



ISSN 2278 – 0211 (Online)

## Mughal Princes and State Formation

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### **Abstract:**

*Most scholars have either located or questioned the Mughal Empire's remarkable strength by examining its administrative and political institutions (such as the jagirdari, mansabdari, legal, and taxation systems). In contrast, networks were the real foundation upon which the Mughal Empire, like its Ottoman and Safavid contemporaries, was erected and maintained. Unlike the case of the Ottoman and Safavid Empires, however, Mughal princes were key factors in forging and working the networks that supported Mughal rule. The relationship between empire and networks through the institution of the Mughal Prince and against a backdrop of princely retinue construction, rebellion against the emperor, and wars of succession have played an important role. My article traces this process between 1569 and 1657, over three generations of imperial princes. Beyond a re-examination of the history of the Mughal Empire*

Mughal princes forged and re-forged a layered, shifting political, religious, cultural and economic networks that provided Mughals with a stable empire across successive generations. This remarkable strength and longevity of Mughal period can be traced to the Mughals' ability to wield and retain the support of these variegated networks over the course of almost 200 years. The Mughal princes, who were the vital players in the imperial system, were involved in a highly competitive and open-ended system of dynastic succession in which the ultimate rule of the game was brutally simple: to reign or to die. Or, in the phrasing of a Persian saying: *ya takht ya tabut* (either throne or funeral bier). These princes were trained to take part in an intra-familial "arms-race" that never abated till it was clear who would succeed to the coveted crown. This race to the throne made them involve in their construction of powerful princely retinues and the broadest possible array of imperial and sub-imperial support networks. The princes not only competed with each other but at times they also often found themselves in competition with their father, the emperor. Mughal emperors sought to control their sons, fearing the empire would suffer from their mutual hostility. However, none of the emperors namely, Akbar, Jahangir and Shah Jahan — managed to stave off rebellions by their sons. Instead of weakening Mughal power, princely rebellions helped consolidate overall imperial strength. Besides inaugurating new and intense rounds of retinue and network construction by rebellious princes, hostilities within the imperial family, it also resulted in vigorous political and military counter-initiatives by embattled emperors. The frenetic competitive energy that marked the building of strong princely retinues and networks, rebellion against the emperor, and wars of succession ultimately proved to be a crucial source for the production and reproduction of Mughal power. In other words, the Mughal Empire's success and dynamism lay precisely in affording free rein to the impulses and consequences surrounding forceful "dynastic darwinism", the theory of survival of the fittest and ablest.

The role played by princes in the forging of Mughal imperial power has been ignored by most scholars. As a result, individual princely efforts aimed at building retinues and networks have been totally overlooked. There has been a widespread notion that princes did not play a distinctive role within the Mughal Empire. They were considered a part of this super structure. This is perhaps best epitomized by the consistent conflation of princes with either the emperor's might or with the Mughal nobility.<sup>1</sup> In a similar vein, a tendency to assume the debilitating effects of princely succession struggles has served to mask the importance of intra-familial conflict to the formation of the Mughal Empire.<sup>2</sup> Emperors refused to institute measures aimed at curbing the independence of these prince. This is in

<sup>1</sup> John F. Richards, *The Mughal Empire* (Cambridge, 1993)

<sup>2</sup> Such ideas may be traced to a long held bias in Western European writings favoring the institution of primogeniture over all other modes of succession. See generally, Peter Calvert, *The Process of Political Succession* (London, 1987), 89. In keeping with this view, the inability of the Mughals to institute a more ordered form of succession has been interpreted both as a sign of Mughal inefficiency and a hidebound adherence to Islamic and Turco-Mongol political orthodoxy (which stipulated that every son have an equal right to his father's patrimony). For the most recent burnishing of this view, see Neeru Misra. See *Succession and Imperial leadership among the Mughals, 1526-1707* (Delhi, 1993).

