Introduction

On December 6, 1992, Hindu nationalists attacked and destroyed the sixteenth-century Babri Mosque. In the lead-up to this event and in its aftermath, India was wracked by terrible violence in which thousands of people were killed or injured. Most of the victims were Muslims. I watched my television screen in shock and horror as the violence unfolded. I recall being especially struck by one news story in which a reporter interviewed Hindu nationalist supporters outside a row of burning shacks while a mob danced around the camera crew shouting this slogan: *Babur ki santan, jao Pakistan ya Qabristan!* (Descendants of Babur, go to Pakistan or the graveyard!).

At the time, I was at a loss understanding the link between, on the one hand, the Emperor Babur, the early sixteenth-century founder of the Mughal Empire in whose name the Babri Mosque had been constructed in 1528, and, on the other hand, Indian Muslims of the late twentieth century. Although of Indian Muslim descent myself, I knew my family was not descended from Babur or any of his heirs. Indeed, if my family had any connection to the Mughal Empire, it was unknown. Separately, the suggestion that Indian Muslims were a cancer in the Indian body politic that had to be either expelled to Pakistan or killed prompted me to wonder what horrors the Mughals were thought to have visited upon India to generate such genocidal sentiments almost five centuries later. Indeed, nothing I had read pointed to Mughal policies deliberately aimed at the violent oppression or exploitation of their overwhelmingly Hindu subjects. To the contrary, the popular legacy of the Mughal period, as I understood it, suggested a standout example of Hindu–Muslim cooperation across political, social, and cultural realms. Such thoughts framed my interest in

the Mughals when I entered graduate school in the mid-1990s. In the years that have followed, I have long pondered exactly how a Muslim, ethnically Turkish, and Persian-speaking dynasty managed to rule 150 million people, themselves of many linguistic and ethnic backgrounds, and to constitute one of the largest empires in human history at its height in 1700.[1] Certainly brutal and unmitigated violence against the Mughals' majority Hindu subjects seemed a highly unlikely explanation.

As I discovered, violence (or at least its threat) did play a critical part in constituting Mughal imperial power, but not in ways that might be assumed by modern Hindu nationalists. Rather than religious conflict, one of the central engines driving Mughal state formation was the competition and occasional bursts of violence that framed political struggles occurring within the Mughal royal family itself. These struggles, which took place against the backdrop of imperial succession politics, not only pitted prince against prince, but also prince against even the emperor (who may have been a father, grandfather, brother, paternal uncle, or cousin). It has been widely suggested that this princely competition weakened the empire. I argue, on the contrary, that – with the attendant construction of independent households, forging of empire-wide networks of friends and allies, disobedience toward and rebellion against the emperor, and wars of succession – princely competition was a central mechanism in the mobilization of Mughal power. Understanding the dynamic and complicated story of political competition within the Mughal family and its impact on the empire offers fresh insight into the success as well as ultimate failure of the Mughal imperial enterprise. If intervening in popular partisan views of the Mughal Empire is one goal of this book, then a second is to complicate our understanding of the processes of Mughal state formation by telling the story of the princes of the Mughal Empire.

PRINCES IN THE STORY OF MUGHAL STATE FORMATION

For more than two centuries, between 1504 (the year the founder of the Mughal Empire, Zahir-ud-Din Muhammad Babur, established himself in Kabul) and 1719 (the first time a prince attained the Mughal throne on the basis of an ordered succession system), the Mughals determinedly refused to institute clearly articulated rules of succession. The Mughals themselves and contemporary imperial historians almost never commented on this

[1] John F. Richards, "The Mughal Empire," in *The Magnificent Mughals*, ed. Zeenut Ziad (Karachi, 2002), p. 3.

fact, although the occasional European traveler noted it. The unspoken rule – deriving from Islamic law and from Turco-Mongol ideas – that every son had an equal share in his father's patrimony and all males within a ruling group had the right to succeed to the throne simply favored an open-ended system.

