

Paper, Performance, and the State

This book explores the changing socio-cultural world in early modern South Asia, and seeks to locate the agency of the Mughal state in shaping and reproducing these changes. The period between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries saw a marked expansion in the use of paper, pen, and ink, and the introduction of typically innovative terms of engagement between literacy and performative and oral traditions. These developments, it is argued here, prompted the opening up of new spaces of social communication, and led to the development of an early modern public sphere in South Asia, one that was actually both somatic and performative.

In *Paper, Performance, and the State*, the author looks at the markets, tea-stalls, and coffeehouses as important sites of sociability, and examines the shifting and contested understandings of the state that emerged from the diffused performative public sphere. At the same time, he draws attention to the inter-subjective communication in the legal spaces, and their significance in shaping the emergent public sphere. As a space where literacy interacted with performance, the legal order was indeed plural, but the legal pluralism in Mughal India was both enhanced and protected by the state.

Without falling into the trap of state determinism, the work makes a persuasive case for bringing the state back in; but for such a perspective to emerge, it adopts the state-in-society approach, and repositions the state within its social field. Focusing on the socially embedded attributes of the state, this book makes an effort to see how the state's relations with the local power relations impinged on, and reproduced, community identities, identity conflicts, legal pluralism, property relations, and forms of social communication.

Farhat Hasan is Professor of Medieval and Early Modern South Asian History in the Department of History, University of Delhi. The primary field of his inquiry is Mughal India, with particular interests in court culture, identities, and gender relations in the period. His other research interests include Islam in India during the medieval and colonial period, focusing on religious thought and practices. He has also authored the monograph *State and Locality in Mughal India: Power Relations in Western India, c. 1572–1730* published in 2004 (Cambridge University Press).

Cambridge University Press
978-1-316-51681-2 — Paper, Performance, and the State: Social Change and Political Culture
in Mughal India
Farhat Hasan
Frontmatter
[More Information](#)

Paper, Performance, and the State

Social Change and Political
Culture in Mughal India

Farhat Hasan



Cambridge University Press
978-1-316-51681-2 — Paper, Performance, and the State: Social Change and Political Culture
in Mughal India
Farhat Hasan
Frontmatter
[More Information](#)

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

University Printing House, Cambridge CB2 8BS, United Kingdom

One Liberty Plaza, 20th Floor, New York, NY 10006, USA

477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, vic 3207, Australia

314 to 321, 3rd Floor, Plot No.3, Splendor Forum, Jasola District Centre, New Delhi 110025, India

103 Penang Road, #05-06/07, Visioncrest Commercial, Singapore 238467

Cambridge University Press is part of the University of Cambridge.

It furthers the University's mission by disseminating knowledge in the pursuit of education, learning and research at the highest international levels of excellence.

www.cambridge.org

Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9781316516812

© Farhat Hasan 2021

This publication is in copyright. Subject to statutory exception and to the provisions of relevant collective licensing agreements, no reproduction of any part may take place without the written permission of Cambridge University Press.

First published 2021

Printed in India

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

ISBN 978-1-316-51681-2 Hardback

Cambridge University Press has no responsibility for the persistence or accuracy of URLs for external or third-party internet websites referred to in this publication, and does not guarantee that any content on such websites is, or will remain, accurate or appropriate.

Cambridge University Press
978-1-316-51681-2 — Paper, Performance, and the State: Social Change and Political Culture
in Mughal India
Farhat Hasan
Frontmatter
[More Information](#)

For my spouse, Fauzia, and our daughters, Sana and Mariam
The three women in my life, who inspire, enrich, and complete me!

Contents

<i>Acknowledgements</i>	ix
<i>List of Abbreviations</i>	xiii
<i>A Note on Transliteration</i>	xv
1. Introduction	1
2. Property and Social Relations: Litigations and Disputes at the <i>Qāzi</i> 's Court	13
3. Law as Contested Communication: Literacy, Performativity, and the Legal Order	39
4. Embodiment, Sensoriality, and the Public Sphere: Shifting Popular Perceptions of the State	67
5. State Formation from Below: Authority and Culture in Micro-Spaces	96
6. Towards a Conclusion: The Project of the Nation-State and the Mughal Historian	121
<i>Bibliography</i>	132
<i>Index</i>	153

