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At Empire's End:

The Nizam, Hyderabad and Eighteenth-century India

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Introduction

In May 1748, Nizam-ul-Mulk Asaf Jah arrived in the central Indian city of Burhanpur. He was seventy seven years old and exhausted after undertaking an extensive tour of his dominion. While in Burhanpur, the Nizam caught a cold that caused his health to swiftly deteriorate. Sensing death upon him, the Nizam called a gathering of close confidants and family. The atmosphere was intimate and sad. Among other matters, the Nizam dictated his last testament (*wasiyyatnama*). Spanning seventeen clauses, this testament was intended to provide insights into a lifetime of almost unparalleled success in statecraft and a template of how to govern Hyderabad, the nascent state founded by him in the early 1720s in south-central India. Although the tone and content of the will suggest

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the Nizam is worried about the future of Hyderabad, he also seems concerned to shape his own historical legacy. There is little doubt that the Nizam wished to be remembered as the most successful politician, general and administrator among the post-Mughal rulers. The will is occasionally pontificatory and self-aggrandizing, yet there can be no disagreeing with the Nizam's own conclusion that he had lived a blessed life.[1] Here, after all, was a man who had not only survived, but also thrived amidst the uncertainty accompanying the collapse of the Mughal Empire during the first decades of the eighteenth century.

Using the career of Nizam-ul-Mulk Asaf Jah I as its backdrop, this essay will explore three broad questions. First, what can a revisiting of a 300-year-old corpus of literature on the Nizam tell us about changing and contested portrayals of the man and the state he helped found? Second, how does an understanding of Mughal court politics from the 1680s onwards help explain Nizam-ul-Mulk's transition from being a loyal Mughal in the late 1600s to the founder of a Mughal 'successor' state in 1724? Third, why did Hyderabad survive as an independent state despite a hostile post-1724 environment in which various external and internal enemies confronted it? In exploring these questions, this essay offers preliminary and tentative insights into a period that, following the withering of the Mughal 'imperial banyan tree',[2] offered tremendous possibilities and also perils for elites formerly linked with the Mughal Empire.

This essay marks a preliminary attempt to engage some of the problems and lacunae surrounding studies on the Nizam's career and also the first few decades of Hyderabad's history. Thus, even as Section I seeks to ground Nizam-ul-Mulk's post-Mughal career in critical political developments *prior* to the Emperor Aurangzeb's death in 1707, it more specifically contests the widely held view that political strength (rather than weakness) dictated the Nizam's decision to embark on a new career in the Deccan. Section II focuses on the creation of the Hyderabadi state itself. Specifically, it argues that Hyderabad's establishment and survival depended on its ability to reconcile previously hostile ethnic groups to its existence, to move beyond Mughal frameworks of governance

[1] See clauses 4, 5 and 6. Tajalli Ali Shah, *Tuzuk-i Asafiya* (Hyderabad: Matba'-i Asafi, 1892), p. 40. See also *Wasiyyatnama-i Asaf Jah*, Salar Jung Museum and Library, Ms. Hist. 454, fols. 1a–5a; Lala Mansaram, *Ma'asir-i Nizami*, Andhra Pradesh State Archives, Ms. Or. 1749, fols. 51a–54a.

[2] Richard B. Barnett ed., *Rethinking Early Modern India* (Delhi: Manohar, 2002), p.22.

even as it maintained the fiction that it was a Mughal dependency, and to position itself as a tolerant and inclusive but nonetheless Muslim-ruled state. In the end, Hyderabad was neither a poor imitation nor a miniature version of the Mughal Empire. Furthermore, even if it did ultimately devolve into a ramshackle state with weak political, social and military institutions by the nineteenth century, this later history *must* be distinguished from that of its founding years. For Hyderabad's early history highlights a state that was dynamic, innovative and strong enough to hold off a range of regional enemies—a far cry from its later counterpart.