Following the collapse of the Mughal Empire and the onset of British rule, which had its own obsessions about dynastic continuity and longevity, historians and others began to pay closer attention to the Mughal "failure" to institute a system of primogeniture or some other form of ordered succession. This interest was mostly framed within the context of debates about collapses of Mughal rule, first briefly in the 1540s and then ultimately in the 1710s. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the prevailing wisdom had it that recurrent princely rebellions and wars of succession destabilized the empire and offered no long-term benefits. Against this backdrop, seeming Mughal insistence on an open-ended system of succession was treated as a sign of political conservatism or a trace of backward tribalism, and thus a failure of enlightened rule. The fact that members of the Mughal royal family were known to have maimed and killed one another, or tried to, only added to the emerging consensus that this was a pernicious and dysfunctional system. That consensus, as this book demonstrates, was as narrow and obfuscating as it was simple for its subscribers to embrace. In particular, by casting all intra-familial strife as negative, it masked the key role that princely competition and conflict played in Mughal state formation.

Historians as well as other observers of the Mughal Empire have been pondering the reasons for Mughal success and the nature of Mughal state formation for centuries now. As far back as the seventeenth century, European travelers variously highlighted the Mughals' "despotic" power, theatricality, and access to economic riches in their efforts to pinpoint the empire's political vitality. Up to the early nineteenth century, the European public treated the then-collapsed empire mostly with respectful deference. This was largely a consequence of early British colonialism's desire to fashion itself as a direct heir to what it viewed as a sophisticated and, on balance, successful exercise in imperial rule. By the late nineteenth century, however, such favorable readings had mostly vanished. The British now saw advantage in treating their own empire as not only standing outside Indian history but as representing a complete rupture from India's past.

This cleavage came to be symbolized as the stark difference between the civilized character of the British Empire as compared to the backwardness

of its Indian and, especially, Mughal forerunners. There were two key lines of attack. The first was anchored in the British Raj's complex administrative machinery and the other in its post-Enlightenment capacity for religious tolerance. Against both markers, the Mughal Empire was judged deficient. Mughal success was dismissed as an outcome of its unrestrained despotism, and its failure attributed to rising "religious intolerance" toward its majority Hindu subjects.

Starting in the early 1900s, waves of Indian nationalist historians began to contest different elements within this colonial historiography. By far the most significant challenge came from successive generations of often Marxist-oriented historians based at Aligarh Muslim University (in the north Indian city of Aligarh). Between the 1940s and the 1980s, the "Aligarh School" developed a powerful counterview of the Mughal Empire. Largely focusing their attention on Mughal administrative institutions, these scholars asserted that the Mughal Empire was – not unlike a modern state – a highly centralized, systematized, and stable entity.[2] The force of this argument was such that the strength of Mughal administrative institutions now became the starting point for most discussions (and explanations) of imperial successes and failures. Religion was largely discounted as a factor in the Mughal collapse. By the early 1960s, the Aligarh view of the Mughal Empire was widely accepted within and outside India.

From the 1970s onward, however, debates about the nature of empire in India took on new life thanks to a fresh cluster of historians – many of them based in England. Especially interested in questioning long-held views of the British Empire as a European leviathan, these scholars pointed to the many ways in which the Raj had been built on Indian foundations, depended on active Indian collaboration, and was administratively less forceful than once imagined. These insights soon carried over into a fundamental reassessment of the Mughal Empire by non-Aligarh-based Mughal historians. They questioned the Aligarh School's exalted view of imperial institutions, arguing that the diffuse and fractured manner in which early modern societies functioned resisted the possibility of strong centralized institutions, not only in India but also in other parts of the early

[2] For representative examples, see M. Athar Ali, "Towards an Interpretation of the Mughal Empire," *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland* 1 (1978): 40; Zahiruddin Malik, "The Core and the Periphery: A Contribution to the Debate on the Eighteenth Century," *Social Scientist* 18, no. 11–12 (1990): 3–35; Iqtidar Alam Khan, "State in Mughal India: Re-examining the Myths of a Counter-vision," *Social Scientist* 30, no. 1–2 (2001): 16–45; Shireen Moosvi, "The Pre-Colonial State," *Social Scientist* 33, no. 3–4 (2005): 40–53.

modern world. Furthermore, they questioned the evolutionary assumption that a centralized state is necessarily a modern or better state.