sharp contrast to the actions of the Ottomans and the Safavids who increasingly restricted the free movement of princes of the blood.<sup>3</sup> Mughal emperors also expressed strong disapproval of the brutal treatment meted out to individual Ottoman and Safavid princes.<sup>4</sup> The behavior of the Mughals raises the question as to why they eschewed the Ottoman-Safavid model of a controlled and stable mode of dynastic succession. The process of training a Mughal prince to ascend the imperial throne began the day that he was born and never ceased through the duration of his life as a prince. The prince was a potential future emperor, and so broad similarities marked their early education, their access to powerful noblemen (usually in the form of *ataliqs* or guardians), and their visibility at the imperial court. These princes received early and unrelenting exposure to the psychological uncertainty that accompanied an open-ended system of succession. Their lives ultimately depended on their own achievements and their ability to out-manuever any and every opponent, these Mughal princes were honed from early on to be independent-minded, tough and ruthless. These traits would be especially important following the emperor's decision to accord them adult status—which usually occurred any time between the ages of fourteen and seventeen. Adult status inaugurated limits on the emperor's authority to meddle and control the actions of his sons. It also signaled a prince's graduation from being the recipient of a relatively low daily stipend to becoming one of the wealthiest individuals in the empire after the emperor. Furthermore, it marked the beginning of full-blown efforts by now resource rich princes to distinguish themselves from one another as well as from their father. The princely search for "power"<sup>5</sup> was never systematically articulated in instruction manuals. Princes generally sought to fulfill their goal of ascending the imperial throne by recourse to two broad modes of action. The first entailed the construction of a strong and resilient princely retinue. The second necessitated forging expansive political, religious, social, economic, and ethnic networks of support and patronage. Failure to engage in both actions simultaneously was the surest way to fall behind in the race to the Mughal throne. These retinues and networks played a very important role in the Mughal context. At the center of the retinue was the figure of the Mughal prince and his immediate family. All relationships radiated outwards from this central core with proximity and access to the person of the prince determining the importance of an individual within the retinue's hierarchy. In general, however, princely retinues comprised two broad circles. The prince generally personally recruited these individuals to serve under him. The expectation naturally was that their fortunes would irretrievably rise or fall with those of their royal master. For the most part, Mughal princes sought to keep this group of individuals free from competing loyalties vis-à-vis either the emperor or their royal brothers. Unfortunately, this was not always possible especially if an imperial opponent was endowed with superior financial resources. On occasion, princes therefore embarked on a deliberate strategy of infiltrating their loyalists into the imperial establishment in an effort to either reduce their own financial commitments or have loyalists in place for a future war of succession. Although such transferees to the imperial service were no longer considered members of a prince's retinue, they and their own servitors would be expected to support their former master when the time came to make a bid for the Mughal throne. The second, and much larger, group of retinue members included individuals representing the entire spectrum of professional and menial responsibilities. These individuals were usually denied easy access to the prince. The more important among them included horse-breeders, eunuchs, soldiers, weapons manufacturers, painters, performing artists, accountants, clerks, storekeepers, cooks, artisans, and tailors. Although these individuals fulfilled important tasks within the larger context of a princely retinue, they often toiled anonymously and with little recognition. It was rare for any one individual in this group to be considered indispensable to the workings of the princely retinue. Not surprisingly, unlike members of the first group of princely retainers, individuals in the second category tended to be almost entirely guided by transactional or single-interest loyalties.<sup>22</sup> Under these circumstances, it is not hard to surmise that there was a fair amount of inward and outward mobility at the edges of a princely retinue. At the end of the day, however, no matter whether one was in the first or second circle of retainers, the *raison d'être* of the retinue as a whole revolved around protecting the political interests of the prince and enhancing the possibility of a successful accession to the Mughal throne. Despite these caveats, the study of princely retinues still affords sufficient insights into the manner in which Mughal princely and dynastic power were concurrently forged. As a result, great emphasis was placed on maintaining the overall integrity of retinues and ensuring that the people who served in them were well cared for and protected. In other words, retinues were recognized to be miniature versions of the larger empire. It was against the backdrop of retinue construction that a prince was expected to hone and demonstrate their administrative and political skills.<sup>6</sup> Besides providing a critical stage to audition a prince's talents, retinues also were important in specifying particular political or ideological positions. For example, Parvez, Khurram and Aurangzeb projected their support or opposition to particular military endeavors by either deploying their retinues at the forefront of military activities or, alternatively, minimizing their participation. In a similar vein, Aurangzeb used his retinue to delineate an image of Islamic orthodoxy that was in sharp contrast to the more latitudinarian beliefs expressed by his primary competitor, Dara Shikoh. The upshot of such endeavors was to not only fashion a space in which Mughal policies could be debated but also provide non-royals

<sup>3</sup> Leslie Pierce, *The Imperial Harem: Women and Sovereignty in the Ottoman Empire* (New York, 1993). See Rogers (Delhi, 1978), Ily, Anthony Aldershot, *The Structure of the Ottoman Dynasty* (New York: 1982)

