six months. On the day of the victory, Akbar ordered a general massacre (*qaṭl-i ‘āmm*) of the garrison as well as of the general population. According to contemporary texts, some 30,000 people were killed as a result. This event stands out as one of the most glaring instances of spectacular military violence in Mughal history, where not only the combatants but also a very large number of civilians were put to the sword. Abul Fazl, the principal biographer of Akbar, provides an official justification of this drastic action. He writes that in the final hours of the defence of the fort, a garrison of around 8,000 men received active assistance from around 40,000 peasants. He points out that when Alauddin, the Khalji sultan of Delhi, had conquered Chitor in the early fourteenth century, ‘the peasantry were not put to death as they had not engaged in fighting’.¹ Abul Fazl argues that on the present occasion, they had to be punished because of the ‘great zeal and activity’ they had shown in defending the fort against the Mughal army.²

Was this incident just a plain act of revenge against an adversary that had offered dogged resistance against imperial expansion? What does this massacre tell us about the larger history of how the empire justified similar acts of military violence? Was the way Abul Fazl legitimized the massacre of the civilian population of Chitor different from how instances of violence against actual combatants were legitimized? What sorts of limits to military violence did Mughal imperial ideology prescribe and Mughal armies observe? In order to answer these questions, one must begin by understanding how Mughal imperial culture conceptualized sovereignty, kingly rule, and war.

In this chapter, I first explore the meanings of Mughal sovereignty and its origins in a particular strand of Persian political philosophy. Drawing on scholars like Muzaffar Alam, I argue that from Akbar onward, Mughal political philosophy was deeply influenced by the normative philosophy of the thirteenth-century Persian polymath Nasiruddin Tusi. Second, I unravel the duties and responsibilities of the sovereign within this ideological framework. Next, I argue that given the nature of the doctrine of sovereignty under the Mughals since Akbar, war was conceptualized less as a princely whim for self-aggrandizement and more as an unavoidable means for fulfilling the duties of rulership. War, in other words, was perceived as a moral compulsion of the king. I then discuss some of the facets of the history of military violence under the ‘great Mughals’ since Akbar. I argue that in the conduct of war and the perpetration of violence, the Mughal state drew heavily on Nasirean ethical recommendations. Making and representing war in the name of the abstract category of justice within the all-encompassing framework of universal sovereignty allowed tremendous flexibility in unleashing as well as restraining military violence. Next, I study the limits of this violence both within the imperial ideological discourse and at a practical level in the course of military campaigns. Finally, I argue that although military violence was an important, frequent, and widespread aspect of Mughal empire-building, it was used more for defeating and co-opting adversaries into the imperial body politic than for destroying or eliminating them outright. I conclude by pointing out that this particular dimension of Mughal military violence finds resonance with the tendencies of the Ottoman and the Qing empires, and marks a contrast with the early modern European experience.

Mughal imperial ideology and Nasirean ethics

Mughal emperors were firm believers in the political philosophy of universal sovereignty. At the heart of the Mughal brand of this philosophy lay a pronounced thrust on cosmopolitanism. This encompassed various aspects of the imperial experience, including religion, race, and language. Several scholars have noted that Mughal emperors scarcely favoured any one particular community when it came to patronage or employment. Ruling a multi-ethnic and multi-confessional land, they kept their imperial vision broad. They welcomed with open arms anyone willing to join their ranks. One of the main philosophical influences that profoundly shaped this Mughal version of cosmopolitan universal sovereignty was a particular strand of Perso-Islamic normative texts (*akhlāq*).

Muzaffar Alam points out that in early modern South Asia, it was Nasiruddin Tusi’s thirteenth-century Persian text *Akhlāq-i Nāṣirī* that remained the most influential text of this normative tradition and the cornerstone of Mughal imperial ideology. Tusi’s ideas can be traced further back to the tenets of Aristotle’s *Nicomachea*. In the Mughal Empire, knowledge of the Nasirean *akhlāq* spread through the circulation of *Akhlāq-i Nāṣirī*. This was augmented by the writing

and reading of other works like *Akhlāq-i Humāyūnī* and *Mau'izah-i Jahāngīrī*, which closely followed and expanded Tusi's ideas. Alam points out that Tusi's text was one of several important works that Abul Fazl recommended to be read out regularly to Akbar. Akbar, in turn, instructed his officials and commanders to read this text closely. Alam argues that Nasirean ethics and political philosophy exerted a deep influence on Mughal political thought, something that is evident from several texts produced, and intellectual projects undertaken, at the imperial court.³ While several other normative paradigms of political philosophy coexisted in Mughal South Asia, Alam stresses that as far as the long-term self-fashioning of the empire was concerned, the Nasirean *akhlāqī* tradition exercised by far the most important and enduring influence.⁴ He sums this argument up by observing that '[T]he unmistakable imprint of Nasirean ethics that one discerns is thus not simply on the norms or principles of governance but on a very wide area of Mughal politico-cultural life.'⁵

At the heart of Mughal imperial ideology lay a particular conceptualization of the meanings of the universal empire and the role of the sovereign therein – one that drew heavily on Tusi's recommendations. Writing in the late sixteenth century, Abul Fazl described the emperor primarily as the fountainhead of justice and the protector of harmony and equilibrium in the world. This association of princely rule with the administration of justice is one of the most enduring themes of political philosophy across Eurasian societies. The Perso-Islamic tradition that Nasiruddin Tusi was a part of was particularly strong and consistent in its emphasis on this association. Tusi's work upholds justice as the highest form of virtue and locates it at the heart of human well-being and prosperity. He also points out that being just was the most important quality that a ruler must possess, since 'in justice lies the order of the realm (*qawām-i mamlukat ba-ma'dalat būd*)'.⁶