What emerged by the late 1990s was a new perspective, one that considered the Mughal Empire less as a "medieval road-roller," to quote Sanjay Subrahmanyam, and more as a spider's web in which strands were strong in some places and weak in others, shedding light on the need to account for regional phenomena caught between the various strands.[3] According to this interpretation, the empire hung loosely over Indian society, exerting only a fleeting impact on local societies, local landed elites (*zamindar*s), and everyday life. Unfortunately, these debates (on the one hand, that the Mughals ran a tight administrative ship and, on the other, that their administration was largely ineffectual) had an irresolvable quality, and they took on an increasingly rancorous tone as well.[4] Thus one historian in the mid 1990s observed that the study of the state in early modern South Asia "has become one of the most controversial issues in contemporary Indian historiography."[5]

Against this backdrop, there has been a renewed push to comprehend the sources of Mughal power beyond its administrative, military, and fiscal institutions.[6] Farhat Hasan's *State and Locality in Mughal India* is of special note.[7] Even though expressing discontent with the fiscal or military prisms through which most studies of the Mughal state are conducted, Hasan is determined to not "de-privilege" the state. *State and Locality* offers four particularly valuable insights: (i) the Mughal state could not simply command obedience, but had to "manufacture" it by implanting itself within local political, social, and economic networks of power;

[3] Sanjay Subrahmanyam, "The Mughal State – Structure or Process? Reflections on Recent Western Historiography," *Indian Economic and Social History Review* 29, no. 3 (1992): 321. See also Muzaffar Alam and Sanjay Subrahmanyam, "Introduction," in *The Mughal State, 1526–1750*, ed. Muzaffar Alam and Sanjay Subrahmanyam (Delhi, 1998), 57; M. N. Pearson, "Premodern Muslim Political Systems," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 102, no. 1 (1982): 47–58.

[4] M. Athar Ali, "The Mughal Polity: A Critique of 'Revisionist' Approaches," *Modern Asian Studies* 27, no. 4 (1993): 699–710. See also the Wink-Habib debates: Irfan Habib, "Review of *Land and Sovereignty in India*," *Indian Economic and Social History Review* 25, no. 4 (1988): 527–31; André Wink, "A Rejoinder to Irfan Habib," *Indian Economic and Social History Review* 26, no. 3 (1989): 363–7; and Irfan Habib, "A Reply to André Wink," *Indian Economic and Social History Review* 26, no. 3 (1989): 368–72.

[5] Hermann Kulke, *The State in India: 1000–1700* (Delhi, 1995), p. 1. This view is echoed by Alam and Subrahmanyam, "Introduction," p. 2.

[6] For a sense of the range of possibilities and approaches, see Alam and Subrahmanyam, "Introduction," pp. 1–71.

[7] Farhat Hasan, *State and Locality in Mughal India: Power Relations in Western India, c. 1572–1730* (Cambridge, 2004).

(ii) besides collecting taxes, the Mughal state also contributed and garnered support by offering security and playing a key role in redistributing monetary and social resources among the most powerful elements in Indian society; (iii) the Mughal state was continuously being molded and constrained by the society that it ostensibly governed; and (iv) the Mughal state was a dynamic and continuously evolving entity quite unlike the static and stable creation that emerges from Mughal imperial sources or most modern accounts of the empire.[8]

Whereas Hasan undertook a fine-grained study of the operations of the Mughal state in urban Gujarat, the present book explores his insights as they apply to the empire as a whole. In the 1990s, even before Hasan's book, early modern historians Muzaffar Alam and Sanjay Subrahmanyam put out a call for scholarship on state formation in South Asia that took on its "evolution over time" and "variation over space."[9] *Princes of the Mughal Empire* wrestles with precisely this challenge. It asks the following: given the empire's wobbly bases in the localities (to which a scholar such as Hasan aptly points), how did the empire successfully manage relations with so many communities, over so vast an area, for its just under two hundred years of effective rule? Of what was the imperial fabric (or spider's web) woven, over the many decades before the empire's collapse into a patchwork of regional successor states? This book demonstrates that such questions can be usefully explored by focusing on how the dynasty's princes built and sustained their power in the long years leading up to the inevitable succession struggles.