<sup>4</sup> In 1615, Emperor Jahangir greeted the news that Shah Abbas of the Safavid dynasty had executed his eldest son after having incarcerated him some years earlier with "great bewilderment." Jahangir's surprise is hinted at in his inquiry as to how the Safavids could possibly hope to rule if they continued to deprive their princes of an active political role. See generally, Nuruddin Muhammad Jahangir, *Tuyuk-i Jahangiri*, English trans. by Alexander Rogers (Delhi, 1978),

<sup>5</sup> term "power" following Max Weber, as the potential for a person or group to realize their will against opposition. See generally, Max Weber, *From Max Weber. Essays on Sociology* (New York, 1949).

<sup>6</sup> see Burton Stein, "State Formation and Economy Reconsidered: Part One," *Modern Asian Studies*, 19(3), 1985, 392 and Nicholas Dirks, *The Hollow Crown: Ethnography of an Indian Kingdom* (Cambridge, 1987), 154.

with choices as to the future direction of the empire through support of a particular princely candidate. Between the founding of the Mughal Empire in 1526 and continuing through to the second decade of the eighteenth century, Mughal princes were freely farmed out to the provinces to serve as generals, governors and imperial envoys. Their retinues always accompanied princes on these assignments. Retinues inevitably were at the forefront of a prince's efforts to assert his authority. Whether this translated into the retinue taking charge of field operations against the enemy, conducting intelligence operations, ensuring the smooth collection of financial dues, carrying out a prince's commands, or providing a counterpoise to disgruntled elements within the Mughal provincial administration, the prince's reliance on his own loyalists was heavy. In situations where Mughal intra-familial relations were especially strained or a war of succession was impending, the dependence on a retinue only increased. Although provincial assignments provided princes with experience and a chance to familiarize themselves with the workings of the empire, these stints also served as invaluable apprenticeships for high-ranking members of a prince's retinue. This was significant because a successful bid for the Mughal throne usually resulted in the wholesale induction and promotion of large numbers of princely retainers into the ranks of the imperial nobility. Once they were accommodated within the imperial service, these former princely retainers were inevitably posted throughout the empire. In order to be qualified for these burdens, however, the Mughals had to find a way to afford princely retainers (as also their royal master) a way to learn the skills needed to run an imperial enterprise. Service in princely retinues promised just such an opportunity. The most important function of princely retinues, however, lay in their role as hinges between their masters and a broad array of networks. It helps that princes were willing to use their retinues to employ and patronize standout individuals and/or groups who would both serve under them and extend the geographical reach of their power through access to broader sets of networks. Naturally, preference was given to ones not already linked up to competing princes or the emperor.<sup>26</sup> Included among the groups who attached themselves to the larger Mughal enterprise after serving stints in princely retinues were Afghans, Mirzais, Dakhnis, Shaikhzadas, Kashmiris, Marathas, Bundelas and Gaur Rajputs. Sub-groups of Muslim sufis, Islamic clerics, Jain merchants, and recently immigrated Iranian intellectuals were similarly harnessed through service in princely retinues. Not surprisingly, imperial expansion into new regions, during the last decade of the sixteenth and the first-half of the seventeenth-century, was often accompanied by local level recruitment drives by individual princes. The presence of expansive princely retinues thus provided the backdrop against which a wide range of political, ethnic and class outsiders were first assimilated, acculturated and socialized within the Mughal system.

