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THE MUGHAL 'MANSABDARI' SYSTEM

PERCIVAL SPEAR

In this paper it is proposed to consider the *mansabdari* system as a pattern of a Mughal elite. But before doing this it would seem right to define more closely the sense in which the word 'elite', now almost as diverse in meaning as such words as 'democracy' or 'freedom', is understood.

If we take the word to mean a directing group or class, it has then to be decided in what field this group is to operate. There are elites in different departments of life and at different levels of life. There are general local elites like the country gentry of Victorian and Hanoverian England. But they were not the only elites, for there were religious, professional and mercantile bodies as well. There cannot always be said to be only one elite in each sphere of life. In the religious field, for example, in nineteenth-century Britain there was an Anglican and Scottish Presbyterian elite, with Free Church and Roman Catholic bodies as well. In the world of learning there was the elite of Oxbridge, which overlapped into the worlds of the Church and education. There was also a scientific body overlapping to some extent with Oxbridge, but also independently growing in London and elsewhere. The fact of overlapping does much to confuse the issue. A striking example of this is the near monopoly of the I.C.S. by Oxbridge graduates as the result of the introduction of the examination system and the manœuvres of Benjamin Jowett and Sir Charles Trevelyan. Did Oxbridge then rule India or was it an influence *on*, rather than an actual regulator of, the Indian government?

It would seem that a line should be drawn between influence and control. An elite is a body which controls a particular sphere of life, though it may be influenced by other elites at other levels or in different departments of life. If this be taken as a working definition, and the question of interlocking elites, such as Oxbridge in relation to the government, the Church or India in Victorian England, is ignored, we can proceed to frame questions about the chosen elite itself. We shall first want to know something of its composition, how it was arranged and what work it performed. How was this elite recruited? which raises the question whether it was an elite within an elite, an expression of something more fundamental than itself. From this point its method

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of self-management and retention of power can be considered and finally the reasons for its collapse.

The *mansabdars* were the governing class of the Mughal Empire. They illustrate the fact that the Mughal Empire was not what used to be called an Asiatic despotism, or, in other words, an irresponsible and all-powerful autocracy. Not many oriental monarchies have been wholly irresponsible and few have been all-powerful. The distinction between Asiatic and other despotisms should in fact be relegated to the limbo of historical jargon. Despotisms are despotisms without geographical labels and they, like other political forms, are subject to classification and analysis. An absolute despotism, where the despot can really do what he likes, is in fact a very rare thing. All despots are to a greater or lesser degree the prisoners of the elites which create and sustain them. The Ching emperors of China were dependent on the mandarinate and the mental prisoners of Confucian and Chinese traditions. The apparently irresistible Sultans of Turkey had sharp checks in the Janissaries, the resources of provincial governors and the mental authority of Islamic law. So it was with the Mughal empire. The Emperor Babur, though a descendant of Taimur, had something of a feudal relationship with his Turkish *begs*. His most difficult tasks in India were to persuade his followers to face the hot weather in India after the overthrow of Sultan Ibrahim of Delhi in 1526, and the next year to face the Rajput host of Rana Sangha of Mewar. His son Homayun was virtually the head of a confederation of jealous aristocrats, Turkish, Afghan and local. With the help of some he conquered Gujarat and Bengal; by the action of others he lost the whole empire and fled to political asylum in Persia. His return in 1555 was a modest affair, helped by a temporary political vacuum in north India, and there was nothing in his position, his powers or his personality to suggest that he would long retain his restored position.

It was his son Akbar who really made the empire. He did this not merely by military prowess, although he was a magnetic leader and skilful general. He turned the Mughal government from a foreign imposition by rulers with an alien culture into an Indian regime by means of a political deal with the Rajputs and a new approach to Hindus in general. He converted the old type of empire with its loosely knit feudatories dominated by a powerful personality at the centre into a bureaucracy working to rule and by decree, and operated by a salaried and graded officer corps.[1] A later example of the confederal type of feudal despotism can be seen in the eighteenth-century Afghan Empire of Ahmad Shah Abdali. By military prowess and skill in managing discordant tribes he blew up in a few years an empire

[1] See V. Smith, *Akbar the Great Mogol*, 2nd ed., Oxford, 1902, pp. 354–67.

