

Mughal Theory of Kingship and Perception of Sovereignty

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Abstract— The Mughal empire established on the power of sword and military strength devised their own concept of sovereignty after establishing themselves in the Indian subcontinent. Their idea of kingship and the perception of the ruler position in the empire were corroborated by number of prerogatives such as the divine theory, introducing and reviving the institution of Jarokha Darshan, implementation of high sounding titles etc. provided immense impetus to the rising sovereignty of the Mughals and means that justified their supreme position in the Indian subcontinent during 16th-17th century. All these could not have been achieved without the existence of efficient and loyal nobles and for this the rulers of Mughal India ensured the recruitment process to be based on merit rather than any religious or ethnic affiliations which led to the diverse and strong administrative machinery.

Index Terms- Mughal theory of kingship-military-prerogatives-khalifa-padshah-farr-i-izadi-symbols-divine theory-jarokha darshan-hereditary succession-high sounding titles- mahzar- construction

I. INTRODUCTION

The Mughal Empire was established on the foundation of military occupation and extensive war skills, practised by first Mughal Emperor Babur. The whole empire was maintained by large army headed by various *Mansabdars* who provided the contingents to the state whenever required. Those officers acted as the commanders of the army and there was no distinction between the civil and military service. Mughal Emperors in order to create awe and respect among the local population, started to work for the betterment of the state. The rule of first two Mughal Emperors was mostly of annexing territories and consolidating it. But monarchy as an institution was established under Akbar's reign, as his court historian Abul fazl, in his account has given the detailed definition of monarch, which according to him was something divinely ordained in order to put a check on the corrupt practices of the human beings. Thus, the

indispensable qualities of the Emperor were made much broader and of universal type under Akbar. The Emperor was the holder of number of prerogatives like adoption of high sounding titles, throne, authority of issuing royal orders, etc. All those privileges made the status of the monarch exclusive and distinctive from rest of the state. The introduction of *Mahzar* document by Mughal Emperor Akbar was also deliberate policy to realize his status and authority among the nobles, religious heads and common masses. The objective behind establishing the theory of kingship and popularise the perception of sovereignty was to set a standard of the monarch that was distinctive and was accepted by the nobles and the general masses alike.

Zahiruddin Muhammad Babur (1526-30) founded his rule in North India through his superior war technology and effective war tactics. His conquests against the Afghans and Rajputs were based on the concept of 'longest sword, longest empire'. Though Babur was unfamiliar with Indian situation in terms of topography and nature of population, he fought four battles in India being confident of his war strategies. In contrast to early sultanate rulers who considered "*khalifa*" as the supreme head and proclaimed themselves as "Commandant of *khalifa*", termed as *Naasir-amirul-mominin*, Mughals had their own concept of kingship.¹ The reason was Mughals considered themselves as "descendants of Chingez khan"² who had their own concept of sovereignty unlike the leaders of Islamic community, and were "politically sovereign" having no such limitations as according to Islamic conception of sovereign.

Babur when entered into battle with Ibrahim Lodhi in the first battle of Panipat (1526) had the strength of force of 12000 which was far much lower than that of the Ibrahim Lodhi, that is, 100000 alongwith 1000 elephants.³ But Babur implemented the war tactics in getting victory over him, which he had learned during his earlier battle with Shah Ismail of Iran at Chaldiran

