

Understanding some facets of Mughal Court Culture in the European Travel Accounts

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Abstract-This paper looks into the Mughal Court Culture, mainly from 15th to 17th century, through the study of the European Travel Accounts. The Mughal court was one place where various activities took place on a daily basis. They had several dynamics attached to it. It was used to give promotions, appointments, hearing of petitions, punishments to offenders, exchanging of gifts, reception of ambassadors etc. This was the platform to socialize with various other people. Different festivals and rituals were performed there as well. It was also used as an effective tool to discipline the men, secure their services and faithfulness. It also helped in projecting the Emperor's public image. It was used as a medium to demonstrate the Emperor's grandeur, might and wealth. A set of norms were in place, starting with the sitting arrangements to the dresses they adored or to the manners and etiquettes as one was to approach the king.

Keyword: Court Culture, European travellers, festivals, jharoka-darshan, Mughal culture, nau ruz.

I.INTRODUCTION

“The residence, retinue and courtiers of a sovereign; sovereign and councillors, constituting the ruling power; assembly held by a sovereign.”

“Court” as defined by the Oxford dictionary.

European traveller's account provides us with a great counter-part to our understanding of the Mughal Court culture. There were drastic changes during the European presence in the country. They came as traders, mercenaries, travellers and missionaries in this foreign land. Some also lived amongst Indians, bought land estates, and wedded the local women, which often led them to settle down. They also showed great intellectual curiosity. Some of these men studied Indian society, wrote voluminously about it and also made some keen interesting observations which they recorded in their local European languages. They introduced a new literary genre to the previously existing “Indo-Persian” literary culture and other indigenous writings.

They were not writing to please the reigning Emperor nor were they obliged to any patronage here. Therefore, they were more explicit in recording the corrupt officials, the flaws of the Empire, the competing palace factions and scandals and various plots for assassinating their rivals. However, we have to keep in mind how they were most of the times unaware of the society and this new environment. They examined the surroundings as an outsider and were often found comparing the functioning of Hindustan with their own native place on countless occasions.

Court was like a sacred space, a holy place, where on entering they had to leave their shoes behind. They also made sure to maintain complete temperance and silence inside the court, again resembling a place of worship. There was some particular distance to be maintained while approaching the throne and not everyone was given the privilege of actually talking to the Emperor. It was reserved for a very few men and was therefore considered as “a mark of high status”. Thomas Roe, an English ambassador at the time of Jahangir, tells us how the guards at the entrance would make sure to smell each courtier before they entered and would not allow anyone who had even a slight smell of alcohol.

The court was usually a site where each and every activity was enacted on a large scale, thus appearing as theatrical to an outsider. Sir Thomas Roe quickly noted,

“This sitting out hath soe much affinitie with a theatre-the manner of the king in his gallery; the great men lifted on a stage as actors; the vulgar below gazing on.”¹

Hence, this theatrical portrayal of the court also justifies their constant need for seeking legitimacy. The Mughal court often had vision of social order, where it separated itself from the rest of its subjects.

¹ Sir Thomas Roe, *The Embassy of Sir Thomas Roe to India 1615-1619*, ed. William Foster, Oxford University Press, London, 1926.

Hence, it made the State as the highest layer of society. Therefore, any order given in the court was that of the highest social order and hence, its detailed, thorough, observation of its rituals and etiquettes was the tool for its preservation.² Therefore, as Prof Harbans Mukhia points out, “the court and its culture stood in splendid isolation from the rest of society, though supported by it, some what like a firm of oil on water; and in some very profound ways, the two merged with each other and became inseparable.”³

II. FESTIVALS

Although the Safavid Empire in Iran (1501-1722) was neither the military nor the economic equal of the Mughal Empire in India, its cultural influence was substantial. Beyond material productions for the court and market, however, Iranian influence penetrated the customs and activities of everyday life. The festival of Nau Ruz, marking the beginning of spring (March 20 or 21) and of the Iranian New year, held an important place in the Mughal calendar. To examine this festival to uncover a different but equally significant impact of Safavid Iran on the culture of Mughal India.

As the beginning of spring and of the new year, Nau Ruz was both a remembrance of the golden past and a promise of the paradise to come. Under the Sassanids the common people donned new clothes and exchanged gifts while at court the kings conferred titles and ranks on the noble and wealthy and received in return gifts and presents.⁴

The celebration of Nau Ruz during the Mughal Period reflected the complex cultural relationship between Iran and India in the early modern world. While it ended up being the most popular festival in India during the middle years of Mughal rule, under the emperors Akbar, Jahangir and Shah Jahan, it was slow to be adopted by the first two emperors (Babur and Humayun) and it was abolished by the last of the great Mughals (the emperor Aurangzeb). It was Akbar, who established the format for the celebration of Nau Ruz in early modern India, a

format that was followed for the next seventy-five years.