I. The Making of a Post-Imperial Mughal Nobleman

Familial Background and Early Connections to Aurangzeb

Mir Qamar-ud-Din (hereafter referred to by his imperial title, Nizam-ul-Mulk, given to him in 1713) was born in 1671 in Delhi—the Mughal imperial capital—to Ghazi-ud-Din Khan and Safiya Khanum. The Mughal Empire was at its height with the Emperor Aurangzeb (r. 1658–1707) at its helm. Despite minor military setbacks in northeastern India in the early 1660s, the dynasty's political and military authority in the late-seventeenth century was largely unchallenged. At its heart lay a small and elite group of nobles whose unswerving loyalty to the empire was richly rewarded in the form of pecuniary and political benefits. The Nizam was the scion of two such elite noble families. On his mother's side, he was the grandson of Sa'dullah Khan—the illustrious and long-serving prime minister of the preceding emperor, Shah Jahan (r. 1628–58). Although Sa'dullah Khan passed away in 1656, his family continued to enjoy great imperial favour. Thus, the women in the family continued to contract excellent marriages. Safiya Khanum was one of them. At the behest of the Emperor Aurangzeb himself, Safiya Khanum was married (in 1670) to Ghazi-ud-Din Khan—the eldest son of 'Abid Khan, one of the emperor's favourite noblemen. This marriage undoubtedly represented a powerful match-up connecting as it did an impeccably credentialed noble family (that of the Nizam's mother) with a fast-rising family of recent immigrants from Central Asia.

'Abid Khan first came to Mughal India in the early 1650s; he was skirting Safavid and Shiite Iran on his way from his Central Asian

hometown of Samarkand to Mecca to perform the *hajj*. While in India, he met the recently appointed governor of the Deccan, Prince Aurangzeb, who promised him great rewards if, on completing his religious obligations, he returned to Mughal India and joined the prince's service. Although the reason for Aurangzeb's interest in 'Abid Khan is unclear, it may have been related to the Khan's lineal descent from the honoured Central Asian sufi saint, Shaykh Shihab-ud-Din Suhrawardi (d. 1234). More likely, however, Aurangzeb's efforts to cultivate 'Abid Khan were part of a much larger attempt to recruit individuals in anticipation of an impending war of succession between the Emperor Shah Jahan's four adult sons. Regardless of Aurangzeb's motives, 'Abid Khan did return to South Asia in late 1656—just in time to fight in the 1657–58 war of succession in which Aurangzeb was victorious. Following Aurangzeb's enthronement as emperor, 'Abid Khan was richly rewarded for having fought with distinction during the conflict. Thus, began an enduring fifty-year long association between Aurangzeb and 'Abid Khan's family that lasted until the emperor's death in 1707.

Over the next few decades, and until his death during the siege of Bijapur in 1686, 'Abid Khan was one of Aurangzeb's favourite noblemen. Appreciated for his candor and loyalty, 'Abid Khan was especially liked because he shared many of the emperor's views regarding Islamic religious practice. Ultimately, he was appointed the imperial *sadr-us-sudur* (head of religious endowments). Other members of 'Abid Khan's family similarly enjoyed imperial favour. This was especially true for 'Abid Khan's son, Ghazi-ud-Din Khan. Besides the honour of marriage to Safiya Begum, Ghazi-ud-Din Khan received steady increments in his noble rank alongside such affectionate sobriquets as *farzand-i arjomand* (noble/distinguished son) from Aurangzeb. Throughout his long political career, Ghazi-ud-Din Khan remained a committed Aurangzeb loyalist.

Although there are many examples of Ghazi-ud-Din Khan's devotion to Aurangzeb,[3] two instances stand out. In the early 1680s, he played

[3] Following the Khan's success in bringing grain to a starving and beleaguered Mughal army commanded by Aurangzeb's son, Prince A'zam, a deeply appreciative emperor went so far as to pray: 'As God Almighty has saved the honour of the house of Timur (*sharm-i aulad-i Timuriyya*) through the efforts of Feroz Jang (i.e. Ghazi-ud-Din Khan), so may he guard the honour of his descendants until the Day of Resurrection (*ta daur-i qiyamat*)'. Khafi Khan, *Muntakhab-ul-Lubab*, ed. Khairuddin Ahmad and Ghulam Ahmad, Vol. II, Part I (Calcutta: Asiatic Society of Bengal, 1860–74), p. 319. For a slightly different rendition of the same, see Mir Abu Turab 'Ali, *Hadiqat-ul-'Alam*, Vol. II (Hyderabad: Matba'-i Saiyidi, 1892), p. 37.

a central role in thwarting an almost successful rebellion by one of Aurangzeb's son's, Prince Akbar (who ultimately fled Mughal India for a life of exile in Safavid Iran). Later, in 1686–87, Ghazi-ud-Din Khan accused another son—Prince Mu'azzam—of engaging in secret negotiations with the Kingdom of Golkonda in order to thwart his father's attempts to conquer the Deccan sultanate. How did the emperor respond? He turned aside Prince Mu'azzam's protestations of innocence and placed him under house arrest for almost a decade!