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which included, besides Afghanistan proper, Baluchistan, Sind, the Punjab, Kashmir and Badakshan. His successors lacked Ahmad Shah's talents and within thirty years this empire had shrunk again to the confines of Afghanistan and Badakshan, with the single addition of Peshawar.[1] It was this bureaucracy (which was organized on the *mansabdari* system) which distinguishes the Mughal Empire from all Indian regimes after the Gupta Empire in the fourth and fifth centuries A.D.

We are fortunate in having a first description of the system by Abu'l Fazl, secretary and confidant[2] of Akbar, who himself had probably much to do with its development, in his political and administrative encyclopedia, *The Ain-i Akbari*. Much more information was given by later writers of the Mughal period which has provided modern scholars with materials both for reconstruction and for argument. The forms of the system with its titles indeed persisted in Hyderabad, Deccan, until the absorption of that state by India in 1948. But this was only an administrative fossil. The content and significance of the system had long disappeared. Thus it has been left to twentieth-century scholars to reconstruct its mechanism and operations.

Certain germs of the system, which provided characteristic features later, are to be found in Turkish central Asian practice. A decimal system was used to classify their horsemen; thus a *khan* commanded 10,000, a *malik* 1,000, and an *amir* 100. Here is to be found both the decimal notation and the idea of numbers determining rank.[3] In the spacious time of Taimur nominal and actual numbers coincided. A *khan* actually did command a sizeable army. But with the break-up of the Empire after Taimur's death in 1404 these numbers could no longer be maintained. Poverty prevented maintenance of the full quota, but pride forbade a reduction in title. So we find officers with high titles commanding small forces. Thus, in the time of Sultan Balban, the *malik* Baq Baq, governor of Budaon (an important position) had the formal command of 10,000, but actually only 4,000 troopers. And these, according to the historian Barani, formed an unusually large contingent.[4] The Delhi Sultanate was relatively powerful until 1398, but thereafter the gap between the title of command and the number commanded became so wide that there was no real relation between the two. This persisted until Babur's day.

It was Akbar who used these materials as the basis for his graded bureaucratic system. From them he took the idea of rank indicated by

[1] See P. Sykes, *History of Afghanistan*, 2 vols, London, 1940, II, 351–91.
[2] V. Smith, *Akbar the Great Mogol*, p. 380.
[3] M. Athar Ali, *The Mughal Nobility under Aurangzeb* [Ali, *Aurangzeb*], London, New York, 1966, p. 38.
[4] *Ibid.* pp. 39–40.

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numbers, and of numbers indicating the command of troops. To this he added a graded system of distinction between rank and obligation to produce troops, and a complete dependence of the *mansabdars* on the government for their maintenance. In the former rather haphazard arrangement a *khan* who commanded a *tomam* or army of 10,000 troopers composed his forces with the followers of ten *maliks* with a thousand men each. Under Akbar's system the commander of 5,000 (*panch hazari*) or any other number was entirely responsible for the number of troops which the figure represented. The contingent was inspected, the horses were branded with the government mark, and he was penalized if he failed to maintain the right number of men or horses or to keep those he had up to standard. A further vital feature of Akbar's system was the financial dependence of the *mansabdars* on the government. For some years Akbar paid all these officers in cash, collecting the land revenue directly through his own officers or *karoris*. His successors found this impracticable in their conditions and substituted for it the system of land assignments.[1] While the government remained vigorous this proved as effective a means of control as that of cash payment. A *mansabdar's* salary was determined by a calculation taking into account both rank and military obligation. Once determined, the officer was given an assignment on the land revenue of a given area. It was not, in fact as well as in theory, a landed estate or a permanent property, but merely a lien on the revenue of that area in lieu of a cash salary. It was, again in fact as well as in theory, resumed at death or dismissal, and a strict account made of the officer's assets against his probable loans from the treasury. In a country where most money was raised from the land in periodic payments, loans for immediate expenses were an integral part of the whole economic structure. The needs of the *mansabdar's* family after his demise were often met by a revenue-free grant of a small parcel of land, perhaps a single village, known as *altamgha*. Nor did the *mansabdar*, once more in fact as well as in theory, retain the same land assignment throughout his tenure of office. They were frequently changed, so that he had no opportunity to develop personal contacts in one area before his assignment was moved somewhere else. He might send his own agents to the new area, but often used men on the spot who knew the local conditions. In either case his relationship to the land was that of cash–nexus, not of landlord–tenant. His relationship to the government was that of a salaried officer subject to orders, and financially tethered to the treasury, which calculated the revenue value of lands against his paper salary, and the chancery which issued the necessary grants.