The past century has produced a large number of biographies and article-length treatments of Mughal princes. None of them consider the role that princes may have played in forging Mughal power.[10] As a result, such crucial princely activities as building a household or cultivating

[8] Ibid., pp. 1–8.

[9] Alam and Subrahmanyam, "Introduction," pp. 6, 17–18.

[10] Bikramajit Hasrat, *Dara Shikuh: Life and Works* (Delhi, repr. 1982); Muhammad Quamruddin, *Life and Times of Prince Murad Bakhsh 1624–1661* (Calcutta, 1974); Iqtidar Alam Khan, *Mirza Kamran* (Bombay, 1964); Iftikhar Ghauri, *War of Succession between the Sons of Shah Jahan, 1657–1658* (Lahore, 1964); S. Moinul Haq, *Prince Awrangzib: A Study* (Karachi, 1962). Other books that include significant treatments of princes include S. M. Burke, *Akbar the Greatest Mogul* (Delhi, 1989); Zahiruddin Faruki, *Aurangzeb and His Times* (Delhi, repr. 1972); B. P. Saxsena, *History of Shahjahan of Dihli* (Delhi, repr. 1962); Shibli Nomani, *Aurangzeb 'Alamgir par ek nazar* (Karachi, repr. 1960); Ishwari Prasad, *The Life and Times of Humayun* (Calcutta, 1956); Jadunath Sarkar, *History of Aurangzib*, vols. 1–5 (Calcutta, 1924–30); Beni Prasad, *History of Jahangir* (Oxford, 1922). Among articles, see M. Athar Ali, "The Religious Issues in the War of Succession, 1658–1659," in *Mughal India: Studies in Polity, Ideas, Society, and*

networks of support have been almost completely ignored, never mind considered within a broader framework of conversations about Mughal state formation. More generally, other scholars of the Mughal Empire have also overlooked the distinctive role of princes in the life of the empire.[11] And yet, as I will argue, from the day that princes were born, and for the duration of their lives as princes, they were critical actors on the Mughal stage. Their centrality ultimately derived from the competitive political energy that framed Mughal succession struggles over the course of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Especially after the 1580s and Emperor Akbar's decision to no longer grant his sons semi-independent territories, the rules of this contest were simple and are best summed up by the terse Persian phrase: *ya takht, ya takhta* (either throne or funeral bier).[12] And it was indeed to the throne or until their deaths that generations of princes scrambled to establish loyal followings, accrue wealth and influence, and build their political power and military strength. They knew that failure to engage would not only mean loss of the Mughal throne but also certain death.

Against the backdrop of a hyper-competitive and open-ended system of succession, royal princes were celebrated and carefully cultivated from the very moment of their birth. Given that every prince was a potential

Culture (Delhi, 2006); S. M. Azizuddin Husain, "Aurangzeb ki takht nashini," *Islam aur asr-i jadid* (April 1994): 44–73; Arshad Karim, "Muslim Nationalism: Conflicting Ideologies of Dara Shikoh and Aurangzeb," *Journal of the Pakistan Historical Society* 33, no. 4 (1985): 288–96; Jalaluddin, "Sultan Salim (Jahangir) as a Rebel King," *Islamic Culture* 47 (1973): 121–5; R. Shyam, "Mirza Hindal," *Islamic Culture* 45 (1971): 115–36; Ram Sharma, "Aurangzib's Rebellion against Shah Jahan," *Journal of Indian History* 44, no. 1 (1966): 109–24; R. K. Das, "The End of Prince Shuja," *Procs. Ind. Hist. Cong.* 28 (1966): 165–8. B. B. L. Srivastava, "The Fate of Khusrau," *Journal of Indian History* 42, no. 2 (1964): 479–92; B. P. Ambashthya, "Rebellions of Prince Salim and Prince Khurram in Bihar," *Journal of the Bihar and Orissa Research Society* 45 (1959): 326–41; Yusuf Abbas Hashmi, "The War of Succession among the Sons of Shah Jahan and the Stand of Aurangzeb," *Procs. All Pak. Hist. Conf.* 1 (1951): 247–70; Henry Beveridge, "Sultan Khusrau," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 39 (1907): 599–601.