Acknowledgements

So many people have contributed to the present book with constructive inputs, suggestions for improvement, and points of substantive criticism that it is with some embarrassment that I claim to be its author. In the given space not all of them can be mentioned by name, but they would be present whenever the book, or portions thereof, meets the expectations of the reader. Among those who helped shape my ideas and encouraged me to refine my arguments are my teachers, colleagues, family, friends, and students. It is a matter of no small satisfaction that one of my gurus, Gordon Johnson, read some chapters and found them worth the effort. His suggestions were, as always, constructive, and encouraged me to step beyond the comfort of my intellectual boundaries. Irfan Habib has been my guru since I was a graduate student at the Centre for Advanced Study in History (Aligarh Muslim University, Aligarh), and though he sees me as an errant pupil, he has always tolerated the differences in our perspectives on Indian history. He was generous with his time and knowledge, always suggesting new sources, and ever so enthusiastically drawing attention to inconsistencies in my work. Over the years, I have found inspiration in the work of Muzaffar Alam and Sanjay Subrahmanyam. They generously welcomed my academic interventions, and I would like to take this opportunity to thank them both. I have met up with Muzaffar Sahib several times at seminars and conferences, and discussions with him have always been most refreshing and thought-provoking. I would also like to thank Eugene Irschik for taking the time and effort to discuss my work in detail over emails, and his suggestions have helped me reposition my work within a wider inter-disciplinary framework.

Among my colleagues at Delhi University, Shahid Amin has been a guiding light not just for me, but for many of my colleagues here. He has an infectious child-like curiosity; there is scarcely any theme in history which does not excite him, and on which he does not have an interesting observation, a stunning aside, or a far-reaching suggestion. I have had many conversations with him, and these have certainly motivated me to make my story here more complex and interesting. I recall with particular fondness the support and encouragement that Upinder Singh gave me when she was our Head of Department, but, more importantly, she organized several workshops and conferences at Delhi University where I tested my formulations, and received suggestions and feedback in the light of which I revised my work. I would like to thank

x *Acknowledgements*

Seema Alavi, Anshu Malhotra, Aparna Balachandran, and Upinder for our coffeehouse meetings where we shared our unfinished work and our academic perplexities, while ruefully reminding ourselves of how the world around us was rapidly changing for the worse. They are not only accomplished scholars but also fine human beings!

The discussion on property relations and disputes in this book is a revised version of ideas that were first written for a conference on ‘Changing Concepts of Landed Property in South Asia: Perspectives from History’, organized by the University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, in 2014. I am grateful to Faisal Chaudhry for inviting me to the conference, and though I could not attend it, I was able to send the paper. He read it with rigor, and his detailed comments certainly helped improve the discussion here. Faisal has an unusually rich understanding of the concepts of property in South Asian history, and discussing with him the issues concerning property relations in Mughal India has been an enriching experience.

Some of the issues I raise here concerning law and legal order were first discussed at a conference on law and diversity in Vienna. I am grateful to Thomas Ertl and Gijs Kruitzer for the invitation, and to the participants who commented on my presentation; in particular, I would like to thank Sumit Guha, Ali Anooshahr, Blain Auer, Indrani Chatterjee, Aparna Balachandran, and Najaf Haider for their helpful suggestions. The Mughal legal order on which I devote a chapter in the book was also discussed at a conference to which I had been invited by the Institute for International Law and the Humanities (University of Melbourne) in 2019. I had several engaging discussions on my presentation with Adil Hasan Khan, Sandhya Pahuja, Seema Alavi, Shaun McVeigh, and Moin Nizami. I am grateful to all of them for helping me develop a better grasp of the complex issues in legal pluralism in pre-colonial political formations.

I count myself blessed to be part of ‘The Indo-European Advanced Research Network’ which holds annual workshops where scholars share notes, and discuss their work with other members. I am grateful to Lakshmi Subramanian for having me on board, and for giving me this rare privilege of sharing my work with accomplished scholars in the field. Given our shared interests, her interventions have always been very significant, and with her wide range of scholarship, she helps me place my work within larger inter-regional perspectives. I have benefitted immensely from the discussions at these annual workshops, and I would particularly like to thank the following for their comments and suggestions: Yannick Le Marchand, Sebouh Aslanian, Pierrs Gervais, Samuel Jube, and Santanu Sengupta.

