CHAPTER THREE

THE MAKING OF MUGHAL GRAND STRATEGY:
MATERIAL AND IDEATIONAL INFLUENCES

Extending the argument made in the previous chapter for developing a historically ‘deep’ understanding of India’s strategic practice, the attempt here would be to explain its evolution during a particular historical period. The chapter looks at the significant material and ideational influences that went into the making of Akbar’s grand strategy, and is divided into three broad segments. In the first section, we will look at the manner in which material influences such as the distance factor and the vast military potential of Indian society shaped the orientation of Mughal grand strategy. Likewise, the subsequent section traces the ideational factors that determined the tenor of Akbar’s policies towards the indigenous elite. The combined thrust of these two sections lies in the central argument of the chapter that while Akbar innovated with his policies, to a great extent he drew from existing ancient and medieval traditions of kingship, and learnt to work within the constraints of the time. The final segment outlines the parameters of Akbar’s accommodationist grand strategy, particularly the key instruments of socialisation through which it was implemented.

Although Akbar pursued certain policies that were not altogether novel, he had to devise a long-term strategy to effectively meet the challenge of endemic violence. The grand strategy he adopted was one of accommodation, wherein assimilative and manipulative policies were pursued to incorporate and control adversaries. This implied a progressively lesser reliance on coercion in the pursuit of political goals. The use of force increasingly became a political statement of Mughal military might within the system, although it continued to define Mughal relations with the powers at the margins of the empire. The interplay of force and conciliation, and of military superiority and participatory tactics, yielded results which were unprecedented in the entire history of medieval India. A relatively peaceful core was set off from the restive and rebellious periphery, although the basic Mughal approach in both cases was one of accommodation. Seen through the realist interpretative lens, accommodation is a function of power...
distribution within the system. However, a materialist approach does not offer help much in explaining the differing degrees of coercion levels that the regions constituting the core and the periphery of the Mughal empire experienced. The key factor that would explain the variation in outcome is socialisation, a key Mughal stratagem that evolved with the development of Akbar's policy of accommodation.

MATERIAL FACTORS

Distance as a Variable in Indian History

In the medieval ages, distance cast a determining influence on the manner in which imperialism developed in different regions within an empire. Recognising the impediments that distance presented to ambitious rulers keen on expanding their territories, Braudel termed distance as 'public enemy number one' in the sixteenth century. (Cited in Parker: 48) Watson also dwells upon the evolving relations between the centre and the periphery in the context of 'marcher states'. The tendency towards tighter imperial control where it had initially slackened came from the marcher communities that lived on the fringes or 'marches' of civilisation. Being on the periphery had toughened them politically and militarily and these communities sought to further centralise power that had 'softened' at the centre. As examples of marcher states, Watson cites the Persians and the Mauryans who

'recognized the value of the administrative experience of the centre, and while they established their dominance by force they were quick to adapt to their purposes the previously existing but now weakened patterns of imperial authority which they found to hand.' (Watson 1992: 128)

The dynamics of power that are set in motion by distance are inherent in the very characterisation of imperialism. Sample, for instance, a standard definition of imperialism that factors in the intervention of distance thus,

'Imperialism is characterized by the exercise of power either through direct conquest or (latterly) through political and economic influence that effectively amounts to a similar form of domination: both involve the practice of power through facilitating institutions and ideologies. Typically, it is the deliberate product of a political machine that rules from the centre, and extends its control to the furthest reaches of the peripheries...' (Young 2001: 27)
In ancient Indian thought, distance as a factor separating distinct political realms did not exist as there were no distinct dominions between which space could be definitively measured. Kautilya, for example did not make a stark demarcation between the internal and external realms of a state. This is not to say that ancient India lacked a sense of physical space and geographical consciousness. Ancient texts like the Vishnudharmottara Purana refer to a particular group of kings called the samanta that constituted the outer reaches of the kingdom. By their peripheral location and the lower numerical strength attached to it by the kingdom, the samantas were always at a position of relative disadvantage in comparison to the seat of power at the centre. (Inden 2006: 143-144) Notions such as ‘the conqueror of the earth’ or ‘the universal emperor’ also embodied the awareness of geographical scale. The conquest of the entire earth was theoretically possible since the circle of kings extended the network of power relations far beyond the immediacies of a king’s boundaries. As far as Kautilya’s schema is concerned, the proximity of the enemy was central to his calculations, evident from his assertion that ‘the janapada is shared with the enemy.’ Kautilya further expanded on the constituents of a king’s domain, namely ‘those who are likely to be won over (by the enemy)’ and ‘those who are not likely to be won over (by the enemy).’ (Wink 1986: 14)

Given that the domain of the king is not clearly demarcated, the strategies Kautilya suggested were the same for dealing with both internal sedition and external invasion. Since the enemy existed both outside and within a king’s domain, the use of force as the primary state instrument was not advised by strategists like Kautilya and Manu. Indeed, coercion was less favoured than sedition in terms of potency and effectiveness in countering enemies. The reason for force being attributed less significance lay in the nature of sovereignty the state aspired to achieve. As Andre Wink notes,

‘The conquest which is desired by the conqueror-to-be is not primarily a matter of military action, but of expansion of his sovereignty or svavisaya by effecting alliances with ‘those who are likely to be won over’ under the enemy’s sovereignty or paravisaya.’ (Wink 1986: 15)

The variable of distance impacted upon the nature of relations that the Mughals forged with local elites and determined the degree of accommodation and expansion
under Mughal grand strategy. The areas, which were situated around the imperial capital constituted the core of the empire. Northern and north-western territories were strategically important to Akbar who made concerted efforts to draw them into his imperial system through the process of socialisation. According to Joseph Schwartzberg, the Mughals attained

‘...a greater degree of territorial control within the Indian subcontinent than had any previous power. Moreover, they maintained their status as a pan-Indian power for nearly one and a half centuries, slightly longer than either the Mauryas or the Guptas.’ (Schwartzberg 1992: 260)

However, in the Deccan region which formed the periphery of the Mughal empire, contact with local rulers was sporadic. Schwartzberg notes that

‘...many small and medium-sized states have survived over much of Indian history merely by virtue of their remoteness from the contemporary principal centres of political and military power. This is, of course, what accounts for the continuation of Bijapur and Golconda as independent entities well beyond the time when the Mughals attained pan-Indian status.’ (Schwartzberg 1992: 259)

Marginalised from the process of socialisation, these regional powers did not identify with the Mughal state and viewed its advance with hostility. The grand strategy pursued was more coercive in these cases and less successful as well.

Schwartzberg’s analysis of the major powers of the Indian subcontinent panning the ancient, medieval and modern periods, allows us to place the political environment of the Mughal era in a broader context. His study of pan-Indian powers (those that controlled four out of the five analytic regions he divides the country into) and supra-regional powers bring out some interesting patterns in the geopolitical power configurations in the subcontinent from the ancient period onwards. Across historical periods, the North Indian Plain has remained the predominant seat of political power both in terms of frequency and longevity, and from where empires have fanned out in all directions. (Kulke and Rothermund 1998: 9) The modern period saw a geopolitical shift in the subcontinent, wherein instead of fanning outwards from a particular locus of power, power began to gradually move further inland. Prior to the British, no coastal state had risen to become a pan-Indian power. Certain regional patterns of power distributions begin to emerge that testify the centrality of location and distance in India’s strategic practice. This is amply
demonstrated by the fact that the north-western and southern regions not only failed to produce a power of pan-Indian status, but also threw up few supra-regional powers. Their geographical location on the peripheries of the Indian landmass accounts for their strategic disadvantage in terms of power distribution.  

For a millennium from 560 BC to 647 AD that characterises the ancient period, the time-span for pan-Indian powers was the longest. For instance, Magadha was the power centre for almost 500 years from mid-sixth century BC as there was no other power centre rivalling its growth. However, with the spread of military technology and growth of populations in other regions, the number of competing supra-regional powers increased. As a result, the early medieval and Sultanate periods saw the simultaneous rise of up to five supra-regional states and the relative decline of pan-Indian powers. Increased competition meant greater frequency of wars among powers in the struggle to gain control. However, the last four centuries have seen the consolidation of power under pan-Indian states, beginning with the Mughals. Increased agricultural productivity coupled with better communication systems and enhanced military capabilities made it possible to establish a pan-Indian state under the Mughals and the British, without necessarily spelling the end for smaller regional entities. Thus, we see the coexistence of the pan-Indian state with lesser powers that did not pose a serious threat to the stability of the system, a situation that was difficult to envisage a few centuries earlier when supremacy meant the extermination of all other power centres. (Schwartzberg 1992: 259)

The strategic implication of ruling over such a political environment was that the centralised system of administration prevalent in the ancient period, gave way to a more decentralised mode of governance among pan-Indian medieval rulers such as the Mughals. The existence of competing power centres significantly reduced the power potential of the

107 Schwartzberg's data tabulation on the duration of pan-Indian and supra-regional powers in the major regions reveals the dominance of the North-Centre region as the seat of power across historical periods (from 560 BC to 1976 AD), accounting for over 48% of all the periods put together. The southern region saw a proliferation of supra-regional states at its peak during the Mughal period, at 58%. The upshot of this detailed analysis is that geographical location has played an important role in determining the probability of political dominance. (Schwartzberg 1992: 259)

108 Schwartzberg defines pan-Indian states as those which stretch over at least four out of the five analytic regions he divides the subcontinent into (north-west, north-centre, north-east, west and south). Supra-regional powers are those that extend over at least two analytic regions. (Schwartzberg 1992: 254)
pan-Indian state and thus, necessitated a mediated approach to administration. (Schwartzberg 1992: 258) Akbar’s accommodation can be seen as the search for a favourable compromise with the rival supra-regional powers he could not afford to ignore.

Distance emerges as a key variable in Stewart Gordon’s analysis of Mughal relations with other regional powers. He discerns three zones of distinct military cultures which were set apart by their respective weaponry and codes of conduct. The first zone he terms as the Rajput zone, which girdles Gujarat, Rajasthan, Punjab, UP and the Himalayan foothills. The Rajput clans were militarily armed with cavalry equipment suitable for warfare in the open battlefield. Interestingly, Gordon opens his brief note on the Rajput zone by clubbing the Mughals and the Rajputs together. He writes,

‘Over the course of more than 150 years - from the early sixteenth century to the mid seventeenth century - the Mughals and certain armed indigenous cavalry groups figured out how to integrate... Both the Mughals and the indigenous participants were changed by the process. By the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, this Rajput ethos had taken on a life of its own and was a widely-used blueprint for military entrepreneurship.’ (Gordon 1994: 182)

Given the fit in the war-making techniques of the Mughals and the Rajputs, this conjunction is not entirely inappropriate. The Mughals also relied on heavily armed mounted archers equipped with the sword, and for which the open field presented the ideal theatre of war. The Mughal mode of warfare signalled a break from the traditional method of war-making which relied on the elephant charge. However, the edge in the battlefield did not necessarily translate into superiority in all departments of warfare. For instance, compared to field manoeuvres, wresting control of fortresses proved to be an arduous exercise. Since the military demands of the Delhi Sultanate were not very different from those of the succeeding Mughals, the modalities of service with the Rajputs had been evolving much before Akbar came to power. As Gordon asserts, ‘We, thus, must see the Rajput policy of the Mughals as in a very long tradition, rather than arising from the genius of Akbar.’ (Gordon 1994: 189) Elaborating further on the military compatibility of the two groups, Gordon writes,

‘Mughals and Rajputs shared the centrality of the horse, the sword, and the bow and arrow. They had both opted for heavy cavalry... and preferred plains battles. Neither put much emphasis on artillery... or infantry.’ (Gordon 1994: 189-190)
The second zone evolved in the Deccan around Bijapur and Ahmadnagar, which he refers to by the generic term Maratha. The Marathas who served the Deccan rulers populated the ranks of their army with lightly armed infantry, and cavalry which was also armed with light equipment. Despite the prolonged Maratha association with the Deccan sultanates, the Marathas did not perceive their Deccan rulers in the manner the Rajputs regarded their Mughal masters, and certainly did not believe in establishing personal ties through marital alliances. The Marathas remained more closely associated with their land

than the Rajputs, their service following the agricultural cycle that meant a seasonal “cessation of military activity. (Gordon 1994: 204) The third zone comprised of the region surrounding the Vijayanagara empire south of the Tungabhadra River. The military strength of the Nayakas was traditionally derived from its swelling ranks of infantrymen, light cavalry and a sizeable section of elephants.