Mughal imperial texts heavily borrowed from Tusi's emphasis on justice as the cornerstone of sovereignty. Emperors were consistently portrayed in contemporary literature as approximations of the just ruler idealized in Tusi's *akhlāq*. Narrating an incident involving Akbar, Abul Fazl describes how, on his way from Kabul to North India in 1589, the emperor discovered that a man had 'dishonoured' a peasant's daughter. Akbar felt obliged – we are told – to dispense justice immediately. He had the offender executed. It was further discovered that one Sharif Khan, the son of an imperial calligrapher, was also partly responsible for the crime. Not deterred by the fact that the man was related to an imperial officer in his own employment, the emperor also punished Sharif Khan severely.⁷

This representation of Mughal emperors as the steadfast defenders of justice is also present in other imperial texts. In his autobiography, Akbar's son Jahangir (r. 1605–27) records that one of the first things he did after his accession was to fasten a 'Chain of Justice (*zanjīr-i 'adl*)'. The chain, he wrote, was made of pure gold and held sixty bells. It stretched across the breadth of the Yamuna, from the walls of the Mughal fort at Agra to a stone post on the other bank of the

river. He declared that anybody in pursuit of justice ‘might come to this chain and shake it so that its noise might attract [Jahangir’s] attention’.⁸ In several of the allegorical paintings commissioned at Jahangir’s court, this chain makes an appearance. All this resonates with the ideas of Tusi, who locates justice at the heart of social order and links it with the notions of equilibrium and unity.⁹ He – and, in his vein, Mughal ideologues like Abul Fazl – argued that one of the principal ways of ensuring the prevalence of justice in society was to replace multiplicity with unity.¹⁰

Justice and the role of the king

It is the method of the establishment of unity in society which brings the king into the picture most prominently in the ideological schema laid down by Tusi. Later texts produced in the Timurid and Mughal milieu echoed this thought. One example is *Akhlāq-i Jalālī*, a fifteenth-century normative text inspired by Tusi’s *Akhlāq-i Nāṣirī*. It argues along similar lines that ‘the maintenance of equity and reference to it, can only be effected by the ascertainment of a mean’.¹¹ However, the author continues, determining this mean is extremely difficult and requires taking the recourse of divine law, since the origin of all unity lies in ‘the Supreme and Holy Divinity’.¹² In order to ensure the determination of the mean and the maintenance of equity on its basis, the mediation of somebody becomes essential.¹³ This can be none other than the just king (*pādshāh-i ‘ādil*).¹⁴ The author argues that it is for this reason that god selected the king and equipped him with a sword.¹⁵ This was done so that ‘whosoever should be in compliant with the equation of money, seeking more than his right and overstepping the path of rectitude, with this trenchant sword he may be enabled to bring them to order’.¹⁶ In turn, this would help establish and preserve unity in the world. In the domain of politics, the duty of the king is to guide the people of the world towards pledging their political allegiance to a single person – himself, since he alone had been chosen by god – and thereby eliminate the evil of multiplicity of allegiances and motives. Writing almost a century later, Abul Fazl echoed the same argument. In the *Akbar-nāma*, he writes that great rulers devote their efforts to ‘the production of unity and to the [*sic*] removing the dust of complexity by the water of simplicity’.¹⁷ He emphasizes that as one such great ruler, his patron’s ‘whole thought is to accept the obedience of mortals so that multiplicity (*manshūr*) may become unity (*paiwast*) and that mankind in general may have repose’.¹⁸

Through such a proposition, kingly rule was conceptualized as an instrument necessary for the establishment of unity, equivalence, and justice in society. Dispensing justice was conceived as the inherent *obligation* of the sovereign, not an occasional *favour* that his rule might or might not bring to the world. Writing in the seventeenth century, the Mughal commander and scholar Baqir Najm-i Sani reiterated this idea by arguing that if divine favour had chosen

somebody to be a ruler, he must value this decision and 'hold the empire dear and venerable'.¹⁹ One particular passage from his text is worth quoting at length as a typical example of his views on the rationale behind kingship:

In systemizing rules and in maintaining their procedures, he must exert the utmost care to achieve justice ('*adl*) and impartiality (*inṣāf*). If the judge [ruler] does not regulate the affairs of the people, a clandestine rebel, abetted by tyranny, will destroy the lives of the nobility and plebeian alike. If the light from the candle of justice does not illuminate the sombre cell of the afflicted, the darkness of cruelty (*ẓulmāt-i ẓālm*) will blacken the entire country just as it does the hearts of tyrants ... Therefore, rulers must consider that they occupy the throne *in order to dispense justice*, not to lead a life filled with pleasure. They must consider justice ('*adl*) and equity (*inṣāf*) as the means to survival of their rule (*mūjab-i baqā'ī-i saltānat*), permanence of their fame (*dawām-i nām-i nekū*) and reward in the hereafter (*ihrāz-i ṣawāb ākhirat*). To them, nothing should be more binding than pursuit of the people's welfare.²⁰

It is interesting to compare such ideas about the ruler's responsibility towards his people as presented by the writers of Mughal chronicles and normative literature with the debates around kingship that emerged in Western Europe around the same time. It is true that the kind of secularization that ideas of kingship went through in those parts of the world, especially in the formulations of John Locke or Thomas Hobbes, was absent in the official discourse of the Mughal Empire. Unlike in Locke's propositions, Mughal political theorists did not give common people any right to judge their kings. The latter could indeed be judged, but only by the divinely mandated universal sovereign, whose realm – and hence right – was all-encompassing. At the same time, Mughal writers – like the ones discussed above – did inscribe in the Mughal vision of kingship a very strong element of reciprocity that kings owed to their subjects in terms of maintaining peace, order, and justice. What this did is project the Mughal emperor as an absolutist, benevolent, father figure – something similar to what Peter Wilson finds in the case of kingship in early modern Germany.²¹