in 1514.⁴ As a part of his war strategy, Babur dug ditches and covered it with branches of fallen trees to avoid it from getting into the notice of the cavalry. Apart from it, he also adopted the technique of joining nearly 700 carts by ropes of rawhide, and in between the joints, short breastworks were planted back of which enabled the matchlockmen to stand and fire at the enemy. This method of stringing carts was called as the Ottoman devise learned by Babur in its early battles. But Babur also added a significant feature as the gaps between the bow shots was left for the horses of nearly fifty or hundred in strength to advance and charge.⁵ Instead of having attacking front, Babur chose to follow defensive formation. He also adopted the flanking part system, popularly known as *Tulughma*, in which Ibrahim Lodhi army was attacked from two sides alongwith arrows shot by cavalry persons which brought much chaos in the army. Apart from it, Babur also made use of the field cannons and involved two Ottoman gunners namely Ustad Ali and Mustafa in his army.⁶ The method of Babur proved to be strong and defensive way of tackling such a large army as a result of which Babur was succeeded in inflicting defeat on Ibrahim Lodhi and annexing his territories. Babur was totally unfamiliar with the topography and other situations prevailing in Indian subcontinent, but in spite of it, he was able to successfully led his very first battle in India against Ibrahim Lodhi, only on the basis of pure military power and his good war strategies.

So, his method of attaining his empire was totally based on his military efficiency. After the battle, the Khutba was read in his name at Delhi, and war booty was distributed among his army men.⁷ Babur was not liable to submit himself to any religious authority as he has acquired the state's authority with his own skill and capability. Thus, he was able to establish his own sovereign and for that, he didn't need the consent of any religious authority and himself became the ultimate ruler of the empire instead. That kind of strategy was applied by Babur in his battle with Rajput king Rana Sanga, in the battle of *Khanwa* in 1527 and the battle of Chanderi in 1528 against Medini Rao. Though, Babur declared both these battles as Jihad and related it with some religious propaganda as he adopted the title of ghazi after the battle of *Khanwa*,⁸ he did that only because he wanted to encourage his army men who had already been exhausted with earlier war and were planning to return back. Babur's

attitude towards his army men was more of like mutual cooperation relation which helped him to inflict crushing defeat earlier. Thus, all the practices and policies made by Babur indicated his perception of sovereignty which he established with his pure military skills and also, it helped to consolidate the empire in the land which was totally foreign to him all because of his theory of kingship which was firmly established under the Mughals.

Once Babur annexed the empire and started to rule over it, in order to consolidate such a vast empire, he needed to be familiar with the topography, culture and socio-economic life prevalent in India. Thus, he initiated some construction practices like he constructed for himself a palace at Agra. Also, he constructed various other structures, that is, buildings, public baths, parks in Agra⁹ which was earlier not very much popular within the local culture of India, as the social inclusion practices was not very much promoted. But Babur, who came from Central Asia where the social gatherings was very much pronounced initiated to bring that culture in Indian subcontinent too. Babur also tried to maintain peace and order in the empire by appointing powerful military officials to various provinces.¹⁰ All these policies formulated by Babur was to establish the concept of sovereignty of the Mughals in North India and also to realise upon the common population where majority were non-believers of the Islamic faith.

Similarly, Akbar during his reign, in order to consolidate his empire, adopted the policy of coalition with the Rajput chiefs where the local chiefs continued to rule their state but on the condition that they had to accept the Mughal sovereignty. This point indicated the fact that mughals perception of sovereignty was so strong that they had to realise it even to the local Rajput chiefs and when those chiefs refused to work with Mughals, they had to fight against the Mughals. Thus, Mughals wanted to impose their sovereignty by both means of mutual cooperation and through battle. For example, the battle of *Haldighati* fought between Akbar and Maharana Pratap was only because the latter refused to work with Mughal government.¹¹

The first mughal ruler Babur though, he did not have the settled government to look after the details of administration, had broad outlook and was more

practical and political than religious. This is evident from the fact that in his letter to Humayun - he clearly states that no other relation or status equals to that of a sovereign.¹² One of the other reasons for the mughals to develop their own concept of sovereignty among the subjects was that in a country like India during mughal's period where there are people of diverse identities and social background i.e Hindus, Turks, Persians, Indian Muslims, etc. all living together, there would be a difficult task to establish a pure Islamic sovereignty among the subjects who are non-muslims in majority. So, the necessity of vigorous monarchy was there which could help them to establish their rule and to dominate the masses of a vast empire.