[1] The use of this term, with the special meaning attached to it, we owe to W. E. Moreland, *India at the death of Akbar*, London, 1920, e.g. pp. 67, 72, 80, 84.

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The *mansabdar* was thus quite definitely an imperial official, subject to orders, and controlled from the centre by very effective financial sanctions. We may now note how the service was organized. According to Abu'l Fazl, His Majesty (Akbar) by divine inspiration chose the numbdr 66 for the number of grades from the Commander of Ten (*Dahbashi*) to the Commander of Ten Thousand (*Dah Hazari*).[1] Only the royal sons, however, held commands of over Five Thousand, so that this figure and rank (*Panch Hazari*) was in fact the highest rank for a subject. The inspiration of the number 66 lay in the fact that under the Arabic system of *abjad* or numerical notation, 66 represents the numerical value of the word Allah. In practice, there were thirty-three grades within the same numerical limits. It has already been noticed that the figure attached to the *mansab* did not mean that that number of troops were required of the officer or that he would be paid for their upkeep. It was, in fact, a definition of rank and status like the words colonel and lieutenant-general in the army, or captain and admiral in the navy. Within the system there were such refinements and gradations, related to what may be called the pay and allowances field, as made the whole system very complicated. There was a wide field, in fact, for 'adjustments' and 'fiddling'. Besides the personal rank of the *mansabdar* called *zat*, there was also a second figure called *sawar*, or horseman. This was never more than the *zat* rank and usually less.[2] Only rarely did it not exist at all. The *sawar* rank related to the number of horsemen the officer must provide, but it was not the exact number. Though related to the actual number required it could also vary, so that this figure not only indicated a service obligation, but a rank within the particular *mansab* itself. It was a rank within a rank. The usual proportion of horsemen required to the number of the *sawar* rank was one-fifth, until the time of Shah Jahan who upgraded it.[3] Thus a man with a *sawar* rank of 3,000 would be required to produce 600 horsemen. You could be, for example, a *mansabdar* with a *zat* rank of 4,000, a *sawar* rank (within the *mansab* rank) of 3,000, actually maintaining 600 horsemen. But the refinements are not yet complete, for how many horses should a trooper provide? There were three grades in this requirement, of one, two, or three horses (*yak*, *du*, *sih aspah*). There was a standard proportion in this regard, the 1,000 horsemen required of a particular *mansabdar*, for instance, being divided in 300 with three horses each, 600 with two horses each and 100 with one horse each, making 2,200 horses in all.[4] But these numbers could be varied and

[1] *Ain-i Akbari*, Book II, Ain 3, tr. H. Blochmann, 2nd ed., Calcutta, 1927, I, 247–59 [*Ain*].
[2] I. H. Qureshi, *Administration of the Mughal Empire*, Karachi, 1966, pp. 92–3.
[3] *Ibid.* pp. 96–7.
[4] *Ibid.* p. 98.

