Politics, Poetry and Pluralism: Bulleh Shah in the Late Mughal Empire

Ashna Hussain

Thesis submitted for Master of Research

Western Sydney University

2018
Dedication

To my parents, for believing in me.
Acknowledgements

First and foremost, I would like to thank my principal supervisor, Dr. Milad Milani, for all the support and guidance he has provided me over the last two years. Sir, without your encouragement I would never have made it this far – thank you.

I would also like to thank my second supervisor, Dr. Alison Moore, who gave me some wonderful feedback on my ideas and encouraged me to present my research at a seminar.

To all my colleagues from the Friday discussion group, our conversations resulted in some great insights and inter-religious dialogue. Thank you for all the wonderful conversations and the poetry shared – the poetic inspiration for my thesis came from here.

Finally, I am indebted to my friends and family who supported me throughout these two years. To my father, for inspiring me to pursue higher degree research, and my mother for always believing in me – thank you. A huge thank you to my sister, Kinza, for her sharp eyes and incredible proofreading skills – your ability to pick out the smallest of typos and mistakes is appreciated. A special thanks to my best friend and cousin, Azkaa, who, despite being across the seas in a different continent, put up with my rants and periodical frustration – thank you for allowing me to vent without judgement.
Statement of Authentication

The work presented in this thesis is, to the best of my knowledge and belief, original except as acknowledged in the text.

I hereby declare that I have not submitted this material, either in full or in part, for a degree at this or any other institution.

........................................

Ashna Hussain
Table of Contents

Abstract ........................................................................................................................................ III

Introduction .................................................................................................................................. 1

Methodology .................................................................................................................................. 3

Chapter One ................................................................................................................................... 9

The Mughal Empire: Religion, Politics and Power in the Indian Subcontinent ......................... 9

Introduction: An Overview of the Mughal Empire ...................................................................... 9

Settling in: Mughal Localised Culture and Tradition .................................................................. 12

The Golden Age and Akbar the Great ......................................................................................... 14

An Inevitable Decline? Aurangzeb’s Legacy .............................................................................. 17

A Glance at Mughal Identity from Literary Sources .................................................................... 20

Babur ............................................................................................................................................ 20

Akbar ............................................................................................................................................ 23

Aurangzeb ..................................................................................................................................... 28

Conclusion .................................................................................................................................... 31

The Mughal Socio-Historical Context ......................................................................................... 31

Reflections on Models of Rule ..................................................................................................... 33

Chapter Two ................................................................................................................................ 35

Placing Bulleh Shah in Context: Religious Pluralism and Sufism ............................................. 35

Religious Pluralism ....................................................................................................................... 35

Religious Pluralism in the Indian Sub-continent ......................................................................... 37

The Mughal Response to Religious Pluralism ............................................................................ 38

Sufism in the Mughal Imperial Polity ............................................................................................ 44
An ‘Indian’ Sufism .................................................................................................................. 48

Chapter Three.................................................................................................................................. 50


Bulleh Shah: A Biographical Sketch ..................................................................................... 51
Folk Tradition in Punjab.......................................................................................................... 56
A Universal Religious Experience .......................................................................................... 62

Conclusion...................................................................................................................................... 67

Bibliography ................................................................................................................................... 73

Glossary....................................................................................................................................... 85
Abstract

The Mughal Empire ruled the Indian sub-continent over the course of three centuries in a history defined by its religious and ethnic diversity. As part of their state-building project, the Mughals employed narratives of identity and belonging wherein different social, cultural and, to an extent, religious identities blended together. This thesis will focus on the historical importance of poetry as a socio-political tool through the work of a Punjabi poet, Bulleh Shah (1680-1757), in order to demonstrate the interconnections between the political, religious and cultural facets of the empire. Such an approach will highlight the relationship between the social and political dynamic of power to allow for a better understanding of the region. To this day, the legacy of Bulleh Shah remains of cultural relevance and importance, with his poetry serving as a cultural bridge between the religio-political divide of the Partition of India and Pakistan.
Introduction

The Islamic world in the early modern era was defined by the rise of three powerful empires that shared a common ancestry from Central Asia – the Ottoman Empire, Safavid Empire and Mughal Empire. Each empire occupied a particular space ranging from Southern Europe to South Asia. The Mughal Empire (1526 – 1857) ruled the Indian sub-continent over the course of three centuries and is estimated to be “humanity’s most powerful and richest state” at its peak. Historically, Muslim rule in the Indian sub-continent has largely been a result of expatriate conquests, ranging from Arab rule in the Middle East to the Turkic warriors of Central Asia. The establishment of Islam and, subsequently, Islamic rule began with the first conquest of Sindh in the eighth century by the Umayyad dynasty. Up until the 13th century, Muslim rule was restricted to the western regions of the Thar Desert. Territorial expansion under the Delhi Sultanate extended the frontiers well into central Hindustan and pushed further down south. By the 16th century, Hindustan was fragmented into regional ruling powers and lacked centralised administration. The arrival of Zahir ud-Din Muhammad, commonly known as Babur, and the subsequent conquest of Northern India (which included the north-eastern region of modern day Afghanistan) in 1526 led to the establishment of the Mughal Empire. As an expatriate dynasty, the Mughals were both an ethnic and religious minority in the region, obliging them to engage in a rhetoric of legitimation against the native population.

As part of their state-building project, the Mughals employed narratives of identity and belonging wherein different social, cultural and, to an extent, religious identities blended together. Yet, despite this attempt to create an all-encompassing and syncretic identity, the Mughals could not escape the distinct diversity present in the region. Muslim identity in the 18th century sub-continent was largely a result of the Mughal effort in forming some sort of identity in order to legitimise their rule and presence in the region. The trajectory of Mughal rule, from Babur to Aurangzeb, illustrates the influence of temporal dynamics wherein

---

1 The Indian sub-continent comprises of modern day India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bhutan and the Maldives. It is important to note that while Mughal rule did not encapsulate the whole region, the term ‘Indian sub-continent’ will be used a reference to the areas within the sub-continent that came under their jurisdiction.


3 The region of Sindh is located in the south-east of modern day Pakistan.
identity narratives evolved in their ratio of ‘sameness’ and ‘difference’. The inherent Islamic nature of the imperial state inevitably played a significant role in creating a Muslim identity – being a religious minority, it was vital that the Mughals set up an identity that would distinguish them from local indigenous rulers and communities.

The history of the Mughal Empire is, therefore, defined by its religious and ethnic diversity. As such, the region has always been shaped by the ruling ability to manage the degrees of difference through policies of integration. The issue of religious relations is so significant that it is virtually inescapable within the literature, and existing scholarship has given much attention to it. Yet, the research has generally treated concerns around religious relations in the light of Mughal political networking policies (i.e. through marriage alliances and regional satrapies) that secured the legitimacy of the rulers. Little has been written on the cultural framework from which these relations and differences are explored through the written medium of poetry. Poetry has served as a popular form of expression in the Mughal Empire with literary pieces ranging from couplets composed by the Mughal rulers themselves to compositions of alternative forms of historical events. As such, its importance in the historical trajectory of the empire is vital in gaining a nuanced understanding of the reciprocity of the region’s religio-political and socio-cultural discourse.

The role of religion as a cultural element of interaction will be given further consideration with the view to shift the discussion from a political vantage to its socio-cultural importance. Religious pluralism played a significant role in the Mughal polity as it helped create an identity of diversity and acceptance, as well as stimulating cultural fluidity across religious communities. The reign of Akbar is a popular period of research on the Mughal Empire, due to the religious and political reforms initiated by the emperor in an attempt to create a more localised identity. Examples such as the Ibadat Khana (House of Worship) and Din-i-Ilahi (Religion of God) feature regularly in scholarship surrounding religious relations in the Mughal Empire as they are visible historical manifestations of religious pluralism in the region. As such, more subtle examples, such as poetry, tend to be

---

4 The biographies and autobiographies of Mughal emperors are rife with couplets composed by the rulers themselves.


overlooked. Giving attention to the religious element in Mughal history brings in the role and function of poetry as a social and cultural production, allowing for a careful examination of poetry as politically charged.

Therefore, this thesis will focus on the historical importance of poetry as a socio-political tool through the work of a Punjabi poet, Bulleh Shah (1680-1757), in order to demonstrate the interconnections between the political, religious and cultural facets of the empire. In this approach, the aim is to flesh out the relationship between the social and political dynamics of power, in order to understand the role and influences of the forces from below (i.e. the social actor) and from above (i.e. the state power) in shaping the region. The literary figure of Bulleh Shah, as explored from a historical vantage, will represent, through his poetic works, the force from below.

Methodology

In order to gain a better sense of the force from above, the empire’s politico-cultural narratives will be examined through a combination of key Mughal biographical sources and secondary literary sources in order to derive an intimate understanding of the monarch’s approach to governance. For the purposes of this thesis, translated versions of the Baburnama, Akbarnama and Maasir-i-Alamgiri will be used in place of their original manuscripts. In choosing these three biographies, the reigns of the respective rulers, Babur, Akbar and Aurangzeb, will serve as case studies to create a comprehensive overview of the imperial polity. These three rulers were specifically chosen as their reigns embody the pillar moments of the empire wherein the imperial identity underwent substantial change.

7 For greater detail on the power of poetry in intrinsically bringing together the socio-cultural and socio-political see: Ruth Rubio Rodriguez, “The Importance of Poetry as a Didactic and Political Tool in Poems by Three Mapuche Poets,” World Cultures Graduate Student Conference 2013, (2015): 1-12, https://escholarship.org/uc/item/10b2m6qj (accessed: October 5, 2018). While this article is specific to the post-colonial voice in poetry, its main thesis on the power of language perpetuated in poetry, exemplifies poetry as a socio-political tool.


comparative analysis of the emperors through the lens of religious governance will reveal the constant evolution of legitimation narratives employed to match the dynamics of the region.

The examination of the key emperors through their biographical writings will be accompanied by secondary literature in order to gain a deeper understanding of the Mughal polity. Since the reign of the Mughal emperors is not the primary focus of this thesis, consulting secondary sources is of utmost importance to ensure a comprehensive account of their religio-political rule. The decision to employ such a method of intertwining both primary and secondary research was taken as a means to ensure a balanced account of Mughal rule. Scholarship on the Mughal Empire is still lacking in comparison to its imperial contemporaries. Scholars of South Asian history, such as Daud Ali, have identified particular historiographical trends on the scholarship over time.\(^{11}\) Early scholarship on the Mughal Empire is dominated by colonial writings which sought to understand and portray the region as a colonial entity. With the rise of nationalistic sentiments in the 1930s, historians and scholars from the sub-continent began to take interest in the region’s history.\(^{12}\) As such, the portrayal of the Mughal Empire in the region’s historical memory is susceptible to simple manipulations of historical data – such as valuing certain sources and focusing on specific rulers, themes and events. With the 1947 Partition of British India into two nation-states, scholarship from within the region continues to grow. Whilst there was an increased interest on Mughal state formation, that was informed through the growing influence of Marxist ideology and its theoretical framework, a more dominant trend of nationalistic narratives arose.\(^{13}\) Given the geopolitical situation, academic scholarship became increasingly patriotic and sought to construct a nationalistic identity resulting in historical misrepresentations.\(^{14}\) Nonetheless, in using secondary literature as part of this research, a conscious effort has been made to filter through such sentimental scholarship. While most of the secondary literature used has been sourced from the late 20th century (i.e. 1990s onwards) till current publications, older publications are still referenced as they provide the critical eye with constructive theories and narratives.


\(^{12}\) Ibid, 7.

\(^{13}\) Ibid, 8-10.

\(^{14}\) After the Partition of 1947, the wars of 1965 and 1971 contributed to the nationalist language used in the scholarship regarding the region’s history.
The choice of Bulleh Shah as the poet for examination came naturally due to his popularity in literature in both India and Pakistan. The Indian sub-continent has witnessed the lives of many great and influential poets that have also left their mark in history, such as Faizi, Waris Shah, Baba Farid and Mirza Ghalib. Of all the poets, Bulleh Shah was chosen as the case study for this thesis as not only has his poetry undoubtedly left a lasting legacy, it also sheds light on the religio-political and cultural environment of Punjab during 18th century Mughal rule. The language of his verses, Punjabi, transcends the geopolitical markings of the Punjab region which had been split as a result of the Partition. Despite being a Muslim, his poetry is rife with references and borrowed cultural imagery from other religious traditions that co-existed at the time. As such, the cultural fluidity helps provide a common ground of understanding between various religious communities. Written during the period of Punjab’s political decline, Bulleh Shah’s poetry reflects the religious tensions that were present and conveys the frustration and bitterness experienced by the common people. As a Muslim Punjabi poet, Bulleh Shah was inevitably a product of the identity narratives employed by the Mughal Empire. Having no formal and direct connections with the imperial state, his poetry can subsequently be seen as the embodiment of the 18th century Muslim identity that existed in Punjab. Hence, being of historical significance, the legacy of Bulleh Shah has played a significant role in forming cultural national narratives in the Indian sub-continent, particularly in Punjab. Whilst some seek to represent the poet as exclusive to a particular tradition, others portray him as a universal figure and a cultural bridge between religious hostility.

Yet, despite the poet’s popularity, not much academic scholarship has been produced on Bulleh Shah. This is not surprising given the lack of historical data available – much of the biographical information on the poet is derived from his works. Much of what has been written on Bulleh Shah portrays the poet as a quintessential Sufi saint, with colourful anecdotes of his mystical abilities peppering his biography. This is not surprising given that scholarship on the poet has mostly been produced from within the sub-continent where there seems to be competing portrayals of Bulleh Shah. The religious philosophies of Islam,

---

15 Punjab is a region in the northern part of the Indian sub-continent which is split between the modern nation-states of India and Pakistan. The name, Punjab, refers to the five main rivers that meet with one another at the Indus River – *Punj* (five) *ab* (river); the land of five rivers.

Hinduism and, to a lesser extent, Sikhism each contend the ownership of Bulleh Shah, claiming, and subsequently attempting to prove, that the poet’s worldview and poetry is essentially a part of their respective framework. As one would imagine, this has led to specific readings of Bulleh Shah’s poetry wherein the myriad of interpretations has simply become an exercise of validation. Nonetheless, one cannot dismiss the importance of such readings and interpretations as they elucidate the universality of Bulleh Shah’s poetry – the ability to accommodate his works within various religio-philosophical frameworks highlights the pluralism of the region.

The historical figure of Bulleh Shah will be examined through the framework of historical anthropology. With its roots in the Annales school, historical anthropology seeks to utilise and apply social and cultural anthropological ideas to historical data by placing the figure/society within its historical environment. This interdisciplinary nature allows for new centres of thinking to emerge by bringing the imagined periphery into the centre. It moves beyond simply explaining the social and cultural phenomena of the past – rather, it seeks to explain the production of people, space and time. This framework is highly effective in historical studies concerning people and/or societies as it helps connect the politics of the past to the present. Historians of Islamic History, such as Richard Bulliet, have used this approach in exploring the growth and impact of Islam in marginalised societies in the Islamic world. Bulliet’s book, Islam: The View from the Edge, seeks to explain how Islam became deeply rooted in cultures and societies that were so far removed from the political centre. Bulliet utilises local biographical data to emphasise the role of local scholars in the establishment of Islam in, essentially, a convert society. While Bulliet uses Iran as his case study, his method and objective provide this thesis with a beneficial guideline in examining Bulleh Shah and his work. The emphasis on locality wherein Islam blends and adapts with cultures and customs thus creating an ‘Islam’ (and subsequently a history of that Islam) that is unique to the respective society. Likewise, when exploring Bulleh Shah and his poetry, the poet’s cultural (Punjabi), social (belonging to a Syed family/caste) and religious (Muslim) environment will be analysed. While some studies argue against compartmentalising his worldview and religio-philosophical orientation to a single tradition, the influence and impact of Islam on

---

17 Ibid, 55.
Bulleh Shah’s poetry is undeniable. And to such an extent, that to deny its fundamental role and presence in his poetry in favour of a complete transcendent outlook would arguably result in a partial and limited study. Nonetheless, such a position does not undermine the inspiration that Bulleh Shah drew from surrounding indigenous philosophies and religious frameworks. Rather, it demonstrates the dynamics of the region and the intricate web of relations between the various social, cultural and religious realms – the borrowing and blending of ideas and religio-cultural expressions exemplify this.