War and military violence as moral compulsion

Within this Mughal ideological paradigm, the sovereign bore a grave responsibility. Harbans Mukhia points out that in Abul Fazl's imagination, the sovereign's absolute power was tempered by his 'responsibility to establish absolute peace among his subjects through the practice of non-discrimination and to bring about tranquillity and prosperity through paternalist care'.²² Problems would usually arise when rival political powers, whose allegiance the Mughals sought, would refuse to bow down to imperial authority. What might have seemed to be an expression of paternalistic care for the Mughals was quite understandably perceived as nothing less than rampant aggression by other powers. In many cases, these rivals would flatly refuse to accept Mughal suzerainty, much to the surprise and annoyance of

Mughal authors, who remained firmly convinced of their own divinely ordained mission and the promise of their eventual victory. Faced by such instances of what the empire saw as strange acts of 'insubordination', military violence did not remain a princely whim; it was conceptualized as a moral compulsion. If Mughal monarchs were to fulfil their kingly duties on earth on the lines suggested by Tusi, they did not have an option but to resort to military violence against their rivals. It is precisely such a vision that Abul Fazl expresses:

The sole idea (*hamagi basej*) of wise kings is day by day to refresh the garden of the world by the streams of justice and assuredly this design is accomplished whenever extensive countries come into the hands of one who is just and of wide capacity. And when an empire has been civilized by an enlightened and just ruler and the people thereof – small and great – sit in the shade of tranquility, it is unavoidable (*nā-guzīr*) that such a prince should cast a profound glance on the deeds of neighbours who have taken the path of dissimulation. He must look closely in order to perceive if their former conduct can be brought into line with love and order and if they can be induced to treat their subjects properly. If they do not, then the requirement of justice is such that (*āyīn-i dādgarī ān-kah*) they should be punished and their land taken from them.²³

This important passage links the Mughal court's legitimization of aggressive campaigns and military violence with their dynastic ideology. Conquest and governance are shown to be not enough in themselves, but depicted as only an intermediate stage before further expansion was made essential by the moral and ethical compulsion of fulfilling the duties of kingship.

This moral compulsion was further magnified by the universalist aspirations of the Mughal emperors. This is where the Mughals assimilated Nasirean *akhlāqī* recommendations with their eclectic ideas about universal rule. The Mughal emperor was seen as the benevolent, just, yet strict *paterfamilias* in charge of protecting order and peace in the world, and guiding humanity towards the bliss of loyalty and true enlightenment. Although in actuality he ruled over the inhabitants of his limited territories, theoretically his dominions were supposed to encompass the entire universe. For this reason, he could not but concern himself with the welfare of all mankind.²⁴

Conditions for waging just war

If violence was inevitable, what were the norms of initiating it? In *Akhlāq-i Nāsirī*, Nasiruddin Tusi lays down very detailed guidelines about when and how the just prince should open military offensive against another ruler. Tusi writes that the initial step for the prince should be to try and win over his enemies through persuasion, so that the need for war did not arise.²⁵ War might be started only when such peaceful methods had failed. The prince was to make sure that he had 'only Pure Good and the quest of the Faith' in his heart and did not want 'superiority

or domination' for himself.²⁶ Tusi continues to argue that a state could wage war on its enemies under six conditions – that the enemy was innately evil and it was impossible to reform him; that fighting him was the only way out of the situation he himself had created; that victory of the enemy would only empower him; that unless given battle, he would escape with one's material belongings; that fighting him would not involve any act of treachery or dishonesty; and finally, that there would be no condemnation of fighting the enemy 'in this world or the next'.²⁷ By laying down these detailed recommendations about the waging of just war, Tusi projected the use of military violence as a last resort. It was to be initiated only when all other methods had failed and the adversary had not shown any sign of 'reform'.

It is interesting how these recommendations perfectly match the economics of war. Waging war is an expensive business, where a state's long-term investments in personnel, animals, and technology run the risk of annihilation in a very short span of time. Hence, across time and space, states have usually tried to avoid war and settle disputes through peaceful negotiations. However, given the extreme frequency of wars throughout human history, what becomes striking is how frequently such negotiations have failed. Hence, waging war as a last resort was not entirely a novel idea that Tusi forwards; what is worth noting is the language he uses and the moral economy within which he locates such decisions.

Contemporary texts unanimously argue that Mughal rulers and commanders sincerely upheld this Nasirean principle of war as a last resort. These texts never forget to mention that before attacking any neighbouring ruler or chieftain, Mughal armies would always seek to persuade him to submit through peaceful negotiations. This is exemplified by a passage from *Akbar-nāma*, where Abul Fazl narrates the dispatch of a Mughal army against the Baluchis in modern Pakistan in the late sixteenth century. He writes that the troops were 'first to guide them [the Baluchis] by wisdom-conferring counsels, and if these were not effectual they were to enlighten their darkness by the flashes of the sword'.²⁸ It is, however, difficult to ascertain whether these steps were actually followed on the ground, or if they were merely literary conventions of Mughal court chronicles, irrespective of what transpired in the real world. However, what we do know is that the Mughals were always willing to accept the submission of their adversaries and to co-opt them afterwards. This meant that imperial armies would likely be willing to first try to convince their adversaries to submit before hostilities broke out.