[11] Harbans Mukhia, *The Mughals of India* (London, 2004); John F. Richards, *The Mughal Empire* (Cambridge, 1993); Stephen Blake, *Shahjahanabad: The Sovereign City in Mughal India, 1639–1739* (Cambridge, 1991); Douglas Streusand, *Formation of the Mughal Empire* (Delhi, 1989); Muzaffar Alam, *The Crisis of Empire in Mughal North India: Awadh and the Punjab 1707–1748* (Delhi, 1986); M. Athar Ali, *The Mughal Nobility under Aurangzeb* (Delhi, repr. 1997); Satish Chandra, *Parties and Politics at the Mughal Court* (Aligarh, 1959).

[12] Khafi Khan, *Muntakhab al-Labab*, ed. Kabir-ud-Din Ahmad, vol. 2 (Calcutta, 1874), p. 596. Although the meaning is exactly the same, Niccolao Manucci, who lived in India for most of the latter half of the seventeenth century, offers us a slight variant on the phrase: *ya takht, ya tabut*. *Mogul India or Storio do Mogor*, trans. William Irvine, vol. 1 (New Delhi, repr. 1996), p. 232.

emperor, broad similarities marked their early education, their access to powerful noblemen, and their visibility at the imperial court. Most importantly, however, young princes received early and unrelenting exposure to the psychological uncertainty that accompanied an open-ended system of succession. Knowing that their lives ultimately depended on their own achievements, networks of support, and their ability to out-maneuver their male relatives, Mughal princes were trained from early on to be independent minded, tough, and ruthless. These traits would be especially important as they approached adulthood.

There were two signs of a prince's transition to adult status: the first was his marriage; the second was an official right to share in the empire's financial resources. Prior to 1585, this latter moment had been marked by the grant of a semi-independent princely territory (often referred to by modern scholars as an appanage[13]). After 1585, a prince's adult status was recognized by the grant of a formal rank (*mansab*) in the imperial hierarchy with concomitant access to income via landholdings (*jagir*s) that were reshuffled every few years. Adult status led to an explosion in the size of princely households. Some part of the growth was linked to the infusion of large numbers of women and eunuchs who were expected to take care of an emerging domestic establishment. The other key element was the individuals with administrative and military skills whose overriding responsibility was to enable the prince to collect the financial resources promised to him. The search for money consumed an increasing part of an adult prince's attention. After the 1580s, with the end of princely appanages, that task got much harder as princes and their *jagir*s were regularly transferred around the empire.

If princely households reinforced and extended the imperial bureaucracy's efforts to improve its administrative mechanisms, they also allowed the prince to act as a military leader in his own right. With his household's help and resources, a prince could organize imperial campaigns, storm well-guarded forts, and protect convoys carrying tribute or tax payments. Since intra-familial conflict (whether in the form of princely rebellions or wars of succession) was a permanent threat, a princely household was in perpetual readiness to fight other princely households or even the emperor's imperial establishment.

[13] The term is derived from a thirteenth-century French adaptation of the Latin term *appanare*, meaning to "equip with bread." From the sixteenth century onward – in both French and English – it is commonly used to refer to grants of land to younger sons of a ruler.