There is a vast collection of poems that are attributed to Bulleh Shah, however, the poet himself did not leave behind any surviving text on his compositions. The earliest manuscripts of his work date to 150 years after his death. Moreover, given the oral nature of Bulleh Shah’s work, most of these manuscripts are in the form of musical transcripts. Yet, even these manuscripts are a problematic historical source – the dialectic differences present result in variations of the same piece of poetry. Additionally, given that the manuscripts were written performance pieces, performed by local qawwali singers, it is highly likely that the performers would add their own lines without clearly differentiating between the original work and their own insertions. It should be noted that even the poems used in this thesis are one form of the many variations that exist as it would not be possible to use an ‘original’ piece (since it does not exist). As such, the first problem that arises in dealing with the primary sources is the inevitable question – which poems are to be attributed to Bulleh Shah in order to establish a defined corpus. Three anthologies will be consulted in selecting the poems that will be used in this thesis, *Bulleh Shah: A Selection*, *Sufi Lyrics* and *Bulleh Shah: The Love-Intoxicated Iconoclast*, each of which contain translations of Bulleh Shah’s poetry. The former two books provide the reader with translations and their original verse in the Shahmukhi script and Gurmukhi script respectively. The latter contains translated verses of the poems along with a detailed commentary of each poem, decoding the metaphorical language and providing a contextual background in order to better understand it. While, the

---

20 For example, see: Rinehart, “The Portable Bullhe Shah.”
21 Qawwali is a form of devotional Sufi music in the sub-continent that is mainly comprised of poetic pieces.
above mentioned books provide a reasonable selection of poems, translations of poetry found online (in places such as forums and blogs) will also be used. In order to ensure the reliability of attribution, poems from online sources will be cross-corresponded with the three selected anthologies.

As an outline of this thesis, chapter one will provide an overview of the Mughal Empire through the reigns of three key emperors, in relation to their position on religion and politics in the region. The chapter will focus on identity formation and its evolution through the reigns of the chosen Mughal rulers. Chapter two will then historically contextualise Bulleh Shah and his poetry with regards to the religious and political climate of the Indian sub-continent. The pluralistic nature of the region and its socio-cultural milieu will be explored to highlight the shaping and influence of Bulleh Shah’s poetic work. Finally, chapter three will identify Bulleh Shah’s poetry as serving as a cultural bridge between regional religio-political and ethnic divides. To this end, the chapter will also explore the poetic language of Bulleh Shah in terms of some of the key references that help foster and shape a transnational ethos in the sub-continent, especially in the Punjab region.
Chapter One

The Mughal Empire: Religion, Politics and Power in the Indian Sub-continent

This chapter serves as a backdrop to the following chapters on Bulleh Shah and the religious pluralism that he sought to portray through his poetry. The history of the empire’s sovereignty encapsulates the region’s complex social and cultural identity, essentially situating Bulleh Shah within a specific historical context. The rich diversity of the sub-continent renders its pluralism as an idiosyncratic specificity to the region. To this end, the focus of this chapter is to provide an overview of the three reigns of key rulers, Babur, Akbar and Aurangzeb, paying specific attention to their identity narratives in relation to the temporal regional dynamics.

Introduction: An Overview of the Mughal Empire

The Mughal Empire began its rule in India in 1526 with the conquest of Northern India at the first Battle of Panipat under a Central Asian prince Zahir-ud-Din Muhammad, commonly known as Babur (1526-1530). Prior to his conquest, Babur was a wandering prince who had been displaced from his ancestral homeland, Samarqand, by a contesting Uzbek tribe. The last of the Timurid princes, Babur’s victory in 1526, and the subsequent establishment of an empire, was arguably driven by an imperialist need to preserve a dynasty of rulers.\(^{25}\) Nonetheless, while the origins of the empire may have been devoid of religious motivations (i.e. establishing an Islamic polity), its role in state-building cannot be ignored. As an expatriate dynasty, the empire was both a religious and ethnic minority within a region dominated primarily by native Hindu communities. Aware of their position, the Mughals employed narratives of belonging in an attempt to create a collective identity of ‘sameness’ while simultaneously maintaining a certain degree of difference. While certain aspects of the narratives altered with the temporal evolution of each Mughal emperor’s reign, there is an underlying continuity of elements that shape the Mughal identity of the region. As such,

Mughal rulers continuously engaged in a perpetual rhetoric of legitimation to justify their presence and authority, as well as to situate themselves in the broader regional dynamics.

The early life of the Mughal Empire is often not given due attention since the highly successful rule of Akbar tends to overshadow the political instability faced by Babur and Humayun. A cursory glance at books written on the Mughal Empire reveal that very little space is provided for Babur and Humayun. Consequently, the empire’s Central Asian origins seem to evoke only a passing mention and general acknowledgement in most of the scholarship. Nonetheless, recent developments in the body of literature on the empire has seen its Timurid heritage gain significant recognition. Scholars, such as Lisa Balabanlilar and Stephen Dale, have produced noteworthy work highlighting the deep-rooted influence of the empire’s heritage and lineage in its political and cultural framework.26

The Mughal’s Timurid heritage is an ever-present feature in the empire’s formation of identity and state-building politics. While the degree of its effect in the formation of imperial identity and narratives varied from emperor to emperor, it retained its significance throughout most of Mughal rule. As a Timurid prince, Babur drew greatly from his heritage in establishing a distinct polity. Babur’s political legitimation was a complex web of narratives that sought to validate his political position from various vantages. From the very beginning, imperial identity and political rhetoric centred around ancestral narratives of the reclamation of Timur’s lands during the Timurid conquests of 1398.27 In the wake of his victory, Babur sent open invitations to all Timurid refugees to his new court in Kabul. With the memory of exile still fresh in the minds of Babur’s people, there was a need to create a sense of belonging in, what was essentially, foreign land. By claiming ancestry from both Timur and Chingiz (Genghis) Khan, the Mughals were able to capitalise on their lineage through symbolic evocations of kingship. As the first of the Mughal rulers, Babur adopted ancestral titles, such as Guregeniyya, which were used by Timur himself as an indication of his status


27 Dale, The Muslim Empires, 53.
as the son-in-law of Chingiz. Not only did this establish loyalty to his ancestral legacy, it allowed Babur to signify his stature as a leader of political importance. Yet, even in employing such narratives, there was a need to re-structure this source of legitimacy to match the social and political context of the region in the early years of conquest.

Given the memory of Timur’s violent military campaign, Babur sought to invoke more well-received figures as models of Islamic kingship, such as previous Muslim rulers of the sub-continent, in asserting his power as a ruler. Despite the replacement of Timurid figures with local figures, these invocations still held significant ancestral relevance as they presented Babur through the mystical lens of a ghazi (holy warrior). The allusion of a spiritual warrior was a useful one as it situated Babur within both the Islamic tradition and the Turco-Mongol heritage. Such a portrayal perfectly depicts the deep-rooted influence of the Mughal’s Timurid heritage in the empire’s religio-political framework. The inter-contextuality and fluidity between Islamic and Turco-Mongol tradition is embodied through the unofficial status of the Sharia (Islamic Law). In laying out the empire’s political foundations, Babur and his son Humayun (1530-1556) drew strongly from their Timurid legacy wherein the Sharia was not an established entity. Primarily, this granted Babur, and subsequent Mughal rulers, a greater degree of flexibility in religious expression and interpretation, as well as a capacity for multiple modalities of kingship. The ad-hoc role of the Sharia as a religious institution is almost inescapable in a climate of religious diversity where Muslims formed a minority. Indeed, one can argue that it was never really implemented as the dominant political framework of the Mughal polity until the end of Mughal rule. Interestingly, the re-implementation of the jizya tax by Aurangzeb as well as other crucial changes in religious policies, that were propagated to be in accordance with the Sharia, is often cited to lay the foundation of the empire’s eventual decline. As such,

29 Balabanlilar, Imperial Identity in the Mughal Empire, 41.
31 As Audrey Truschke notes, this claim is popularly circulated in the Indian sub-continent. While such sentiments surfaced during the twenty-first century, it is heavily influenced by twentieth century colonial and post-colonial thinking. For example, see; Audrey Truschke, Aurangzeb: The Life and Legacy of India’s Most Controversial King (California: Stanford University Press, 2017), 7-8. For greater detail see; Riyaz Wani, “Seeds of Partition Were Sown When Aurangzeb Triumphed Over Dara Shikoh,” Tehelka, May 1, 2017,
without a previously established religio-political framework, Mughal emperors had the capacity to formulate an identity (or multiple identities) in accordance to their respective ideologies.

**Settling In: Mughal Localised Culture and Tradition**

With the progression of time, Mughal rulers began to place greater emphasis upon local culture and traditions. Most notably, the reign of Akbar saw a pivotal change wherein the emperor adopted a syncretic approach in an attempt to create an inclusive polity. However, the empire’s Timurid heritage was not undermined in the process. Rather, an examination of various imperial activities reveals the seamless incorporation of the Turco-Mongol legacy into an increasingly localised culture.

The nomadic nature of the imperial court serves as a prominent example consistent throughout Mughal rule. Unlike their contemporaries, the Ottomans and the Safavids, Mughal rulers did not have a permanent capital city from which they conducted their political activities. Although the Mughals peripatetic court is attributed to their heritage, the contextual situation in which this tradition operated differed. While Timurid mobility was largely dependent on their constant warfare and military campaigns, the peripatetic Mughal courts served as a symbolic and physical reminder of the empire’s power and grandeur. Nonetheless, that is not to say that they did not have a stable court. With the exception of the first two emperors, Mughal rulers enjoyed a strong sovereign presence with their mobile court, reducing the political importance of captured cities and hence minimising potential subversion. Hence, in a show of symbolic rhetoric, the Mughal court represented the fluidity of the empire’s legitimacy in the region – their regular travels allowed them to establish a presence across the sub-continent.

The construction of gardens also served as a significant requisite in keeping alive the empire’s ancestral culture. In his autobiography, Babur laments the sub-continent’s lack of


charm claiming that “there is no beauty in its people, no graceful social intercourse, no poetic
talent or understanding, no etiquette, nobility, or manliness”, ultimately leading him to
construct gardens in which such qualities may be cultivated. 

Social activities, such as
keeping a poetic audience and wine drinking bouts (often complementary to the poetry
recitals), were integral components in the Timurid culture that took place in large gardens.
Despite the existence of gardens built by previous dynasties, Babur commissioned the
building of Persian style gardens popular amongst the Timurids, known as charbagh, since
the former gardens lacked walls and running water which were essential components of a
charbagh. 

Built in an entirely geometrical fashion with four main parts (hence the name
charbagh, ‘four-garden’), these gardens came to represent Timurid nostalgia and an attempt
to relocate a lost identity. For Babur and his small court of Timurid immigrants, the gardens
became the centre for royal social gatherings and a venue for indulging in the famous
Timurid past-time; wine-drinking and poetry events.

The importance of gardens was two-fold; not only did it serve as a social setting for
keeping alive cultural traditions, it also symbolised sacred kingship. The construction of
gardens allowed the emperors to perpetuate the powerful rhetoric of divine religiosity to
portray themselves as rulers favoured by god. The gardens represented ‘paradise on earth’, a
powerful concept taken from the Perso-Islamic tradition wherein Mughal rulers sought to
present themselves as having the ability and power to create heaven on earth. 

Indeed, such was the rhetorical power of gardens that Babur ordered for gardens to be built in each place
he conquered. The gardens served as a visible reminder of the imperial polity and
established a presence of authority. As such, the construction of gardens (and later, other
monument) allowed Mughal rulers to legitimise their position and propagate a distinct
identity. The evolution of the garden’s architecture (and the architecture of building projects
more generally) into incorporating more local styles and motifs while maintaining a Timurid

33 Babur, Baburnama: Memoirs of Babur, Prince and Emperor, trans. by Wheeler Thackston (New York:
34 Balabanlilar, Imperial Identity in the Mughal Empire, 81.
35 For greater detail on the Persianate influence of the charbagh and its symbolic importance see: Lisa
Solmaz M. Kive, “The Other Space of the Persian Garden,” Polymath: An Interdisciplinary Arts and Sciences
36 Balabanlilar, Imperial Identity in the Mughal Empire, 81.
flair, reflects the Mughal endeavour in creating an imperial identity that would affirm loyalty to their ancestral legacy and the region’s disparate realities.

**The Golden Age and Akbar the Great**

The reigns of Akbar til Aurangzeb have proved to be a popular period of research on the Mughal Empire. Scholars justify this narrow focus by arguing that the Mughal Empire, as a polity, truly formed under the rule of Akbar and hence greater attention is given from then on. As such, the period of 1556 til 1707 is frequently cited as the ‘Golden Age’ of the empire, with the difference in governance between the beginning and the end proving to be a point of fascination. Yet, even within the period of the ‘Golden Age’, scholars note more work is produced on Akbar as opposed to other Mughal rulers. In comparison to the early instability of the empire during the reigns of the first two emperors, Akbar’s reign established a stable state structure and an internal balance of power. Literature on Akbar’s rule focuses on the policy reforms of the imperial system that facilitated inter-religious relations and inter-cultural exchange between the diverse communities. Of particular interest is Akbar’s *Din-i-Ilahi* (Religion of God) which, although played a significant role in the religio-political sphere of the empire, has failed to garner substantial scholarly attention. Most of the scholarship regarding *Din-i-Ilahi* is placed as a subset within the broader context of Akbar’s reign, with a general purpose of drawing conclusions on Akbar’s religious orientation. Although the majority of research focuses on Akbar, scholarship on the politics of successive rulers does exist, albeit not as much. The reign of the fourth emperor, Jahangir, has drawn attention for the emperor’s autobiographical writing which reveal significant insights into the

---


41 For example, see, Makhanlal Roychoudhury, *The Din-I-Ilaahi or The Religion of Akbar* (India: University of Calcutta, 1941).
legacy of Akbar’s rule. Likewise, the controversial reign of Aurangzeb has recently garnered attention from a historian of South Asian history, Audrey Truschke, who provides a revisionist account of Aurangzeb’s biography. However, research into the religio-political rule of these emperors is lacking, especially in relation to the reign of Aurangzeb. Such a gap in scholarship presents significant limitations in assessing Aurangzeb’s reign in a holistic manner. Given his controversial position in history, neglecting the religio-political underpinnings of his rule only serves to fuel misconceptions about his actions as a leader. This is important to note, since Aurangzeb’s rule highlights the tensions between religious governance and a civil society where Muslims are a minority ruling elite. However, such an equation was not unusual, with early Muslim dynasties being in a similar position as a religious and ethnic minority ruling over a largely non-Muslim non-Arab population. For example, the advent of the Abbasid empire saw a cultural shift from an Arab-centred capital in Damascus to Baghdad where Persianate influence transformed its socio-cultural milieu.

The successful centralisation of the Mughal state under the effective rule of Akbar (1556-1605) can be attributed to the shift in succession traditions initiated by Akbar himself. The political instability experienced by both Babur and Humayun were partly a result of the internal imbalance of power caused by their adherence to the traditional Timurid appanage system. The appanage system, in which territories were divided amongst legitimate successors, resulted in an inherent fragmentation of rule wherein contenders were left competing for monopolised rule. Being the first ruler to inherit under this system, Humayun spent the majority of his reign vying for territory in an attempt to establish himself against his brothers, often having to seek foreign assistance (mainly from the Safavid Empire) to reinstate himself back on the throne. Growing up, Akbar was aware of his father’s political struggle which possibly led to his decision in establishing a single rule sovereignty. While this did not prevent future successors from contending for the crown, it provided the emerging victor with unparalleled political authority and hence strengthened their legitimacy to rule.

---


43 Truschke, *Aurangzeb*.


Akbar’s reign brought a significant shift in the empire’s identity, marking it as distinctively ‘Mughal’. Through a series of political, religious and cultural reforms, Akbar actively created a unique identity of the empire and its people that transcended the imperial realm and established itself in the region’s localities. Aware of the diversity of religious, cultural and social communities in the Mughal polity, Akbar’s reign focused primarily on the incorporation of these groups into the imperial realm in order to legitimise his position as a ruler.