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even doubled, with corresponding variation of salary, so here again was wide scope for adjustments of claims, for promotions and demotions. An example of the working of the system is given by Dr Qureshi in the following terms.[1] A *mansabdar* with a *zat* rank for his *mansab* of 5,000 was called a *Panch Hazari*. Supposing that his *sawar* rank was also 5,000 (common but not invariable), he would, under the system outlined above, have to maintain 1,000 troopers (one fifth of his *sawar* rank). These troopers would have between them 2,200 horses, in the proportions mentioned above, and the *mansabdar* would be paid for their maintenance. The horses were regarded as government property; they were branded with the government mark, and were inspected from time to time.

There was one more complication. The above description assumed that the *mansabdar* in question is paid for twelve months in the year. But this was by no means always the case. Payments could vary from twelve months to as little as five. When a salary was thus reduced, the obligations of the *sawar* rank were correspondingly less. Thus, if the holder of a *sawar* rank which required the maintenance of 1,000 troopers (as above) was paid for only nine months in the year instead of twelve, the troopers' requirement would sink to 750, and the normal horse requirement to 1,650. Thus obligations could be varied within a *sawar* rank itself by the manipulation of pay as well as horse maintenance, just as obligations within the *zat* rank could be varied by manipulations of the *sawar* rank. All these variations of obligations also affected rank and status. When these refinements are realized, it can be seen how complicated the system in fact was, and what a field it contained for claim and counter-claim, for plot and counter-plot. Indeed, had not most of the *mansabdars* been absent from the court on civil or military employments, it is difficult to see how the system could have survived in the welter of claims and resentments which would have accumulated at the centre. As it was, these distinctions served as so many cords of varying strength to bind the serving *mansabdar* to the system by hopes of advancement and fears of ceremonial setbacks. The whole system was ingeniously devised to cloak differences of obligation and the realities of service beneath dignified titles. It was a way of reconciling family and tribal aristocratic pride with the discipline of a bureaucratic system. There is perhaps some analogy with the proliferation of titles in Europe as a cover for the loss by the nobles of hereditary office and power.

These were the devices by which the Empire sought to harness into its service a restless territorial aristocracy diverse in race, creed, community and culture. And what were the motives which induced these

[1] *Ibid.* pp. 98–9.

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men to submit to these controls, appearing at the imperial court with bowed heads and a humility which they would scorn as craven weakness in their own country?[1] One such motive, and I think a major one, was ambition. The imperial service offered a career open to talent, with no officer barred up to provincial governorships and the chief ministries. To remain outside the system meant relegation to one's estates, nothing more than a local celebrity, and no chance of independence through rebellion because of the strength of the system which was being boycotted. While some families, like that of Asaf Khan, the brother-in-law of Jahangir, seemed to have something of a lien on high office, it remained true until the end that immigrant adventurers and local men without influence could and did rise to high office. Appointments never became the monopoly of a group of families as in Venice, and the hereditary element, though present, was not as great as might have been expected. It may also be noted, in reverse, as it were, that, as prospects waned and inducements grew less with the growth of financial stringency in the later Empire from about 1690 onwards, so positive loyalty declined also. A second motive was that of class or clan solidarity. A quite small group such as the Sayyids of Barha, famous for their bravery, but not previously conspicuous in public affairs, found that the imperial service extended and magnified their influence. Other groups of existing standing or reputation, like the Rajput chiefs, found it more satisfying to be ornaments and props of an all-India empire than the rulers of usually distracted courts in distant and barren Rajasthan. Raja Man Singh was a confidant of Akbar as Raja Jai Singh was of Shah Jahan. A tribal group like the Afghan Rohillas of Rohilkund thought the same. Without the empire they were little more than successful marauders, looked upon with suspicion and hostility by the people of their own chosen area of settlement. Within its service they had status, prestige and the possibility of unlimited influence.