Whenever Akbar found himself in his new capital, he appears to have celebrated the New Year in an elaborate manner. In March 1582, for example, Father Monserrate, the Portuguese Jesuit, writes down about a exquisite celebration that he witnesses. He also mentions how in the next year, that is, 1583, the festivities was expanded, in which it lasted for nineteen days. It was observed how the high ranking Amirs competed with each other in decorating the public building of the palace fortress. In response to this, on the the last day of the celebration, Akbar held a grand assembly and presented the Amirs and the other officials with horses, robes of honour, and increased their rank and salary. The emperor visited the mansions of the great amirs, one after another, where, the nobles offered rich cloth from Khurasan, and Iraq. They also presented him with precious “pearls, rubies, and gold; and elephants, camels and Arabian horses”.⁵

This elaborate expansion of the New Year’s festival seems to have been part of Akbar’s effort to transform the Mughal state. In addition to a new calendar, Akbar also introduced on 21 March 1584 a new era (the Ilahi or Divine). Since the emperor’s accession had occurred in mid-February 1556, “it was decided to make the vernal equinox the date both of his accession and of the start of the new era.”⁶ Hence, two major reasons for such an elaborate and an expanded celebration were, the accession of the emperor (*jashan-i julus*) and the New Year (*jashan-i nau ruz*).

However, Abul Fazl states that the emperor introduced the solar calendar primarily for economic reasons. In an agrarian economy it was important to have the official calendar coincide with the seasons. Since the solar calendar is 11 days longer than the lunar calendar, there is approximately 31 lunar years in every 30 solar years and, as a result, the peasant under the Hejira reckoning would be asked to pay an extra year’s tax.⁷ Hence, for Abul Fazl, the introduction of solar calendar was a way of bringing order and justice to the administration of the land

² Harbans Mukhia, *The Mughals of India*, Blackwell Publishing, Malden, 2004, p. 75.

³ Ibid., p. 157.

⁴ Stephen P. Blake, ‘Nau Ruz in Mughal India’, *Exploring Medieval India Sixteenth to Eighteenth Centuries, Culture, Gender, Regional Patterns*, ed. Meena Bhargava, Orient Blackswan, New Delhi, 2010, pp. 169-70.

⁵ Abul Fazl, *The Akbar Nama*, vol. 3, tr. H. Beveridge, Royal Asiatic Society of Bengal, Calcutta, 1902, p. 589.

⁶ Abul Fazl, *Ain-i Akbari*, vol. 2, ed. & tr. H. Blochmann, Atlantic Publishers and Distributors, New Delhi, 1989, pp. 1-2 and 29-32.

⁷ S. P. Blake, ‘Nau Ruz in Mughal India’, p. 176

revenue system, as he justifies the introduction of new era by Il-Khanids in Iran.

Before its formal adoption, the state records bore the date from the Hejira. It means “the road was opened to grievous oppression, because 31 lunar years are equal to only 30 solar years and great loss occurred to the agriculturists, as the revenue was taken on the lunar years and the harvest depended on the solar. Abolishing this practice, Ghazan Khan promoted the cause of justice by the introduction of this era.”⁸

Another traveller, Peter Mundy describes the “Kings manner in sitting out the Nouroze. Att this tyme in Agra, the kinge sitteth out upon his throne or Tackhe [takht] of which everye kinge hath his owne, there being one now makeing for this-, that by Computation cannot be worth lesse then 4 Courourees [karor, crore] of rupees, (Every Courouree is 100 Lack and every Lack is 1 00000) which, in our money, is fower millions and three hundred thousand pounds sterlinge; All of pure gold, curioslye engraven, enamelled and sett with diamonds, Rubies, emraldes, Saffiers, etts. Prettiuous stones, taken out of the treasure. I say the king sitteth out nine dayes under mightie high, rich and stately pavillions of Cloth of gold etts., with his Amrawes or Lords about him, all makeing the greatest shews of magnificence and mirth they can, in feastinge, presentinge, recreatinge, with severall shewes and pastimes, and dauncinge wenches, fightinge of Eliphants, etts.”⁹

Under Jahangir (1605-28), the New Year’s celebration followed the routine established by Akbar. Lasting for nineteen days and commemorating both the coming of spring and the accession of the ruler, the preparations were extensive and celebrations lavish.