The propagation of his religio-political ideology, wherein all factions of society were equal in their belief in God, was a two-fold process in which the literature and policy acted as complementary. With the aid of his official historian, Abu'l Fazl, Akbar formulated an ideology of kingship that placed him in the centre as a ruler for all religious communities. To further this image of universality, the *Din-i-Ilahi* was introduced in an attempt to unite religions under a banner of commonality of belief in God. While the *Din-i-Ilahi* theoretically functioned as a religion, with the attachment of rituals and laws, its performance was arguably that of a policy. Indeed, the very notion of a ‘Religion of God’ indicates to the application of Akbar’s policy of *suhl-i-kul* (universal peace) – notable scholars have commented that the translation of the *Din-I-Ilahi* as a religion has been a result of the inaccurate translation of Abu’l Fazl’s *Akbarnama*. Nonetheless, Akbar’s syncretic approach was critical in creating an identity that allowed him to legitimise the imperial presence on a more local level (as opposed to the state-centred approach taken by Babur). Despite its sovereignty over the region, the Mughal Empire was not immune to the power of regional tribes and communities that still clung to their territorial control. Of the local rulers, the Rajputs, a group of Hindu tribes famous for their warrior-like prowess, posed a significant threat to Mughal legitimacy. Although many local rulers were subjugated through military advancements, Akbar allowed them to retain their territories in exchange for their service under the imperial system. One of the primary ways in which Akbar managed to impose his authority over them was through integrating Rajput nobles into his political and administrative ranks. By striking a delicate balance between autonomy and authority,

Akbar’s interaction with the local rulers demonstrates a key aspect of the identity that he sought to propagate – a pluralistic polity.

**An Inevitable Decline? Aurangzeb’s Legacy**

The religious reforms initiated by Akbar wherein non-Muslim communities, especially the dominant Hindu population, were brought within the fold of the Mughal state, set a precedent of religious coexistence and tolerance for more than a century. The continuity of these reforms and policies were broken during the reign of the sixth emperor, Aurangzeb (1658-1707). Aurangzeb inherited a rich empire that was at the peak of its expansion. His ascension to the throne was preceded by the most famous of the Mughal succession wars that lasted for two years and invariably impacted the future discourse of the empire. Popular sentiment surrounding Aurangzeb’s character and religio-politico orientation is arguably a result of the competition between Aurangzeb and his brother, Dara Shukoh. Each came to symbolise two ends of an ideological dichotomy, with the former being branded a bigot while the latter was heralded as a champion of religious co-existence.

Yet, contrary to popular belief, Aurangzeb’s political outlook was not always an embodiment of bigotry and oppression. As a prince, Aurangzeb spent much of his career away from the imperial court, engaged in military campaigns and governing various cities. As one would imagine, this provided him with the opportunity to interact and deal with various communities and groups, many of whom proved to be hostile. Historian Munis D. Faruqui claims that Mughal accounts illustrate Aurangzeb’s close connection with the ulema and prominent local Sufi figures over other religious leaders. Imperial patronage and endowments allowed Aurangzeb to secure the loyalty of these figures who later proved to play a crucial role in his contest for the throne. During the war of succession, Aurangzeb successfully rallied the support of local religious leaders, managing to receive military support and resources from the Naqshbandi Sufi order. While Truschke notes that both Dara Shukoh and Aurangzeb garnered equal support from high-ranking Hindu nobles that were part of the Mughal administration system, Aurangzeb’s career as a governor gave him

---


49 Ibid.

50 Ibid, 170.
the upper hand in securing the support of other religious and ethnic groups. In particular, Aurangzeb’s close relations with the Afghan tribes secured him their unwavering support during the war, with most of the tribal groups participating in the war. Aurangzeb’s victory in the war of succession is often foreshadowed as the decline of the Mughal Empire, a popular position that focuses almost exclusively on the second half of the emperor’s reign.

The administration of the imperial polity under Aurangzeb reflects the realities with which the emperor had to deal. Truschke notes that there was a rise in the proportion of Hindus in the Mughal administrative realm, from 21 percent to 33 percent during the reign of Aurangzeb – a tactic that allowed the emperor to retain loyalty of the vast region against the rise of rebellious groups. However, the rise of corruption within the imperial ranks made it increasingly difficult for the emperor to manage the growing empire. Where bribes became the norm, security of the state began to dwindle allowing rebellions to gain weight in their campaign for autonomy. Despite the rebellions being of non-Muslim groups (in particular, the Marathas and the Sikhs), Aurangzeb did not reduce the representation of those groups within the imperial system. Rather, he incorporated an increasing number of Marathas in his ranks in the hope to subdue them politically through an allegiance of loyalty to the empire. The criteria of recruitment as set by Aurangzeb did not pay heed to the religious affiliation of those seeking imperial employment. An event narrated by Truschke illustrates the emperor’s nonchalance towards such criterion, wherein a Muslim man in imperial service advised Aurangzeb to deny certain groups admission into imperial ranks based on their religion. However, the emperor denied such a proposal claiming that to do so would be bigotry as there is no place for religiosity in worldly matters.

While Aurangzeb’s personal religious disposition is widely highlighted in scholarship as evidence of the increasingly ‘Islamic’ nature of his rule, subtle details, such as the above incident, are overlooked in favour of presenting a linear narrative of an orthodox Islamic identity supposedly perpetuated by the emperor. Truschke’s work on Aurangzeb presents a revisionist account in order to demonstrate the complexity of the emperor’s reign. Other scholars, such as Satish Chandra, have also countered arguments of Aurangzeb’s bigotry and

51 Truschke, *Aurangzeb*, 56.
52 Faruqui, *The Princes of the Mughal Empire*, 171.
54 Ibid, 58.
his supposed attempt to instate an Islamic ordinance in the sub-continent.\textsuperscript{55} Aurangzeb’s acts of state violence and his landmark decision to reimpose the \textit{jizya} tax have become the synoptic archetype for his rule. Although both instances hold a degree of truth, the circumstantial context that drove the events cannot be ignored.

The rise of rebellions from the emperor’s decades long campaign in the Deccan, resulted in a significant strain to the financial state of the imperial treasury.\textsuperscript{56} The Deccan Policy under Aurangzeb was geared towards prospective conquest of the three kingdoms that ruled in the Deccan region; two of which were \textit{Shi’a} sovereigns and a Maratha state. Despite a campaign that lasted longer than twenty years, Aurangzeb failed to subdue and annex the Marathas. Instead, the Maratha kingdom continued to grow in power, posing a significant threat to the Mughal polity. The leader of the Marathas, Shivaji Bhonsle, and Aurangzeb both engaged in a power play where shifting alliances formed a dynamic relationship between the different communities involved.\textsuperscript{57} As various regional kingdoms and states grew in economic power, rebellions against the Mughal state for autonomy spread across the subcontinent.\textsuperscript{58} In an attempt to subdue potential uprisings, Aurangzeb increased the number of nobles in the imperial administration, providing the imperial elite with land grants and a handsome salary. However, as J. F. Richards reasons, the rapid intake of imperial positions drained the state treasury as it was unable to match the sudden growth, rendering these positions as ineffective.\textsuperscript{59} As such the re-imposition of the \textit{jizya} tax in 1679 can be seen as both an attempt to place a financial burden on those communities to curb the rebellions, as well to replenish the depleting state treasury. However, the rampant corruption amongst state officers, particularly those responsible for collecting the \textit{jizya}, have led many scholars to believe that the tax did little in easing the financial strain of the imperial polity.\textsuperscript{60} With many


\textsuperscript{56} The Deccan forms the southwest region of the Indian sub-continent.

\textsuperscript{57} Truschke, \textit{Aurangzeb}, 63-64.


\textsuperscript{60} Chandra, “Jizya and the State,” 322; Truschke, \textit{Aurangzeb}, 71.
of the tax collectors being Muslims in notable positions, it led to a great discord between the Muslims and other religious communities that lasted well beyond the decline of the empire.

A Glance at Mughal Identity from Literary Sources

The primary historiography of the Mughal Empire is arguably dominated by biographical writings, as they appear to form the basis of official contemporary history within the empire’s literary tradition. In examining the legitimation process of the Mughal Empire, the portrayal of individual rulers and their respective ideologies becomes the basis of identity formation. One of the primary means through which rulers would portray themselves and propagate their philosophies was through biographies and memoirs. Biographical writings held substantial political significance in the empire as it provided rulers with a medium through which they could promote their ideologies and notions of kingship. It is important to note that the biographies and memoirs were a product of their time and context – as such, the emperors’ projection of themselves and their ideologies were significantly influenced by the dynamics within the region. As the imperial polity underwent changes in its structure, both cultural and political, so did the writings of the rulers.

Babur

Memoirs written during the Mughal era can be divided into two main categories – autobiographies and biographies. This distinction can be simplified through authorship, with the former being penned by the subject themselves and the latter being written by a secondary person. However, on a textual level this distinction is often blurred, as noted by Zaman, who comments on the intertextuality between the two, citing the Baburnama (an autobiography) as an example. Along with a narrative account of Babur, the Baburnama also includes details of other people’s lives, namely those from his intimate circle. As one would expect of an autobiography, the Baburnama is mostly anecdotal in nature. From the very beginning, the memoir reads as a narration of events and people, inserted with frequent introspective and, at times, deeply personal reflections of the emperor himself. Yet, Babur frames his autobiography as a work of history, attempting to attach to it some form of historical reliability. He states quite explicitly:

“I have not written all this to complain: I have simply written the truth. I do not intend by what I have written to compliment myself: I have simply set down exactly what happened. Since I have made it a point in this history to write the truth of every matter and to set down no more than the reality of every event, as a consequence I have reported every good and evil I have seen of father and brother and set down the actuality of every fault and virtue of relative and stranger. May the reader excuse me; may the listener take me not to task.”62

The contradiction between Babur’s statement and the literary nature of his memoir is noted by Stephen Dale who argues that, as an autobiography, Babur’s representation of the ‘truth’ is simply a single perspective amongst others.63 While inherently biased towards a specific audience (in this case, those of Turco-Mongol heritage), it is still a valid perspective as it reflects the historical context within which Babur operated. As the founder of the Mughal Empire, Babur’s rhetoric of legitimation was perpetuated through the lens of his immediate heritage, a Timurid and Chingizid ancestry, which ultimately reflected its significance in the imperial identity.64 One of the primary indications of this is the language in which Babur wrote his autobiography in – a Chagatai Turkish script. Wheeler M. Thackston, the translator of the Baburnama, notes that such a decision was unusual given that Persian was deemed to be the universal literary language of the time.65 However, given the cultural force of ancestral memory such a decision was not unusual at all, wherein choosing to write in Chagatai Turkish merely reflects a natural tendency of language choice. Nonetheless, such a choice is indicative of the lens through which Babur sought to portray the imperial polity – an identification with his ancestral culture rather than the one he had settled in, propagated a clear distinction between the locals and the new empire.

The political landscape when Babur established the Mughal Empire also played an important role in influencing the autobiography’s record of the time period. The region of Hindustan was dominated by a population of non-Muslims, mainly Hindus. As such, when

64 Ibid, 638.
justifying his presence in the region, Babur sought help in establishing his authority through a mystical order of Islam, the Naqshbandi Sufi order. This led to the construction of divine rulership within the empire utilised by successive Mughal rulers. Aspects of divinity and sainthood can be derived from his memoirs, where he narrates a mystical dream which supposedly allowed for his escape from his enemies. While this is not the only instance of miraculous and divine happenings, by attributing his escape from his enemies (who, according to Babur, would have killed him) to his dream, Babur effectively positions himself as a ruler favoured by God. The political implications of this are not lost on Azfar Moin, who argues that these references “set Babur apart as someone with a noble and worthy soul” which, in the context of his early years as a struggling prince, served to legitimise his rule.

The allusion of mysticism can also be found in the literary stylistic nature of the *Baburnama*. In keeping tradition with the Central Asian linguistic practice of poetry, Babur’s autobiography is peppered with Turkic couplets in the form of *ghazals*. *Ghazals* are derived from the Persian tradition of poetry used to express emotions of pain and separation through devotional love that transcended mortal boundaries – this form of poetry has deep spiritual and divine meaning within an acutely religious framework. According to Dale, Babur’s poetry mirrored the spiritual sentiments of Naqshbandi beliefs wherein he invoked "feelings of sufi devotionalism." When examined from a broader religio-political perspective, it becomes clear that the particular allusion to the Naqshbandi order through a poetic medium was a means by which Babur could perpetuate a symbol of allegiance. In addition, the fusion between Persian and Turkic traditions of poetry is highly indicative of the influence of cultural practices that permeated the imperial domain.

---

68 Ibid, 496.
69 Ibid, 498.
71 Ibid, 643.
72 Ibid, 644.
Akbar

While Babur is often cited as setting the precedent for the extensive custom of compiling memoirs within the Mughal Empire, this tradition can be traced back to the early medieval period in the Arab world. Using the work of Reynolds, Zaman highlights the Islamic tradition of collecting information about people who would narrate sayings of the Prophet Muhammad as a means of establishing reliability in the chain of narration. Additionally, a closer examination of the textual composition of the biographical literature reveals a reliance on primary documents and eye-witness accounts in an attempt to produce historically accurate works. The Akbarnama, is a noteworthy example wherein the author, Abu’l Fazl, assures his readers of the reliability of his work by stating his sources of information. He claims to have gathered “narratives and accounts of the events in His Majesty’s life”, spending extensive amounts of time “questioning members of the court and intimates” of the emperor’s family, supposedly obtaining over twenty written testimonies for each event. Abu’l Fazl’s methods are also mentioned by Lefèvre, who notes that he meticulously interrogated people of “right character” about past events. While these claims may seem exaggerated, his method of recording the memories of eye-witnesses has been confirmed in the writings of some officers and nobles. The act of gathering testimonies in writing about past events and characters can be labelled as a form of anecdotal writing. The reciprocity of anecdotes and testimonies is explored by Michael Ullyot who calls “anecdotes as forms of testimonies” insofar that they [testimonies] are used as a means to persuade the reader of an argument. In stating the testimonial nature of his evidence, Abu’l Fazl essentially acknowledges the rhetorical weight of his writing wherein the authority of his writing is legitimated and, hence, the narration is ‘confirmed’. Establishing a sense of

76 Lefèvre, “Recording a Missing Voice from Mughal India,” 456.
reliability was not an isolated act – rather, it allowed Abu’l Fazl, in conjunction with Akbar, to create a particular narrative around rulership.

Akbar’s vision of rulership combines the notion of divinity with a more rational approach which is clearly perpetuated in the Akbarnama. The opening of the Akbarnama is dedicated to the supremacy of God, where Abu’l Fazl attests to God’s perfection in an attempt to create a sacred frame of reference in which he places Akbar’s sovereignty. There is an allusion to divine intercession wherein the ruler is “graced” with “good fortune” to “raise[s] the banner of the shadow of God.”79 Despite still viewing sovereignty through the religious lens of divinity, the religious core of rulership, wherein the ruler was expected to uphold the legal tradition of Sharia, was significantly downplayed by Akbar through Abu’l Fazl’s writings.80 Instead, rulership was viewed as a ‘social contract’ between the ruler and those being ruled, where the qualities of the leader were expounded with great importance.81 However, as Khan points out, this was not an entirely new concept – rather, Abu’l Fazl seems to have drawn inspiration from the 14th century historian, Ibn Khaldun, as well from the Persian akhlaqi tradition (tradition of ethics).82 Abu’l Fazl’s conception of Akbar as the “Perfect Man” stems from Islamic theology wherein the ruler is perceived to have attained complete conscious, transcending the material world. While such an attribution is traditionally given to the Prophet Muhammad, in honour of his position as the last of all prophets, Abu’l Fazl blends it with the akhlaqi tradition, essentially portraying Akbar as a divine ruler of not just Muslims but of humanity.83 The allusion of divinity is closely tied with repeated emphasis on justice which is central to the akhlaqi tradition. The ascension of Akbar to the throne is portrayed as a new era of justice in the Akbarnama, wherein Abu’l Fazl claims that the emperor “himself named the era as the Divine (Ilahi) Era…When the world was illuminated by the justice-increasing rule of this [the] one nurtured by divine light.”84 Yet, despite placing Akbar within a sacred framework, Abu’l Fazl avoids Islamically

---

79 Ibn Mubarak, Akbarnama, 1:15.
82 Khan, “Tracing Sources of Principles,” 46-49.
specific proclamations when praising the emperor and his position as a ruler. Rather, there is a deliberate attempt to portray Akbar as a ruler of Hindustan, wherein the different religious communities are encompassed under the overarching identity of ‘Hindustani.’ The socio-political environment of the empire, wherein society was comprised of a Hindu majority and Muslim minority, influenced this conception of rulership. Mukhia maintains that there was a need to establish a common ground upon which emperors could effectively legitimise their authority over the local population.\(^{(85)}\) Coincidentally, there was a growing movement within societal factions that promoted the idea of a universal God which transcended individual religious beliefs.\(^{(86)}\) As such, the Akbarnama was used politically as a means of propagating a new vision of equality amongst all factions of society, irrespective of their religious inclinations.