This tradition continued well into the seventeenth century. Mirza Nathan – a Mughal commander who served on the empire's eastern front in the early seventeenth century – goes on at great length in his autobiography to narrate how this line was toed in the Mughal military operations in Bengal and Assam in during his time there. One example relates to the sending of an expedition against an Afghan adversary – Khwaja Usman of Bokainagar. Nathan tells us that Islam Khan

Chishti – the *shūbadār* (governor) of Bengal – and his commanders agreed to first write to Usman, admonishing him. If Usman was to submit to Mughal authority, he would be forgiven; if not, the imperial army would invade his land.²⁹ Nathan writes that as per this decision, a letter was drafted addressing Usman, ‘every word of which was a closet of peace’.³⁰ It reasoned that the ‘well-being of both the worlds’ and the ‘main spring of better days’ for both him and his people would immediately ensue if he were to get over his ‘self-conceit and arrogance’ and bow down to the authority of ‘the protector of the world’.³¹

In the face of such diplomatic pressure that combined the hope of getting a share of the empire’s increasing resources and a threat of entering into serious armed conflict with a powerful state, many *zamīndārs* (chieftains) and rulers felt it wise to submit and accept Mughal suzerainty. This is what the Baluchis mentioned above, for instance, did when Akbar sent an army against them. Abul Fazl notes happily that violent means did not need to be adopted in teaching them a lesson in loyalty to the empire. He observes that the ‘sound of the approach of the world-conquering troops aroused the slumberers (*ghunūd-gān-i pīndār*) and guided them to good service’.³²

Conduct of war and military violence

If such diplomatic posturing was rejected, war would follow sooner or later. The chronicles give us the impression that in the course of campaigns, imperial armies always preferred to engage their enemies out in the open in frontal combat. For the Mughal court, this was the most honourable thing to do. This is something that Shah Jahan’s (r. 1628–58) biographer Abdul Hamid Lahori calls *jang-i šaff*.³³ Apart from the *akhlāqī* recommendations about honourable war, Mughals also knew that it was in such forms of engagements that their strength lay. Whenever the enemy refused to do this, and resorted to night attacks, surprise attacks, hit-and-run tactics, or used the cover of jungles and rains instead, Mughal texts would brand them as deceitful, treacherous, duplicitous, and cowardly.

Legitimizing violence against civilians was always more difficult than legitimizing that committed against combatants. One of the problems, however, was that in North India, a large number of peasants wielded weapons and served as combatants during the off season of cultivation.³⁴ Not only peasants, but even a large number of religious ascetics also bore arms and hired out their services to states and armies as mercenaries.³⁵ In fact, historical scholarship points out that a large part of the South Asian population was perpetually armed throughout early modern times. Douglas Streusand points out that this made Mughal empire-building remarkably different from similar contemporary processes.³⁶ Given the unclear boundary between combatants and non-combatants, the issue of violence against civilians was much more complex in this part of the world than in others. The incident at Chitor that I began this chapter with is a case in point.

This ambiguity between a combatant and a civilian notwithstanding, there are several examples when large numbers of common people became the targets of Mughal military violence. In the course of campaigns, imperial armies often took recourse to systematic plundering of villages and terrorizing the general population. This was especially true in cases where imperial armies feared that their adversaries enjoyed wide moral and logistical support of the local population or the local *zamīndārs*. Apart from lending military support, the latter would also often be responsible for supplying the local ruler – whom the Mughals had attacked – with food and other essential resources. In these cases, alongside pursuing the ruler, imperial armies would also direct their violence against these chieftains to dissuade them from supporting him and thereby resisting Mughal expansion.

Mirza Nathan's memoirs provide us with a particularly large number of such examples from the Mughal campaigns in Kuch Bihar and Assam in the early seventeenth century. The reason behind this is probably twofold. First, the fact that Nathan was involved in several of these raids himself in one capacity or the other meant that he saw the unfolding of the campaigns from a proximity unmatched by imperial chroniclers, who would usually be located far away from the action. As opposed to the overviews offered by the latter group, Nathan's version provides us with a detailed and ground-level account of day-to-day events. Second, written of his own volition, Mirza Nathan's account is relatively more objective in its narration of events than those writing in the direct employment of emperors.

For instance, Nathan writes that as an imperial army marched against Dhubri in Assam in 1612–13, he was sent at the head of a detachment to raid the areas of Bhitband and Bahirband. He writes that he was instructed 'to bring the ryots [peasants] under control; failing that he was to bring them as captives and drive them away from their lands'.³⁷ Nathan records that he carried out these orders to the last word and notes that his soldiers 'did not allow the natives any respite even to drink water, for a period of four days and nights'.³⁸ Many were imprisoned, their property looted, and animals seized. This severe action forced the local *zamīndārs* to submit to the imperial army. They were allowed to remain in their territories only upon the solemn promise that they would not oppose the Mughal advance.³⁹ After eventually consolidating their base in Hajo and Pandu in Kuch Bihar, Mughal armies tried to subjugate the 'Eighteen Rajas' of the Himalayan foothills. After conquering Rani, there was again serious raiding and plundering. All the forts of the Rajas were destroyed. Nathan records that Mughal troops executed all those who resisted them, while the rest were imprisoned. The soldiers and crew of the imperial fleet, who had suffered during the campaign due to a shortage of food, compensated for their hardship by looting and plundering the local villages.⁴⁰

This kind of large-scale violence was legitimized in Mughal chronicles as an unfortunate but necessary condition for the Mughal mission of establishing justice and social order in the world. Normative texts produced during the first half

of the seventeenth century support such a justification. Baqir Najm-i Sani, for example, writes:

If punishment and chastisement are non-existent, [state] affairs will be in ruin ... If the sword of retribution (*tegh-i siyāsāt*) is not drawn from the scabbard of vengeance (*niyām-i intiqām*), the roots of rebellion (*bunyād-i fitna*) are not eradicated and the basis of oppression (*asās-i sitām*) is not undermined. If the debris of tyranny (*khas wa khāshāk-i bī-dād*) is not burnt in the fire of [imperial] wrath (*ātish-i qahr*), the seedling of repose will not flourish in the garden of hope ... Therefore, rulers should display mercy of God toward the virtuous and the reformers and the wrath of God toward the evildoers and the seditious.⁴¹

Of course, there was no telling where the ‘roots of rebellion’ or the ‘basis of oppression’ should be located. There was a great deal of merit in using such vague categories. Any measure of raiding, plundering, enslavement, or massacre that strategic concerns could deem necessary could also dovetail into this provision created by the *akhlāqī* tradition. Within the imperial ideological framework, these two logics – the logic of *realpolitik* and the logic of the *akhlāq* – were inseparable. There was no opposition between them, and the flexibility of the Nasirean *akhlāqī* tradition meant that the norms could be variously interpreted by the chroniclers and commanders to mean different things at different points of time to suit the imperial agenda.

Limits of Mughal military violence

Nasirean ethics recommended that if the enemy would surrender and seek pardon in the course of war, the righteous imperial soldiers were to treat him with generosity – the noble quality that was ranked next only to justice.⁴² Imperial chronicles usually discuss in detail how this was precisely the way Mughal armies behaved. Well into the second half of the seventeenth century, when – under Aurangzeb (r. 1658–1707) – Mughal imperial ideology had taken a Sunni Islamic turn, these Nasirean recommendations were still upheld by the chronicles. Harbans Mukhia also points out that the image of the Mughal emperor as the justice-dispensing and caring *paterfamilias* endured throughout the greater part of Mughal rule.⁴³ At times, precedence could be drawn from Islamic religious texts to justify the same action. For example, describing the treatment of defeated Ahom soldiers by Mughal troops, Shihabuddin Talish invokes Quranic verses not to contradict what Nasirean ethics recommended, but to bolster it.⁴⁴

Contemporary Mughal texts were always enthusiastic in stressing that in the course of military campaigns, imperial armies would go to great lengths to ensure that the life and property of the common people were not harmed. We are told that commanders frequently issued categorical orders to this effect. The Assam campaign of 1662–63 is a case in point. Shihabuddin Talish writes that Mir Jumla,

the commander of the invading Mughal army, issued an imperial decree at the very outset. It instructed his soldiers 'not to plunder the property and not to be cruel to the women and children of the local inhabitants'.⁴⁵ Talish claims that Mir Jumla enforced this rule with such severity, that during the entire period of the invasion 'none of the officers or soldiers had the courage to cast covetous eyes on the property and women of the people of Aasham'.⁴⁶ Whether or not this really happened, such stories gave Mughal chroniclers narrative resources to portray an image of imperial armies as the vanguards of justice and social order.

The chronicles narrate several instances where Mughal soldiers – found guilty of violating such decrees – were expressly brought to justice and punished publicly. One such incident is narrated by Talish from the time of the Mughal occupation of Kuch Bihar in 1661. When some soldiers of the imperial army were found guilty of defying a similar *farmān* forbidding the infliction of any harm to the life and property of the people of the city, they were arrested and presented before Mir Jumla. Talish writes that as a punishment, 'an arrow was passed through their respective nostril. The stolen goods were hung round their neck and they were paraded through the entire town'.⁴⁷

Owing to the limited amount of information, it is difficult to gauge how far such incidents reflected the norm. It was obviously in the interest of the empire and its chroniclers to exaggerate the role of such decrees in shaping the behaviour of imperial soldiers and keeping them on the righteous path prescribed by Tusi. How much of these ethical norms were actually observed in the heat of the moment and away from the watchful eyes of imperial supervisors is a matter of debate. It is likely that vernacular sources would tell a different story about the role of Mughal soldiers in the countryside over the course of prolonged military campaigns. For our purpose, however, it is important to note that Mughal chroniclers would like us to believe that imperial commanders regularly resorted to different methods to protect the interest of the common people, and that they were generally successful at this. After narrating the incident cited above, for example, Talish goes on to boast about how Mir Jumla's prompt, strict, and public dispensation of justice restored the Kuch people's faith in the Mughal army, and encouraged the ones who had run away from their homes to return.⁴⁸

These ground-level measures mirrored the orientation of Mughal political ideology. Harbans Mukhia points out that Mughal ideologues like Abul Fazl tempered the absolutist image of the justice-dispensing world-conquering emperor with 'paternalistic generosity and the spirit of forgiveness'.⁴⁹ Once again, the genealogy of these traits can be traced back to the Nasirean ethical paradigm, where generosity ranks right after justice as a quality desirable in the ideal sovereign. There are several instances cited in Mughal texts about emperors making public statements about their generosity. In 1605, for example, three Rajputs of the Khachhwa house rebelled against imperial officers, taking up arms against them. Jahangir writes that his own officers demanded serious punishment for the offenders. They

reminded the emperor that had such acts been carried out in the Uzbek realm, the 'whole family and connections of that band of men would have been destroyed'.⁵⁰ However, Jahangir decided to display his magnanimity instead of his vengeance. He retorted that 'justice demands (*muqtaṣā-i 'adālat nīz ast*) that many shall not be chastised for the fault of one'.⁵¹ Abul Fazl makes a similar point while narrating the episode of Akbar pardoning the Baluchis and calling back the army that had gone against them. The chronicler reiterates the idea that his patron did not intend to use military violence to fulfil his own selfish motives or just randomly; his decision to unleash violence was tempered by his inclination to shower generosity on anybody who was willing to submit to him.⁵²