As we find in Terry’s account, he describes how Naw Ruz was celebrated on the 10th of March, according to the English calendar and was continued for nine days. All the nobles attended the court in ‘great pomp’, presented gifts of the King and got much in return. “I being in his presence” remarks Terry “beheld most immense and incredible riches, to my amazement in gold, pearls and precious stones

jewels and many other glittering vanities. The feast was celebrated even in camp.”¹⁰

Shah Jahan celebrated the Iranian New Year on a lavish scale. On his first Nau Ruz, imperial workmen erected a great tent beneath the Hall of Public Audience in Agra. In the general audience Shah Jahan distributed honorary robes, cash and increases in rank and salary to nobles and officials. Thousands of rupees were given to the poor as well.¹¹

For the first ten years of his reign, Shah Jahan celebrated the holiday in the usual fashion. Sebastian Manrique, who visited India in the the mid-1630s, was fascinated by the lights that outlined the towers and minarets of the imperial palace-fortress on the eve of equinox. On the first day of the festival, four thousand cavalymen in full dress and six hundred heavily-decorated elephants lined the road leading to the palace-fortress. In the evening animal fights and fireworks displays were arranged in the great open courtyard.¹² Shah Jahan had the famous Peacock Throne moved from the palace to the imperial tent for the duration of the festival. Studded with jewels, surrounded by railings of gold and silver, and covered with silken canopies, the royal seat was, in the words of the contemporary historian, the New Year’s (Nau Ruz) throne.

The emperor Aurangzeb (1658-1707), the last of the great Mughals, was a man of austere temperament, pious and abstemious. The contrast between him and Akbar could not have been more stark. The comparison, however, is not that of modern-day Indian journalism: the one liberal, open to religious diversity, the patron saint of secular India; the other narrow, bigoted, and fundamentalist. The changes in the court culture from the late-sixteenth to the late-seventeenth century in the context of individual agency were more a matter of temperament than of policy. Aurangzeb’s legalistic turn of mind, his lack of interest in artistic matters, and his piety accounted for the shift in style. In 1659, the second year of his reign, Aurangzeb abolished the celebration of Nau Ruz. Soon after, he increased the grants and gifts to the ulama and the money donated to the poor. In the eleventh year the practice of weighing the emperor on his solar and lunar birthdays was also

⁸Abul Fazl, *Ain-i Akbari*, vol. 2, ed. & tr. H. Blochmann, pp. 1-28.

⁹Peter Mundy, *The Travels of Peter Mundy in Europe and Asia, 1608-1667*, ed. Richard Carnac Temple, Second Series No. XXXV, Hakluyt Society, London, 1925. pp. 237-38.

¹⁰Edward Terry, *A Voyage to East India*, p. 79.

¹¹S. P. Blake, ‘Nau Ruz in Mughal India’, p. 178.

¹²Sebastien Manrique, *The Travels of Fray Sebastien Manrique 1619-1643*, p. 223.

discontinued. He also forbade the playing of music at the court and selling of clay images on Islamic festivals, and he banned the visits of women to the shrines of saints. In 1679 he re-imposed *jizya*, the canonical tax on Non-Muslims, which the emperor Akbar had abolished in 1564.¹³ According to *Ma'āsir-i 'Ālamgīrī*, 'His Majesty from the dawning of his understanding, being fully aware of the [canonical] duties and prohibitions, out of the perfect continence of his passions, never partook of anything except the canonically sanctioned pleasures. All the agents of pleasure and entertainment, such as sweet-voiced singers or charming players on musical instruments, were gathered in large numbers round his throne, and in the first few years of his reign he occasionally listened to their music and had a perfect expert's knowledge of this art; yet out of extreme abstinence he [later on] totally gave up listening to music.'¹⁴

All the celebrations took place on a regular basis with the same grandeur irrespective of the court being stable or mobile. In India, there was a custom of presenting a gift to the Emperor while visiting him. The nobles and courtiers conferred 'nazi'¹⁵ and 'peshkash'¹⁶. The king also conferred valuable gifts, bestowed titles and jagirs, promoted them to high mansabs, hence recognizing and rewarding their services.

As bernier say, "In *Asia*, the great are never approached empty-handed,"¹⁷ as "admittance to court is a distinction conferred on the nation at large...Admittance to the ruler of the land is for the success of his government what irrigation is for a flower-bed; it is the field, on which the hopes of the nation ripen into fruit..."¹⁸

The ambassadors, made the *Salam*- the Indian act of obeisance, which was placing the hand thrice upon the head. They then approached the Emperor and presented the letter. However, the *Omrah* received the letters and opened them for the King after which it was presented to the King.¹⁹

Another festival that was performed at the court was tuladan, which was the Emperor's lunar and solar

birthday celebration. Jharoka-darshan projected him as a benevolent Emperor who was charitable and just.