The Akbarnama also served to complement Akbar’s introduction of reformatory religious policies aimed at encouraging religious tolerance.\(^{(87)}\) The emphasis on universality, propounded in the Akbarnama, came to manifest itself in the creation of Akbar’s syncretic Din-i-Illahi, which sought to create idyllic religious harmony in society.\(^{(88)}\) Founded in 1582, during the twenty-sixth year of Akbar’s reign, the Din-i-Illahi aimed to reconcile the differences between the diverse religious traditions that were present in the sub-continent. However, this was not a separately conceived project, rather it was the result of two of Akbar’s most famed conceptions; the suhl-i-kul (policy of universal peace) and the Ibadat Khana (House of Worship). The religious climate of the sub-continent was one of diversity, though acceptance of this diversity, especially within the orthodox Muslim circle, was hard-pressed. The power of the ulema surpassed the religious authority of the emperor, insofar that Akbar was politically bound to the decisions made by them. As such, with the help of Abu’l Fazl’s father, Shaikh Mubarak, a theologian who opposed the bigotry of the orthodox ulema, a religious decree was created in 1579 which proclaimed Akbar as the Imam.\(^{(89)}\) Essentially, this elevated Akbar’s religious stature above that of the ulema, giving him ultimate authority

---


\(^{(86)}\) Ibid, 7-8.

\(^{(87)}\) Khan, “Tracing Sources of Principles,” 46.


in religious matters. As a result, the emperor introduced the policy of universal peace as a means to encourage tolerance of the region’s diverse religious philosophical ideas.

The suhl-i-kul was complemented by the Ibadat Khana, built in 1575, which was home to the many intellectual discussions between religious scholars of various traditions. These discussions, mediated by Akbar himself, allowed the emperor to gain an understanding of different models of religiosity, subsequently leading him to conclude that the search for God forms the basis of all religions. Inspired by this commonality, the Din-i-Illahi was created in an attempt to rein in religious denominations under a single umbrella of faith. Debates regarding the Din-i-Illahi revolve around its purpose of inception and what it came to represent. While some scholars believe it to be a religion, others view it as a political tool that allowed for a balance between the two prominent religious traditions in the region; Islam and Hinduism. Much of this divide turns on the ‘laws’ and principles that were set out by Akbar, in particular the injunction of prostration to the emperor. Despite most of the principles being primarily concerned with moral and ethical behaviour, such as forgiveness and abstinence from evil, making the prostration to Akbar compulsory stands out as an anomaly. Although this places the Din-i-Illahi (and subsequently Akbar as well) outside of the Islamic tradition, such a reading isolates its function from the broader context of Akbar’s scheme of religious policy. The Din-i-Illahi was part of Akbar’s reformations for peaceful coexistence – the final puzzle piece for his syncretic approach. In conjunction with the policy of universal peace and the House of Worship, the injunction of prostration can simply be viewed as a rhetorical principle to further a political motive. It served as the crux of his propagation of his theory of kingship in which he was the ‘perfect ruler’. As such, both the shifts in politico-religious ideology and public policy acted as a propagation of one another. Nonetheless, the Islamic undertones of the biography cannot be ignored – despite the

---


compelling rhetoric of universality in creating a syncretic identity, neither Abu’l Fazl nor Akbar could escape the inevitable influence of their identity as a Muslim. As the House of Worship demonstrates, in creating an image of pluralism, there was a need to acknowledge the significance of religious traditions. The pluralism that Akbar sought to portray as opposed to the pluralism that existed within the social and cultural realities of the region is indicative of this.

Despite propagating an ideology that did not adhere to a single religious framework, Akbar could not escape the empire’s inherent Islamic underpinnings. Indeed, in his quest to propagate an image of the ideal ruler, the emperor needed to acknowledge the role of the Mughal polity as an Islamicate entity on a global scale. As such, he commissioned, almost simultaneously with the Akbarnama, the Tarikh-i-Alfi (History of the Millennium). Yet, there is a striking difference between the Tarikh-i-Alfi and the Akbarnama, wherein the former portrays Akbar within an Islamic framework as opposed to the universal image in the latter.\(^\text{92}\) The Tarikh-i-Alfi was written within the context of the Islamic millennium, celebrating 1000 years since the migration of the Prophet from Mecca to Medina.\(^\text{93}\) As such, it sought to portray Akbar as an upholder of the Islamic tradition – as the Muslim ruler who strove to achieve Muslim unity and was constantly fighting a battle of jihad against the disbelievers.\(^\text{94}\) Unsurprisingly, there was a broader geo-political motivation in creating such a starkly different image. At the time of its conception, Akbar was engaged in a series of political and territorial struggles with rival regional empires, most notably with the Uzbek state in Central Asia. Additionally, neighbouring empires, such as the Safavids of Persia, the Ottomans of the Middle East, and closer to home, the Afghan rulers in the north-west, all propagated sentiments of the Islamic millennium in order to invigorate their religious status.\(^\text{95}\) As such, one of the primary reasons for commissioning the Tarikh-i-Alfi was to gain a sense of legitimacy as a ruling Islamic power. The Mughal imperial ideology, while focusing on inclusivity of all religious traditions, recognised the significance of utilising authoritative Islamic expressions in maintaining their ruling power. The Tarikh-i-Alfi served as the perfect balance to the Akbarnama – while the latter developed a theory of kingship based on tolerance and universality, the former provided that theory with a perspective grounded in the

\(^{92}\) Subrahmanyam, “The Mughal,” 305.
\(^{93}\) Ibid, 306.
\(^{94}\) Ibid, 305.
\(^{95}\) Ibid, 306.
Islamic tradition. Both maintained distinct performative roles in the crystallisation of identity narratives, with the *Tarikh-i-Alfi* operating as a form of external propaganda while the *Akbarnama* functioned as internal propaganda.

**Aurangzeb**

The reign of Aurangzeb is perhaps the most controversial of all Mughal rulers. Aurangzeb’s personal religious inclination, while supposedly extended only to his private life, often translated into imperial policies and the emperor’s preoccupation on being a just ruler. Truschke observes that while Aurangzeb was considerably more practising than his forefathers in certain aspects, such as abstaining from drinking and drug use, his piety was by no means the standard to which he is often held accountable. Nonetheless, Aurangzeb’s strong identification with the Islamic tradition set the tone for a typical portrayal of Muslim identity in the 18th century. Unlike Babur and Akbar, Aurangzeb did not rely on an autobiography or a commissioned biography to propagate his model of an ideal ruler. Rather, a historical examination reveals that the identity perpetuated by the emperor was naturally a result of his policies and military campaigns. Understandably, Aurangzeb’s policy on temples has been of particular scholarly interest given the issue’s popularity in current times, regarding religious relations in the Indian subcontinent. Indeed, the branding of the emperor as a religious bigot and extremist arguably stems from the state violence perpetrated against the Hindu communities and their associated temples.

Beginning in the early 1670’s, widespread uprisings and rebellions plagued the empire, with various social and religious groups vying for autonomy against the Mughal state. This opened multiple military frontiers within the imperial borders, posing a serious threat to Aurangzeb’s legitimacy as a ruler. Politically, many of the rebellions and uprisings were linked to a religious institution, usually a temple. The destruction of the Keshava Deva Temple in Mathura in 1670 serves as an early example of the political motive behind temple desecration. The region had been under the emperor’s sight for its uprising of the Jatts, a Hindu community, and its covert alliance with Shivaji. Consequently, the destruction of a temple served as a public announcement of political transgression against the imperial state.

---

96 Truschke, *Aurangzeb*.

Richard M. Eaton, a historian specialising in temple desecration, argues that destroying temples was a tradition that predates Muslim rule in the sub-continent.\textsuperscript{98} It was a popular form of legitimation by Hindu rulers to establish their authority and leave a visible presence of their power. Likewise, in his campaigns against the rebellions and uprisings, Aurangzeb engaged in the act of temple desecration as a means of demonstrating Mughal domination in the region. While historical records suggest that only a few dozen temples were affected, the number is often exaggerated in an attempt to demonise Aurangzeb to suit identity narratives of the Hindu-Muslim divide.\textsuperscript{99}

The emperor’s representation in literature has contributed to the distinctively Islamist image of Aurangzeb. The portrayal of Aurangzeb as a ruler is significantly dependent upon the perception of his contemporaries. Despite the first ten years of Aurangzeb’s reign being documented by the court historian of the time, Mirza Muhammad Kazim, it was left unfinished as Aurangzeb cut back on the expenditure of the project.\textsuperscript{100} The official biography, \textit{Maasir-i-Alamgiri}, was compiled three years after the death of Aurangzeb by a state officer, Muhammad Saqi Mustad Khan. The author was given access to all the imperial records and archives to assist his work. Unlike the biography of Akbar, which, despite not being authored by himself, contains reflective passages of the emperor, the \textit{Maasir-i-Alamgiri} is devoid of intimate introspection. Rather, the author provides his own reflections on Aurangzeb’s rule, essentially projecting a perceived image of the emperor. The language used in the biography is highly indicative of the author’s orthodox Islamic inclinations, inevitably resulting in an image of a pious emperor whose aim of kingship was to defend the Islamic faith from any external threat, be it political/militant or philosophical/ideological. Beginning with the war of succession, the author immediately situates Aurangzeb within a paradigm of a saviour. Khan downplays Aurangzeb’s active rebellion against his father, Shah Jahan, by framing him as a prince who came to the defence of the imperial state against the evils of Dara Shukoh. He writes that Shah Jahan’s illness led Shukoh to “seize[d] the opportunity” to usurp his father and through his “magic arts the Emperor’s mind was somewhat estranged from Aurangzeb.”\textsuperscript{101} Consequently, Aurangzeb was forced to “defend

\textsuperscript{98} For greater detail see: Eaton, “Temple Desecration.”


\textsuperscript{100} Khan, \textit{Maasir-i-Alamgiri}, “Translator’s Preface,” v.

\textsuperscript{101} Khan, \textit{Maasir-i-Alamgiri}, 1-2.
the faith and the State” and hence became a competitor for the crown.\textsuperscript{102} To further this image of a humble defender of faith, Khan writes that Aurangzeb attributed his success against Shukoh to God rather than his own military prowess, thereafter immersing himself in the “devotion of God, dispensation of justice” and administrative duties.\textsuperscript{103} The strong Islamic undertone is further illustrated by the structural form of the biography wherein each chapter documenting one year of Aurangzeb’s reign commences with the advent of the holy Islamic month of Ramadan. This allowed to Khan to begin with praises of the emperor’s display of piety, both private and public.

Revisionist accounts of Aurangzeb reveal that the emperor was concerned about his performance as a just ruler. Indeed, anecdotes of the emperor’s acts of virtue and kindness towards the common people appear frequently in the \textit{Maasir-i-Alamgiri} as Khan paints the ruler in a benevolent light.\textsuperscript{104} Yet, despite aligning his ideals of rulership closely to the Islamic tradition, Truschke notes that in the battle of religious ideals and state interests, the latter usually preceded.\textsuperscript{105} Incidents, such as the war of succession and temple desecrations illustrate the clash clearly. The imprisonment of Shah Jahan by Aurangzeb resulted in serious repercussions from the Islamic state in Mecca, wherein Aurangzeb’s legitimacy as a ruler was denied by the religious leaders.\textsuperscript{106} Indeed, Aurangzeb’s willingness to manipulate Islamic principles under the guise of justice and state welfare is well documented by Truschke.\textsuperscript{107} This discrepancy between the ideological and the eclectic reality of Aurangzeb has resulted in misconceptions wherein events of violence and marginalisation of religious communities are mistranslated into the emperor’s theoretical preoccupation with Islam. The overly Islamic tendencies of the \textit{Maasir-i-Alamgiri} further serve as evidence for these misconceptions, fuelling narratives of bigotry and extremism against Aurangzeb.

\textsuperscript{102} Ibid, 2.
\textsuperscript{103} Ibid, 11.
\textsuperscript{104} See for example the incident in Hasan Abdal in 1974; Khan, \textit{Maasir-i-Alamgiri}, 82-84.
\textsuperscript{105} Truschke, \textit{Aurangzeb}, 68.
\textsuperscript{106} Ibid, 68.
\textsuperscript{107} Ibid, 68-77.
The rise and decline of the Mughal Empire, in light of its identity formation, can be examined through Ibn Khaldun’s theory of cyclical dynasties, wherein the maintenance of political power is dependent upon the asabiyyah (social cohesion) of the rulers. In his book, *Muqaddimah*, Ibn Khaldun states that all dynasties have a certain lifespan during which they enjoy a period strong rule with complete authority, inevitably ending in a series of generational decline. As such, dynastical power operates as a cycle which begins with conquests of sedentary people by nomadic communities. These nomads possess, what Ibn Khaldun refers to as, ‘group feeling’ which is only present due to a number of prerequisites that essentially revolve around notions of kinship. The close-knit nature of the nomads and their nomadic lifestyle result in greater fortitude and, hence, greater asabiyyah. The first few generations of leaders are argued to have the highest form of authority as asabiyyah is at its peak – loyalty and a willingness to defend is strongly linked to the ‘group feeling’. However, as they settle into city life and become sedentary, the asabiyyah weakens due to their preoccupation with worldly matters (primarily, luxury and materialism). Ibn Khaldun labels this as the last stage of civilisation before the dynastical reign comes to an end with the former being subject to conquest by another community with a stronger ‘group feeling’.

Despite the conquest of 1526 by Babur, scholars generally agree that the Mughal Empire was truly formed under the rule of Akbar, some 30 years later. This popular sentiment aligns well with Ibn Khaldun’s theory as it accounts for the lack of asabiyyah between the rulers and the ruled during the empire’s first 30 years. The conquest of 1526 was by a small nomadic group who shared an experience of exile – Babur and his humble court arrived in the Indian sub-continent with the desire to preserve their endangered dynasty. As such, the beginning of Babur’s rule is acutely defined through his attachment to his Turco-Mongol heritage as he sought to revive the Timurid dynasty. The nostalgic evocations of a

---


lost homeland in Babur’s autobiography, written in the Chagatay Turkish script, along with an exclusively Timurid court to keep cultural traditions alive, demonstrate the conscious effort to retain the ancestral connection and kinship felt. Babur, despite his military success in India, spent the vast majority of his rule in an attempt to revive Timurid cultural traditions. As refugees, Babur and his people experienced a strong sense of communal identity which can translate into Ibn Khaldun’s ‘group feeling’. However, this ‘group feeling’ did not extend to the dwellers of the sub-continent who were essentially under Mughal rule. Balabanlılar notes that the Timurid nostalgia and trauma of exile resulted in Babur forming his own societal circle with other Timurid court refugees and, hence, neglecting social ties of the wider regional community. This exclusivity continued in the reign of Humayun who likewise did little to include the local population in the empire’s socio-political sphere. While Humayun’s neglect can be attributed to the constant warfare that kept him occupied for the majority of his rule, a quick look at his court reveals the domination of Turani (those of Central Asian descent) and Persian nobility. According to historian Muhammad Zia ud-Din, Abu’l Fazl records a list of 57 Mughal nobles who accompanied Humayun of which 27 were Turani, 21 were Persian and the remaining 9 are unidentifiable.