Yet, however dynamic a hegemonic discourse may be, it tends to be set in a pattern that had proven to be successful in winning over secondary powers. Hegemons display reluctance in tampering with the winning strategy, which results in its inability to reinvent its discourse to co-opt the new powers that lie on the fringes of an expanding empire. As Gordon observed of the successful Mughal strategy of assimilation,

‘The Mughals had only one model for the integration of indigenous military talent. That was the Rajput. It had been mutually developed in the North over several generations before the Mughals crossed the Tapti. By and large, it was a successful amalgamation of prior Rajput ideas and Mughal core values.’ (Gordon 1994: 204)

This propensity is further compounded by the fact that the strategic discourse tends to be dominated by certain actors within the system who seek to preserve the order in which their interests are best secured. The inclusion and participation of a group may be at the exclusion and marginalisation of another. Change in the status-quo which often follows the expansion of the empire may be seen by dominant participants as a threat to their stakes within the system. At the level of discourse, the participant ‘in-group’ would press for greater cohesion within the hegemonic system at the cost of the alienation of the ‘out-group’. The Mughal case presents a classic example of a state that was hesitant to reformulate an equation that had worked successfully with ‘the geographically, ethnically and linguistically adjacent Rajputs.’ (Rudolph and Rudolph 1985: 52) The costs of this inflexibility are summed up by Gordon,

‘Clinging to this single [Rajput] ethos of what constituted a correct cavalryman, horse, battle, method of entre’, pay and reward, the Mughals failed completely to manipulate or even see the symbols, actions, and attitudes which might have generated loyalty and made the whole Deccan operation far less costly.’ (Gordon 1994: 204-205)

An instance of internal resistance in this context would be the Rajput opposition to the inclusion of the Marathas within the imperial service. The Rajputs fought the assimilation
of outside powers like the Marathas over material benefits. Although the Mughals did gradually employ numerous Marathas, they failed to realise that 'there is a huge difference between hiring Marathas and somehow converting them into loyal soldiers, willing to take high risks and die for the Empire.' That the Maratha troops were enlisted as 'Deccani Rajputs' by the Mughals is indicative of the extent to which the Mughal association with the Rajputs had come to influence their perception of the Deccan powers. (Gordon 1994: 205)

The cause behind this inability to sustain diverse imperial relationships lay in the lines of influence that radiated outwards and weakened with distance. Rather than operate within neat boundaries that cut off systemic influences, socialisation worked within loosely defined realms. (Gommans 2002: 89) Burton Stein drew attention to the discrepancy in political and ritual power between the centre and the periphery. Although the ruler controlled both ritual and political power at the centre, the latter tended to diminish with distance. Consequently, actual political control was exercised by the subject elite in the peripheries. As Stein points out,

'Overarching political control may not be very important at all... In a segmentary state, while political control is appropriately distributed among many throughout the system, ritual supremacy is legitimately conceded to a single centre.' (Stein 1975: 269)

The sense of otheration was not restricted to peripheral powers alone but was experienced by social groups which found themselves outside the Mughal hegemonic discourse. For instance, the Mughal discourse resorted to a variety of tactics of otheration through which the Meos of Mewat were portrayed as a threat and a disturbance. The Mewatis were among the local ruling groups that had been ousted from the networks of power when the Rajputs organised their territories into regional states. The hostile posturing of the Mewatis and the imperial state has a long history that dates back to the thirteenth century and has its roots in the latter's centralising and extractive tendencies. Shail Mayaram looks into the different strategies of representation that the Mughal chroniclers employed to construe the Mewati resistance as a rebellion to be quelled for the benefit of peace and order. The resistance of Mewatis to such subversive tactics were projected as attempts by rebels (mufsid) at fomenting disorder (fasad). The Meos were
also referred to as dissenter (zortalabi) to state authority. (Mayaram 1997: 178-179)

Local narratives emphasise the attempts by the state to monopolise visible symbols of power. For instance, the Mughal administration forbade the Meos from retaining their horses which could be deployed to challenge the state apparatus. Similarly, the state appropriated the right to play the drum (dhol) which was a veritable sign of power for much of western India. By doing so, the Mughal state sought to deny the Meos, in both practical and symbolic terms, the ability to wield power as understood in local discourses. (Mayaram 1997: 189-190) As Mayaram asserts,

‘...the otherness of these groups was seen as constituting a spatial boundary, that Heesterman calls the ‘inner frontier’. They are part of the interiority of the imperial and regional states as well as on the margins and beyond their control. This perception orients state policy towards the ‘fasad mewan’, who must be ‘crushed’ and killed.’ (Mayaram 1997: 179)

Mancur Olson’s work on group behaviour over collective goods is relevant and enlightening in this regard. He argues that a group would seek to restrict its size if the collective benefit is limited and fixed in supply. He refers to such a benefit as an ‘exclusive collective good’. According to him, ‘whether a group behaves exclusively or inclusively... depends upon the nature of the objective the group seeks, not on any characteristic of the membership.’ (Olson 1971: 38-39) The perceived threat to the Rajput vested interests provides the explanation for hostile perceptions towards the Marathas, outside which the dynamics of their interrelationship may be dictated by other set of factors. As Johnston notes, ‘In-group solidarity requires the dehumanisation of the out-group.’ (Johnston 1995: 160) This may not be as purposive as stated, but the participants of the system or the ‘in-group’ are aware of their privileged status and the shared identity accruing from it. Sterling-Folker similarly refers to ‘in-group favoritism and out-group discrimination’ in explaining how social practices enhance internal cohesion and stability within a system. (Sterling-Folker 2002: 76-77)

Both these factors were present in the case of Mughal-Rajput relations. Just as distance as a barrier cannot explain differing coercion levels, likewise socialisation alone cannot explain why some actors are excluded while others are not. As Gary Goertz puts it, proximity to the centre certainly does increase the likelihood of a particular outcome, here, lowered coercion levels in the concerned relationships. (Goertz 1994: 17) However,
it does not in itself ensure their internalisation by the concerned agents. The correlation
between socialisation and proximity to the centre of its dissemination is not self-
exploratory.

To sum up, the degree of proximity to the imperial capital, which shifted from
Delhi to Agra and then to Fatehpur Sikri under Akbar, influenced the level of
socialisation the regional powers experienced. The more peripheral the powers were, the
lower was the level of socialisation and, consequently, the higher the probability of the
use of coercion in the subsequent imperial dealings with it. Conversely, a 'core' area had
higher chances of being inducted into the political system and was subject to co-optive,
rather than coercive imperial policies. The advantage that proximity to the imperial centre
gave to regional powers like the Rajputs was further enhanced by the fact that the
Mughals and the Rajputs shared complimentary belief systems which facilitated the
strategic discourse between the two actors. The affinity of belief systems certainly
reduces the 'conceptual distance' the targeted elite may have to cover to bring their
interests and policies in line with the hegemon's. Both Mughals and Rajputs found that
cooperation based on shared values meant higher pay-offs than what competition was
likely to promise.

The military ethos of both actors also proved to be complementary. The Mughals
saw a useful ally in the warrior Rajput on the horseback who had traditionally served a
political superior in return for rewards. The Rajputs met the Mughal need for a loyal
cavalry force that could conquer new terrain for them. (Gordon 1994: 189-92)
Furthermore, Mughal intervention in Rajput politics shifted power relations between the
various Rajput clans and ones such as the Kachhwahas who served the Mughals came to
dominate inter-clan power networks.

For its sheer size and scale, the Mughal empire was distinct from its other
contemporaries. It was more prosperous and populous than the Safavid and the Ottoman
empire. The most powerful empire in Indian history had a population of 100 million in
1700, which was five times that of the Ottomans and 20 times that of the Safavids.
(Metcalf and Metcalf 2002: 1) Given its spread, the degree of control that the Mughals
wielded over such a vast and populous landmass would assume greater importance,
particularly since the society it ruled was heavily militarised. The distribution of power in
the domestic system under Akbar is theoretically the starting point of this study. The lack of monopoly over force and the fact that power distribution was roughly even throughout the system was a critical factor that predisposed the Mughals to a strategy of accommodation.

Map 2: The Expansion of the Mughal Empire 1605-1707

The Military Labour Market

The fact that Akbar ruled over a highly militarised society determined to a great extent the nature of his grand strategy. Engagement with socio-religious groups as a means to gaining information is particularly notable during Akbar's reign when his extensive interaction with Hindu pundits yielded detailed and meticulous descriptions of kingship, rituals and cosmology under Hinduism. Christopher Bayly adds,

'There was more to this tradition than rational observation. Abul Fazl...was also seeking knowledge of Hindu religion and cosmology because God had given all men some modicum of religious understanding. The Emperor and his Minister believed that a varied and respectful society could be nurtured in India through such mutual knowledge.' (Bayly 1996: 24)

Although militarisation was a usual feature of medieval societies, it was the sheer scale and density of the armed Indian society that made it a phenomenon in itself. Fazl notes that 'the zamindars of the country furnish more than four million, four hundred thousand men'. (Ain, II: 241) At more than three per cent of the total population, which stood at roughly 135 million in 1600, the Indian society was a highly militarised one. Given that the Ain estimates do not cover the whole of the Indian subcontinent, the share could be close to four per cent.109 (Rosen 1996: 130) A more accurate estimate would be the share of the armed population drawn from the total active male population, which constituted the main resource base for military personnel. Dirk Kolff estimates the military labour force to be roughly 10 per cent of the active male population. (Kolff 1990: 3) No contemporary European society presented such high levels of militarisation. In 1600, military force was 0.4 per cent of the total population in France, 2.5 per cent in Spain and 0.7 per cent in England and Wales. (Kolff 1990: 135) This vast reservoir of military manpower constituted the military labour market chiefly because the participants competed with one another to be employed by the highest bidder. On the supply side, the military labour market comprised two categories of potential recruits—immigrants and highly mobile tribal groups; and the relatively sedentary landed zamindars heading large