Akbar was supposedly weighed twice a year, twelve times against the following articles: "gold, quicksilver, silk, perfumes, copper, drugs, ghi, iron, rice-milk, seven kinds of grain, salt...silver, tin, cloth, lead, fruits, mustard oil and vegetables."²⁰

We have a weighing ceremony of Jahangir described by Terry and also by Sir Thomas Roe, where it was performed 'in house or tent', where one was admitted by special favour. The weighing scale was plated with gold, and so were the beams on which it rested and was hung by chains of gold. The Emperor sat in one of them and was weighed firstly against silver 'which immediately distributed amongst the poor', and also gold and jewel. Physicians keep the exact account of the king's weight. Thus weighed, he threw among the audience "thin pieces of silver and some of gold, made like flowers of that country, some made like cloves, some like nutmegs but very thin and hollow. Than he drank wine in the company of his nobles."²¹

This was an ancient yearly custom and it took place in the presence of the king's chief grandees where he was weighed in a balance. It should be noted that Terry was present here with his Lord Sir Thomas Roe. He observed further that the Emperor was weighed against several things that were laden in silken bags on the contrary scale. These include cloth of gold, silk, linen, spices and all sorts of goods.

Of tuladan, Ovington notices,

"On the 5th of November, Aurangzeb was weighed ... and if it's found that he has increas'd in bulk, above what he weighed the preceeding Year, this adds excess of Mirth and Joy to the Solemnity; but if he lighter in the scales, this diminishes their Triumphs, and damps their cheerful Entertainments. The Grandees and Officers of State prepare for this feats,

¹³S. P. Blake, 'Nau Ruz in Mughal India', p. 180.

¹⁴Saqi Mustad Khan, *Ma'āsir-i 'Ālamgīrī*, tr. Jadunath Sarkar, p. 21.

¹⁵ Offering of coins.

¹⁶ Tribute paid in kinds.

¹⁷Francois Bernier, *Travels in Mogul Empire A.D. 1656-1668*, p. 122.

¹⁸Abul Fazl, *Ain-i Akbari*, vol. 1, ed. & tr. H. Blochmann, p. 165.

¹⁹Francois Bernier, *Travels in Mogul Empire A.D. 1656-1668*, p. 86.

²⁰John-Pau Rubies, *Travels and Ethnology in the Renaissance: South India through European Eyes 1250-1625*, p. 277.

²¹Edward Terry, *A voyage to East India*, J. Wilkie, London, 1655, p. 22.

two Months before its approach, what costly Jewels and curious Rarities they can any where meet with, which they present to the Emperour at this Ceremony; either to secure his Favour, or to ingratiate with him for a more exalted station, or Honourable Employ. The Moguls are sometimes weighed against Silver, which has been distributed to the Poor.”²²

III.CONCLUSION

While observing a particular ritual, the Emperor’s temperament can be concluded. Liberal, tolerant attitude, even the condition of the Empire can be understood. Initially the concept of proper court was not there as the Emperor’s were engaged more into conquest and consolidation. Like for example, Babur and Humayan were involved in the empire making process and hence, they could not introduce well-defined protocols. The continuous contestation and conquests during the period of Babur and Humayun kept them preoccupied and hence, we do not find evidences of such court culture in their period. Also, for them gaining and regaining their territories was the priority than gaining political legitimacy, unlike the later Mughals.

It was only from Akbar’s period that such court rituals and ceremonies started. Most of the court rituals were borrowed from the different cultures around, like for example, Sijda, Paibos and Navroz were the Persian influence, whereas tuladan, jharoka-darshan were the Rajput concept of kingship. The festivals like dashehra, rakhi, diwali were the Hindu customs. However, some were the Emperor’s innovations- taslim and kornish.²³ It has often been argued how Akbar turned his court into a laboratory of religions experiments, participating actively in a combination of rituals from various religions, a phenomenon that Sunni mulla interpreted as renunciation of orthodox Islam. Nonetheless, it can be said that Akbar’s main motive in incorporating customs and rituals of various communities and from commoners was a way for self glorification. It can also be read as the means of obtaining authoritative and durable legitimacy from the subjects. These customs proved to be a very powerful instrument for the Mughal sovereign for

the success of the empire. Not only was it the means of constant show of Mughal power and wealth, but also brought glory and wealth. The Mughal ceremonial and protocol had a crucial role in the Mughal politics and society.

In the court with certain rules like, not everyone being allowed at certain occasions, like jharokadarshan, where the entry was a privilege, helped the Mughals to set up a divine image of themselves. Hence, the rituals and court culture, not only acted as a way of legitimizing the Mughal rule but also in a way amplified the Emperor’s power and authority and placed him at the centre of the stage.

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