In contrast, the reign of Akbar witnessed a greater inclusivity of local natives in both the court nobility and administration. This inevitably led to an increased engagement between the Mughals and the people of Hindustan, thus resulting in stronger asabiyyah and stable rule. Akbar’s reforms allowed for the integration of Turani migrants into the local population and, hence, weakened the stronghold of powerful families and clans who clung to their Central Asian roots and traditions. Additionally, the incorporation of natives into the imperial realm resulted in inter-cultural exchange between the different religious communities in the sub-continent. Akbar’s religious debates and discussions with scholars of different religions along with his precedent of inter-religious marriages allowed for open dialogue and an adaptation of cultural traditions which created a bond that transcended religious boundaries. It is only upon the reversal of Akbar’s reforms during the reign of Aurangzeb that the ‘group feeling’ gradually disintegrates leading to the beginning of the empire’s decline. Aurangzeb’s

gradual shift towards a more Islamicate polity is perhaps epitomised through the re-
imposition of the jizya tax. Essentially, such a move effectively dichotomised society into
two mainstream categories – Muslim and non-Muslim. Despite including non-Muslim nobles
into high administrative ranks, the socio-religious division proved to be irreparable.\textsuperscript{113}

The decline in asabiyyah can also be attributed to the changes brought in the politics
of the imperial household. Princes of the empire were a significant institution in themselves,
as they would form crucial alliances and political networks with regional leaders and
powerful notables. Not only did these alliances play a significant role in the royal wars of
succession due to the military support provided, they also served as a way of linking the
different regions together through a series of networks. As Munis D. Faruqui observes, the
independent position of princes was gradually restrained by Aurangzeb, thus limiting their
ability to maintain the ties that had kept them in power.\textsuperscript{114} Consequently, later generations of
princes were unable to form sustainable ties with the rising non-Muslim communities, such
as the Rajputs, Sikhs and Marathas. Without an independent base from which they could
assert their authority, it became increasingly difficult for the princes to establish a strong
profile as a contender for the crown. As such, the network of alliances that once bound the
empire together fractured, with each regional ruler contending for independence. As the
Mughal Empire declined, new powers emerged, and the cycle of rule continued.

\textbf{Reflections on Models of Rule}

The history of the Mughals is founded on the shifting sands of ideology as developed
in specific religio-political policies through centuries of social and cultural change. To
accommodate for this climate each emperor formulated their own unique religio-political
policy that reflected the dynamics of the environment. The trajectory of Mughal rule
demonstrates the evolving identity narratives that were propagated by each emperor. From
the ancestral evocations of kingship, to policies that were aimed at integrating the local
inhabitants, and narratives steeped in religious tradition, each ruler had a distinctive method,
yet, as Muslims they each drew upon a common Islamic approach in the legitimation of rule.
The rules of Akbar and Aurangzeb in particular personify two archetypal approaches to
governance, each of which, from the onset seem to be decidedly binary. While the

\textsuperscript{113} Truschke, \textit{Aurangzeb}, 56-58.
\textsuperscript{114} Faruqui, \textit{The Princes of the Mughal Empire}, 274-276.
biographical data illustrates the perceived ideal governorship of each ruler, one can reasonably conclude that it is their individual temperament that set them apart. Both men were arguable guided by their conscience to advance on their ancestral inheritance and ultimately create a legacy of an ideal sovereignty.

Despite the stark contrast in their approaches, both emperors sought to achieve the same goal: to control and dominate the region. Akbar’s reign is decidedly Ruminesque, with strong mystical undertones wherein notions of universality and pluralism are ultimately underpinned by a singular religious (Islamic) core.\textsuperscript{115} Akbar’s approach is cultural – he draws upon his ancestral heritage, emulating the Mongol policy wherein difference is appreciated for its utilitarian benefit.\textsuperscript{116} Aurangzeb’s approach, by contrast, evolves into a seemingly ‘religious’ outlook, taking the style of Charlemagne. Such an approach seeks to dominate through a visible presence of power – the destruction of temples and imposition of the \textit{jizya} exemplify this. Yet, while their manner of rule varied between syncretic styles of religious affirmation and uniform orthodoxy, as the next chapter will demonstrate, the Mughal rulers engaged with the Sufi networks of power to garner support and disseminate influence. In the face of increasing turmoil, diversity, and pluralism, the distinctive approaches of Akbar and Aurangzeb is indicative of the temporal variances and tensions, the effects of which continue to play out in the time of Bulleh Shah.


\textsuperscript{116} For greater detail on how the Mongol’s managed their rapidly growing empire see: Richard W. Bulliet, Pamela Kyle Crossley, Daniel R. Headrick, Steven W. Hirsch, Lyman L. Johnson and David Northrup, eds. “Mongol Eurasia and Its Aftermath,” in \textit{The Earth and Its People: A Global History} (USA: Cengage Learning, 2015), 280-305.
Chapter Two

Placing Bulleh Shah in Context: Religious Pluralism and Sufism

*Sab ikko rung kapaahai da*
All cotton threads are of the same colour
-Bulleh Shah

The above verse, while seemingly referring to a description of textiles, illustrates Bulleh Shah’s belief in God as the essence in all humans. The analogy speaks directly to religious and ethnic pluralism, at the core of which is a powerfully simple spiritual outlook. The cotton threads are symbolic of the different ways in which people seek God. As the poem goes on to illustrate, there are many forms of cloths that the cotton threads take, and there are many techniques in which the threads are spun. But ultimately, all the cotton threads, in their inherent form, share the same colour. Despite the presence of many distinct practices of spirituality and the many different people of varying cultures that seek the spiritual, they all ultimately seek a connection with a higher power or a divine entity. In the sub-continent, the idea that the essence of God resides in all comes bursting into the foreground in Bulleh Shah’s poetry. It is of no surprise, then, that Islam should take shape in the region in such a distinct manner. Just as all threads come from one source, cotton, likewise, whether these paths share a common trajectory or not, in their purest form they are simply manifestations of a single point of origin – Islam.

Religious Pluralism

Religious pluralism encapsulates a broad definition. Most commonly, it refers to the existence of diverse religious traditions and practices and the response that it emulates. While a pluralist response can take many forms, a broad and general stance usually acknowledges that, to a certain extent, all religious traditions contain elements of truth while holding a steadfast belief in their own tradition. However, religious pluralism is also often used as an

---

interchangeable term with religious diversity. In this usage, the term operates within an anthropological framework as opposed to the socio-political framework of the former. As such, it becomes less about responding to the diversity present in society and more about the multi-faceted nature of society – there is greater focus on the intrinsic relationships within the social realm. It is important to note the subtle yet discrete difference between ‘pluralism’ and ‘plurality’. The latter refers to the social reality of diversity of which the existence of a vast array of traditions and practices is an unescapable truth. Even within seemingly monolithic religions, such as Islam and Christianity, there are nuanced differences that prevail.

‘Pluralism’, on the other hand, is a two-fold system wherein it first recognises and validates ‘plurality’, and subsequently, presumes that there are certain religious truths that are prevalent across different religious systems. The different ways in which religious pluralism has been understood historically has significantly evolved the intellectual discourse surrounding it. Tracing the development of the religious pluralism hypothesis, Michael Barnes argues that while seeking and highlighting commonalities between religious traditions in spiritual experiences allow for a common ground of understanding, such an approach runs the risk of perpetuating reductionist portrayals of religions. Religions are complex systems of beliefs and practices, and entail certain manifestations and teachings of the ‘Divine’ and the ‘ultimate truth’, each of which differ significantly to the other. As such, to simply reduce this complexity to a few universal points would be to ignore the very diversity that allows for an increased awareness of the ‘other’. Difference is important as it allows for communities and religious groups to maintain an identity that would distinguish them – while inclusivity plays an important role in inter-faith dialogue and co-existence, an exclusive identity establishes their validity.

Religious diversity has arguably existed since the inception of religious systems themselves. The agency of interpretation within religious traditions has allowed for a myriad

---


of perspectives to emerge, resulting in an internal plurality. With the growth of various religions throughout history, from poly-theistic to mono-theistic traditions, diversity amongst communities within various regions has become part of the ordinary. Subsequently, an intellectual discourse regarding religious diversity and plurality stems from the need to navigate and seek a better understanding of these differences. The impetus for religious pluralism is ultimately to function as a neutral buffer of tolerance and co-existence through awareness. Debates on religious plurality are traditionally centred around Christianity. Scholars, such as Terry O’Keeffe and Lenn E. Goodman, model ideas of religious pluralism on the precept of Christianity, primarily exploring the plurality that exists within.\textsuperscript{121} Likewise, while John Hick, a notable philosopher of religion, explores religious pluralism outside of Christianity, advocating for the validity of multiple realities and perceptions of God, he compares non-Christian religious traditions with Christianity as a frame of reference.\textsuperscript{122}

Nonetheless, there is a dominant trend wherein most conceive of religious pluralism as a means of validating difference. In its essence, religious pluralism allows for communities to better understand their own practices and beliefs through developing an appreciation of other traditions. It allows for an enriching experience of diversity as narratives of similarity and difference are perpetuated in the search for the ultimate reality – in theistic traditions this would equate to a divine entity, such as God, while for the non-theistic it would be a spiritual experience of the self. As Goodman puts it, “[…] the faith of pluralism is that values can be reconciled and that diverse perspectives do not reflect an underlying incoherence in reality itself.”\textsuperscript{123}

\textbf{Religious Pluralism in the Indian Sub-continent}

The Indian sub-continent has a rich history of diversity. It encompasses a huge array of ethnicities and religions that have pervaded the vast region due to the high frequency of


\textsuperscript{123} Goodman, “Religious Pluralism,” 462.
migrations and constant flow of movement. An interesting study by Rajeev Bhargava, a political theorist, explores India’s religious diversity and its pluralist response by drawing a strong comparison between the ancient Indian empire of Maurya (third century BCE), and the modern secularist Indian nation-state. Bhargava contends that while both eras deal with a different form of religious diversity, with the Mauryan Empire dealing with sectarian issues and modern India being gripped in inter-religious conflicts, each demonstrate a highly politicised response. In the Maurya Empire, the king, Asoka, passed a series of edicts on tolerance, welcoming the communities of different traditions and beliefs and encouraging a restraint in hate speech. Modern India, on the other hand, faces a different set of challenges in light of its religious plurality. With many different religious communities existing side by side, Bhargava argues that it becomes imperative for the state to maintain a distance from religious politics. Throughout the history of the Indian sub-continent, interference and impositions on religious activity in a region that is ultimately defined by its diversity has proved to be an ineffective mode of governance.

The Mughal Response to Religious Pluralism

Ruling over a course of three hundred years, the success of the Mughal Empire’s sovereignty over the imperial lands can be attributed to their general policy of religious pluralism. Of all the empires to rule over the majority of the sub-continent, the Mughal Empire is the only empire to have ruled such a vast region for the longest period. Ruling over an approximate 3.2 million square kilometres, the empire was home to many religious, ethnic

---

125 Siraj, “India: A Laboratory,” 320.
127 Ibid, 28-29.
and cultural communities. Despite its Islamic underpinnings, most of the Mughal rulers pursued an approach of reciprocity whereby they integrated themselves into the regional religio-cultural milieu while also seeking to incorporate the locals and indigenous into their imperial structure. As the previous chapter explored, narratives of identity and state-building were carefully crafted to project notions of assimilation and unity while maintaining their expatriate status as Turco-Mongol descendants. Indeed, an examination of the trajectory of the key Mughal rulers reveal dynamic shifts in their religio-cultural thought which, subsequently, translated into their religio-political frameworks. The case studies of Akbar and Aurangzeb exemplify a sharp contrast between the model of governance implemented in response to the religious diversity present.

The Mughal Empire, under the reigns of the first two emperors, Babur and Humayun, was defined by its political instability and a reliance on its Turco-Mongol heritage. Despite encompassing a diverse region, there was little attempt made in addressing its plurality. Indeed, the dismissal of Indian gardens in favour of Timurid gardens by Babur as a means to create an exclusive social space for the Central Asian expatriates, reflects the indifference towards the local populace. As such, it comes as no surprise that scholars refer to the ‘true’ establishment of the Mughal Empire as beginning from the reign of Akbar – he was essentially a figure climatised by the sub-continent and later held as a model ruler for successfully synthesising various elements of the region. Akbar sought to construct a polity in which diversity, particularly religious difference, would be respected. Unlike his predecessors, Akbar realised that evoking his prestigious lineage and continuously perpetuating his heritage would only legitimate his rule to a certain extent. As such, he aimed to propagate his position in inclusive terms through his commissioned official biography. The Akbarnama sought to portray Akbar as a universal leader for all of humanity. In the literary realm, the textual structure of the Akbarnama marks a departure from the traditional framework of historical writing from within Transoxiana (Central Asian

regions) and local Hindustani regions, as well as from the Islamic tradition. While histories of Muslim rulers would be traced back to the lineage of Muhammad to validate their legitimacy as an Islamic leader, Abu’l Fazl goes a step further in tracing the lineage of Akbar back to Adam, who is agreed to be the first human. While Abu’l Fazl’s approach seems to be novel in the context of the sub-continent, a closer examination reveals a distinct Islamic undertone in his writings. By positioning Akbar as a universal leader, as opposed to simply a leader for Muslims, Abu’l Fazl essentially draws on the very religious boundaries that validate the reign of rulers in the Islamic world. Despite avoiding Islamically specific terminology, Abu’l Fazl’s framework seeks to emulate the same portrayal of the Prophet who is quoted in the Quran “as a mercy to the world[s].” Such a shift implicitly adds to the imperial rhetoric of pluralism – in essence, through the writings of Abu’l Fazl, Akbar developed a distinct model of pluralism through which he sought to address the region’s diversity. The subsequent conception of the Din-i-Ilahi was thus a means through which Akbar sought to unite all religious traditions under a single system. However, the unsuccessful nature of the Din-i-Ilahi testifies to the strength of diversity and religious plurality of the region. In attempting to create a single system of religious expression, Akbar’s aspirations mirror those of the Islamic principle of tawhid, wherein there is unity under an Absolute, albeit a manipulated variant of it. Interestingly, the utilisation of a monotheistic model juxtaposes against the very notion of religious pluralism itself. While religious pluralism advocates for the acceptance and tolerance of difference, aiming to promote co-existence, Akbar’s Din-i-Ilahi sought to erase the difference, in unifying the religious communities by focusing solely on their commonalities. As such, it is without a

---


surprise that the political model failed to gain a stronghold during Akbar’s reign and during the reigns of successive emperors.

While the Din-i-Illahi, as a political model, did not achieve its objective as the overarching religio-political model of the empire, religious diversity continued to be addressed through the lens of religious pluralism. Akbar’s political responses to the diverse localities highlight a pluralism that not only validated their legitimacy but also allowed for a reciprocity of borrowing and blending various traditions and cultures. Akbar’s relationship with the various religio-cultural communities is historically well-documented, particularly of the Rajputs who were perceived to pose a significant threat to the Mughals’ sovereign legitimacy. Given the Rajputs’ socio-cultural power and influence in the region, political autonomy was granted, with the retention of territories being offered in exchange for service under the imperial system.  

The laws and policies of these communities were respected and, hence, permitted to be maintained along with pre-existing alliances (that were not in opposition to the Empire). Additionally, Rajput nobles were integrated into the imperial political and administrative ranks, ensuring a reciprocal relationship of loyalty. To further strengthen this political bond, a series of inter-marriages resulted in the formation of an inextricable network of alliances. As one can imagine, the presence of Hindus within his imperial household and in the circle of nobility led Akbar to adopt a number of Hindu customs and rituals. This essentially led to the fostering of inter-religious dialogue and engagement, allowing for a greater understanding of the region’s pluralism.

Akbar’s relationship with the religious communities in his empire was one of cordiality and inclusivity. Due to his inquisitive nature, Akbar developed an appetite for intellectual discussions between the learned men of a number of religious groups. His Ibadat Khana has been passed down in history as the epitome of religious tolerance and co-existence. Arguably his most famous legacy, the Ibadat Khana served as the meeting place

137 Dale, The Muslim Empires, 98; Richards, The Mughal Empire, 20; Fisher, A Short History of the Mughal Empire, 116.
138 Dale, The Muslim Empires, 98; Richards, The Mughal Empire, 21; Fisher, A Short History of the Mughal Empire, 116.
for philosophical discussions between various religious traditions of which Akbar appointed himself as the mediator. What began as a simple means to resolve sectarian differences between the Sunni and Shi’a scholars, gradually expanded to form a circle of knowledge by including scholars of prominent religious communities, such as the Jains, Jesuits, Sikhs and Hindus.¹⁴⁰ In his own autobiographical memoirs, Akbar’s son, Jahangir, mentions that his father “was in the constant habit of familiar conversation” with the Hindu scholars.¹⁴¹ This tradition of theological debates was continued by Jahangir, whose memoirs reveal a deep influence of Akbar in his life through constant references to his father’s political, administrative and martial achievements.¹⁴² Indeed, Akbar’s approach in managing and responding to the religious and cultural diversity within the imperial polity, reveals a legacy of co-existence, wherein differences were not merely tolerated but treated with respect.