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109 Moreland estimates India's population in 1600 to be 100 million, and that of Akbar's empire at 60 million. Shirin Moosvi computes the total population at the beginning of the seventeenth century as being in the range of 136-150 million, including the section of urban population that Moreland fails to include. (Moosvi 1987: 402)
groups of armed peasantry and other local elements. (Gommans 2002: 68) Ascriptive identities of race and caste held limited currency in the military labour market and did not significantly define the alliances that were arrived at or the deals that were struck. Instead, notions of honourable service (naukari) and loyalty to one’s patron (namak) came to epitomise the functioning of the labour market. Recruitment into regional armies was indirect and brokered through middlemen such as zamindars. (Kolff 1990: 7; Gommans 2002: 63)

How does the military labour market become a point of reference for Mughal grand strategy? The issue of the labour market is instructive for the strategies that the Mughals adopted in order to cope with its formidable proportions, especially since it influenced the Mughal bid to dominate the existing power networks. It is evident that the large masses of armed peasantry and war bands posed a serious challenge to Mughal power. For example, opposition to Akbar at Chitor in 1567 came not just from the Rajputs who numbered 8000 but also from the 40,000-strong peasant army. (Kolff 1990: 10) With violence being an endemic feature of medieval Indian society, the Mughals clearly lacked monopoly over force. As Kolff notes,

‘it is clear that Indian agrarian society was to a large extent an armed society, skilled in the use of arms....Moreover, the countryside was studded with little forts....In such a society, no government, however powerful, could even begin to think of achieving a monopoly on the use of arms. In some respects, the millions of armed men, cultivators and otherwise, that government was supposed to rule over, were its rivals rather than its subjects.’ (Kolff 1990: 7)

Given that the state exercised limited power over the sources of potential threats, it is not surprising that intelligence gathering was traditionally accorded high priority within Indian political thought. For rulers of large empires, surveillance was a mode of gaining better control over their land and subjects. Information mostly travelled through informal channels facilitated by the movement of soldiers, merchants and pilgrims. Apart from its practical benefits, surveillance also carried symbolic significance since it projected the power of the king. The notion that the ‘universal king’ was omnipresent

110 Tod’s figures for the state of Bikaner in early nineteenth century place the military population at roughly nine percent of the total population, and for Marwar the ratio was pegged at six percent of the entire populace. The numbers suggest the high levels of militarisation that survived despite the best efforts by the Mughals to assimilate and control the military labour market during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. (Rosen 1996: 131-132)
noting all major and minor happenings within his realm was cultivated as an ameliorative measure for his lack of information and control on local affairs. (Bayly 1996: 13)

Since retaliatory power was fairly evenly distributed, the Mughals could not resort to coercion against their adversaries. A coercive grand strategy aiming at the extermination of the enemy and the annexation of its territory would have been a costly and a futile venture. Particular regional kingdoms could be vanquished on the sheer weight of military superiority but the source of military power from which these powers drew their might, namely the labour market, continued to thrive. The preponderance of the military labour market made any solution based on coercion unviable. According to Kolff,

'Clearly, an important reason for the limited achievement of Mughal state formation in the 'early modern' European sense was that the state was faced not with individual zamindars or rebels, but with parties of armed peasants who represented the backbone of society and who could not be destroyed without dire consequences to the agrarian productivity on which the regime depended for its survival.' (Kolff 1990: 15)

For instance, forced migration and deportation of thousands to Central Asia as slave trade failed to make any drastic impact on the military labour market. (Kolff 1990: 15; Gommans 2002: 75) Military density in areas such as Agra and Ajmer continued to remain high in the seventeenth century. Moreover, the bulk of the military labour market was made up of the armed peasantry, which constituted the revenue base of the empire and hence, could not be dispensed with. For these reasons, the policy of accommodation presented itself as the only cost-effective course of action open to Akbar. The Mughal state in employing large numbers from the military labour market was following the precedent set by the Delhi Sultanate under the Lodi Afghans. The Sultanate recruited hordes of immigrants who had travelled to the subcontinent in search of employment from Central Asia and Afghanistan.

The preponderance of the military labour market underlines the imperative to locate the Mughal state and its military power within the social context. Kolff argues that

'[t]he Mughal army can never be made into a neat category of research outside the context of North Indian society: as such, it defies definition. It can only be described in terms of the dilemma in which the Mughal empire itself seems to have been caught, to wit, the dilemma between, on the one hand, the territorial state where the writ of the emperor was unopposed, and, on the other hand, the
state as the largest and most honourable employer of the country whose huge army was the fundamental expression of its achievement.' (Kolff 1990: 2)

Although the Mughal army directly under the command of the emperor was not constituted of members of the armed peasantry, they tended to populate the provincial armies and local war-bands. Zamindars proved to be a vital link in the chain to harness the military potential of the countryside as they were the primary recruiters of the military labour drawn locally. (Kolff 1990: 25)

Enrolment brought about a number of internal changes within peasant populations. Communities which saw large scale recruitment of their men became increasingly conscious of their identity, being more close-knit and clan conscious. Soldiers of peasant origin such as the Barha Sayyids, who enrolled for service under Akbar and were gradually assimilated into the military system, came to guard their lineage more zealously than before. (Kolff 1990: 18-19) The Rajputs began to lay stress on their genealogical background as a means of limiting the scope of royal favours to certain family-groups. Kolff refers to the ‘Rajput Great Tradition’ that emerged from the sixteenth century onwards, wherein lineage histories of Rajput clans began to crystallise in Rajasthan. Certain clans such as the Ujjainiyas adapted to the contingencies of time (the Mughals laid emphasis on genealogies of their nobles) and succeeded in making the transition from open-status groups to closed kin bodies. (Kolff 1990: 73)

IDEATIONAL INFLUENCES
The Mughal grand strategy presents us with an intriguing paradox: a state committed to accommodation turns unyielding and inflexible when it encounters a certain set of actors who are located at the empire’s fringes. The repeated Mughal offer of incentives and its interest in playing up ideational affinities that the Rajputs were familiar with, were conspicuously absent in Mughal dealings with the Deccan kingdoms. Accomodation as a grand strategy did indeed give rise to different strategies, although the basic approach towards the secondary powers remained the same. As we have already seen, a strategy is not predetermined or programmed to proceed along a set trajectory, rather the hegemon may have to reformulate its set of policies if it does not evince a suitable response from the subject elite. The modified strategy arrived at would be a compromise position
between what is appropriate (given the response of the subject elite) and what is feasible (given the logistical constraints on policy application). The limitations on policy application, in the case of the Mughals, were imposed by the distance that separated the peripheral powers from the centre of power. The material constraints on cooperation were compounded by a basic incompatibility between the two actors in terms of divergent military ethos and belief systems, resulting in an assertion of Mughal hegemony through primarily coercive means of establishing control.

Despite the attacks and military campaigns that came to dominate the Mughal approach to the rulers in the Deccan, the policy did not run counter to the basic tenor of an accommodationist grand strategy. A coercive strategy was consistent with the fundamental assumption of accommodation— the subjugation and not the annihilation of the secondary power was to be the basis of expansion. Thus, accommodation as a grand strategy threw up distinct strategies, yielding results that varied drastically in their coercion content. The aim and approach of Akbar to establish an empire without exterminating the existing ruling elite is reflected in both the strategies of socialisation and coercion.

The Mughal approach to power acquisition as a non-zero sum enterprise was in essence reflected in their dealings with the Deccani powers just as it was in its relations with the Rajputs. To begin with, Akbar did not view the Deccani powers with hostility, and the measures initially employed to secure their cooperation were similar to the ones adopted with the Rajputs— a combined strategy of incentives and sanctions. Although the strategy involved an impressive display of material preponderance, it was not aimed at the total annihilation of the subject power. The explanation lies in the proximity of the secondary power to the political centre of the empire. In the Rajput case, coercive subjugation was followed by a combined strategy of material incentives and assimilative practices. Rajput princes were not only offered high offices, but were made participants in governance. They were required to be present at the Mughal court, which took keen interest in Rajput politics of succession. Moreover, the mobile capital's perambulations touched many of the power centres around the capital and resumed contact with local rulers. Gommans calculated that the imperial camp travelled and camped within an annual radius of action of roughly 1200 km from Delhi. (Gommans 2002: 108) It is
evident that the radius covered the core areas which experienced other tactics of socialisation as well, whereas the swathes of territories that fell outside the radius were marginalised from the co-optive measures of the Mughals.

These practices, over and above material incentives, were singularly absent in the Mughal dealings with the powers at the margins of the empire. Accommodation was restricted to offers of material incentives but was not further consolidated through sustained normative engagement. Securing compliance was a costly affair at the fringes since the relationship was based entirely on the exercise of coercive power such as offers and threats without any transformation of belief systems. That made the margins relatively sensitive to shifts in power balance within the system as the discontented rulers had little incentive in supporting a power that was incapable of offering the same level of material benefits to them as before. In relative terms, the peripheries were less likely to see the value system of a hegemon ‘outlast’ periods of its decline, than in the core areas. Thus, a nuanced understanding of hegemonic power that differentiates between its material and ideational components is vital in order to explain its varying impact.

The Akhlaka Literature: The Ideational Basis for Accommodation

The Mughals under Akbar displayed the distinct characteristics of an accommodationist strategy in their efforts at empire building. That the Mughals did not see themselves as locked in a zero-sum game with their adversaries is evident from the political tradition upon which Mughal rule was based. The Mughal grand strategy drew on the akhlaq treatises which fostered a moderate and accommodative intellectual climate in Mughal India, an obvious indicator of what Michael Mann calls ‘diffused power’. The akhlaq literature are essentially medieval Persian treatises that propounded moral and ethical codes of conduct, and included a number of notions that were non-Islamic in origin and content. Given that the akhlaq literature constituted the ideational foundation of Akbar’s accommodationist grand strategy, it would be instructive to examine the ethics and norms that informed the philosophy of this particular genre of writing. As Alam observes,

111 Diffused power ‘spreads in a... spontaneous, unconscious, decentered way throughout a population, resulting in similar social practices that embody power relations but are not explicitly commanded.’ (Mann 1986: 8)
‘The manuals on Nasirean ethics together with the liberal Sufic tradition and Persian poetry contributed significantly to the making of this milieu, and provided guidance to an acceptable pattern of living in a heavily religious but multi-cultural medieval set up. Non-sectarianism and a serious concern for justice and harmony among the elite was desired, especially noticed, and highlighted.’ (Alam 2000: 90)

The consciousness that Muslim subjects remained in minority in medieval India and the Muslim political elite ruled over a population predominantly Hindu, spawned two parallel traditions in Indo-Islamic thought. Whereas on the one hand, it led to the growth of the orthodox strain that was acutely conscious of the vulnerable position of the Indian Muslims in the early periods, on the other hand the liberal tradition was committed to devising means of establishing communal harmony between Hindus and Muslims.112 The central issue that occupied the advocates of both dispositions was the extent to which the powers and duties of the ruler were to be circumscribed by the strictures of the Sharia. An attendant concern was the status of non-Muslims within an Islamic state in terms of their duties and prerogatives. (Friedmann 2003: 51; Alam 2000: 73) The classical interpretation saw the king as primarily the ruler and representative of Muslim subjects. The reformist tradition accorded a broader and more enabling role to religion in political affairs ‘to illustrate, and in support of, the universal human ideals.’ Ordinarily, the status of Hindus was that of ‘non-Arab idolaters’ who were to abide by the strictures enumerated for infidels in the Sharia. However, political realities tempered this theoretical position which caused Muslim rulers to variously implement the Sharia regulations. As Friedmann notes, ‘Among the ‘further’ Islamic lands, the Indian subcontinent is probably the area in which Islamic civilisation attained its highest achievement.’ (Friedmann 2003: 50) In a selection of Muslim positions on Hindus that is fairly representative of the prevailing views in the medieval era, a continuum ranging from staunch orthodoxy to a conciliatory approach is discernible. Al-Biruni (973-1050) offered the initial scholarly perspective on Hinduism and its believers.113 (Friedmann 2003: 52-53)