However, the mughal ruler, in spite of having the strong military base which could provide them firm establishment, opted for "benevolent despotism".¹³ They wanted to create "awe and respect among the people of conquered areas"¹⁴, and for that reason they had to portray themselves as the ultimate sovereign of the subjects and something which was purely ordained in divinity and has the approval of divine power which is supreme of all people as Abul Fazl clearly states - "no dignity is higher in the eyes of God than royalty and those who are wise, drink from its auspicious fountain".¹⁵ This shows that mughal rulers considered themselves as something that belonged to the supreme being and whose ordinance would be considered as the words of god and if rebel against him, And would be rebellion against God itself and would be equal to commit a sin.

When the unlimited power, a genuine desire to do good to the people by the mughal emperors and a belief in one being a representative of god on earth were combined together, it was natural that it initiated the idealisation of the institutions of monarchy and laid trends to be followed by future successive rulers. Thus, in order to transmit the ideas or concept of sovereignty among the masses, the emperor used to perform various activities or rituals that exclusively belonged to him only. These rituals not only conveyed the ideology and virtues of kingship among the people, but also, in terms of controlling the empire, this perception proved an indispensable tool, to keep a check on the nobles and other people at the court. The theory of kingship or the perception of sovereignty of mughal emperors was attributed to many factors which

justified their strong monarchial base. The *khutba*, which was the ultimate symbol of Islamic legitimacy, used to recite in the name of *Padshah* and inclusion of this in the Friday's prayers further elevated the king's authority. The factors like theory of "divine light", adoption of high sounding titles, hereditary rights of succession to imperial throne, introduction of Mahzar document during the reign of mughal emperor Akbar, all helped the mughal rulers to establish an ultimate sovereign over a vast empire which can neither be questioned nor to be rebel against with. Other than that, various political symbols were-

- The throne
- umbrella(*chattr*),
- Flags and standards,
- Authority to issue coins,
- Authority to give royal orders with royal seal belonging to emperor only

All these privileges helps to form the basis of ideology which on the one hand differentiates the status of the emperor from the rest of the nobles and also helped them to transcend territorial and other limits in the empire.

II. DIVINE RIGHT THEORY

The proclamation of the divine right to the throne was dated back to the Mongol's period where Timor (the ancestor of mughals) propounded the divine right of kings as he stated in his memoirs-

"Whenever god exalts any person to the throne of sovereignty, he confers on him special dignity and wisdom, by means of which he renders mankind obedient to him, this virtue is a ray of the grace of god which shines on the monarch and as long as he is grateful for that favour, his fortune and dominion continued to increase".¹⁶

Thus, he indicates that a king as the gaze of god that keeps mankind in subjection and whose authority should be obeyed and not to be questioned. Their theory of belonging to some supernatural origin was further followed and absorbed by mughal rulers in Indian territories too.

This thought was also uplifted by the Muslim jurists, according to whom – in order to curtail the selfish means and actions of human beings, god has selected

one *hakm-i-adl* whose duty was to protect his subjects and establish peace and prosperity around him.¹⁷

As stated earlier, Babur's achievements were mostly related to military conquests and not the administration, but in his letter to Humayun, he clearly stated the importance of sovereign whose status cannot be equalled with anything. He further advised him to accept all the responsibilities of being a sovereign by creating discipline and enhancing strength of the army and to carry the administration with the help of begs and ministers.¹⁸ Babur was conscious of the status of a sovereign which was totally exclusive, but he was also aware of the fact that the administrative machinery could not operate without the help of loyal and efficient officials and ministers. Therefore, he advised his son to take help from the ministers at regular intervals. During the reign of Humayun, the concept of sovereignty has started to take some shape and begun to be considered as divinely ordained, indivisible, and not subordinate to any foreign power. Humayun was of the opinion that sovereign is like the sun in the solar system around whom the state termed as planets moved around him.¹⁹ In spite of these, concept of monarchy remained "embryonic"²⁰ during the reign of both these rulers. A major shape was taken during Akbar's reign where we find much evidences of the propounded divine theory and also the various reasons to justify the institution of monarchy on the divine base that were considered necessary in order to curtail the wrong and corrupt actions of human beings.²¹ Monarchy as an institution was well established under Akbar's rule where his court historian Abul Fazl has given detailed definition of a monarch and his relation to the divine power in his book *Akbarnama*. Abul fazl in his account has tried to relate the cause of the existence of the monarch with the divine theory. The authority of the monarch is indispensable as to keep the check on the corrupt activities of man and responsible for peace and prosperity in his empire as he is the origin of stability and possession. He stated in his account as –