The reign of Aurangzeb, some 100 years after Akbar, illustrates a quite distinct approach in addressing the religious plurality of the sub-continent. While the first twenty years of his rule maintained the policies of religious pluralism laid down by Akbar, the second half of Aurangzeb’s reign saw a radical change in the emperor’s approach towards the diverse communities of the imperial realm. Certain events and instances, such as the reimposition of the jizya and temple desecration, have been popularly painted with a single stroke of religious bigotry. Such characterisations fail to perceive the temporal dynamics of the region which inevitably led to the afore mentioned occurrences. As discussed in the previous chapter, the re-imposition of the jizya was both a political and financial decision masked in religiosity. Aurangzeb’s military campaigns in expanding the imperial frontiers resulted in a harsher stance towards the targeted communities, who happened to be of non-Muslim faith. Unlike his predecessors, where the local rulers would be given autonomy while accepting the imperial legitimacy of the Mughal emperors, Aurangzeb’s rigid stance pushed the opposition into warfare.¹⁴³ Despite attempting to integrate the Marathas and Hindu...
warrior tribes, the two dominant religious communities in question, within the imperial nobility class, Aurangzeb failed to establish political alliances of loyalty with them. Correspondence between the emperor and Shivaji Bhonsle, the leader of the Marathas, reveal the tense political situation on both ideological and militant affronts. As such, the re-instatement of the jizya was perceived as a violation of the imperial polity’s general policy of religious non-interference. Unsurprisingly, this decision allowed for Aurangzeb to rally the ulema and local religious leaders that had previously been marginalised to the sidelines by Akbar’s religious reforms. The sudden rise of the scholars in the empire’s religio-political realm consequently led to an imbalance of power between the religious communities of the region.

Although, the institution of kingship within the Mughal Empire has, for the most part, been a result of their Turco-Mongol heritage, its Islamic identity cannot be ignored. It is during Aurangzeb’s reign that this particular facet of the imperial polity emerges at its strongest. While Aurangzeb and Akbar are traditionally cast on either ends of a spectrum of religious tolerance, both rulers essentially pursued parallel objectives – to unite the polity’s diversity. Aurangzeb’s approach to religious diversity was heavily influenced by his Islamic orientation. Like Akbar, he sought to establish himself as the leading spiritual authority of the imperial polity. Interestingly, his theoretical justifications were supported by the mahzar of 1579, a religious decree passed by Akbar that declared the ruling sovereign as the supreme authority in religious matters. Additionally, in a correspondence between Aurangzeb and Rana Raja Singh, a Mewari ruler, the emperor emphasises his role as the dispenser of justice and upholder of tolerance. Despite the seemingly universalist message, Aurangzeb followed a highly Islamised trajectory of unification under a single religious model – Islam. By establishing himself firmly within the community of the ulema, the emperor sought to signify a dominative religious faction. Thus, the creation of a distinct Muslim Mughal identity emerges, wherein differences are greatly expounded as a means to mark individuality between religious factions.

Sufism, in the subcontinent, has played a significant role amongst the region’s populace, particularly in the understanding of Islamic religious experience. The term Sufism is thought to have derived from the Arabic term, *tasawwuf*, which is understood as the inner dimension of being, or the science of the heart. Historically, Sufism is characterised by its esoteric practices leading it to be termed as Islamic mysticism. Traditionally, Sufism operates as a two-fold phenomenon – while it opposes the dry legalism and dogmatic orthodoxy of the Islamic tradition, it is firmly rooted within the religion’s theological tradition. Scholars, such as Martin Lings, note that the mystical facet of Sufism often falls victim to the notion of a universality that is independent to any religious tradition. Following Lings argument, while the philosophical underpinnings of Sufism centre on the notion of inner spirituality and a closeness to God, it primarily functions within an Islamic framework.

The beginnings of Sufism are obscure, with there being no unanimous agreement in scholarship. While many believe that Sufism has existed since the time of the Prophet Muhammad, albeit in perhaps a different form, there seems to be greater historical evidence of Sufism, as known today, emerging during the medieval times. The advent of Sufism is believed to have been a result of the mass conversions during the early years of Muslim Caliphate, wherein Sufism functioned as an intermediary in helping to understand the religion and, subsequently, allowing for the new non-Arab Muslims to create their own identity. The 11th and 12th centuries saw the codification of Sufism as various Sufi orders.

---


emerged, leading to its institutionalisation and marking the beginning of an intellectualised tradition.¹⁵¹

The idea of Sufism and politics together seems slightly atypical given the popularised image of Sufis renouncing worldly matters and focusing all their energies on the inner self. Yet, if one follows the historical trajectory of the Sufi philosophical tradition, there is a discernible intrinsic relationship between the Sufi world and that of politics. Indeed, a historical examination reveals a close correlation between the height of Islamic jurisprudence and the flourishing of Sufi thought.¹⁵² Many notable Sufi figures such as Hasan Al-Basri (642-728) and Al-Ghazali (1058-1111) held significant political agency through which they disseminated their religio-political ideologies.¹⁵³ The treatises and works of various Sufi thinkers have contributed significantly to contemporary understandings of Sufism and its relationship with politics. While not glaringly obvious, ideas of ethics, morals and the individual by Sufi figures has played a tremendous role in shaping the socio-political landscape of regions dominated by a populace of Muslim converts, and non-Muslims. In particular, Sufism provides a framework of religious experience that is seemingly open-ended and impressionable by the locale.

Muslim conversions across lands touched by Islam are considerably indebted to the Sufis, as is the case in the Indian sub-continent.¹⁵⁴ The intermediary role of the Sufis in the sub-continent was a dynamic interplay between the state and society, as well as within the societal realm. However, this was not unique to the region as Sufi mediation and intervention in the polity takes its precedent from the 12th century.¹⁵⁵ Historical examinations of Sufi

¹⁵¹ For greater detail see: Knysh, _Islamic Mysticism_, 116-149.
¹⁵² Milad Milani, _Sufi Political Thought_, 2.
¹⁵⁴ Fisher, _A Short History of the Mughal Empire_, 41. An interesting study by Sarwar Alam documents the advent of Muslim society in Bangladesh, which was once part of Mughal lands, attributing the mass conversions to Sufism. For greater detail see: Sarwar Alam, “Sufism Without Boundaries: Pluralism, Co-existence and Interfaith dialogue in Bangladesh,” _Comparative Islamic Studies_ 9, no. 1 (2013): 67-90, doi: 10.1558/cis.v9i1.26765.
political engagement demonstrate their voluntary discretion which lends to the suggestion that prominent Sufi figures were well aware of their authority in the polity.\textsuperscript{156} Indeed, the relationship between the Mughal imperial state and prominent Sufi orders in the region was one of symbiosis and reciprocity. Mughal rulers exercised their political and spiritual authority through discreet interventions by closely allied Sufis. The literary tradition of the Mughal period, particularly that of biographical writings, are peppered with mystical anecdotes that feature close encounters with Sufis.\textsuperscript{157} Recounts of Sufi saints providing spiritual assistance and, subsequently, religious spiritual legitimacy to the Mughal rulers signify a complex hierarchy of political power. In return, the emperors would grant Sufi orders patronage following their ancestral Turkic tradition.\textsuperscript{158} There are several instances related in Babur’s autobiography where Sufi spiritual interventions and consultations, mainly of the Naqshbandi order, are mentioned.\textsuperscript{159} Such anecdotal incidents serve as symbolic manifestations of Mughal legitimacy, with spiritual authority proving to be a form of covert political expression.

Allegiances to particular Sufi orders shifted as the historical trajectory of the empire progressed. The Naqshbandi order maintained imperial superiority over other local based Sufi orders during the early years of the empire due to their close connection with Central

\begin{flushleft}


\textsuperscript{159} Babur seems to have been a devotee to the Naqshbandi order, as he recounts several instances where they provided the emperor with political and spiritual direction: Babur, \textit{The Baburnama: Memoirs of Babur, Prince and Emperor}, trans. Wheeler M. Thackston (New York: Modern Library, 2002). 98-99, 134-139, 420. Additionally, Babur’s strong allegiance to the Naqshbandi, particularly to the legacy of Khawaja Ubaydullah Ahrar, an eminent saint, is noted by Muzaffar Alam: Muzaffar Alam, “The Mughals, the Sufi Shaikhs and the Formation of the Akbari Dispensation,” \textit{Modern Asian Studies} 43, no. 1 (2009): 146-150, doi:10.1017/S0026749X07003253.
\end{flushleft}
While Babur and Humayun would pay homage to the Sufi locale, such as the Chishti order, it was not until the Indianisation of the empire, during the reign of Akbar, that these orders gained imperial significance. Unlike the Naqshbandi, the Chishti order drew widely from the indigenous milieu and, subsequently, harboured inclusive practices, engaging in the political realm covertly. The significance of their spiritual authority is well documented as three generations of Mughal rulers dedicated numerous paintings, that depicted the close relationship between the imperial state and Sufi order, as a means to pay homage and respect. The Chishti ideology aligned well with Akbar’s ideas of universality regarding kinship and the state-society relationship. As such, in a spiritual vacuum created by the inevitable clash between the Mughal state and the orthodox Naqshbandi faction, the establishment of the more liberal Chishtis as the dominant client of Mughal patronage seemed natural.

However, despite the seemingly sustainable flourishing relationship of the imperial polity and Sufi orders, tensions arose with the ascension of Aurangzeb to the throne. Aurangzeb identified strongly with orthodox Sunni beliefs, and, theoretically, sought to rule in a manner that followed Islamic principles. While the Naqshbandi order underwent a revival period during Akbar’s reign, it was not until Aurangzeb’s time that they were able to reclaim their position as the leading spiritual authority in providing the imperial polity with legitimacy. Aurangzeb upheld the Mughal tradition of close consultation and homage to leading Sufi figures, with the reciprocal relationship allowing him to bypass certain obstacles deemed to be illegal with the assistance of personalised Islamic orders being issued. This not only demonstrates the influential power of the Sufi world within the imperial realm, but also highlights the religio-political agency of Sufism in directly informing Mughal ideology.


An ‘Indian’ Sufism

Sufism in the Indian sub-continent is a phenomenon unique to the region itself. As discussed before, there is no concrete definition of Sufism given its diverse manifestations across the world. Likewise, to confine Sufism within a single definitional framework in the context of the sub-continent would be to simplify and reduce its functionality as a universal approach to an Islamic religious experience. Despite the presence of numerous Sufi orders in the sub-continent, each with their own philosophical ideologies, the historicisation of what seems to persevere is an amalgamation of Indo-Muslim traditions derived from local indigenous practices. The adaptation and adoption of the locale can be viewed as a natural process of establishing a sense of socio-cultural legitimacy, as well as gaining religio-political authority in a region dominated by non-Islamic traditions. Indeed, a parallel can be found in Persianate Iran, where the Sufi tradition, and its subsequent contribution to Muslim conversions, is largely a result of regional appropriations.

Hence, Indian Sufism, by nature, is characterised by its syncretic approach to the various presiding religious and cultural traditions. As a historically pluralistic region, religion and philosophical traditions are, for the most part, informed by temporal localities – contrary to popular belief, there exists no monolithic pan-Indian religion. As two of the dominant traditions in the region, both Hinduism and Sikhism influenced local Sufi thought. While the assimilation of indigenous philosophical ideas allowed for a greater understanding and wider acceptance of Sufism, some scholars believe that this resulted in the loss of Sufism’s Islamic feature. However, similarities between Sufi teaching and Vedantic teachings simply manifest on a surface level, with certain philosophical ideas, such as that of divine love and union, demonstrating an inherent universality that exists across the various mystical traditions. Not only did this allow for cultural dialogue of inter-faith to foster, the perpetual interplay of reciprocity between traditions gave birth to a shared culture. While certain

religious boundaries remained to maintain distinct identities, the shared culture of folk traditions created a space where conceptualisations of religious frameworks permeated through the socio-cultural fabric of society. Of great importance is the role of literary artists, such as the famed Punjabi poet, Baba Bulleh Shah (1680 – 1757), who were able to disseminates messages of spirituality through their poetry and folk tales. Such figures thrived upon the pluralistic environment of the region as they were able to amass a following across various religious communities.
Chapter Three

The Soul of the Indian Sub-continent: The Poetry of Bulleh Shah

Poetic expression in the Indian sub-continent, particularly in Punjab, has strong cultural roots with the prevalence of folkloric poetry. Folk songs “serve as a repository of local culture, beliefs, social structures, and response to historical change.”¹⁷¹ From the everyday mundane to celebratory occasions, these songs depict the rich heritage of Punjab and provide an illustrious image of the rural life of the common person. Bulleh Shah’s poetry draws heavily from this tradition, allowing him to effectively convey his beliefs and ideas to the common people. There is no definitive corpus of Bulleh Shah’s poetic works due to the performative nature of his poems – his poetry is popularly sung as a qawwali, a form of Sufistic devotional music, with performers often incorporating their own compositions as well as merging various poems together.¹⁷² While this has contributed greatly to the preservation of Bulleh Shah’s poetry, these modifications and dialectical differences have resulted in the uncertain attribution of the poetic corpus.

Nonetheless, one of the primary ways in which scholars have compiled the poet’s works is through the identification of his poetic style. Bulleh Shah predominantly wrote in a lyrical form called kafi, a popular style of poetic composition amongst Punjabi poets, especially the Sufis of Punjab and Sindh. Many poets and notable Punjabi figures before Bulleh Shah, such as Baba Farid and Guru Nanak, have written in kafi form making it the standard model of didactic poetry. The literary choice of kafi poetry is reflective of the ordinary populace as it utilises idioms and phrases of the locale.¹⁷³ The poems of Bulleh Shah follow this general pattern of the kafi wherein the philosophical framework is structured


around certain cultural emblems, symbols and metaphors. Additionally, the lyrical style of his poetry lends to its performative function which subsequently allowed for it to become an integral part of the region’s musical culture.

Bulleh Shah: A Biographical Sketch

Bulleh Shah (1680-1757), born as Abdullah Shah, is considered to be one of the greatest poets of the Indian sub-continent. Popularly dubbed as the ‘Rumi of Punjab’, his poetry is widely recognised for its universality. Indeed, the widespread appeal of his message across the various religious factions in the sub-continent has led him to be labelled as the “portable” Bulleh Shah.\(^\text{174}\) Inevitably, this has led to the categorisation of Bulleh Shah wherein different religious communities paint a historical figure who fits within their framework. The two most rivalling denominations are represented by the Islamic and Hindu philosophies. Muslims revere the poet as a Sufi who had reached the unattainable level of devotion to God, while Hindu’s see him as a Vedantic deeply influenced by ancient Indian philosophy.\(^\text{175}\) Of lesser prominence is the claim of Sikhs upon Bulleh Shah, who assert the influence of Sikh Gurus on the poet – however, there is no definitive attempt to place him within their tradition. Not surprisingly, such positioning has impacted the biographical narrative of the poet. Due to the lack of historical evidence on Bulleh Shah, there is no definitive consensus on his life and worldview. The absence of information is not a historiographical anomaly, with scholars identifying a large gap in scholarship on Punjabi literature between the 18\(^{th}\) century and the colonial period.\(^\text{176}\) As such, most of what is known is pieced together from manuscripts of his poetry, leaving many of the nuanced details of Bulleh Shah’s life to the interpretation of the reader. Those who believe the poet to be Muslim create a narrative with strong Islamic tendencies and those who believe Bulleh Shah to be a Vedantic present a corresponding biographical account.