Mughal military violence in the early modern world

It is this aspect of Mughal statecraft that lent it a specific quality. On the one hand, the linking of military violence with the category of justice meant that the Mughal state could legitimize making war against anybody and everybody in the name of this abstract concept. Any act of perpetration of military violence – or the restraint of it – could be justified as something that justice demanded. On the other hand, the projection of the Mughal emperor as the benevolent, paternalist, universal sovereign committed to the cause of *ṣulḥ-i kul* (peace with all) meant that he was open to forging alliances with almost anybody, irrespective of their race, religion, and other denominations.⁵³ Recent scholarship on Mughal warfare and empire-building highlights this strong accommodative and inclusive dimension of Mughal statecraft. Farhat Hasan argues that the reason the second Mughal emperor Humayun's (r. 1530–40, 1555–56) conquest of Gujarat in the early 1530s proved short-lived was that he did not forge alliances with the various stakeholders and power blocks at local and regional levels. Four decades later, his son Akbar managed to found a more durable regime in the same region by co-sharing his resources and sovereignty with these people after his initial conquest of them. Douglas Streusand reasons that when it came to sieges, Mughals as well as their adversaries treated fortresses more as bargaining chips for striking political deals than as targets meant to be annihilated. Finally, Jos Gommans stretches this argument the farthest and contends that large-scale military victories only had a symbolic value for Mughal empire-building. Spectacular victories – like those in the battles of Panipat (1526, 1556) and Khanua (1527) – merely served as trump cards in a political game largely dominated by forging and switching alliances.⁵⁴

To say that wars and military violence played only a marginal or symbolic role in Mughal empire-formation is problematic. The instances of long-drawn-out violent conflicts involving very large numbers of combatants and casualties are simply too many in contemporary sources. However, what is indeed borne out by the latter is that the Mughals used military violence more to force their adversaries into submission and co-option, than for their outright destruction. Building their empire in the

multi-ethnic and multireligious region of South Asia, this inclusivity of the Mughals ushered in the development of a highly diverse and cosmopolitan empire. At the same time, the empire must have benefited from the projection of the sovereign as the defender of justice and military violence as a means of his establishing it. Linking war to the interest of a specific community would have created fissures in their diverse empire. But the definition of military violence as a means of defending justice helped motivate the extremely heterogeneous aristocracy and armies of the empire.

This inclusiveness of Mughal statecraft resonates with several other early modern empires. Karen Barkey argues that Ottoman empire-building revolved around a similar ideology of universal sovereignty. She contends that the Ottoman process of incorporation and assimilation of different political groups did not involve 'much of the contestation assumed in the European model of state-making'.⁵⁵ Peter Purdue argues that the Qing espoused a similar openness in China in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. He observes that their 'ethic of inclusion, offering all who committed a proper place in a universal moral order', set them apart from their Ming predecessors, whose 'ethnically oriented policy' characterized an empire meant primarily for the Han Chinese.⁵⁶ Consequently, while the Ming had shut themselves off from the Mongol invaders of Inner Eurasia, the Qing sought more active engagements with the latter and were even prepared to absorb them into their empire if they were ready to submit. Purdue argues that it was this broad-based inclusiveness of their universalist imperial ideology that helped the Qing state achieve territorial expansion to a degree unknown to any other Chinese dynasty before them.

It is also evident that the Mughal case marked a considerable divergence from early modern Europe in terms of the development of the norms for the conduct of war and the perpetration of military violence. In his now classic text on the changing ideologies of war in late medieval and early modern Europe, James Turner Johnson outlines this complex process. Johnson argues that throughout the medieval period, there existed in Europe a theological doctrine about the right to wage war and a chivalric body of thought about the conduct of war. These two doctrines merged together in the sixteenth century to form what has been called the classic just war doctrine. But soon after this, the new combined doctrine once again split between the proponents of war waged in the interest of religion, and those who argued in favour of war being waged for entirely secular political reasons. With the rise of the secular state over the following centuries, it is the second doctrine that found increasing currency in the domain of politics.⁵⁷

Interestingly, in the Mughal case too, we find religion taking a back seat in justifying military violence, especially between Akbar and Shah Jahan. However, this did not amount to the increasing secularization of political philosophy found in Europe. The dominant discourse on kingship in the Mughal Empire still held it very much as divine, and the emperor continued to be seen as appointed by god.

But, as I have pointed out earlier, the rhetoric used to conceptualize this kingship transcended the boundaries of any specific religion. The overwhelming adherence to the Nasirean ethical norms created a state that was aggressively expansionist, yet cosmopolitan, tolerant, and most importantly, ready to ally with anybody. As a result, the military violence that it was ready to unleash was, in theory, infinite in its scope, but in practice, tempered by its universalism and inclusivity.