Discussions with young scholars who share my interests and approach to the history of the early modern period have always been enlightening and bring fresh perspectives to my understanding of the history of the period. I would like to thank Shivangini Tandon, Abhishek Kaicker, and Prathayay Nath for providing me with inputs, both orally and in print, that have helped me steer my research into exciting new directions. Shivangini was also particularly helpful in improving my reading of

Cambridge University Press
 978-1-316-51681-2 — Paper, Performance, and the State: Social Change and Political Culture
 in Mughal India
 Farhat Hasan
 Frontmatter
[More Information](#)

Acknowledgements xi

some of the Braj sources that I consulted for this work. My teachers, colleagues, and friends at Aligarh have always been generous with their support and encouragement. I would particularly like to thank Shireen Moosvi, Ishrat Alam, Syed Ali Nadeem Rezavi, S. Jabir Raza, and Mohd. Sajjad. I also thank the following young scholars for helping me locate sources, and for drawing attention to sources that had eluded me: Priyanka Khanna, Huma Hasan, Heena Goswami, and Lubna Irfan.

I would like to place on record my gratitude to the staff of the following libraries and archives for allowing me access to their holdings: National Archives of India (New Delhi), Centre for Advanced Study in History (Aligarh Muslim University, Aligarh), Maulana Azad Library (Aligarh Muslim University, Aligarh), University of Delhi Library (New Delhi), British Museum and India Office Library (London), and Raza Library (Rampur). I would like to acknowledge the assistance of Syed Farid Ahmad, Deputy Director, National Archives of India, in ensuring prompt delivery of documents, and even those that were not easy to recover from the pile of documents that few in the Archives could read or understand.

The world had changed by the time this book reached its final stages. The Covid-19 pandemic had taken many lives, and people in large numbers lost their livelihoods. In my country at least, an indifferent state and shoddy preparedness made the situation so much worse for the ordinary citizens. These developments raise questions about the relevance of academic activities, and pose fresh challenges about how to make teaching and research meaningful in this fast-changing world. In India, for sure, these questions have taken on an added significance in view of the resurgence of violence against students, demonization of academics and activists, and suppression of dissent by the regime in power. Dubbed and demonized as ‘anti-nationals’ (*desh-drohi*), ‘urban naxals’, and ‘gang of nation-breakers’ (*tukde tukde gang*), students, women, and activists are at the forefront of the movement to reclaim democratic and inclusive spaces in India. To them, vilified by the state and subjected to its coercive powers, I owe a special debt of gratitude, for they give me hope, dreams, and the resolve to work in times that are indeed quite bleak. Their struggles are mine too; if they fail, I fail too – as a teacher and an academic.

I would like to thank Qudsia Ahmed of Cambridge University Press for competently handling the publication of this book, and for taking personal interest in its timely and efficient publication. She meticulously looked into all the details that go into the publication of a book, and has ensured that this book meets the high standards of the Press. Sohini Ghosh has supported her well, and has worked diligently to ensure timely publication. I am grateful to her as well.

Finally, I acknowledge the support and encouragement of my family, and, at the risk of sounding formal, let me conclude with a big thank you to Fauzia, Sana, Hamza, and Mariam. But for their support and encouragement, this work could never have been completed.

Abbreviations

AMU	Aligarh Muslim University, Aligarh (Uttar Pradesh)
BM	British Museum (London)
BN	Bibliothèque Nationale (Paris)
CSSH	<i>Comparative Studies in Society and History</i>
IESHR	<i>Indian Economic and Social History Review</i>
IOR	India Office Records and Library (London)
JESHO	<i>Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient</i>
JRAS	<i>Journal of Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland</i>
MAS	<i>Modern Asian Studies</i>
NAI	National Archives of India (New Delhi)
PIHC	<i>Proceedings of the Indian History Congress</i>
RSA	Rajasthan State Archives, Bikaner (Rajasthan)

A Note on Transliteration

I have kept diacritical marks to the minimum when transliterating Persian, Urdu, Hindi, and Arabic words. Even so, in the case of Persian and Urdu words, I have indicated long vowels with a stroke above the letters to help the reader grasp the words in their original language. For instance, the Persian word for ‘water’ is written here as: *āb*. The presence of *‘ain* in a Persian or an Urdu word is indicated by: ‘. The Islamic festival of Eid is written here as: ‘Īd. The presence of *hamzah* in a word is indicated by: ‘; for example, the word for ‘invisible’ in Persian and Urdu is written as: *ghā’ib*. I have avoided using diacritical marks for names of persons and places.