The very first disparity in Bulleh Shah’s biography begins on his birth. Born in 1680 during the reign of the sixth Mughal emperor, Aurangzeb, Bulleh Shah’s birthplace has been

\(^{174}\) Rinehart, “The Portable Bullhe Shah.”

\(^{175}\) Ibid, 55.

questioned by scholars. One of the earliest scholars, C. F. Usborne, believes that the poet was born in Pandoke, a village near Qasur which was a city in the district of Lahore in southern Punjab. However, according to Qamar Abbas, some researchers argue that Bulleh Shah was born in his family’s ancestral village, Uch Gillanian, in the city of Bahawalpur. Shortly after his birth, his family is believed to have moved to Multan from where they shortly shifted once again to Pandoke. It is believed that Bulleh Shah’s father received an offer to teach the village children and preach at the local mosque in Pandoke. As such, Bulleh Shah received his early education from his father and was later sent to Qasur, a city located to the south of Lahore, for higher education. Being born into a Syed family, Bulleh Shah is thought to have received a strict orthodox Islamic education that is traditionally given Syeds. While most scholars agree on this, some, such as Usborne, believe that despite being from a Syed family, Bulleh Shah’s father had Sufi tendencies and hence oriented his son’s education accordingly. When examined from a historical vantage one can conclude that, contrary to what it seems to say, Usborne’s statement simply implies that Bulleh Shah’s father was a religious man. Interestingly, there seems to be no explicit description of what such an education would entail. Rinehart argues that Bulleh Shah’s family background as well as references made in his poetry have led to researchers suggesting what an orthodox Islamic education would look like. Generally, most agree that Bulleh Shah was well-versed in Arabic and Persian along with his native tongue, Punjabi. It is assumed, through his poetry, that his education included a rigorous study of the Quran, Islamic legal tradition and

177 Charles Frederick Usborne was an early 20th-century oriental translator and poetry scholar. Unfortunately, no original source of Usborne could be found, hence, anything attributed to this scholar is done so from the vantage of secondary literature. For greater detail on his publications see: “Usborne, Charles Frederick 1874-1919,” WorldCat Identities, http://worldcat.org/identities/lccn-n85012673/ (accessed: December 31, 2018).


180 The Syed’s are believed to trace their lineage back to the Prophet Muhammad, which subsequently contributed to their belief in being socially superior.

181 Both Karishna and Abbas document this view of Usborne.

182 Historically, the Syeds of Qasur were known to be religiously bigoted and believed themselves to be superior to other families.

Persian Sufi literary tradition. During his time in Qasur, Bulleh Shah is believed to have studied under well-known scholars of the time, such as Hafiz Ghulam Murtaza, who was also a Syed. Upon the completion of his studies in Qasur, the poet set out to Lahore where he discovered a mentor to whom he attributed his spiritual attainment, Shah Inayat Qadiri.

As with most of his biography, there is no definitive information on how Bulleh Shah met Shah Inayat. There are two traditions that recount the meeting between the two, neither of which hold any precedence over the other. The first narrates that Bulleh Shah went to Lahore in search of a mentor. According to some, the poet had heard tales of a great Sufi master and decided to become his disciple. Shah Inayat, though a scholar and a renowned Sufi, made his living as a gardener. Upon meeting him, Bulleh Shah requested to be made his student and disciple so that he may be taught the secret of finding God. Shah Inayat responded, saying, “Oh Bulleh, the secret of God is this; on this side He uproots and, on the other side He creates.”

Tradition holds that Bulleh was so impressed and awe-struck by this statement that he begged Shah Inayat to accept him as a disciple, upon which his master agreed.

According to the second tradition, Bulleh Shah met Shah Inayat by chance while visiting Lahore. The young poet had been exploring the Shalimar Gardens where Shah Inayat worked as a gardener. There, he came across a mango tree from which he desired to eat some fruit. He looked around for a caretaker in order ask for permission but found none. Afraid of the sin of stealing, he uttered the phrase, “Allah Ghani” and a ripe fruit fell from the tree. He did this a few times, collecting the mangoes to eat. He then came across Shah Inayat who accused him of stealing the fruit. At this time, Bulleh Shah was not aware of who the gardener was and hence replied back with levelled superiority that he had not stolen and, in fact, the fruit had come to him. He repeated his act to demonstrate. However, Shah Inayat was not impressed and informed the poet that he had been mispronouncing “Allah Ghani” and, hence, reducing its power to perform. He then uttered the words and all the ripe fruit fell. He repeated it again and the fruits went back up on the tree. At this point, Bulleh Shah was so ashamed of his initial superiority over, who he had assumed to be, a common gardener that he subsequently pleaded to become his disciple. Here it is important to note that Shah Inayat hailed from an Arain family, a caste that was considered to be socially inferior to

185 Allah Ghani translates into “The Self-Sufficient God”.

53
the Syeds. Indeed, Bulleh Shah’s attachment to Shah Inayat was looked down upon by his own family. However, for Bulleh Shah, this mentor-disciple relationship transcended the social boundaries of caste hierarchies. The backlash received from his family and caste is well-documented by Bulleh Shah himself through his poetry. He asserts:

_His sisters and sister-in-laws have come to advise Bulleh_

_Oh Bulleh, why have you dishonoured the Prophet and descendants of Ali?_

_Heed our advice, oh Bulleh, and let go of the Arain’s hem_

_Whoever calls me a Syed shall be punished in Hell_

_Those who call me an Arain shall have a swing in heaven_

_Oh Bulleh, become an Arain to seek the pleasures of the garden._

Bulleh Shah’s denouncement of the classist mentality is a reaction against the social setting of the 18th century in light of the religious tensions that had begun to take hold of the region. Despite the co-existence of different religious communities, social stratification amongst each religious community was prevalent, with identity narratives being grounded in these societal structures. The caste system, derived from ancient Indian religious traditions, was perceived to be of importance as it was a form of both differentiation and identification within each community—belonging to a particular caste was closely associated to one’s lineage. For Bulleh Shah such social restraints went against notions of egalitarianism and universalism which led to self-purification, a fundamental concept in Sufi philosophical thought, as it promoted egoistic thinking and superiority. The poet’s strong stance against this social divide, especially amongst the Muslim community, is clearly highlighted in the above

---


verses, wherein he criticises and condemns the supremacy associated to certain groups (i.e. the Syeds) simply by virtue of their lineage.

While the first story has greater historical validity, the second tradition is more popularised and recounted more often as means of illustrating the mystical presence of Bulleh Shah. Nonetheless, both stories can be seen as two sides of a single coin wherein emphasis is placed upon Bulleh Shah’s impression of Shah Inayat. The poet’s attachment to Shah Inayat is of great importance as it becomes the subject of a many poems.\(^{189}\)

Bulleh Shah lived through the turbulent events that had seized Punjab politically. He witnessed the region’s decline as it went through the short-lived reigns of multiple Mughal emperors and was invaded several times from the west – first by an Iranian ruler, Nadir Shar, and later by an Afghan ruler, Ahmad Shah Durrani.\(^{190}\) Amidst this rapid decline, the Sikhs arose as a dominant force, contesting for power against Mughal rule. The 17th century saw a substantial change in Sikh political thought with the rise political violence. Sikhism emerged during the 15\(^{th}\) century under a mystic, Guru Nanak (1469-1539), just prior to the conquest of Northern India by Babur. The Sikh religious tradition began as a mystical philosophy, with Guru Nanak’s writings and works centring around the notion of divine love.\(^{191}\) Sikhism, for the most part, has traditionally been located in the region of Punjab, with the language and customs of the region forming a considerably significant element to their identity. The execution of the fifth Sikh Guru, Guru Arjan Dev, in 1606 under the reign of Jahangir proved to be a turning point in Sikh religio-political thought. What was previously a unified religious society, the Sikh community became divided into two factions under separate lineages, each

\(^{189}\) Bulleh Shah’s attachment with Shah Inayat features in many of his poems. Bulleh Shah framed his mentor-disciple relationship with Shah Inayat being the embodiment of the concept of “The Perfect Man.” Hence, the relationship depicted in his poems is one of devotional love and a yearning to merge his identity with the beloved (i.e. Shah Inayat or “The Perfect Man”) to achieve the ultimate connection with the Divine. For example, see: Shah, *Bulleh Shah*, 80-83, 164-165, 202-203; Puri and Shangari, *Bulleh Shah*, 191-195, 197-199, 253-257, 260-261, 270-271, 332, 444-446.

\(^{190}\) Abbas, “Bulleh Shah,” 46.

of which held differing views on Sikhism. As the opposition and violence against the Sikh community grew, primarily instigated by the Mughal sovereignty, in 1699 a militant faction arose from within the Sikhs, known as the Khalsa. As such, there began a power struggle of authority in Punjab between Mughal legitimacy and Sikh legitimacy. Syan notes the emergence of a popular historical narrative that conveniently placed the Mughal sovereign as the ‘others’ which, in effect, boosted the political legitimacy of the Khalsa. With the Mughal Empire following the steady trajectory of an inevitable decline, Aurangzeb’s response to the Sikh uprising was one of both conciliation and force. However, due to the emperor’s death in 1707, any possibility of peace and cordiality between the Sikhs and Mughals were quickly quashed. Instead, with the advent of a new leader in both the Mughal and Sikh polity, Mughal-Sikh relations became increasingly tense. Indeed, the writings of the Khalsa leader, Guru Gobind Singh, against Mughal power highlight the popularised view of the imperial polity as a failed state. A clear theme that runs across is that of justice. Guru Gobind Singh laments the situation of the Mughal Empire, accusing its imperial leaders of failing to fulfil its duty to uphold justice. He goes further to accuse and ridicule Aurangzeb of hypocrisy, claiming that his religious attitude is merely a façade and subsequently justifies the Khalsa violence as permissible against that perpetuated by the Mughals. Such a view arguably encapsulated the general attitude of the Punjab populace, against which Bulleh Shah composed his works.

**Folk Tradition in Punjab**

The pluralistic society of the Mughal Empire resulted in a high frequency of inter-cultural and inter-religious dialogue which led to certain elements of each being merged into one another to form a common culture. Regional communities across the sub-continent, regardless of their religion, shared common cultural traditions which helped foster communal bonds. In particular, communities from the region of Punjab share a deep and intrinsic connection with each other through the Punjabi language and the cultural traditions it carries.

---

194 Ibid, 218.
The history of the literary Punjabi language has two separate yet intertwined traditions. The advent of Sikhism in the late 15th century led to Punjabi being adopted as the language of the religion, with the holy scriptures and writings of Sikh Gurus being written in a Gurmukhi script. Similarly, the development of Punjabi, as a language for the Muslims of Punjab, was heavily influenced by religious bias. Like the Sikhs who sought to establish a distinct identity, Muslims incorporated much of the Persian and Arabic vocabulary and wrote in the Shahmukhi script to create a more Islamised identity. Bulleh Shah, himself, used the Shahmukhi script for his poetry and drew greatly from the Persio-Arabic vocabulary to indicate his religious status. Discussions and debates around the categorisation of Bulleh Shah, as mentioned previously, become futile when taking in account the subtle markings of the Punjabi literary tradition. Punjabi became the language of the common people, unlike Persian which was the official language of the Mughal Empire and, hence, was largely confined to a more noble and educated class. Bulleh Shah’s choice of using Punjabi as his literary medium can be perceived as a political reaction against the imperial state. The poet lived during the decline of the Mughal Empire and when religious tensions, caused by its state politics, created significant divides in society based on rigid religious dogmatism. By employing a language of the common people, and distancing himself from the centre of the empire, Bulleh Shah underlines the universalism of spiritual experience across religious traditions – a trajectory far removed from the central narratives of orthodoxy perpetuated by Aurangzeb. Hence, the abstract ideas expressed through Punjabi verse transcended the religious divide, allowing for fluid exchange of religio-cultural symbols.

Punjabi literature itself is dominated by poetry. It draws greatly from its folk tradition, using socio-cultural elements and imagery, such as the metaphorical use of the spinning wheel, as a place where various religions intersect one another. The imagery of the spinning wheel features in several poems in Bulleh Shah’s corpus as a metaphor for the human body. This poetic symbol is often accompanied by analogies of the soul and its journey towards a union with the Divine. The poem *Katt Kure Na Vatt Kure* (“Spin, Oh Girl, Do Not Roam”) stresses the importance of meditation for the human body. Bulleh Shah draws on the well-known analogy of the wedding night to illustrate the nearness of death, urging the protagonist

of the poem, an unmarried girl, to prepare for the big day.\textsuperscript{198} He further warns her that once she leaves her parents’ house, she will be unable to return, pointing towards the transient nature of one’s time in the world.

\begin{quote}
Do your spinning, Oh Girl, roam not aimlessly.
Take off the hand of yarn, put it in the basket.
Your parents have fixed your wedding day,
And you are still unmindful of it.
The days are few, you waste your time.
You will not come again to your parents’ homes.
Do your spinning, Oh girl, roam not aimlessly.\textsuperscript{199}
\end{quote}

The repetitive intonation of “Do your spinning” signifies the spiritual exercise of the human in seeking the favour of the Divine for the ultimate union. Likewise, in another poem, \textit{Dhilak Gayi Charkhe Di Hathhi} (“My Spinning Wheel is Broken”), Bulleh Shah highlights the importance of a spiritual master as a guide in the journey towards the purification of the heart. The broken spinning wheel indicates the obstacles of human desire which hinders spiritual experience. Throughout the poem, Bulleh Shah implores an ironsmith to repair what is broken alluding to the need of a spiritual guide to assist in overcoming the worldly barriers.\textsuperscript{200}

\begin{quote}
The spinning wheel is broken, I cannot spin.
Call the smith, for the axle wobbles on its pin.
The thread keeps breaking, smith, let your job be neat;
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{198} The “Wedding Night” (\textit{shab-e-arusi}) is attributed to Rumi as recognition of his final union with God (i.e. his death). In the Sufi tradition of the Mevlevi (those who follow the way of “Our Master” Rumi), the \textit{sama} ceremony, which involves the mystical dance of whirling, is the ritual form of capturing Rumi’s philosophy on death. For greater detail see: Ibrahim Gamard, “Rumi's "Wedding Night"," Daru’l Masnavi of the Mevlevi Order, http://www.dar-al-masnavi.org/wedding-night.html (accessed: December 31, 2018).

\textsuperscript{199} Translation taken directly from: Puri and Shangari, \textit{Bulleh Shah}, 333-334.

\textsuperscript{200} The allusion here is made to Rumi’s second beloved and deputy, a goldsmith by the name of Salahoddin, after the disappearance of Shams, his first mentor. The story of their meeting also relates to the theme of musical audition (\textit{sama}), wherein Rumi, upon hearing the rhythmic beating of the goldsmith’s hammer, fell into an ecstatic trance and began to whirl. The implication being made is that the absence of Shams left Rumi a broken man – the chance encounter with the goldsmith enabled him to, once again, feel the inner stirrings of spiritual life. For greater detail see: Jalal al-Din Rumi, \textit{The Masnavi: Book One}, ed. and trans. by Jawid Mojaddedi, (UK: Oxford University Press, 2004), xviii.
It sways so that not a spool comes off complete.
I cannot tie it well, it slips, again and again;
Its grease is all used up, it creaks and groans.
The spinning wheel is broken, I cannot spin.  

Bulleh Shah’s use of the spinning wheel as a metaphorical symbol allows for the message being conveyed to be of universal relevance. By employing a popular cultural motif that is known across the region, he essentially reveals the underlying spiritual commonalities of religious traditions. As such, Bulleh Shah challenges the perception of religious identity as being confined to doctrinal boundaries and encourages inter-faith dialogue through his poetry’s syncretism.

The syncretic nature of the sub-continent meant that religious identities were fluid, with the universal experience of mysticism permeating through traditional boundaries. As such, even with the considerable influence of Sufism on Indian Islam and its entailing conventions, the social identity of a mystic was held to greater significance than their religious identity.  
Prefixed titles of Sufi figures, such as ‘Baba’ and ‘Pir’, held little religious significance and were used as social markers instead – the term ‘Jogi’ is often used as the Hindu or Sikh equivalent of a mystic or Saint. For example, Baba Bulleh Shah’s prefix of ‘Baba’ merely indicates his social standing as a learned mystic. Indeed, Green asserts that the term ‘Musalman’ (i.e. Muslim) had less of an ideological inference but, rather, implied a clan-like identity of a community.