Needless to say, Ghazi-ud-Din Khan's relations with Aurangzeb's sons were strained. Ghazi-ud-Din Khan's antipathies would be passed on to his eldest son, Nizam-ul-Mulk. Can an understanding of the complex relations between Aurangzeb, his royal sons and high-ranking Mughal nobles provide us with any insights into the Nizam's transformation from an ultra-loyal Mughal nobleman in the late 1600s to someone who deserted the Mughal system in the 1720s? This essay will argue in the affirmative. In so doing, it suggests a different emphasis from the accounts of Yusuf H. Khan, Satish Chandra, M. A. Nayeem and Muhammad Umar among others, all of who focus on the post-Aurangzeb period to explain the Nizam's later career trajectory.[4] Any understanding of the Nizam's role in the political jockeying between Aurangzeb and his sons, however, does demand some insight into Mughal succession practices.

Aurangzeb, Mughal Succession Practices and Imperial Nobles

Unlike their Ottoman and Safavid counterparts after the 1590s, the Mughals never instituted ordered rules of dynastic succession. Operating within an open-ended and highly competitive system of succession that encouraged rebellion against the emperor and conflict amongst contending siblings, Mughal princes spent decades cultivating groups and forging alliances across a wide geographical terrain. The rules of this deadly contest were simple and are best summed up by the terse Persian phrase: *Ya takht, ya tabut* (either the throne or the tomb). Ultimately, however, inasmuch as a prince's competitive impulses directly benefited his own dynastic ambitions

[4] Yusuf H. Khan, *The First Nizam* (Bombay: Asia Publishing House, 1963 reprint); Satish Chandra, *Parties and Politics at the Mughal Court*, 1707–1740 (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2002 reprint); M. A. Nayeem, *Mughal Administration of Deccan under Nizamul Mulk Asaf Jah*, 1720–48 AD (Bombay: Jaico Publishing House, 1985); Muhammad Umar, *Muslim Society in Northern India during the Eighteenth Century* (Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1998).

they also—more crucially—drew disparate social groups beyond the Mughal court into partnership with the imperial dynasty.

Rather than threatening the strength of the Mughal Empire, princely activities of retinue and alliance building and competition were crucial cornerstones of Mughal state formation in the dynamic economic, political and social climate of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century South Asia. Even as successive generations of princes scrambled for the throne for fear of death, they built and nurtured relationships with all manner of potential allies. These efforts would not only unfold in the opulence of the imperial court but, more importantly, in the arid mountains of Afghanistan, the steamy riverine areas of Bengal, the coastal plains of the Konkan, the cotton-weaving areas of the Coromandel and also the high plateau of the Deccan. In fact, it was to recruit support that individual princes often travelled to the geographical peripheries of the Mughal Empire and in so doing both expanded these peripheries and also incorporated potential opponents into an imperial Mughal framework.

Crucially, service within princely establishments became one of the primary mechanisms through which the Mughal Empire accommodated groups that were distant from and unfamiliar with Indo-Mughal norms of statecraft and sovereignty. Put differently, princely retinues were the outstations where Indo-Islamic and Mughal political and social norms were learnt and loyalty to the dynasty cultivated and tested. The institution of the Mughal Prince arguably played a central role in extending and sustaining Mughal state formation until Aurangzeb's reign.[5]

The position of the Mughal princes, however, declined dramatically during Aurangzeb's reign. Although it is impossible to definitively explain Aurangzeb's motives for undermining his sons' critical role within the Mughal system, this much is clear: he, unlike his imperial predecessors, increasingly deprived his sons of opportunities to build independent bases of authority. He also made it difficult for them to cultivate and sustain ties to powerful political, social and economic networks. The emperor used a panoply of tools to achieve these ends, including frequently rotating his sons through provincial assignments and independent military commands, weakening princely establishments by

[5] These arguments are laid out in my book: *Princes of the Mughal Empire*, 1504–1719 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

transferring princely loyalists out of them and, more generally, crushing any signs of opposition to the emperor.

Most significantly, however, Aurangzeb fostered a powerful and ultra-loyal core of high-ranking nobles—among whom were Ghazi-ud-Din Khan and Nizam-ul-Mulk—to serve as a counterweight to his sons. Although these nobles continued to pay lip service to the authority of the emperor's sons and grandsons, Aurangzeb implicitly encouraged them to view princes as potential competitors rather than overlords. Indeed, the success of Aurangzeb's political strategy is manifest in Ghazi-ud-Din Khan's direct challenge of Prince Akbar and Prince Mu'azzam when they opposed their imperial father.[6]

As long as Aurangzeb was alive, men like Nizam-ul-Mulk and his father never wavered in their loyalty to the ageing but relentless emperor. This was true even when large swathes of the Mughal nobility had clearly lost all confidence in achieving the emperor's goal of conquering and pacifying the Deccan.[7] In the face of widespread demoralization and defeatism, Nizam-ul-Mulk remained a standout general; contemporary sources describe him as showing a casual disregard for his own personal safety when on imperial duty.[8] How can we explain the Nizam's determination to stay the course until Aurangzeb commanded otherwise? The Nizam's personal letters and anecdotes provide us with some initial insights.