Following Emirbayer and Goodwin's description, the term "network" can be used to refer to groups of actors who are linked together by specific social relations—18 for example, communicative, power, affectual, or exchange relations—or social ties.<sup>27</sup> In spatial terms, networks ran the whole gamut from ones that extended across the length of the empire (intellectual, religious and trading networks) to others that were confined to a particular region or even a distinct locality (generally ethnic and kinship networks). The aim of every Mughal prince was to forge ties to the broadest set of networks in the hope that these ties would collectively enable a successful accession. A rich and complex sub-field within Sociology,<sup>28</sup> network analysis offers a powerful analytical tool through which to reexamine questions of early-modern state formation in South Asia. The assumption is that social structures or large-scale social formations are a "network of networks" formed and created through social interactions and interpersonal relations.<sup>30</sup> This study has sought to echo these impulses by focusing on the figure of the Mughal prince and his interlinking efforts to build retinues and cultivate the support of variegated sets of networks. The importance of networks to the Mughal state can be best explained by their central role in expediting imperial political, military and economic control at the local level. In addition, networks were crucial in linking the center and the peripheries of the empire; forcing the empire to acknowledge and accommodate potential sources of opposition; and, ultimately determining which Mughal prince would ascend the imperial throne. Mughal princes were especially cognizant of the latter point—namely that a successful accession hinged on forging powerful networks of support throughout the empire. A key piece of evidence supporting the idea that princes recognized the importance of cultivating networks is provided by the vigorous attempts to entice broadly connected individuals or groups into their retinues. Employment in retinues, however, constituted only one path through which princes sought to develop extensive patron-client, leader-follower linkages. Other ways included the provision of cash, land and other gifts; marital alliances; recommendations for employment in the imperial service; and promises of protection from any manner of enemies. Not surprisingly, princely efforts to harness the broadest possible array of political, social, religious and economic networks were not only spread over many years (if not decades) but also over an extensive geographic terrain. Since political loyalty and support could never be assumed, princes were constantly renewing their ties to previously favored networks. The complexity of a prince's task is perhaps best gauged by the knowledge that networks themselves were neither fixed nor timeless but subject to constant molding, morphing and, on occasion, destruction. To add to a prince's difficulties, all efforts were invariably undertaken in the face of intense competition from their father or brothers.<sup>7</sup> Given the life-threatening implications of a failure to cultivate and re-cultivate networks of support, princes were invariably intensely protective of their endeavors.

<sup>7</sup> Mughal princes prized engaging and anchoring new networks to their cause. At the same time, they rarely ignored opportunities to compete for the favor of networks that had already expressed allegiance to another prince or to the emperor. Prominent examples in this regard are the successful efforts by both Princes Shuja and Aurangzeb, during the 1640s and 1650s, to contest their older brother's close ties to the Qadiri sufi network. Likewise, in the 1590s, Prince Salim not only actively wooed Afghans in the service of his brother,

Daniyal, but also successfully recruited large numbers of Barha Sayyids who were especially respected by the Emperor Akbar for their courage and resourcefulness in battle.

The decision to send princes away from the imperial court was one of the means by which the Mughals sought to dampen competitive pressures between siblings and disperse their efforts at retinue building and networking. Princes generally valued, and occasionally begged for, such opportunities to either recoup earlier losses or steel themselves for a future war of succession. "Send me away from the court by any means you can," said Prince Aurangzeb to the emperor's grand-wazir in 1644, "for I have lost my sleep and peace of mind".<sup>8</sup> On occasion, however, physical separation did not live up to a prince's expectations. In such situations, princes invariably resorted to rebelling against their fathers. Lest there be any doubt, however, rebellion was always a desperate and final expedient. A prince never embarked on such a venture without weighing its impact on his carefully nurtured relationships and prospects for ultimately ascending the Mughal throne. For all the disruptive qualities inherent in a princely rebellion, rebellion did offer certain invaluable long-term advantages for princes. Besides affording a prince and his supporters real military and political experience against an inevitably stronger imperial foe, rebellion also added a sense of urgency to princely efforts aimed at connecting with additional sets of networks— networks that a prince might have otherwise either overlooked or never had an opportunity to come in contact with. The benefits of this are apparent from the fact that Jahangir, Shah Jahan and Aurangzeb, all of whom ascended the Mughal throne following rebellions against their fathers, profited from the contacts and connections they had forged either in preparation for rebellion or in actual rebellious opposition. Significantly, following each instance of a successful or failed princely rebellion, the empire ended up stronger than previously. Besides drawing new groups into the ambit of Mughal politics, rebellions tied formerly peripheral areas more closely to the imperial center.

This process occurred in at least two ways. First, the very presence of princes and their retainues constituted a powerful symbol of Mughal dynastic aspirations and authority in regions otherwise far removed from the imperial court. Second, princes often attempted to vigorously apply imperial administrative mechanisms in response to immediate financial and political pressures. Crucially, such short-term expedients helped spur other long-term entrenching processes of Mughal political and administrative control. In the final analysis, Mughal unwillingness to rein in their sons only makes sense when considered against the positive impact that princely competition and rebellion had on processes of imperial state formation and consolidation.

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<sup>8</sup> Four years later Prince Shuja made a similar plea to be transferred out of the imperial court and to Bengal. Both princes' requests occurred against a backdrop of increased political pressure on their retainues and networks from their eldest brother, Prince Dara Shikoh, who happened to be his father's designated heir and favorite son