112 The Naqshbandi Sufi Jan-i Jahan believed that Hinduism had its own lineage of prophets in Rama and Krishna, whose mission and message to similar to that of Prophet Mohammed. (Friedmann 2003: 58)

113 According to al-Biruni, the association of Hinduism with idolatry was misplaced, arguing instead that enlightened sections of both communities found religious consciousness without resorting to idol worship.
The early medieval period is also marked by a growing Muslim interest in the indigenous belief systems. For instance, astrological calculations figuring in the Indo-Persian writings of thirteenth century indicate an area of convergence that began to emerge between the Hindu and Islamic traditions. Hasan Nizami’s metaphorical use of zodiacal signs and constellations to stress on the uncertain political climate preceding Iltutmish’s assumption of power (hailed by some theologians as the ‘bright star’ of the caliphate) could be seen as contributing to a longer tradition dating back to al-Biruni. Al-Biruni’s enumeration of astrological systems prevalent in India and Firdausi’s *Shah Nama* which emphasised on the efficacy of astrological predictions constituted an increasing awareness of indigenous astronomical and astrological systems. (Hardy 1998: 229)

As far as *akhlaq* literature is concerned, it relied on religious arguments to gain credibility while attempting at the same time to redefine the norms governing kingship and political norms. Put differently, they presented an essentially non-Islamic political discourse in Islamic terms, drawing on the established and widely recognised grammar of religion (*din*) and the *Sharia*. But the arguments that the religious language was used in support of, and the conclusions that were arrived at, were vastly different from the central tenets of the classical tradition followed in Islamic law books. For instance, the *Akhlaq-i Humayuni* despite affirming the importance accorded to religion in the *Sharia*, effectively challenges the narrow role ascribed by it to the king as a Muslim ruler concerned primarily with the interests of the Muslim community. (Alam 2000: 73-78) As Alam notes,

‘The aim of the authors of the treatises on *akhlaq* was generally to provide cures for ‘character defects’... and thus prepare healthy individuals to develop a stable social order.... The *akhlaq* literature, thus represents some of the best examples of appropriation in the medieval Muslim intellectual world, of otherwise non-Islamic (and strictly juristically, in some instances, even anti-Islamic) ideas.’ (Alam 2000: 67)

In *akhlaq* literature, the check on the monarchy was not extraneous to the ruler but was inherent in the very nature of his duties. An abiding concern with justice that

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Those who did could belong to any religious faith and came to depend on constructed representations of the divine due to their lack of education. (Friedmann 2003: 54)
informed the position and duties of the king was an effective means of constraining his powers. Thus, the larger principles of peace and justice were invoked to mould kingship into a responsive and unifying institution. The literature propounded a rational view of justice, according to which inherent virtues of ideals like justice were revealed to human understanding through reason. This assertion of akhlaqi norms was significant for they no longer drew their relevance and sustenance from any religious interpretation but were upheld for their intrinsic value. Thus, justice in akhlaq literature implied achieving a dynamic state of harmonious balance in society among contending groups. The entire apparatus of the state and its resources were to be devoted in the pursuit of this secular conception of justice. Likewise, the early Muslim rulers conformed to the norms of righteous behaviour expected of victors which were enumerated in ancient Sanskrit texts. For instance, the notion of dharmavijaya stating that the vanquished ruler should be reinstated in his kingdom upon his defeat was generally observed by victorious Muslim kings. Upon eliciting formal submission and a consent to pay the stipulated tribute, the Muslim rulers left the domain of the defeated king largely undisturbed. (Hardy 1998: 230) It led Stein to characterise the medieval Indian state as 'custodial' because it did not 'arrogate to itself and attempt to monopolize the coercive functions and authority of other, essentially non-political institutions in society.' (Stein 1975: 76)

Deviations from the conventional opinion drew upon the Persian and Greek political discourses, and among the texts that propounded an alternative theory of political norms was Khwaja Nasir ud-Din Tusi’s Akhlaq-i Nasiri composed in 1235. The influence of Greek thought was evident in Tusi’s conceptualisation of the ruler as the philosophical king whose duty was to oversee the development of all individuals, irrespective of their social identity. The Akhlaq-i Humayuni, compiled by Ikhtiyar-al-Husaini during Babur’s reign, similarly asserts that ‘[t]he perfection of man...is impossible to achieve without a peaceful social organisation, where everyone could earn his living by cooperation and helping each other.’ The text recognises the need to locate individuals within their larger social environment and despite its Quranic citations, does not remain limited within the confines of a narrow religious debate, but makes a determined pitch for universal principles of justice and peace. (Alam 2000: 77) Ikhtiyar further adds,
'The affairs of living thus must be administered through cooperation... which in turn depends on justice.... If [justice] disappears each will then follow his own desire. Therefore there has to be an institute... and a balancing agency... to ensure the cooperation. Sharia, the protectors of which have been the prophets... serves this purpose. But Sharia cannot work without it being administered by a just king, whose principal duty is to bring the people in control with affection and favours.' (Cited in Alam 2000: 78)

Thus, the Akhlaq-i Humayuni, much in the genre of Akhlaq literature that it forms a part of, sought to ensure the acceptability of ideas that lay outside the narrow juridical interpretation of the Sharia by skilfully cloaking it in religious language. This was much the same manner in which writings seeking to introduce controversial notions into the strategic discourse would seek to do.

Not only did Akbar, heeding to Fazl’s advice, listen to the injunctions and theorisations given in Tusi’s Akhlaq, but he also ordered his officials to read the treatise regularly. The philosophy of Akhlaq-i Humayuni was also deeply engrained in the Mughal approach to politics. As Alam notes,

‘The influence of Ikhtiyar al-Husaini’s Akhlaq is unmistakable on their [Mughals’] religious and political views as well as their actual politics. Babur’s descendants in India sought stability, as al-Husaini had desired, by harmonizing their political actions with the akhlaqi norms of governance...’ (Alam 2000: 84)

The affinity between Fazl’s opinion and akhlaqi ethics on the role of reason and the position of the ruler is therefore not surprising. The Mughals were attentive to the concerns of the diverse social groups that made up their imperial subjects, and one of the initiatives Akbar took in this regard was to patronise the official translation of ancient Indian texts. Fazl notes that Akbar’s objective in commissioning translations of Sanskrit works into Persian was to smoothen out differences between the two communities through reasoned argument and debate. Jahangir, in Tuzuk-i-Jahangiri, notes that Akbar was

‘...always associated with the learned of, every creed and religion, especially with Pandits and the learned of India, and although he was illiterate, so much became clear to him through constant intercourse with the learned and wise... that his deficiency was not thought of.’¹¹⁴ (TJ: 33)

¹¹⁴ For a discussion on Akbar’s engagement with Jain religious leaders, see Prasad 1997: 97-107.
The *akhlaqi* emphasis on reason as the path to justice is amply evident in Fazl’s argument that the translations offered the way out by encouraging people to ‘refrain from hostility...seek truth, find out each other’s virtues and vices and endeavour to correct themselves.’ \(^{115}\) (Cited in Alam 2000: 85) By patronising translations of Hindu texts, Akbar and his successors were also according importance and recognition to the pre-Islamic phase of Indian history to which these texts belonged. \(^{116}\) In a sense, the official project ‘secularised’ the reading of history by expanding its ambit further back in time than an Islamic reading would render. (Alam 2000: 85) As Friedmann observes,

‘...it is clear that Akbar’s policies created an atmosphere in which the belief in the exclusive truth of Islam was substantially undermined. The willingness of Akbar to admit Hindu sages into his presence and to listen to their religious discourses implied that their views were worthy of consideration....The classical conviction that Islam is the only true religion...lost its axiomatic nature, and the way was opened for the development of conciliatory attitudes towards Hinduism.’ (Friedmann 2003: 55)

Akbar’s keen interest in engaging religious leaders in debates can be read in a different light. Patronising court discussions on diverse issues was one of the many sources of information that Indian kings tapped, grounded as they were in social networks. The official channel was supplemented by what Bayly calls the ‘patrimonial knowledge’ of specific regions which rulers gained from chiefs. Kings also sought access to ‘affective knowledge’ through ‘participation in communities of belief and marriage, through religious affiliation and association with holy men, seers, astrologers and physicians.’ (Bayly 1996: 23-27) The king’s personal participation in these exercises was in keeping with his image as the upholder of order in society, although communities were left to arbitrate on moral issues. These self-controlling social mechanisms probably explain why active state intervention in carrying out religious persecutions and controlling heretical practices that occurred in early modern Europe and Shia Iran did not

\(^{115}\) Al-Badaoni offers a counter-narrative to Fazl’s portrayal of a liberal and tolerant Mughal regime Badaoni’s *Muntakhabu-T-Tawarikh*, compiled before his death in 1615, should be read in the context of his general disapproval of Akbar’s eclecticism that amounted to an undermining of Islamic practices in favour of more moderate ones. (*MT* 1898)

\(^{116}\) However, the early years of Akbar’s reign saw a general sense of intolerance towards the Hindus, a position that he rejected in favour of a more liberal approach in the 1570s, given his growing inclination towards *sufi* doctrines. (Khan 1992b: 20)
take place in India. Fazl’s writings reflect a sympathetic attitude towards the phenomenon of idolatry in Hinduism, asserting that idols were merely ‘aids to fix the mind and keep the thoughts from wandering’. Significantly, for Fazl the much-glorified Mahmud of Ghazni was misguided by ‘fanatical bigots representing India as a country of unbelievers at war with Islam’. (Cited in Friedmann 2003: 56)

One of the key texts within akhlaq literature to be commissioned by the Mughals was Akhlaq-i Jahangiri by Nur ud-Din Qazi, for whom the principle of justice was the overriding concern in matters of governance. ‘A non-Muslim but just ruler, in his view, would serve society better than an unjust Muslim.’ (Alam 2000: 88) The liberal tradition’s most committed proponent, the Mughal prince, Dara Shukoh (1615-59) considered Hinduism and Islam to be complementary and compatible. Dara argued that the complementarity emerges from the religious principle of monotheism that is upheld in all the holy books, including the Bible, the Quran and the Vedas. Of all the holy books, the religious truth is the most well-enunciated and explicit in the Upanishads and for that very reason should be read in order to better understand the contents of the Quran. (Friedmann 2003: 56)

Thus, ‘[t]he concise formulation of one book can therefore be elucidated and understood by the detailed exposition found elsewhere... The idea that one must use the Hindu scripture in order to attain the real meaning of the Quran is hitting at the very core of the conviction that Islam is a self-sufficient system that is in no need of ideas extraneous to it.’ (Friedmann 2003: 57-58)

Hardy succinctly captures the tenor of the evolving cultural and political milieu in medieval India,

‘Perhaps there were certain nuances, certain ambiguities, a certain elbowroom in the traditions of both Muslims and Hindus that eased co-operation once that had been seen as both necessary and desirable... ’ (Hardy 1998: 237)

It was this potential for complementarities and mutual learning between the two traditions that the akhlaq literature sought to explore. What is noteworthy about this genre is that it couched radical notions in politically and religiously acceptable terms that made the pursuit of universal principles like justice and peace a commendable exercise. The Mughals unreservedly drew upon this tradition of liberal writings, which not only offered the king practical injunctions in matters of statecraft, but crucially moulded the Mughal
disposition towards accommodation and conciliation. However, beyond the ideational dimensions of Mughal grand strategy, there were more visible manifestations of Mughal intent, and one of them was its proclivity to wage limited wars.