"his subjects, a monarch having a large heart who could attend every section of society without any biasness and should be totally impartial in giving his decisions, also, he is referring the monarch as "royalty is a light emanating from god, and a ray from the sun, the illuminator of the universe, the argument of the book of perfection, the receptacle of all virtues".²²

The statement indicates the position of sovereign as second to god consisting of all the qualities of a just monarch which has been given to him by god himself and the divine virtue is deep within him. The light known as *farr-i-izadi* is said to be communicated by God to kings without any intermediate.²³

Thus, the indispensable qualities were made much broader and of universal type under Akbar's reign by basing the role of sovereign on a divine origin. The king is neither affected by any offender nor is he uninformed of the needs and wishes of the lowest. A well established activity regarding this trend was the institution of *Jarokha Darshan* which was a medium to realize the existence of monarch and laid the impression that Mughal rule is some blessing sent from Supreme Being for the betterment and general welfare of the people. Thus, the logical and religious-spiritual claims made by Abul fazl in his *Akbarnama*, invested the *Padshah* with an unprecedented legitimization of Muslim rule over the subjects, who were non Muslims in majority. Apart from, mere the figure of religious spokesperson, Abul Fazl linked the idea of "spiritual" connection with the king, and laid that the *Padshah* is related to god, and thus, elevated his status compared to other human beings and regarded his decision as "divinely inspired and guided". Akbar has uplifted the esteemed status of the monarchy in the eyes of his subjects. And this trend was carried and further enhanced by his successors too.

His immediate successor, Jahangir's famous 12 ordinances and "chain of justice" indicates the strong and exclusive power and status of the monarch which enabled him to exercise and control the activities of corrupt officers and took steps to prevent the exploitation of general masses in the hands of these nobles.²⁴

III. HEREDITARY SUCCESSION OF RULERS

During the Mughal period, there was prevalence of tradition of hereditary succession but there was no definite law for the succession of eldest son to the throne only.²⁵ Babur nominated his eldest son Humayun as his successor but he also advised him to maintain harmony with all of them and give all the brothers their equal share. Babur's belief in the rights

of hereditary succession and feeling of superiority was so high and firm that he wasn't afraid of losing his esteemed position and high birth status by freely mixing and interacting and contributing in the social life of his officials. However, we find that the trend of succession of eldest son was never really followed. As we have evidences that prove the continuous rebellion and struggle for throne. During the period of Humayun, the activities of Kamran to claim Kabul on the ground that it was given to his mother by Babur.²⁶ It was, although ignored by Humayun but it was a rebellious act challenging the authority of the ruler. Similarly Akbar's period too saw some rebellions but by the time rebellion arose Akbar had full control over his position and authority and the support of many trusted officials.²⁷ However, at the end of his reign, there arose the struggle for power between prince Salim and prince Khusroe.²⁸ Likewise, struggle arose during Jahangir's reign too and prince Khurram, popularly known as ShahJahan came out of it successful. And Aurangzeb too succeeded in ascending the throne after eliminating his brothers. Thus, the matter of succession to the throne was not the subject of people's choice. And the virtues of military expertise and the support of royal officials proved successful as reasons, to gain kingship, instead of benevolence and popularity among general masses. For example- prince Khusroe and Dara Shukoh, no matter how much they were popular among the masses, could not bring themselves to the seat of the throne. Apart from these, one fact is worth noticing that, neither of the officials or nobles of the mughal administration tried to contest for the throne. It was the members of the royal family only who were aspired to gain throne by any means possible. But the nobles are seen mostly extending their help or support to one or other claimants to the throne. An example could be during the revolt of Khusroe, where many nobles like Raja Man Singh and Khan-i-Azam Mirza Aziz Koka, who revolted on the side of Khusroe and when captured, nearly all of them were punished including the prince by the emperor.²⁹