The Nizam and Aurangzeb

On one level, the relationship between the Nizam and Aurangzeb was one of deep personal regard. Reading the Nizam's materials, one is

[6] Other high-ranking noblemen would similarly challenge Aurangzeb's sons. In 1693, for example, Zulfiqar Khan and Asad Khan temporarily imprisoned Prince Kam Bakhsh (Aurangzeb's youngest son) following bitter disagreements over military strategy during a campaign in the Deccan. Although Aurangzeb subsequently ordered his son released and even reprimanded Zulfiqar Khan for over-reaching, the Khan's reputation was not affected in any significant way. See Saqi Musta'id Khan, *Ma'asir-i 'Alamgiri*, ed. Maulavi Agha Ahmad Ali (Calcutta: Asiatic Society of Bengal, 1870–73), pp. 354–59.

[7] Beginning in 1683, Aurangzeb shifted his attention towards a long-standing imperial goal: the conquest of the Deccan. The emperor seemed assured of success especially following the conquest of the independent sultanates of Bijapur (1686) and Golkonda (1687), and the capture and execution of Shambhaji, the leader of the Maratha opposition (1689). Through the 1690s, however, the initiative slowly slipped away from the Mughals. By 1700, the Mughals were trapped in a quagmire of their own making. Unable to crush the Marathas militarily, political prestige dictated that they stay an increasingly hopeless course as long as Aurangzeb was still alive.

[8] During the 1705 siege of Wakhinkheda, for example, the horse he was riding was blown apart by a cannon shot. How did he react? He called for a fresh horse and continued his inspection of the Mughal frontlines.

struck by the depth of his reverence for Aurangzeb, even decades after his death in 1707. Nizam-ul-Mulk clearly felt that he had learned much of what he knew about people, politics, loyalty, leadership and religion through his association with Aurangzeb.[9] The two men, despite a fifty three-year age gap, by the Nizam's account, enjoyed a strong relationship that went all the way back to the Nizam's infancy when Aurangzeb himself personally chose the Nizam's non-noble and birth name—'Mir Qamar-ud-Din'. Other examples of intimate relations abound: when the Nizam was a very young boy, the emperor requested that Ghazi-ud-Din Khan (his father) leave him under Aurangzeb's personal charge for one day a week so that the emperor might train him;[10] when the Nizam was only six years old Aurangzeb granted him his first noble rank;[11] and the emperor took it upon himself on at least two occasions (in 1698 and 1705) to mediate breaches in relations between the Nizam and his estranged father.[12] Such favours—not to mention unusually close contact with the emperor—bred loyalty over and above that of an ordinary *khanazad* (house-born) Mughal nobleman who spent most of his youth imbibing Mughal political and social values while in residence at the imperial court.[13]

Two additional factors, however, may explain the Nizam's unquestioned loyalty to Aurangzeb. First, even as Aurangzeb promoted the Nizam and his father to the highest rungs within the Mughal nobility, he extended his generosity to other members of their extended family as well. Muhammad Amin Khan—who was Ghazi-ud-Din Khan's first cousin and the Nizam's uncle—is a case in point. Within nine years of his arrival in India from Central Asia in 1687, Muhammad Amin Khan was promoted to the much-coveted position of *sadr-us-sudur*—the position once held by the Nizam's grandfather. Later, just prior to Aurangzeb's death, Muhammad Amin Khan was further honoured with the imperial title of 'Chin Muhammad Khan' and another rise in his

[9] Lala Mansaram, *Ma'asir-i Nizami*, fol. 73b.

[10] Murad Ali Taali, *Nizam-ul-Mulk Asaf Jah Awwal* (Hyderabad: Idarah-i Adabiyat-i Urdu, 1944), p. 11.

[11] For this and other marks of imperial favour, see Mir Abu Turab 'Ali, *Hadiqat-ul-'Alam*, Vol. II, p. 49.

[12] *Ibid.*, Vol. II, pp. 49–50.

[13] See generally John F. Richards, 'Norms of Comportment among Mughal Imperial Officers', in *Moral Conduct and Authority*, ed. Barbara Metcalf (Berkeley: University of California Press; 1984), pp. 255–89.

imperial rank.[14] Such examples of imperial favour towards the Nizam's extended circle, including uncles, cousins, nephews and family retainers, abound. Having received seemingly boundless imperial patronage and generosity, could there be any question that the Nizam would not, to use a favourite Mughal expression, be true to his salt?