**Power in Restraint: The Mughal Policy of Limited Wars**

Mughal military history is marked by a singular absence of major battles. Instead, we see a distinct characteristic of accommodation come to the fore: limited wars. But for the two battles of Panipat in 1526 and 1556, and the battle of Khanwa in 1527, no battle of comparable proportions occurred during the period of Mughal expansion. Historians have attributed this phenomenon to Mughal military superiority as displayed in the few battles in the early period of Mughal history and the subsequent unwillingness of their adversaries to take on the Mughals in open battle. (Streusand 1989: 52, 65) This perception enabled the Mughals to project more power than the actual military capability they deployed. For instance, when Akbar entered Chitor with a small force, the king of Mewar refused to face them and instead retreated to the fortress.

However, Mughal military superiority and the absence of battles accruing thereof should not be taken to be indicative of only accommodation. A coercive grand strategy pursued by a militarily powerful state may effectively deter other states into submission, resulting in conflict avoidance. Thus, a state’s aggressive pursuit of power can be characterised by a coercive grand strategy but still be marked by an absence of major battles. However, what is distinctive about accommodation is the calibrated use of violence in conflict situations. Johnston argues that limited wars are characterised by restrictions along spatial and temporal dimensions, and goal orientation. Limited wars operate within a grid of restricted ends and means. They pursue a prioritised set of limited political goals and thus, not all setbacks are seen as carrying equally high stakes. This discriminating potential of limited war acts as a powerful check on the further escalation of conflict. (Johnston 1995: 65-66) Furthermore, a strategy that blends both elements of coercion as well as conciliation serves to further restrict the scale of violence in limited war scenarios.

This raises the issue of the efficacy and legitimacy of the use of force against an adversary under accommodation. Although accommodation does not proscribe the use of
force in forwarding political goals, its use against an adversary is usually cloaked in language that is deemed politically acceptable. Johnston argues that a state facing an adverse situation may justify coercive action as a resort to 'force under unavoidable circumstances'. (Johnston 1995: 68) The adversary's aggressive disposition is portrayed as leaving the state with little option but to employ force. The responsibility of precipitating the conflict and making war unavoidable is attributed to the enemy and hence, any action on the part of the state is seen as legitimate and righteous. Contending that a zero-sum view of the adversary underlies the notion of righteous war, Johnston notes, 'The enemy is irredeemably an enemy who cannot be won over but must be destroyed. The concept of enemy itself connotes unrighteousness'. (Johnston 1995: 72) By inference, this implies that the notion of righteous war with its view of irreconcilable conflict is causally linked to a hard-nosed parabellum paradigm. Righteous action must necessarily aim at annihilating the enemy and hence leaves no scope for accommodation.

Such a conclusion is a problematic one, especially in the Mughal case where an accommodationist strategy invoked the issue of righteousness in certain instances. For instance, the Chitor seige of 1567 is described by Fazl as a campaign against 'the rebellious ones', but not as against the kuffar (the unbelievers). (Hardy 1983: 170; AN, II: 489) The king was projected as the epitome of righteousness and the adversary, by opposing him, was immoral and unrighteous in his pursuit of power. Fazl notes, 'in conquering countries and cities, his [Akbar's] first thought is to enquire into and sympathise with the condition of the oppressed.' (AN, II: 536) This justificatory stance was not confined to Fazl but extended in general to Mughal historiography itself. Rebellion against imperial authority was accounted for within the rhetoric of accommodation. Indeed, challenge to the emperor was not termed a rebellion against his power but was depicted as attempts to claim greater space within the imperial order.¹¹⁷ Chroniclers such as Fazl, Nizam al-din Ahmad and Badauni interpreted the resort to

¹¹⁷ When it comes to explaining acts of violence committed by non-Muslims, Mughal historians make certain differentiations. Hindu rulers challenging the authority of the Mughal emperor risked being branded a rebel, particularly to the Islamic order. On the other hand, the refusal of Hindu zamindars to pay tax was simply seen as resistance by disobedient elements, from which larger religious implications were not drawn. (Hardy 1983: 190)
violence against the Mughal state either in terms of moves to gain more power or as a manifestation of human foibles in individuals. As Hardy observes,

‘... such violence... [is] seen as a bid for greater consideration within the Mughal system, or as an attempt to persuade the Mughal ruler to alter course, rather than as an attempt to replace him.... Abu'l Fazl is as a writer unlikely to depict men as wishing to leave permanently the ‘good home’ that the Akbar he portrays provided for his subjects.’ (Hardy 1983: 188-189)

If the vocabulary used to describe such challenges is anything to go by, then the description does not suggest sedition or rebellion as historians from the Sultanate period were prone to employ. (Hardy 1983: 170)

However, the corrective mode chosen was not always the violent one. Moreover, where coercion was employed, the aim was not to annihilate the enemy but to intimidate. While the act was a political signal meant to convey the true might of Mughal power, it afforded room for reconciliation, should the adversary chose to submit. All along, the rhetoric of righteousness was neither abandoned nor was it used to cloak a non-zero sum approach to the adversary. In another instance of the Mughal non-zero sum approach, the use of violence by an adversary was seen as stemming not from an intrinsically evil nature, but from its sense of insecurity. Thus, righteous war needs to be disassociated from a zero sum approach and is as much an instrument of an accommodationist state policy as of a coercive one. The next section will examine the key dimensions of Mughal grand strategy that informed imperial relations with other regional powers.

THE PARAMETERS OF MUGHAL GRAND STRATEGY

The Insignia of Power: The Mughal Instruments of Socialisation

It becomes increasingly evident that Mughal power rested firmly on the notion of ritual sovereignty that was high in terms of symbolic content, and stressed on the centrality of the ruler in maintaining order and stability within the imperial system. Susanne Rudolph defines ritual sovereignty as the

‘... cultural activities, symbols, and processes that in the absence of instrumental mechanisms nevertheless create a domain, a realm. Ritual sovereignty has ceremonial, aesthetic, and architectonic aspects as well as historically grounded, genealogically perpetuated elements.... These are processes and signs by which a universal monarch is gradually elevated into a species distinct from the more
Symbolic power, according to Norbert Elias, assumed centrality in court proceedings where 'each act received a prestige-character symbolizing the distribution of power at the time.' The precise observation of elaborate courtly rituals led Elias to observe that 'etiquette had a major symbolic function in the structure of this society and its form of government'. Elias refers to such an act of etiquette with precise value in the distribution of power as a 'prestige-fetish' that 'served as an indicator of the position of an individual within the balance of power between the courtiers, a balance controlled by the king and very precarious.' (Elias 1983: 84-85)

Rudolph makes a case for an alternative framework to study Asian polities, which takes into account the ideational and symbolic processes of state formation. According to her, cultural replication and ritual sovereignty were vital processes of state building in India, which extended beyond the state's formal institutions. Rudolph argues that the western notion of state monopoly of force needs to be problematised since historically, Asian polities were akin to intercontinental empires, unlike Europe's nation-states. The alternative framework Rudolph suggests is of a custodial state ruling over the various mechanisms of a 'self-regulating' society such as castes, regions and religious communities. Rudolph's model is instructive not only for the comparative frames within which she locates Asian polities such as the Mughal empire, but also for drawing attention to the cultural contexts within which Indian empires learnt to operate. Emperors in the medieval period were mindful of existing indigenous notions of kingship, and sought to suitably replicate the image of the king in their own domains. The Hindu doctrine of kingship regarded authority to be an attribute inherent to the king, and yet it existed in a passive state since the king's temporal domain was balanced by the transcendent authority of the brahmin. Subordinate kings, recognising the divinity of the superior king were expected to submit to his power. In turn, the superior king would accept their tribute and leave their domains undisturbed. This notion of kingship held significant implications for the structuring of the empire itself which relied less on direct penetrative conquest than on ensuring submission. As Streusand notes, 'Conquest thus meant something different in the subcontinent from elsewhere. Hindu kingdoms, even the
most powerful like the Chola and Rashtrakuta empires, had a less coherent structure than their contemporaries in the Islamic world.’ (Streusand 1999: 39)

Indeed, the evolution of conventions and tenets that regulated inter-state relations outside Europe is an area that has remained understudied. For instance, Asian states in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries observed and enforced mutually agreed norms and conventions within their respective territories. This rudimentary form of international law, which covered not only natives and subjects but also foreigners and their possessions, could be seen in operation in Mughal India as well. A notable absence in inter-state diplomacy was the notion of ‘extra-territoriality’, under which claims of sovereignty on foreign soil could be entertained. Despite the prominent presence of Indian trading communities in Persia, there is no evidence suggesting any attempt at carving out autonomous groups that claimed differential treatment. Neither did the Mughal state seek to enforce its domestic laws outside its domain on the basis of extra-territoriality, nor did it entertain similar claims made by foreigners on its own soil. In both cases, the law of the land prevailed. (Ali 2006: 310)

Athar Ali observes two aspects that characterised diplomatic practices among Asian states that distinguished them from their European counterparts. Firstly, embassies with permanent residencies in other sovereign states were never sent. Temporary missions to other courts to meet certain objectives were despatched, and were recalled or dismantled once its function had been served. In such cases, the gifts that the emissary presented carried great importance as their monetary value indicated the significance of the mission itself. Secondly, the practice of signing common agreements and formal treaties did not exist among Islamic states. Mutual agreement on a certain issue took the form of an exchange of letters to that effect. If a particular proposal or offer put forward by a sovereign was accepted in another court, then the agreement was deemed as finalised between the two states. For the agreement to become functional, each side was expected to observe it by making suitable arrangements. Ali refers to the tepid Mughal response to Thomas Roe’s offer of a ‘solemn treaty’ between Jahangir and James I, to

118 Significantly, third parties were extended immunity in case a ban affected trade between two states. Thus, we see English trade with Persia that operated from Surat continuing unhindered in the 1640s, despite the fact that a ban prohibiting farther trade with Persia was imposed on Indian merchants. (Ali 2006: 309)
demonstrate that the Mughals, like the Safavids and the Uzbeks, did not attach the level of significance to the notion of a treaty that the Europeans did. (Ali 2006: 313)

As far as the enculturation in the Mughal court was concerned, there were a number of means through which power was exercised, ranging from symbolic measures to those that enabled Akbar to extend and exercise control over political matters outside the court.

_The Mansabdari System_

Akbar sought to counter the challenge of the vast military potential of the military labour market by devising a unique institution—that of the mansabdari system. Introduced in 1573-74, the system constituted the basic administrative structure of the Mughals. The mansab or the rank, which determined the position of the official (mansabdar) in the hierarchy, enjoined upon the mansabdar the responsibility to maintain a required number of mounted retainers for the Mughal army. The system was modified to differentiate between the mansabdar’s personal rank (zat) and the troopers he was expected to maintain (sawar). Since the mansabdar had to maintain troops at his own expense, his income was calculated on the basis of both, his zat and sawar ranks. Although the mansabdari system was an elaborately structured military-administrative system, there existed no functional chain of command. It entailed that every mansabdar was to report only to the emperor rather than to another official of a higher mansab or rank.