Mughal emperors usually employed the royal princes as governor of various provinces. In this way, princes get to know the aspects of functioning of administrative machinery and could gather administrative skill along with their military expertise. Partial responsibilities of the administrative works of

provinces were given to them. For example – Aurangzeb was deployed in the Deccan during the reign of Shah Jahan.³⁰ It was only during the rule of Aurangzeb that the ruler allocated all the strings of administration in his hands only, as a result of which we find that the successors of Aurangzeb proved unworthy to carry on the administration as they didn't have the first hand experience to deal with the administrative affairs of the state.

IV. ADOPTION OF HIGH SOUNDING TITLES

One of the most important prerogatives of the mughal emperors was the adoption of high sounding titles. The title of *Padshah* was assumed by Babur in 1508. He mentions this in his memoirs as –“Upto that date people had styled Timur Beg's descendants ‘*Mirza*’ even when they were ruling, now I ordered that people should style me as *Padshah*”.³¹

It was necessary for Babur to adopt high sound titles and create a differentiation among the positions of ruler and his nobles in a diverse country. As it was no democratic set up, the empire was purely military in origin and to make it acceptable to the large masses, the need for a separate and uplifted status of the monarch was necessary. The title of *Padshah* brought much power to the ruler that could not be eliminated by anyone. Even the highest officers were dependent and answerable to him. Nobles were mere medium for the execution of king's state policies in the empire. Thus, as a legacy, Babur left the title for his descendants and Mughal emperors were all styled as *Padshah*. As we can see, Mughal emperors rarely used their original name, instead, they applied the name given to them at the time of their coronation as ‘Jahangir’ or ‘Shah Jahan’ along with royal epithets as ‘*Muhammad*’ or ‘*Naseeruddin*’. The title of *Padshah Ghazi* was used by all emperors except Farukhsiyar.³² A major epoch in the trend of adopting high sounding titles during the reign of Shah Jahan, who added a new title as ‘*Sahib Kiran Sani*’ which means second lord of conjunction, evident is the fact that his ancestor Timur, being the first to use and similar titles were adopted by his successors too.³³ In the adoption of titles, one fact is worth noticing that since the Sultanate rulers often associated themselves with the ‘*Khalifa*’, Mughals considered themselves *Khalifa* of Indian territory.

The reason was the ancestors of Mughals, before converting to Islam were already a mighty monarch over the vast empire and didn't find the necessity to gain approval of the Khalifa, who are said to be the leaders of Muslim community. The significance of adopting titles lies in the fact that it gives the legitimacy to uplifted status of the ruler which is indifferent from those of ministers and other officials. In the Mughal government, the adoption of high sounding titles such as '*Padshah*' as mentioned earlier, was absolute in character and was strongly held. No one from the non-royal background dare to assume the royal title as it was certainly the royal prerogative and would be regarded as breach of law and practise to dishonour king's authority.

V. MAHZAR DOCUMENT

Akbar started the concept of *Mahzar* document. He issued this new proclamation in conformity with some Quranic principles and practises it as to the benefit of his empire. All subjects are bound to it and opposition or disbelief to it will involve "damnation in the next world, and loss of religious privileges and property in this".³⁴ Based on the sources of the contemporary period, the reason behind the inauguration of this new trend by Akbar was his need which led him to develop his own system of proclamation that would be independent of the Muslim jurists and the decision of the emperor would be supreme and final. At the time of Akbar, on the advice of Shaikh Mubarak, he issued a decree which affirmed the religious supremacy and his superiority to all ecclesiastical dignitaries. This shows that Akbar believed in the importance of a sovereign and wanted all his subjects to have similar opinion. As Badauni in his account has mentioned this document in the following words