As might be expected, princes were always on the lookout for important or talented individuals and groups to recruit into their households. Preference was often accorded to men not already linked to competing princes or the emperor. Thus, over the course of the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, princely households provided a vital avenue for social mobility in the Mughal Empire. Through them, a wide range of political, ethnic, and class outsiders were first assimilated, acculturated, and socialized within the Mughal system. Following a successful accession, many in the victorious prince's circle would be inducted into the imperial nobility, a practice that simultaneously replenished the nobility's ranks and provided a counterweight to holdovers from the previous reign.

Princes never stopped building alliances with notable individuals and groups beyond their households. With the end of fixed territorial appanages in the 1580s, these efforts took on a more plainly imperial character. Rather than focusing on single or even contiguous territories, princes now had to compete and cultivate friends and allies across the entire expanse of the empire. From the very start of this era, Akbar urged his sons to venture forth and cultivate their influence. Akbar not only connected his young sons with powerful people in and beyond the Mughal court, he also experimented with sending them on temporary and varied assignments.

Under Akbar, too, the empire shifted from an Islam-imbued to a more pluralistic project. As such, after the 1580s, Mughal princes approached each and every group, regardless of religion, as potentially useful in their alliance building efforts. Relentless political competition within the imperial family ensured that princely efforts rarely lost momentum. They continued to break new ground in their attempts to woo and nurture individuals and groups that had either been frozen out of the Mughal system or disenfranchised by political shifts within it. Simultaneously, since political loyalty and support could never be assumed and was always being contested, princes were constantly renewing earlier claims to friendship. One crucial impact of such frenetic activity was this: imperial political, social, and monetary resources remained in constant circulation, which created powerful and widespread investment not only in individual princes but also in the dynasty as a whole.

Between Akbar's and Aurangzeb's reigns, imperial expansion into new regions was often accompanied or immediately followed by local recruitment drives by princes in their capacity as governors, generals or even rebels. Inasmuch as administrative and political consolidation in the northern heartlands was crucial to the construction of the empire, it was the almost unique ability of the Mughals to accommodate and harness the

energies of formerly nonsubject and even oppositional groups along the edges of their growing realm that enabled and indicated the empire's vitality throughout much of the seventeenth century. By understanding these transactions, which often occurred in the context of princely initiatives aimed at winning friends and allies, we may begin to comprehend the empire's reach even in regions where its administrative institutions were weak or nonexistent. As might be expected, starting with Salim/Jahangir's accession in 1605 and continuing until Mu'azzam/Bahadur Shah in 1707, the best "networked" prince inevitably became the next Mughal emperor.

The decision by an emperor to grant a prince full adult status (sometime between the late teen years and the mid-twenties) led to an intensification of efforts to build a powerful household and gather allies around the prince's person. As one contemporary observer noted, "when these princes once leave the paternal house, they work and scheme to make themselves friends. They write secretly to the Hindu princes and the Mahomedan generals, promising them that when they become king they will raise their allowances ... if any of these princes mounts the throne, he fancies that they will have been faithful to him."[14] Adulthood also imposed important limits on the emperor's capacity to control the actions of his son. Inevitably, emperors found themselves on a collision course with their princes as the latter moved to assert their own political identities and/or sought to protect resources they considered vital to their political future. At this point, we begin to see instances of princely disobedience. An emperor's ability to respond effectively to these challenges was a sign of his continued political relevance. An inability or unwillingness to assert his authority was liable to be read as a mark of weakness, which could encourage more direct political challenges. Humayun faced precisely this predicament vis-à-vis his refractory brothers. Ultimately, emperors had to strike a fine balance between some oversight of male relatives and undue restraint of their activities. Allowing for some measure of princely dissent and disobedience was a crucial safety valve that prevented the Mughal Empire from being constantly wracked by destructive princely rebellions.

The decision by princes to rebel was always a difficult one. A rebellion taxed both the loyalty of supporters and household resources. Worse yet, a prince could lose his life in the course of a rebellion or suffer physical mutilation and permanent imprisonment as punishment. A prince who rebelled was thus a prince who believed he had no other choice. All princely rebellions point to the despair that fueled them. Prince Akbar's

[14] Manucci, *Mogul India*, p. 320.