The role of the Mughal emperor was not restricted to merely overseeing administrative matters. The frequent and extended periods of attendance at the court by the nobles enabled the emperor to actively intervene in the personal matters of his officials. Elias notes that personal attendance at the court also served the nobles well as it was a means through which the nobles maintained their elite status. In order to sustain their high status,

> ‘they remained dependent on the king because it was only by going to court and living within court society that they could preserve the distance from everything else on which … their social existence and their personal identity depended.’ (Elias 1983: 99, emphasis original)

The revenue assignment system put in place by the Mughals was by no means novel as it had been implemented by the Delhi Sultanate and other regional kingdoms in the past.
Under the system, individuals as part of the centralised order of revenue collection could not stake a hereditary claim to their position or over the lands under their control. The increasing control that the nobility had begun to assert through hereditary claims under the Tughlaqs and the Lodis was done away with by Akbar, under whom the occupancy of a position ended with the demise of the noble. Nobles were also periodically transferred within the empire to prevent the consolidation of power in any particular place. However, deviations permitting the regionalisation of administration existed in practice, which were indicative of the challenges the Mughal empire faced in bureaucratising its regional diversity. (Khan 1992a: 62-63; Singh 1988: 317) As Wink observes,

'The Mughal empire represented a form of sovereignty, a balancing system of continually shifting rivalries and alliance which differed in its dimension but not in its basic constitution from preceding sultanates of Hindu kingdoms in Hindustan or the Deccan.' (Wink 1986: 34)

There were a number of new elements introduced by Akbar that marked off the Mughal period from the Sultanate and Sur periods. The administration was systematised and structured around the mansabdar system. The earlier system of ad hoc appointment and promotions was abandoned in favour of a more structured format. These now implied a change in mansab which came with attendant benefits and conditions.

The Mughals under Akbar emphasised on the absolute sovereignty of the emperor. Extolling the famed ancestry drawn from Timur and Chengiz Khan, Mughals sought to reinforce their distinct status by preventing the marriage of their women to princes outside the royal family. The religious element was also a crucial input in Akbar's theory of sovereignty. In 1579, Akbar sought to assume the role of a religious leader through the mahzar. However, in order to be acceptable to all his subjects, it was necessary for Akbar to make the transition from being a religious leader to a spiritual

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119 In the early years of Akbar's rule, the jagir or the revenue assignment of a noble often fell within the territories under his military-administrative charge, which was always larger than the area earmarked as his revenue assignment. After 1561, jagirs were increasingly fragmented and located in distant locations spread across several parganas. This fragmentation was reinforced by a parallel move to delink administrative jurisdiction from jagirs. Together, these measures were meant to prevent the rise of potential seats of rebellion to the authority of the emperor.
guide. The inclusive identity was not only secular; it also shifted the focus away from Islam from which Akbar had initially derived his legitimacy, to himself as the source of Divine Light. The royal imperative to make the monarchy appear intrinsically distinct from the rest of the society was articulated by Louis XIV of France,

As it is important to the public to be governed only by a single one, it also matters to it that the person performing this function should be so elevated above the others, that no-one can be confused or compared with him; and one cannot, without doing harm to the whole body of the state, deprive its head of the least mark of superiority distinguishing it from the limbs.’ (Cited in Elias 1983: 117-118)

The hierarchisation of political sovereignty with the emperor at the top was executed and regularised through the mansabdari system. Under the revised political order, the Mughal princes were given ranks that placed them in subordination to the emperor, as against the traditional system of collective sovereignty in which they were co-claimants to the throne. (Streusand 1999: 109) As Streusand notes,

‘In less than three decades, Akbar and his advisers had transformed the political face of Hindustan....The power of the central bureaucracy had increased proportionately. Though composed of men with vastly different backgrounds, the ruling class of the new Mughal polity formed a single hierarchy, its heterogeneity not destroyed but subordinated to allegiance to Akbar.’ (Streusand 1999: 153)

Akbar also introduced the convention of jharoka darshan, which bore affinity to Hindu practices. He succeeded in reorganising the relations of the royalty with the nobility. The creation of composite nobility was not altogether novel; it had been achieved already by the Khiljis (on the basis of race) and the Tughlaqs (on the basis of religion). Under Akbar, the royalty was also disengaged from the Muslim nobility when it came to crucial matters of survival and succession. The acceptance of the Persian culture among the local ruling elite such as the Rajputs proved to be an enabling factor in forging lasting ties between the royalty and the nobility.

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120 Akbar envisaged himself as the spiritual guide to a chosen few who were deemed to be his followers. Contrary to popular belief, Akbar did not conceive of Din-i Ilahi as a religion that sought followers among the masses and failed. Far from attempting to popularise the new belief system, acceptance into the select circle of disciples was a matter of privilege. (Alam 1983: 126-127)
The mansabdari system was devised to draw into the fold of the Mughal army, the maximum possible number of military recruits. Technically, it was open to all those who could bring in recruits. Since the Mughal nobility was not sustained primarily on the heredity principle and also allowed for a certain degree of merit, the system ensured optimal absorption of warlords and recruits. Moreover, it allowed Akbar to tap various recruitment networks for which a closed nobility system would have been ill-suited. (Gommans 2002: 70) A system of rewards was put in place and higher maintenance grants were offered as incentives to warlords who enlisted superior horse breeds. (Moosvi 1987: 235-236) Every effort was made by Akbar to draw in warlords to fill the swelling Mughal army. Thus, there is a direct correlation between Akbar’s lack of monopoly over force and the strategy he employed to counter this systemic problem. Coercive options would have been viable if the number of potential recruits had not been so large in number and if direct recruitment was possible. Since neither was the case, any effective degree of control of the military labour market would only have been possible through the willing cooperation of the warlords. This entailed a system of rewards and incentives—a typical mode of accommodation. As Nurul Hasan argues,

‘Akbar was the first emperor who realized the importance of forging powerful links between the empire and the chieftains by absorbing many of them in the imperial hierarchy and the administrative machinery. This policy was continued by his successors...’ (Hasan 1998: 286)

However, since recruitment was indirect, channelled as it was through middlemen such as the zamindars and tribal warlords, the Mughal grasp over Indian military power remained tenuous throughout. Had the Mughals gradually monopolised the military labour market, stricter regulations and control could have been possible. Instead, the number of mansabdars and the perks accorded to them increased under Akbar’s successors. And with that, the empire expanded to newer frontiers. Gommans rightly refers to the mansabdari system as ‘an important instrument in the expansion of the [Mughal] empire’. (Gommans 2002: 89)

To expand and consolidate the empire, Akbar co-opted the middlemen of the military labour market into the ruling class, thereby indirectly recruiting hundreds of their retainers into the Mughal army. Fazl’s observation sums up the co-optive strategy that Akbar adopted to deal with the latent power of the militarised society, ‘...if that which is
numerous be not pervaded by a principle of harmony, the dust of disturbance will not "settle down and the troubles of lawlessness will not cease to rise". (*Ain*, I: 247) The lack of monopoly over force led Akbar to adopt various manipulative strategies including the periodic transfer of the mansabdars and the assignment of distant *jagirs* to prevent them from developing local power bases. Akbar's wariness of the potential challenge from the imperial officials is echoed in Fazl's observation that

"Whenever a large body is gathered together of one mind and speech, (and) show(s) much push and energy, it is proper to disperse them....Even if no improper act of aggression be seen or suspected, such dispersion is the material of union". (*AN*, II: 487)

This cannon, which Fazl considered to be 'constant with the religion of sovereignty', came to inform Akbar's strategy of assimilation and was institutionalised in the mansabdari system.

**Mobile Imperial Capital**

A distinctive feature of Akbar's policy of socialisation was the mobile imperial capital. Mobility was a signal feature of Mughal rule and emperors spent a good part of their reign travelling the length and breadth of their expanding empires. Although Babur used to travel around and lead military campaigns, it was Akbar who made it an imperial policy to stay mobile, and that too in imperial grandeur. Akbar's camp was the veritable capital of the empire where every aspect of the administration- the imperial household, the residence of the nobility, the treasury, stables- was replicated so that the affairs of the empire could be conducted while touring (*Richards* 1993: 136) Gommans calculated that the four Mughal emperors (Akbar, Jahangir, Shah Jahan and Aurangzeb) spent 35 per cent of their reign in travel. As Stephen Blake observes,

"Of the strategies used by patrimonial-bureaucratic emperors to control their officials, travel was the one most heavily relied upon by Mughal rulers. Moving across the countryside to renew the personal tie between leader and distant subordinate was an important activity in the reigns of most emperors...Even when trips of one year or less are excluded, rulers of the Mughal state spent nearly 40 percent of their time during this approximately two hundred-year period on tour." (*Blake* 1979: 92)
The tendency towards mobility is evident from the fact that the Mughals shifted their central capital more times than perhaps any other dynastic ruler in India. Writing on the importance of royal perambulations, Aurangzeb argued that '...the ruler of a kingdom should not spare himself from moving about.' (AAI 1963: 14) Given below are figures for the years that the Mughal emperors spent in travel, and when read in terms of percentage share of total number of regnal years, the emphasis they placed on imperial perambulations becomes evident.

Map 3: The Annual Radius of Action of the Mughal Imperial Camp


The radius of action of the Mughal camp, which is calculated on the assumption that it travelled nine months annually with an average speed of about 8 km, is demarcated at around 1200 km from Delhi.
The purposes for staying mobile were many, ranging from pilgrimages to organising and conducting hunts. What did the mobile imperial capital in all its splendour signify for Akbar's grand strategy?

Firstly, it proved to be a strategic break from the earlier political tradition of a permanent capital. Even though Fatehpur Sikri was built to Akbar's specifications, it did not become as effective a seat of political power as the mobile capital. Till the time of Humayun, a city was the seat of sovereign power, which could be effectively undermined if the city fell to invaders. This strategic threat was a real and continuous one, which had spelt the downfall of a number of preceding rulers. By making the mobile capital the seat of political power, Akbar deterritorialised Mughal sovereignty. As Blake observes, 'The organization and activity of the Imperial camp illustrate the exercise of sovereignty on tour'. (Blake 1979: 92) The mobile Mughal imperial camp released sovereignty from its association with a rigid understanding of territory, a dimension that Richards stresses on.

'For two and a half centuries, Delhi had been the unassailable redoubt, the refuge for Indian Muslims and the seat of the Sultans of Hindustan. By moving...to Agra, and later to...Fathepur Sikri...Akbar reduced existing associations of legitimate rulership with Delhi. Neither Akbar nor a possible rebel could henceforth claim the imperial throne by virtue of possession of the citadels, the palaces, or the active support of the volatile population of the old imperial city.' (Richards 1978: 93)

Secondly, the mobile capital was the face of the Mughal empire, the visible manifestation of Mughal power and grandeur. By eschewing a narrow territorial definition of sovereign power, Akbar enhanced Mughal ability to effectively project power within a wider radius than what a permanent capital would have enabled. Blake notes that emperors were engaged in travelling extensively across their territory, and

'...renewing in countless face-to-face meetings the personal bond between master and subject on which the state was founded; they demanded of all soldiers and officials regular attendance at court and, on their departure, often required that a son or relative be left behind as hostage...' (Blake 1979: 80)

The Mughal emphasis on developing a close association with the territory over they ruled bore strong affinity with notions of kingship enumerated in medieval Hindu philosophy. The relationship among the constituents of the political community namely the king, the land and its people is clearly enumerated in medieval Hindu texts. Among
the three, primacy is accorded to the king who is symbolically seen as the husband of the "earth and a father figure to his subjects. Whereas the hierarchic relationship between the ruler and the people is so defined in all political communities, the unequivocal subordination of both the land and its people to the supremacy of the king finds its most clear articulation in the Hindu political system. Ritual provided the medium through which the unity of the three elements of the political community were fused and centred in the person of the king. Inden notes that 'Ritual worship was the act by which the transcendent and immanent were repeatedly reunited and the power of the one infused into the other.'