Second, Aurangzeb's success in drawing the Nizam and his extended family into an ever-closer political relationship led the emperor's sons to foreclose any possibility of a political alliance with them. This further reinforced the Nizam's loyalty to Aurangzeb.

Survival and Isolation in the Post-Aurangzeb Era

Everyone knew that the emperor would not live forever. By the early 1700s Aurangzeb was already in his mid-eighties (an astounding fact given that the average life expectancy at the time was likely not more than thirty years). Having mostly burnt their bridges with Aurangzeb's three surviving sons (Mu'azzam, A'zam and Kam Bakhsh), the Nizam, his father, and their supporters were thus faced with the real possibility that the next emperor would destroy their collective power. Rather than resigning themselves to this fate, or turning belatedly (and most likely futilely) to the task of allying with one of the princes and thus betraying Aurangzeb's trust, the Nizam and Ghazi-ud-Din Khan chose a risky strategy, one for which there was no precedent. They were going to sit out the much-anticipated war of succession, maintaining strict neutrality towards the rival contenders.

At the same time, they prepared themselves for the possibility of princely aggression. Towards this end, the Nizam and his family began stockpiling weapons—especially artillery—in the early 1700s. The buildup did not go unnoticed. In a 1703 letter from Aurangzeb to his grandson, Bidar Bakht, the emperor states:

> . . .Khan Firuz Jang's (i.e. Ghazi-ud-Din Khan) expenses for his followers are greater than the requirements for his rank and salary (*ziyadah az zabit-i mansab wa tankhwah*). I noticed all manner of guns... horsemen with weapons... and many other things, some of which are necessary and others not. As a result I confiscated many of those things.[15]

[14] See generally, Shahnawaz Khan, *Ma'asir-ul-Umara*, ed. Maulavi Mirza Ashraf Ali, Vol. I (Calcutta: Asiatic Society of Bengal, 1888–91), pp. 346–50.

[15] Aurangzeb, *Ruq'at-i 'Alamgiri*, ed. Sayyid Muhammad Abdul Majeed (Kanpur: Matba'-i Qayyumi, 1916), pp. 31–32.

If Aurangzeb's decision to confiscate some weapons proved a set back, it nonetheless was only a temporary one. For, by the time the emperor passed away in February 1707, the Nizam, his father, their extended family and their supporters were ready to implement their plan of armed neutrality.

Upon learning of the emperor's death, the Nizam and Muhammad Amin Khan undertook a series of difficult manoeuvres as they simultaneously negotiated their noble duties and their desire for neutrality. First, they deserted their commander Prince Kam Bakhsh (then governor of Bijapur). They then journeyed to the imperial encampment near Daulatabad where they paid their last respects to Aurangzeb and also congratulated Prince A'zam—who was in the camp at the time—on declaring himself emperor. Under some duress they agreed to accompany Prince A'zam's army northwards to fight against Prince Mu'azzam who, meanwhile, was marching southwards from his stronghold in Kabul. During the journey, however, the Nizam and Muhammad Amin Khan deserted Prince A'zam's army, plundered its supply train, and made off towards the city of Burhanpur where they quietly awaited the outcome of the conflict. Their actions matched those of Ghazi-ud-Din Khan who refused to leave his armed encampment in Daulatabad despite many invitations to also join Prince A'zam's army.

After three months, Prince A'zam was defeated and killed by Prince Mu'azzam at the Battle of Jajau (June 1707). With military momentum and almost all the personnel and financial resources of the Mughal Empire under his control, Prince Mu'azzam now moved towards the Deccan to confront Prince Kam Bakhsh. The outcome of the conflict between the princes was never in doubt (Prince Kam Bakhsh died following a brief battle near the city of Hyderabad). What was uncertain, however, was Prince Mu'azzam's response to Ghazi-ud-Din Khan, the Nizam, and their supporters. Would he order their elimination? Their disgrace and banishment? Or, would he favour forgiveness and magnanimity? In the end, and likely following calculations concerning their military strength, Prince Mu'azzam (now crowned as Emperor Bahadur Shah) chose the third option. It would soon become clear, however, that the rewards and high-ranking assignments granted by Bahadur Shah were nothing more than sops. The Nizam, his family, and their supporters were not going to be trusted in any significant way and they certainly were not going to be admitted into the emperor's inner circle. This was the price for having been so closely associated with Aurangzeb against his sons and grandsons.