Notes

- 1 A. F. Allami, *Akbar-nāma*, ed. M. A. Rahim (3 vols, Calcutta, 1877–86), II, p. 323; H. Beveridge (trans.), *The Akbarnama of Abu'l Fazl* (3 vols, Calcutta, 1897–1921), II, p. 475. Also see K. N. Ahmad, *Ṭabaqāt Akbarī*, ed. B. De (3 vols, Calcutta, 1927–40), II, pp. 214–19; B. De (trans.), *The Ṭabaqāt-i Akbarī of Khwājah Niẓāmuddīn Aḥmad* (3 vols, Delhi, 1992), II, pp. 341–8; M. A. Qandahari, *Ta'riḫ-i Akbarī*, ed. H. S. Muinuddin Nadwi, S. A. Ali, and I. A. Arshi (Rampur, 1962), pp. 109–15; T. Ahmad (trans.), *Ta'riḫ-i Akbarī* (Delhi, 1993), pp. 148–53.
- 2 *Akbar-nāma*, ed. Rahim, II, p. 323; *Akbarnama*, trans. Beveridge, II, p. 475.
- 3 M. Alam, *The Languages of Political Islam in India, c.1200–1800* (Delhi, 2004), p. 61.
- 4 *Ibid.*, pp. 81–114, 141–89.
- 5 *Ibid.*, pp. 70–1.
- 6 Tusi assigns justice a uniquely high place among various virtues. N. Tusi, *Aḫlāq-i Nāṣirī*, ed. M. Minavi and A. R. Haidari (Tehran, 1976), pp. 304, 143; G.M. Wickens (trans.), *The Nasirean Ethics*, (London, 1964), pp. 230, 104.
- 7 *Akbar-nāma*, ed. Rahim, III, p. 569; *Akbarnama*, trans. Beveridge, III, p. 861.
- 8 N. Jahangir, *Tūzak-i Jahāngirī*, ed. S. A. Khan, vol. 1 (Ghaziipur, 1863), p. 3; A. Rogers (trans.), *Tūzuk-i Jahāngirī or the Memoirs of Jahāngir* (2 vols in 1, Delhi, 2006), I, p. 7.
- 9 The translators of *Aḫlāq-i Nāṣirī* use 'unicity' rather than 'unity' to express the idea of being or comprising one, or the state of being united as a whole and complete entity.
- 10 *Aḫlāq-i Nāṣirī*, ed. Minavi and Haidari, p. 131; *Nasirean Ethics*, trans. Wickens, p. 95.
- 11 J. M. Asad, *Aḫlāq-i Jalālī*, ed. H. S. A. Haidari (Delhi, 2007), p. 57; W. F. Thompson (trans.), *Practical Philosophy of the Muhammadan People, exhibited in its Professed Connection with the European, so as to Render Either an Introduction to the Other; Being a Translation of the Akhlak-i Jalaly, the Most Esteemed Ethical Work of Middle Asia from the Persian of Fakir Jany Muhammad Asaad* (London, 1839), pp. 126–7.
- 12 *Aḫlāq-i Jalālī*, ed. Haidari, p. 57; *Akhlak-i Jalaly*, trans. Thompson, pp. 126–7.
- 13 *Aḫlāq-i Jalālī*, ed. Haidari, p. 57; *Akhlak-i Jalaly*, trans. Thompson, pp. 126–7; the translators render 'mediation' as 'intermediacy'.
- 14 *Aḫlāq-i Jalālī*, ed. Haidari, p. 57; *Akhlak-i Jalaly*, trans. Thompson, p. 127.
- 15 *Aḫlāq-i Jalālī*, ed. Haidari, p. 57; *Akhlak-i Jalaly*, trans. Thompson, p. 127.
- 16 *Aḫlāq-i Jalālī*, ed. Haidari, p. 57; *Akhlak-i Jalaly*, trans. Thompson, p. 127.
- 17 *Akbar-nāma*, ed. Rahim, III, p. 518; *Akbarnama*, trans. Beveridge, III, p. 791.
- 18 *Akbar-nāma*, ed. Rahim, III, p. 240; *Akbarnama*, trans. Beveridge, III, p. 343. These findings support the arguments of Linda Darling, who has worked extensively on the idea of