As the visible manifestation of royal authority, rituals were the means through which the king was seen to partake in the affairs of his domain, namely ensuring order and stability. As Sudipta Sen points out,

'In a part of the world still without the blessings of print-capitalism, with sacred and literary manuscripts delegated to the province of the calligrapher, the draftsman, the scribe, and the painter, the image of the empire was perhaps much less reified and more experiential. Thus the very presentation of the Mughal cavalry, the peripatetic royal camp with its huge train, the layout and hierarchy of the imperial darbar (court), and entreaty and supplication face-to-face with the emperor (nazir) were aspects of relating empirically to the realm...'

The initial Mughal refusal to acknowledge the Caliphate in 1526 was later followed by the resurrection of the notion of the Hindu king as the font of divinity by Akbar. The role of the ruler in maintaining order is emphasised by Fazl as well in the Akbar Nama. The emperor signifies the wielder of force and in that capacity he was expected to extend protection to the existing notions of justice and harmony. As Andrea Hintze notes,

'The historical, rational and religio-spiritual claims to authority invested the [Mughal] emperor with an unprecedented legitimation of rule which corresponded to the Muslim and Hindu ideals of the universal monarch.'

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121 The symbolic subordination of the land to the king is highlighted in the coronation ceremony in which clays from different parts of the earth are brought to daub corresponding parts of the king's body. For instance, the earth dug up at the mountain top was daubed on the king's head as the symbol of his control over the highest reaches of the earth. The ceremonial bath of clays unified the king to his land and empowered him through the concentration of powers drawn from different sites of the earth. (Inden 1998: 61-62)
The general import of the text is that force is valued as a means to achieve a higher objective rather than as an end in itself. Even Barani who advocated a strong Muslim ruler at the helm of affairs gave primacy to the maintenance of order before establishing an Islamic state. As Peter Hardy puts it, the medieval theologians realised that 'without order there can be no Islamic order.' (Hardy 1983: 169; Wink 1986: 30) The centring of force in the person of the emperor that in a sense personified its rightful possessor is the abiding theme of Fazl's commentary. A visible manifestation of the emperor's coercive powers is the 'large number of troops [that] accompany him [Akbar], in whatever direction an expedition may go'. (AA, I: 49) The temporal functions of the emperor are his alone, inalienable and cardinal to the scheme of things. In making a case for his role as the upholder of acceptable ethics, Fazl approximates the position that a number of medieval Hindu theologians took on the vital function of the king in protecting the realm of norms and beliefs.

**The Imperial Court Culture**

A potent instrument of socialisation was the Mughal court culture. An elaborate set of rituals and court practices went into the creation of a syncretic court culture that socialised and conditioned the beliefs and behaviour of the nobles in the imperial court. The dynastic ideology of Akbar sought to emphasise his exalted status by portraying him as the bearer of Divine Light. Fazl regarded royalty to be 'a light from God....Without a mediator it appears as a holy form to the holders of power and at the sight of it everyone bends the forehead of praise to the ground of submission.' (AA, I: 3) Akbar's assertion of paramountcy had dynastic precedents which further strengthened his claim to legitimacy. Babur, for instance had assumed the designation as the *padshah* of Kabul thereby signalling a shift from the Timurid notion of collective sovereignty. By elevating himself to the position of the sole sovereign, the rest of the Timurid princes were reduced to the status of Babur's subordinates from being claimants to a shared understanding of power. (Siddiqui 1983: 32) Akbar's concern with syncretic traditions was reflected in the buildings of Fatehpur Sikri as well. As Streusand notes,
'The Akbari synthesis in architectural style stated, and thus adumbrated, the mature Mughal constitution, which combined Muslim and Hindu elements in a new political order which derived its unity and underlying pattern from the sovereign.' (Streusand 1999: 94)

As the descendent of God, Akbar’s knowledge and intrinsic worth was portrayed in self-referential rather than relative terms, and was independent of the positions and interpretations put forward by the religious community. Fazl calls it ‘Farr-i Izidi’ (the divine light), which is ‘communicated by God to kings without the intermediate assistance of anyone’. The emperor so blessed by God becomes the embodiment of perfection and rules with ‘paternal love towards the subjects.’ (AA, I: 3, emphasis original) Just as obeying the emperor amounted to worshipping the divine for the subjects, administering his people was for the emperor akin to performing the duties of an enlightened patriarch. In keeping with the Divine Light theory, Akbar began to publicly worship the sun. By hailing the emperor as ‘the origin of stability’, the Divine Light theory privileged Akbar over other claimants to power. (AA, I: 2) The position of the emperor at the apex of the socio-political order was central to the balance in society itself, a point that Fazl states in unambiguous terms.

‘If royalty did not exist, the storm of strife would never subside, nor selfish ambition disappear. Mankind being under the burden of lawlessness and lust would sink into the pit of destruction, the world, this great market place would lose its prosperity and the whole earth become a barren waste’ (AA, I: 2)

Akbar’s dynastic ideology, the cornerstone of his grand strategy, marked a radical shift from the appanage system of governance that had hindered the process of empire building under Babur and Humayun. The Mughal emperor was the sole sanctioning authority of appointments and promotions within the nobility. The nobles were expected to offer their service to the Mughal emperor in any of the three modes—personal attendance at the royal court as an expression of submission, participation in war and military campaigns, and the more formal mode of appointments to administrative and military positions. (Richards 1984: 257; Siddiqui 1983: 210-214) As Streusand observes,

‘The arrangement of the persons attending the darbar represented the society in microcosm, and, through Abu al-Fazl’s imagery, the world, just as the Hindu king’s audience hall did.....[T]he rituals and underlying assumptions made the Mughals appear more like Hindu kings, or what Hindus expected kings to be like,
Irrespective of the nature of service rendered to the emperor, the trait constantly emphasised and rewarded was of overriding loyalty to the ruler. The constant emphasis on cardinality as a feature of the royal position found reflection even in the location of the king’s private chambers. For instance, Louis XIV of France ensured that his sleeping quarters were located at the centre of the first floor of the palace from where he could enjoy a panoramic view of his lands.

'The king was, as it were, lord of the house throughout the land, and lord of the land even in his most seemingly private chambers.... It [the bedroom] reveals vividly how indissolubly the ruler’s character as lord of the house merged with his function as king.' (Elias 1983: 82)

Elias’ surmise about the French king was to a great extent true of the Mughal emperor as well. The centrality of his position was reflected in the structure of the court, during travel and otherwise, and in its elaborate rituals of initiation, arbitration and deliberation. His place within the imperial order was indispensable, as every symbolic act he engaged in was vested with enormous significance, one of which was the bestowing of royal robes.

Robes of Honour

The bestowing of a garment by the emperor was a common practice throughout large swathes of Eurasia, although the practice came to acquire special significance within Islamic kingship. The bestowal of an article of clothing by the caliph held special significance as it was believed to be bearing an element of his intrinsic luminosity (haraka). The ceremony became popular among kings who wished to confer robes of honour in their own right, recognising the authority of the caliph all the same. The practice, introduced in India by the Ghaznavids and the Ghurids assumed special significance under the Mughals who regarded it as a veritable political tool and vested it with greater nuances in terms of gradations of these robes. (Hambly 2003: 31)
The practice of bestowing robes of honour on nobles by the emperor was part of "the elaborate procedures that formed the Mughal court culture."\(^{122}\) (Gordon 1996: 225) While the article in question acquired value by the very act of bestowal, the significance of the custom lay in the observance of certain highly structured practices of acceptance by the concerned noble in court. The emphasis on the rituals associated with the ceremony ensured that the political elite internalised the court culture of which this rite was an integral part. Robes of honour were veritable symbols of power that were bestowed in appreciation of an accomplishment or as a means of subordination. These robes were a means through which the emperor defined the relationship of the recipient with the court. As Gordon observes,

'Acceptance of robes of honour was a precise recognition of the personal authority and largesse of the giver, and, in return, recognition of the honoured position of the receiver, whether that position be of king...ambassador, official, successful general or creative poet.' (Gordon 1996: 228)

The Mughals frequently bestowed their kin and nobles with honours although a shift is discernible in terms of the purpose and frequency of such bestowals. The Tuzuk-i \(^{123}\) Baburi chronicles Babur's fondness for the ceremony through which a wide array of individuals from kinsmen and religious leaders were honoured. (Hambly 2003: 36) From the honouring of princes on special occasions during the time of Babur, the practice of distributing robes of honour encompassed a broader set of meanings under subsequent Mughal emperors. Not only were robes given more frequently and extensively than before, but they were also bequeathed to nobles on occasions other than of special significance, such as on regular events of the year. The robes of honour gradually entered court etiquette from the time of Akbar.\(^{123}\) Formal induction into imperial service commenced with the acceptance of the written contract detailing terms of service

\(^{122}\) The act of bestowal was a common practice in many societies, particularly in Islamic polities that date back to 700 AD. Although the distribution of such royal symbols was not the prerogative of any particular society, the practice tended to be adopted by courts that came into contact with Muslim states. For instance, the Rajputs had adopted the ritual from the Sultanate court with which it had had a long military association. (Gordon 1996: 225, 232)

\(^{123}\) The emperor also received articles offered to him as a mark of submission or tribute. Under Akbar, the practice of receiving and preserving the presents was further systematised to include their classification according to their monetary value and quality. (Gordon 1996: 234)
(farman) by the noble upon donning the robe that he had been bestowed by the emperor.

(Gordon 1996: 233-234) According to Gordon,

‘The ceremony established a direct, personal link between sovereign and recipient. At best, the recipient was reminded of this link every time he wore the outfit, whether at court or on assignment far from the capital. He was also reminded that it was through the largesse of the king that he belonged to the elite world that donned high-value, courtly textiles. Others, seeing the recipient, were also reminded that loyalty to the giver might bring such rewards to them.’