A further motive, and a strong one, was that of personal loyalty to the emperor. This arose partly from their personalities, which were remarkable from the coming of Babur in 1526 to the death of Bahadur Shah I in 1712. Such characters provided a powerful catalyst for the Indian desire and capacity for personal devotion. It was fostered by Akbar's skill in throwing a mystique of divinity around the emperor's person and office in line with Persian precedent. The idea also accorded with the general respect for authority in the subcontinent and the acceptance, emotional as well as intellectual, of the belief that a hierarchical society should have a reverential head. Finally perhaps

[1] See Bernier, *Travels in the Mogol Empire*, 2nd ed., revised, London 1934, pp. 260–70, for a description of court etiquette.

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may be mentioned the Persian culture which the *mansabdars* shared, overlaying the various local cultures of the communities from which they had sprung. For Persian in the Mughal period was not only a linguistic and administrative convenience—Persian revenue terms and the use of Persian as a diplomatic language found their way into the Hindu far-south—but a cultural magnet as well. It exercised that fascination which one civilization sometimes exercises over another, leading to admiration, imitation, emulation and a desire to achieve the sense of 'belonging'. And this it did in spite of the handicap of being a language imported by foreign conquerors professing a foreign and unloved creed. Persian values in literature, art, administration, manners and deportment were generally accepted by the upper classes as conferring a title to gentility and good taste, a sense of being 'with it'. To use a homely comparison it presented the sort of fascination for backwoods nobles and chiefs that Beau Nash's school for manners at eighteenth-century Bath did for the bucolic and crude gentry of the shires. Granted this fascination for things and ideas Persian, it is to be noted that the Persian ethos was redolent with the idea of authority, of semi-divine monarchy (going back to the pre-Muslim kings and heroes like Chosroes and Rustum), of rank and order, of bureaucracy and imperialism.

The numbers of the *mansabdars* varied less than one might expect. The *Ain* at the end of Akbar's reign listed 1,800 *mansabdars*, of whom 133 held *mansabs* from 1,000 to 5,000. This was the class denominated *amir* or noble, hence the anglicism of 'omrah' for a Mughal noble from the Arabic plural of *amir*. By Shah Jahan's time there was a jump to 437 in this group. Thereafter the increase was slow, reaching 486 by 1678 and 575 by 1707.[1] Considering that during Aurangzeb's reign the empire absorbed two large Muslim kingdoms in the Deccan, parts of Maharashtra and the Carnatic coastal strip, this was a very moderate increase indeed. It suggests that there was a corps of about 500 high officers, comparable to the higher ranks of the British I.C.S., which really ran the Empire. If we recollect that the I.C.S. (or its earlier equivalents) numbered in all ranks from 800 to 1,200 and then subtract the junior members, we get a total for the British-Indian elite not unlike that for the Mughal.

The composition of the *mansabdar* order was as varied as its ranks and gradations. There was first a division between foreign and home-born officers. W. E. Moreland calculated that 70 per cent of Akbar's *mansabdars* were either foreign-born or the sons of foreigners. The remaining 30 per cent were, in the higher ranks, about equally divided between Hindus and Muslims.[2] This foreign element continued

[1] Ali, *Aurangzeb*, p. 9.

[2] W. E. Moreland, *India at the death of Akbar*, pp. 69–70.

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to the end, the last effective minister of Shah Alam in the 1770s being a Persian immigrant, Mirza Najaf Khan. But their share of appointments tended to decline in favour of men of foreign origin settled for one or two generations. This process was helped by the Empire's expansion in the Deccan which brought in both Deccani Muslims and Marathas. The men of lineage, with their pride of race and clan, tended to keep themselves separate from the country-born, known as *sheikhzadas*. The broad conclusion is that the administration in its higher reaches was in foreign or semi-foreign hands. In the lower ranks, outside the *mansabdari* system, Hindus, as always, predominated. In this respect the British did not replace an indigenous administration by a foreign one, but replaced one foreign regime by another. The trouble, from the Indian point of view, was that it was more foreign and more strict.