- the circle of justice in West Asian political philosophy. Darling argues that the association between justice and kingship remained strong under all of the great Mughals and that this was especially true for Akbar, Jahangir, and Shah Jahan, although it wielded some influence before and after them as well. L. Darling, “Do Justice, Do Justice, For That is Paradise”: Middle Eastern Advice for Indian Muslim Rulers’, *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, 22:1–2 (2003), pp. 8–12.
- 19 M. B. N. Sani, *Mau’izah-i Jahāngīrī of Muhammad Baqir Najm-i Sani: An Indo-Persian Mirror for Princes*, ed. and trans. S. S. Alvi (Albany, NY, 1989), pp. 45–6, 147–8. Emphasis mine.
 - 20 *Ibid.* Emphasis mine.
 - 21 P. H. Wilson, ‘War in German Thought from the Peace of Westphalia to Napoleon’, *English History Quarterly*, 28:1 (1998), p. 12.
 - 22 H. Mukhia, *The Mughals of India* (Oxford and Victoria, 2005), p. 52.
 - 23 *Akbar-nāma*, ed. Rahim, III, p. 474; *Akbarnama*, trans. Beveridge, III, p. 715. Translation partially mine.
 - 24 *Akbar-nāma*, ed. Rahim, III, p. 69; *Akbarnama*, trans. Beveridge, III, p. 96. See also *Akbar-nāma*, ed. Rahim, III, p. 188; *Akbarnama*, trans. Beveridge, III, p. 264. Also see Pratyay Nath, *Climate of Conquest: War, Environment, and Empire in Mughal North India* (Delhi, 2019), pp. 225–47.
 - 25 *Akhlāq-i Nāṣirī*, ed. Minavi and Haidari, p. 311; *Nasirean Ethics*, trans. Wickens, p. 235.
 - 26 *Akhlāq-i Nāṣirī*, ed. Minavi and Haidari, p. 311; *Nasirean Ethics*, trans. Wickens, p. 235.
 - 27 *Akhlāq-i Nāṣirī*, ed. Minavi and Haidari, p. 338; *Nasirean Ethics*, trans. Wickens, pp. 255–6.
 - 28 *Akbar-nāma*, ed. Rahim, III, pp. 235–6; *Akbarnama*, trans. Beveridge, III, p. 335.
 - 29 M. Nathan, *Bahāristān-i Ghā’ibī*, transcribed copy of the original Persian manuscript preserved in Bibliotheque Nationale, Paris, JS 60–62; National Library, Kolkata, Jadunath Sarkar Collection, JS60: 62b–3a; M. Nathan, *Bahāristān-i Ghaybī: A History of the Mughal Wars in Assam, Cooch Behar, Bengal, Bihar and Orissa during the Reigns of Jahangir and Shah Jahan*, trans. M. I. Borah (2 vols, Guwahati, 1992 ed.), I, p. 159.
 - 30 *Bahāristān-i Ghā’ibī*, JS60: 62b; *Bahāristān-i Ghaybī*, trans. Borah, I, p. 159.
 - 31 *Bahāristān-i Ghā’ibī*, JS60: 62b; *Bahāristān-i Ghaybī*, trans. Borah, I, p. 159.
 - 32 *Akbar-nāma*, ed. Rahim, III, pp. 239–40; *Akbarnama*, trans. Beveridge, III, p. 342.
 - 33 The phrase stands for a military encounter where both the parties involved first draw up their forces in proper battle array and then engage in frontal combat.
 - 34 D. H. A. Kolff, *Naukar, Rajput and Sepoy: The Ethnohistory of the Military Labour Market in Hindustan, 1450–1850* (Cambridge, 1990); D. H. A. Kolff, ‘Peasants Fighting for a Living in Early Modern North India’, in E.-J. Zürcher (ed.), *Fighting for a Living: A Comparative History of Military Labour 1500–2000* (Amsterdam, 2013), pp. 243–66; I. A. Khan, ‘Muskets in the Mawas: Instruments of Peasant Resistance’, in K. N. Panikkar, T. J. Byres, and U. Patnaik (eds), *The Making of History: Essays Presented to Irfan Habib* (London, 2002), pp. 81–103.
 - 35 Important works in this field include W. G. Orr, ‘Armed Religious Ascetics in Northern India’, *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library*, 24:1 (1940); D. Lorenzen, ‘Warrior Ascetics in Indian History’, *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 98:1 (1978); W. Pinch, *Warrior Ascetics and Indian Empires* (Cambridge, 2006).
 - 36 D. Streusand, *The Formation of the Mughal Empire* (Delhi, 1989), pp. 70–2.

- 37 *Bahāristān-i Ghā'ibī*, JS60:110a; *Bahāristān-i Ghaybī*, trans. Borah, I, pp. 230–1.
- 38 *Bahāristān-i Ghā'ibī*, JS60:110a; *Bahāristān-i Ghaybī*, trans. Borah, I, pp. 230–1.
- 39 *Bahāristān-i Ghā'ibī*, JS60:110a; *Bahāristān-i Ghaybī*, trans. Borah, I, pp. 230–1.
- 40 *Bahāristān-i Ghā'ibī*, JS61:197a; *Bahāristān-i Ghaybī*, trans. Borah, I, p. 419.
- 41 *Mau'izah-i Jahāngīrī*, ed. and trans. Alvi, pp. 46–7, 148–9.
- 42 *Akhlāq-i Nāṣirī*, ed. Minavi and Haidari, p. 338; *Nasirean Ethics*, trans. Wickens, p. 255.
- 43 Mukhia, *The Mughals*, pp. 52–4.
- 44 S. Talish, *Tarikh-i Aasham*, trans. M. Asif (Guwahati, 2009), p. 31.
- 45 *Ibid.*, pp. 31–2.
- 46 *Ibid.*
- 47 *Ibid.*, p. 13.
- 48 *Ibid.*, pp. 13–14.
- 49 Mukhia, *The Mughals*, p. 54.
- 50 *Tūzak-i Jahāngīrī*, ed. Khan, I, p. 13; *Tuzuk-i Jahangiri*, trans. Rogers, I, p. 30.
- 51 *Tūzak-i Jahāngīrī*, ed. Khan, I, p. 13; *Tuzuk-i Jahangiri*, trans. Rogers, I, p. 30.
- 52 *Akbar-nāma*, ed. Rahim, III, p. 240; *Akbarnama*, trans. Beveridge, III, p. 343.
- 53 Defined as 'universal peace', the doctrine of *ṣulh-i kul* was developed at Akbar's court. For details, see M. A. Ali, 'Sulh-i Kul and the Religious Ideas of Akbar', in M. A. Ali, *Mughal India: Studies in Polity, Ideas, Society and Culture* (New Delhi, 2008), pp. 158–72. Also see Nath, *Climate of Conquest*, pp. 270–1.
- 54 J. J. L. Gommans, 'Warhorse and Gunpowder in India c.1000–1850', in J. Black (ed.), *War in the Early Modern World* (London and New York, 1999).
- 55 K. Barkey, *Bandits and Bureaucrats: The Ottoman Route to State Centralization* (Ithaca, NY, 1994), pp. 1–2.
- 56 P. Perdue, 'Why Do Empires Expand?', in G. Wade (ed.), *Asian Expansions: The Historical Experiences of Polity Expansion in Asia* (New York, 2015), p. 44.
- 57 J. T. Johnson, *Ideology, Reason and the Limitation of War: Religious and Secular Concepts, 1200–1740* (Princeton, 1975). Also see J. Q. Whitman, *The Verdict of Battle: The Law of Victory and the Making of Modern War* (Cambridge, MA, 2012).