(Gordon 1996: 241)

The robe was at once personal and public in its significance to the recipient. Its bestowal in a public ceremony at the court was an initiation into the elite realm of the emperor. It was in recognition of a noble’s abilities and demanded total submission to the emperor above all other loyalties. The acceptance of the robe in public gaze signified a pledge by the recipient to abide by the will of the emperor. Apart from the robe being an explicit symbol of recognition and initiation, it also carried a compelling personal meaning for the beneficiary. The robe of honour was seen as an extension of the emperor’s person and continued to hold that significance once it was bequeathed. A garment bequeathed as such was believed to carry a trace of the emperor’s aura. Thus, the act of bestowal allowed the recipient to partake in the personal realm, glory and charisma of the emperor. Thomas Roe who was bestowed a robe of honour by Jahangir gauged the significance attached to the garment when he observed that ‘it is here reputed the highest of favour to give a garment warn by the Prince, or being New, once layd on his shoulder.’ (Cited in Hambly 2003: 37)

The significance of the ceremony within the Mughal court culture is evident from the fact that the emperors zealously guarded their symbols of authority so that they were to be identified solely with them. For instance, Jahangir passed a stricture forbidding his regional officers from using certain honours that were to remain his prerogative. They were not supposed to preside over proceedings from a throne that was more than half the

\[124\] Gordon arranges the varied symbols of honour along a continuum, ranging from the very personal and indispensable objects of royal prerogative to the more common objects that were regularly endowed on nobles. Apart from the minting of coins and reading the khutbah (Friday prayers) in the name of the emperor, the Ain lists certain symbols of kingship that form an inalienable part of the emperor, such as the throne, the umbrella (chatr), the flag (jhanda) and the drum (naqara), among others. Articles such as jewelled weapons, robes and horses formed the other end of the continuum that were frequently given as gifts to nobles. (Gordon 1996: 240-41)
height of a human being, nor were they to receive the formal bow (taslim). (Gordon 1996: 241) The significance of the honour was always grounded in local contexts, and thus was always reflective of and specific to the cultural milieu of the time. It is hence not surprising that courts in different regions in different periods distributed a wide variety of honours (such as horses, weapons and slaves), of which the robes also had great variation in terms of their texture and complexity of design. (Gordon 1996: 228)

Outside the pale of court culture within which the honour bestowed through the robe could be fully grasped, the article and the rite lost their symbolic significance. The worth supposed to be attached to an object so blessed by the emperor was not grasped by members of the political elite who were unfamiliar with the ‘grammar’ and language of symbols and norms. The limits of such endeavours is articulated by Gordon who notes,

‘All of the local powers who submitted were required to learn court etiquette and put on robes of honour. When Mirza Nathan [the Mughal commander] got to the outer edges of Assam, the robe of honour had less and less authority. He tried to recruit Gharos into his army, gave them robes of honour; nevertheless, no amount of robes of honour or other Mughal transactional objects could make the hill rajas loyal.’ (Gordon 1996: 235)

The British grasped the symbolism attached to the bestowal of robes, and the lower ranking British officials continued to offer nazr and accept robes of honour from the emperor well into the nineteenth century, when the practice was discontinued in 1843. In return and as a concession to the emperor’s protests, the Governor-General Lord Ellenborough offered to increase his allowance as per the value of the offerings made in the past. With the calculation of the monetary estimate of the nazr that the Company was authorised to disburse, the position of the emperor shifted from being a sanctioning authority to that of a sovereign equal, and finally to that of a dependent. Subsequently, the British appropriated the right to proclaim the end of the Mughal dynasty, as was evident from Dalhousie declaration,

‘It is fitting that we should exert our power and our right to the full... On the death of the King [Emperor Bahadur Shah Zafar]... I would propose that the... Dynasty [of the Mughals] should cease.’ (Cited in Minault 2003: 136)
Imperial Discipleship

Another pillar of Akbar’s socialisation was imperial discipleship wherein commitment to the emperor was deemed to be above all other loyalties. Commitment to the emperor provided the polyglot elite with a ‘secular’ focal point and enabled the multi-ethnic and multi-religious nobility to reconcile their primordial identities. Elias explains,

‘The individual’s identification with the social stratum or group in the wider dominion from which he comes, whether with village, town or tribe, with professional or estates group, grows weaker or disappears. It is replaced by a new identification with the charismatic central group in the foreground. In the feelings of its members it takes on the function of social homeland.’ (Elias 1983: 124)

Once again, Akbar’s policy marked a shift from the political ideology that had provided the rationale behind Babur’s strategy of elite formation. Under Babur, shared ancestry and ethnic background primarily formed the basis for entry into the nobility, making the political system exclusive in nature. Akbar’s policy to introduce indigenous elements into his nobility was, however, not altogether an innovative measure. Babur had admitted a number of Indian nobles who participated in major military expeditions after the battle of Panipat. (Husain 1999: 3) Similarly, Humayun’s advice to Akbar that ‘this qaum (Rajputs) should be reared up because they do not have contumacy and disobedience but only obedience and service’ reflects the Mughal proclivity towards accommodation, which Akbar later incorporated into his grand strategy. (Cited in Chandra 2003: 376) Humayun inducted a number of local elements in the nobility and even entered into a marital alliance with a local chief. However, the reign of both Babur and Humayun were plagued by factionalism, and clan politics dominated the Mughal nobility under both the emperors. A large number of nobles were drawn from the Chaghtai clans that viewed political rule as the function of a confederacy rather than the prerogative of a single ruler. (Husain 1993: 7) Moreover, Babur’s and Humayun’s strategy was limited primarily to balancing the various factions within the nobility. Their reigns were too brief and unstable to ensure the socialisation of the political elite in any significant manner.

A necessary corollary of Akbar’s policy of accommodation was an inclusive political system, not a closed and exclusive one. Over several decades, the Mughals developed a code of behaviour that became the basis for a cohesive class of nobles who
came to be known for their personal allegiance and service to the emperor. The code was personified in the khanazads who were nobles attached to the Mughal household through familial and hereditary ties. The nobles were to build on an established lineage of loyal service to the ruler through their valour, commitment and ready willingness for sacrifice. Not only did the institution of khanazadi entail a constant reiteration and demonstration of these qualities as a sign of personal subordination to the emperor, but it also implied imbibing the etiquettes and behavioural attributes associated with the Mughal court culture. Khanazadi represents yet another institution of enculturation through which the Mughals ensured that aristocrats were groomed in the accepted mode of behaviour. Elias explains the process through which social perceptions, which were articulated in elaborate court rituals, reinforced identities of the nobles and the appropriate conduct expected of them.

'The practice of etiquette is...an exhibition of court society to itself. Each participant, above all the king, has his prestige and his relative power position confirmed by others. Social opinion, which constitutes the prestige of the individual, is expressed by reciprocal behaviour within a communal action according to certain rules...Without confirmation of one's prestige through behaviour, this prestige is nothing.' (Elias 1983: 101)

The noteworthy aspect of khanazads was that personal loyalty and submission was emphasised to such an extent that they came to derive their identity from the Mughal emperor, their master and patron. The khanazadi system was an offshoot of Akbar's dynastic ideology that stressed on his divine origins, thereby elevating him to the status of the venerable master worthy of service and respect.

Imperial discipleship was also based on the notion of the Islamic military slave who personally attended to his master. There were other aspects of the khanazadi system that bore a strong affinity to military slavery, such as the emperor's prerogative to determine the fate of the disciple's property upon his death. In what was a common practice under the Mughals, the emperor seized the property of deceased nobles of which only a portion was often left to their lawful successors. The projection of the emperor's rightful claim was not limited to the estates of his khanazads, but also extended to his heirs. Emperors often complied with requests by khanazads to name their sons who
eventually went on to join the royal service. (Richards 1984: 263-265) As Richards points out,

‘Basic to this system was the reciprocal relationship of master to slave. In return for service and devotion, the khanazads expected, and obtained, continuing expressions of the emperor’s concern for their welfare (as well as his intense interest in their performance). Increments to...rank, robes of honor, bejewelled swords, all bestowed personally by the emperor in open court, met both needs. (Richards 1984: 265)

With the induction of Deccani nobles into the royal service in late seventeenth century, the composition of the nobility underwent a significant change. The new officers did not belong to the khanazadi tradition but had joined the system for tactical benefits. The reallocation of resources led to enduring rivalries between the khanazads and the newly recruited Deccani nobles.

Since the khanazadi tradition was grounded in notions of imperial service and martial ethos, it is not surprising that the master-servant relationship was one of the most stable institutions of the Mughal era. (Richards 1984: 265) Jahangir noted, ‘there was room for the professors of opposite religions’ and even the ‘sunnis and shias met in one mosque’, unlike the practice in Persia and Turkey. (TJ I: 37) Moreover, Akbar entered into ‘matrimonial alliances with princes of Hindustan, and of other countries, and secured by these ties of harmony the peace of the world.’ (AN I: 45) Raja Man Singh’s participation on a military expedition was interpreted in a similar fashion by Fazl, ‘Religion has gained such grandeur through your [Akbar’s] that a Hindu wields the sword of Islam.’ (Cited in Farooqi: 101)

Emphasis on loyalty to the emperor who was seen as presiding over his realm with paternal care led scholars like Blake to conclude that the Mughal state was a classic example of a patrimonial-bureaucratic empire that added complexity and scale to the much smaller model of the patrimonial state which Weber had propounded. Blake modifies the Weberian model of the patrimonial state to explain the complex network of personal ties that the emperor developed to sustain the Mughal state. The patrimonial states entail

‘[p]atrimonial domination [that] originates in the patriarch’s authority over his household; it entails obedience to a person, not an office, it depends on the
reciprocal loyalty between subject and master, and is limited only by the ruler's discretion.' (Blake 1979: 79)

He further adds that patrimonial states emerge when

'...lords and princes extend their sway over extrahousehold subjects (patrimonial states themselves) in areas beyond the patriarchal domain. This extension involves a change of authority: from the patrimonial, which is domestic and personal, to the purely political, which is military and judicial....Within the larger realm, conceived as a huge household, the ruler/master tries to exercise military and judicial power in the same absolute and unrestrained way.' (Blake 1979: 79)

The Mughal state characteristically demanded personal attributes such as loyalty and familial ties from officials, along with the technical qualifications and competence required for their position. It could be argued that Indian empires have historically shown a proclivity towards the patrimonial-bureaucratic form of state organisation. The Mauryan empire and centuries later the Delhi Sultanate followed certain aspects of the model that Akbar further refined in the sixteenth century. (Blake 1979: 82) The line of distinction between the personal and the political was blurred by the overlapping of the domains of the court and the household. The Mughals came to uphold the principle of paramountcy in their dealings with the chieftains, in that they reserved the right to select the successor to the deceased chieftain, thereby intervening in succession disputes. Rightful heirs could no longer claim their hereditary right to succeed unless the emperor so approved. (Hasan 1998: 287) Officials were brought into the royal household which formed the locus and hub of power and activity even within the structure of the mobile capital. The Ain enumerates in detail the frequency of postings and visits of officials at the court. Apart from their monthly and annual trips and on the event of a promotion or a transfer, they were also required to attend court proceedings on ceremonies and special occasions. (Blake 1979: 90)

It was expected that the process of political participation would be self-sustaining by increasing the stakes of the participants in the system through continued participation. The rationale of participation was that it evinced the participants to seek the maximisation of interests within the system rather than opt out of the system altogether.
CONCLUSION

The Mughal grand strategy drew upon a rich tradition of liberal secular thought that came to inform the imperial policies of Akbar. Although he initiated a number of modes of power projection using both subtle and ostentatious means of asserting his authority, it is imperative to contextualise Akbar's policies within the social milieu that emphasised on coexistence and social acceptance of difference. The universalist tenor of the liberal tradition provided the appropriate justification for Akbar to move away from particularistic and religious notions of legitimacy, towards a more secular and personalised interpretation of his authority. As we shall see in the next chapter, Akbar succeeded in synthesising the imperial aims with the aspirations of the Rajput elite by appealing to their normative understanding of loyalty and service. The strategy, however, failed to take off in the case of the Deccan powers, impeded as sustained engagement was due to the vast distances that separated the two loci of power.