-“This document has been written with honest intentions, for the glory of God, and the propagation of the Islam, and is signed by us, the principal ulema and lawyers”.³⁵

Akbar wanted all his officers and nobles to realise that emperor is the ultimate head of the empire and his will is the law of empire, which could not be question by anyone in the state. The document with the intention of the welfare of the people, as according to Akbar was signed by Ulemas of Islam and many other leading theologians of the time in the month of Rajab, A.H.987

[August- September 1579].³⁶ It was signed by leading ulemas and scholars of the time, which include – Shaikh Mubarak, Makhdum-ul-Mulk, Shaikh Abdur Nabi, Qazi Jalal-ud-din and many others.³⁷ This document declared Akbar as the king of Islam, helper of the humanity, and illuminator of god's light in this world. In this way, Akbar tried to get the socio-political legitimacy in all the decisions and proclamations made by him.

By placing himself equal to God on Earth, he uplifted his status in the eyes of his subjects more than the *Mujtahid* and no other authority or religious superior could question or rebel against the authority of the document. Thus, Akbar attained the “temporal authority and spiritual supremacy”³⁸ both, through this decree. However the concept of Mahzar document did not last long. The reason was its scope which, quite evident, was very limited and restricted. By the issuance of Mahzar document, the emperor was granted the authority to choose one of the several opinions of the legists, which appears to him as the best for the welfare of the state and people and to issue ordinances with relation to the opinion selected by him. All the opinions were also placed by the Khalifa only who placed different views on political and fiscal topics before him. Thus, practically, it makes no difference among the decisions of the state. However, it gives us the indication of the authority and status of the emperor who, we find, was totally independent of the leaders of the Muslim community. As believed by his predecessors, Akbar too found himself a ruler of the vast empire with no authority or individual superior to him. Thus, the initiative taken by him was the noted deliberate step to realize his status and authority among the nobles, religious heads and the common masses. One such other prerogative of the emperor which legitimises its sovereignty and serves as great deal for the nobles was the visit of the emperor to the houses of the nobles. It was a matter of extraordinary favour, and helped to reconfirm noble's influence in the court. It was the highest honour that could be bestowed to any noble. But it also shows us the significance of the authority of the sovereign and his importance in the life of the state officials. Although, Mughal Emperors used to visit the houses of highest ranked officials, even then, this royal favour was not ordinary and was a rare phenomenon. For example: Mughal Emperor Akbar used to visit the

houses of Zain Khan Koka, Birbal, Bhagwan Das, Abdur Rahim Mirza khan etc.³⁹ And the repentance visit to the house of these nobles shows the level of intimacy which was greater than any royal favour. This factor exemplify that Mughal rituals of entertaining and welcoming the authority of the ruler were on such a splendid scale that not only, it strengthened the concept of sovereignty and kingship but also played an important role in strengthening the relationship between sovereign and the aristocracy. Also, it affirms the sincerity and loyalty of the nobles, and give them the chance to rise themselves to the distinguished members of the court. The major significance in establishing the theory of kingship and popularise the idea of divinely ordained sovereignty was might be that, once the military power was achieved by the Mughal Emperors, all they want to do was, to create a standard or a theory which was widely adopted and accepted by the state officials and general masses alike. The Mughal Emperors wanted to claim commitment and loyalty from their subjects, out of their devotion and respect, and not from the fear. They didn't want to be presuming as a figure of an Emperor. Instead, they wanted to reach out to the remote masses and realize them of their presence. The concept of laying periodical courts was an initiative to fulfil this objective which will be discussed later.

Thus, on the whole Mughal Emperor's prerogatives clearly defined their authority and placed it distinctive from the rest of the subjects of the Empire. Also, their perception of justice was aand thus, it helped them to strictly supervise the functioning of the administration.

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