But distinctions amongst the *mansabdar* order did not stop there. Among the foreign officers the most prominent were Iranis and Turanis, Persians and Turks. India had long been regarded, since the days of the Sultanate, as a happy hunting ground for enterprising adventurers and emigres. Muslim minority regimes were always on the look-out for promising recruits, uncommitted to any cause and uninvolved in local politics. Babur's Turkish antecedents gave the Turanis a flying start, so to speak, and the unsettled state of Central Asia as well as the openings in India encouraged a steady stream of immigrants. Persia was under the strong Safavi dynasty, but there were still dissidents or aspirants who thought they could better themselves in India. The Turanis had consanguinity and vigour in their favour, the Iranis cultural prestige and intelligence, while both had the advantage, from the government's point of view, of detachment from local issues and interests. Then there were the Afghans, both from their homeland and those already settled in India. But they were not favoured by the emperors, both because it was an Afghan regime which the Mughals had ousted from India after a thirty-year struggle, and because they were considered turbulent and unreliable. Thus the leading factions of the late empire were the Turanis and Iranis, the Afghans only becoming prominent in imperial politics when they emerged as allies of the Afghan invader Ahmad Shah Abdali in the 1750s. In the last years of effective empire it was a Persian, not an Afghan, who directed the state. It was an Afghan who blinded Shah Alam.[1]

Within India itself the Indian Muslims were known as *sheikhzadas*, of whom a half to a quarter claimed the more prestigious name of *Khanzadas* or sons of former *mansabdars*. This Indian Muslim element numbered,

[1] Ghulam Qadir, grandson of the Afghan chief Najib-ad-daulah, who was at one time a supporter of the Afghan invader Ahmad Shah and later chief Mughal minister for nine years.

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according to the *Ain*, about 15 per cent of the whole number of higher officers. If we reckon the descendants of foreign officers as country-born, the proportion by 1700 had perhaps doubled, the balance being made up of Hindus and the really foreign.[1] At first drawn mainly from Turkish families in northern India, they were reinforced in Aurangzeb's time by officers of the Deccan kingdoms who were bribed to change sides by the offer of a *mansab* or who were taken into service after the extinction of the kingdoms. This process was facilitated by the Indian tradition that it was honourable to serve a *de facto* ruler and therefore no dishonour to serve the conqueror of your previous master. Thus Mughal rulers often took the supporters of a rival into service immediately after a decisive battle and it was common for such an event to lead to an avalanche of changed allegiances.[2] It was the *khidmat* or service, which was honourable, rather than allegiance *à outrance* to a particular person. This tradition of Indian public life may perhaps help to explain the epidemic of changing sides which has recently occurred in some Indian legislatures. It was no disgrace to join the winning side provided it really won.

The last constituent of the service was the Hindu element. In Akbar's time they, like the *sheikhzadas*, numbered about 15 per cent of the whole service in its higher ranks.[3] Then they represented Akbar's political deal with the Rajput chiefs and mostly belonged to those clans. There were a few others like the Khattri Raja Todar Mal, the revenue minister, and the Brahmin wit, Raja Birbal. In the seventeenth century the Rajput connection continued, even throughout Aurangzeb's reign. But towards the end their numbers were augmented by the same Aurangzeb who attracted chiefs from the allegedly implacable Marathas with offers of *mansabs*. They came in sufficient numbers to form a distinct element in the whole corps. Unfortunately for Aurangzeb this policy did not pay off as Akbar's similar policy had done with the Rajputs; the Marathas had a different social organisation so that a chief could not necessarily carry his followers, who in the Rajput case were related clansmen, with him.[4] In the reign of Shah Jahan there were only thirteen Maratha *mansabs* of a thousand or more *zat* or 2·9 per cent of the total. In the years 1679 to 1707 there were ninety-six, or 16·7 per cent of the total.

Recruitment to the order was nominally in the hands of the emperor. On occasion a young man from abroad would present himself at the imperial durbar and catch the emperor's eye. He would be enrolled in

[1] Ali, *Aurangzeb*, pp. 16–18.
[2] E.g. after Aurangzeb's defeat of his brother at the battle of Samugarh in 1658.
[3] W. E. Moreland, *India at the death of Akbar*.
[4] Ali, *Aurangzeb*, p. 29.

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