The dominant influence of folk tradition amongst the Punjabi populace, wherein the socio-cultural realm transcends that of the religious realm, is best exemplified through the classical folk tale of *Heer Ranjha*, which was popularised during the late 18th century by a Punjabi poet, Waris Shah. On a surface level one may perceive it to be a story of romance, yet the deeply embedded motif of love serves as an important function within the tale.

---

202 Green, “Making Sense of ‘Sufism’,” 1057.
203 Green, “Making Sense of ‘Sufism’,” 1056.
strength of *Heer Ranjha* is demonstrated by its usability by different religious traditions in highlighting the message of spiritual devotion and a mystical religious experience. Both protagonists in the tale, Heer and Ranjha, represent a certain element in the mystical tradition – the story of the female, Heer, characterises a devotional path of love while the male, Ranjha, embodies the notion of the soul. The universality of *Heer Ranjha* has resulted in the story becoming one of the most famous legends in Punjab. Its popularity amongst the Punjabi people is manifested through the folk poetry of the region, wherein allusions to Ranjha and Heer are common. Indeed, Bulleh Shah’s corpus is peppered with poems that feature Ranjha. The poem, *Ranjha Ranjha Kardi* (“Ranjha Ranjha, I repeat”), embodies the essence of the original folk tale wherein the journey towards the union between the soul and the Divine is versified through a strong Sufi framework. Throughout the poem, Bulleh Shah asserts the unity of the soul in its ultimate abode with the Divine by repeatedly proclaiming, as Heer, that (s)he has become one with Ranjha.

*Repeating the name of Ranjha,*

*I have become Ranjha myself;*

*Let no one call me ‘Heer’;*

*Call ye me Dhidho Ranjha.*

The poem further alludes to the principle of Sufi ascetism in being a vital component of the devotional path by urging Heer to don the attire of the archetypal Sufi. The allusion towards the quintessential Sufi garb stems from the etymological derivation of the word ‘Sufi’ wherein the Arabic word, *suf* (wool), was used to identify ascetics. Likewise, the reference of the *fakir* in the following stanza, is an alternative title in South Asia commonly given to those who adopt materialist poverty for spiritual purposes.

*Take off your white sheet, my lass;*

*And put on the fakir’s coarse blanket.*

---


207 Translation taken directly from: Puri and Shangari, *Bulleh Shah*, 276. Also, the name, Dhidho, is a nickname given to Ranjha in the original folk tale.

The white sheet will catch stains,
The blanket will get none.209

The reference of the white sheet against the blanket is highly symbolic of the worldly concerns and spiritual experience, respectively. By discarding the white sheet and donning the blanket, Bulleh Shah hints at moving away from the mediocrity of overt dependence on dogmatism and towards a path of inner spirituality. The ‘stains’ can be perceived as the ego of the self – the rigid adherence to a doctrinal tradition can result in conflict of ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ and hence hinder one from achieving closeness to God, as opposed to greater attention to the inner self and a cleansing of the heart.

The Punjabi language has a strong oral tradition wherein verses are created and sung spontaneously, from describing the mundane to satirical jabs at orthodoxy. Oral traditions play a vital role in the sub-continent since it functions as a means of preserving the region’s history – against the context of low literacy rates, oral transmission served as the frontier of historical memory. A study on the memory of the saints of Aurangabad, a city in the midwest of India, explores how oral narratives surrounding the shrines of particular saints has allowed for communities to preserve their historical past.210 These oral histories often have an idiosyncratic touch to them, with a deep discourse of spiritual power, that matches the narrative styles of folk tales. As Green contends, these spiritual allusions serve as allegories of authority between the temporal and the manifest sacred.211 Like these narratives, poetry also has a strong oral tradition, especially in Punjab. Folk poetry forms an essential part of Punjabi culture as it creates many phrases and idioms that connect the Punjabi people across religious boundaries.212

Like the folk tale of Heer Ranjha, many poetic expressions manifest themselves deeply in the culture and become part of the everyday. Indeed, ‘Ranjha’ and ‘Heer’ are popularly used to label lovers who are willing to sacrifice everything for unity with one another – each name is heavily loaded with a backstory and cultural context, yet a simple

209 Translation taken directly from: Puri and Shangari, Bulleh Shah, 276.


211 Green, “Stories of Saints and Sultans,” 426.

mention of either is understood by those familiar with the folk tale. The performative function of poetry, wherein verses are sung and recited, is aided by the tradition of oral transmission as a means of preservation. Bulleh Shah’s poetry has also been subject to oral performances, allowing for his ideas and philosophical beliefs to be effectively disseminated amongst the common people. Such a medium of circulation also lends itself to open interpretation as many lines and verses can be isolated from the larger corpus and used independently.\(^{213}\) This margin of variation allows for different audiences to interpret Bulleh Shah’s poems through their own religious frameworks and subsequently colour it with their respective identities. As such, in combination with the use of the Punjabi language, Bulleh Shah’s poetry thrives upon the connection formed between various religious traditions, fostering a communal identity built upon the prevalent cultural milieu.

**A Universal Religious Experience**

The Sufi tradition, in its most simplistic form, seeks a spiritual path towards the heart. Its journey is one of self-realisation through inner awakening. While there is a wide array of Sufi orders, each of which maintain their own ideologies and doctrines, the notion of inner religiosity trumps that of rigid dogmatism. Even the more orthodox oriented orders, such as the Naqshbandi, display a clear tendency towards a reconciliation of the heart’s consciousness. The literary manifestation of Sufism in Punjabi literature, especially in poetry, is evident in Bulleh Shah’s poetic works wherein he draws upon the philosophical underpinnings of the mystical tradition.\(^{214}\)

Bulleh Shah’s poetry aims to redirect the religiously zealous towards a path of self-examination, independent from heavy reliance upon doctrine. The poem, *Ilmo Bas Karien O Yaar* (“Enough of Learning, My Friend”), asserts that excessive book-learning and scholarship does not guarantee a better understanding of the Divine. He seeks to replace ‘book-ish Islam’ with a more mystical Islam in the hearts of his readers.

*Gather no more knowledge, O Friend!*

*This knowledge will be of no avail.*

*All that you need to know is Alif.*

---


Life is fleeting, its end uncertain.
Gather no more knowledge, O friend!
You read and read, and pile up a heap;
The Qura'n and other books lie all around you.
All around is light, but within you is darkness.
Without the guide there can be no knowledge.
Gather no more knowledge, O friend;

Indeed, Bulleh Shah claims that “A single Alif is sufficient” in seeking the essence of God. The metaphorical significance of the letter Alif gives the verse a multi-dimensional meaning. Alif is the first letter in the Arabic alphabet as well as the first letter of the name of God in Arabic, Allah. As such, by using Alif, Bulleh Shah powerfully hints at the self-sufficient nature of the Divine as well as implying the futility of dogmatism in the spiritual experience of religion. This message is reinforced in various couplets and verses of Bulleh Shah’s work, where the poet scorns the pursuit of knowledge that lacks a self-directed effort of spiritual awakening as meaningless.

The idea of religious experience being intrinsically connected to both the inner self and humanistic sense is a dominant theme across Bulleh Shah’s poetry. While there is no concrete evidence of Bulleh Shah affiliating himself with a particular Sufi order, his mentor, Shah Inayat belonged to the Qadiri order of Lahore. As such, this arguably had a profound impact on Bulleh Shah’s worldview which subsequently translated into his poetic works. Founded by Mian Mir (1550-1635), the Qadiri order is believed to have had strong links with

---

the Sikh community, particularly in regard to the *bhakti* movement ideology. Like Sufism, *bhakti* is simply an Indian mystical movement that manifested itself in the diverse religious traditions of the region. Despite having a long and rich historical tradition, the *bhakti* movement is believed to have truly established itself in the Indian sub-continent as a form of pan-Indianism during the Mughal period. As such, one is often able to find strong parallels between the literature and philosophical conceptions of both the Sufi tradition and *bhakti*. This close association between the Qadiri order and the *bhakti* of the Sikhs resulted in religio-political tensions within the empire. In particular, the hostile relationship between the Naqshbandi and the Qadiri orders manifested itself in the imperial state wherein notable figures of the former Sufi order exercised their influence on the Mughal rulers against the latter. The death of the Sikh leader, Guru Arjun, in 1606 was a result of Naqshbandi assertion over the emperor’s political affairs. Consequently, it is against this hostile environment that Bulleh Shah composed his works, in an attempt to counter the increasingly overbearing nature of what was becoming a more dominant version of Islam.

Many of Bulleh Shah’s poems explore the dichotomy of empty rituals and inner spiritualism. Despite the antagonist attitude towards the Qadiri order, as well as any Muslim community that was perceived to be a threat against the prevailing orthodoxy of the period, Bulleh Shah wrote with a bluntness and a spirit of rebellion. Indeed, amongst his most famed poems the likes of, *Ki Jaana Mein Kaun* (“Who Knows Who I Am”) and *Makke Gayan Gall Mukdi Nahin* (“Going to Makkah is Not the Ultimate”), cut across the religious boundaries of society. In a universal call, Bulleh Shah urges people to cultivate the essence of their soul and


inner spirituality rather than blindly performing the rituals and practices of religious traditions. In an excerpt from his poem, *Makke Gayan Gall Mukdi Nahin* ("Going to Makkah is Not the Ultimate"), Bulleh Shah highlights the emptiness of such rituals.

> Going to Makkah is not the ultimate
> Despite offering hundreds of prayers
> Going to Ganga is not the ultimate
> Despite taking hundreds of dips in it
> Going to Gaya is not the ultimate
> Despite teaching hundreds of worshippers

> Bulleh Shah, the ultimate is achieved
> When the "I" is eliminated from the heart.223

Here, Bulleh Shah explicitly mentions sites of ritualistic significance from the dominant religious traditions of the region. For Muslims, Makkah is the holy city where pilgrimage to the House of God is performed. The Ganga river is a sacred site for Hindus who believe it to be a place for physical purification which in turn allows for a spiritual cleansing. Likewise, the Gaya temple, where Buddha supposedly attained enlightenment, is known to be a pilgrimage site for Buddhists. Bulleh Shah targets each of these holy sites, arguing that there is no achievement in performing these pilgrimages if the ego of self remains. Each of these sites represent a place of inner purification and spiritual enlightenment. However, for Bulleh Shah a dependence upon rituals is not enough to achieve the level of spirituality intended in each of the religious traditions. Rather, the removal of ego and self-superiority is vital for an absolute religious experience – a notion which is arguably the foundation of the pilgrimages themselves. As such, the poem highlights the universal criteria for fulfilling religious obligation – the struggle of the self transcends religious boundaries and divides. Living in a pluralistic society, Bulleh Shah is able to discern the common ground of ‘the self’ upon which religious traditions thrive.

Similarly, *Ki Jaana Mein Kaun* ("Who Knows Who I Am") explores the trivial nature of religious divides set by society. While, from the onset the poem may be perceived as a

---

rejection of religious affiliation, Bulleh Shah’s message penetrates deeper than such a superficial reading. As he claims:

_Bulleh! Who knows who I am?_
_I am neither a believer in the mosque_
_Nor am I a disbeliever of pagan rituals_
_I am not pure amongst the impure_
_Nor am I Moses, nor Pharaoh._

As seen from the excerpt, Bulleh Shah refused to socially categorise himself, as he deemed it be a form of feeding the ego, a sense of superiority over the other. This is clearly highlighted in his use of dichotomous pairings, such as that of a believer/disbeliever or pure/impure.

In a time where religious divides were festering amongst communities who shared a social and cultural tradition, Bulleh Shah’s rejection of orthodoxy was an attempt to present an alternative religiosity borne by ‘the way of the heart’ – a prominent Sufi teaching for the enriching of a universal spiritual experience available to all.

---

224 Translation altered from: Qausain, “Bulleya Ki Jaana Mein Kaun,” _Sufi Poetry_,
Conclusion

The Indian sub-continent has a rich and complex history with its diverse population and an eclectic political record. The vast region is a repository of many cultures, ethnicities and religions due to the constant flow of movement and migration from neighbouring lands, resulting in a disparate social reality. The pluralistic society has been an integral feature of governance under the sovereignty of various kingdoms and empires throughout time. Of the most recent, its management under the Mughal Empire continues to persevere in the historical memory of the contemporary region. The history of the Mughal Empire is subsequently defined by its ability to manage the region’s diversity through their identity narratives of similarity and difference as well as through policies of integration.

There has been extensive research on the religio-political rule of the Mughal Empire, particularly in regard to religious relations and its role in the rhetoric of imperial legitimacy. Although the majority of research focuses on the time period between Akbar and Aurangzeb’s reign, recent scholarship has drawn much needed attention towards the empire’s Turco-Mongol ancestry and Central Asian heritage. The works of Lisa Balabanlilar, especially, and Stephen Dale are significant in highlighting its deeply-rooted influence on the imperial political structure and cultural developments through an examination of the lives of early Mughal rulers, Babur and Humayun. While, this has initiated the dialogue on the Mughal’s cultural roots, further research is needed into the socio-cultural framework from which these inter-religious and inter-cultural relations are explored. To this end, this thesis has attempted to provide an introductory study into the historical trajectory of the empire’s religio-political narrative and its relationship with the socio-cultural milieu.

Mughal rule in the sub-continent was dictated by its pluralistic society and the temporal dynamics of social and cultural change. The rules of Akbar and Aurangzeb are of particular importance as they signify the embodiment of two archetypal modes of Islamic governance. While both are often put on either end of a dichotomous scale, the Islamic underpinnings of their religio-political ideologies, albeit vastly different to one another, unites them in their goal for an ideal polity. The Mughal Empire under Akbar saw a more inclusive and centralised imperial state, wherein his vision of rulership centred around the notion of universalism. Through the biographical work of Abu’l Fazl, Akbar sought to portray himself as a ruler of Hindustan, with no attempt being made to divide the identity of
the sub-continent into sectarian regions. His policies of integration, universal peace (i.e. *suhl-i-kul*) and the religio-political movement, *Din-i-Ilaahi*, along with the *Ibadat Khana* (House of Worship) aimed to foster religious tolerance amongst the diverse communities.

The syncretism propagated by Akbar was later undermined by Aurangzeb, whose religious inclinations led to a more orthodox orientated rule. While the character of Aurangzeb presents scholars with a juxtaposed image of the ruler, it indicates to the complexity of his rule. In a narrative where he is almost always cast as a villain, greater research and scholarship is needed to understand the nuances of Aurangzeb’s reign and the environment which shaped his political outlook. The shift from a syncretic polity to one of religious orthodoxy resulted in increased religious turmoil as well as socio-political unrest. Indeed, the re-implementation of the *jizya* tax along with the rise of rebellious states and the relentless pursuit of the Deccan campaign cannot be examined as separate facets of Aurangzeb’s rule. Rather, their intrinsic nature contributed to the inextricable series of events that led to a declining empire and fragmenting region. The recent emergence of revisionist scholarship on Aurangzeb, particularly with the work of historian Audrey Truschke, has shed light on the historicity of the emperor’s character along with a renewed examination of the contextual factors that contributed to his tumultuous reign. Both emperors were ultimately a reflection of their temporal localities. The evolving narratives of identity and legitimacy were a response to the social and cultural dynamics that essentially informed the religio-political framework of each emperor. While Akbar sought to unify the imperial region in the wake of his father’s political instability, Aurangzeb ruled against multiple frontiers of rebellions with an increasingly inept and corrupt administration. Popular comparisons of the two emperors in the mainstream historical conscious are futile, as each ruler was informed by their individual temperament and the temporal dynamics of the region.

With the demise of Aurangzeb, the Mughal Empire fell into an irreversible decline. The rule of later Mughals was mostly short-lived, with few managing to maintain their authority and imperial legitimacy. Additionally, the growing administrative and judicial power of the British trade company, East India Company, further marginalised imperial authority as they sought to expand their influence in the region. One of the primary legacies left by colonial rule is the division and categorisation of religious groups in an attempt to rule an incredibly diverse population. Many studies exploring the political approach of British rule highlight, what may be called, the ‘re-invention of the *Sharia*’ in a land where Muslims
were a minority.\textsuperscript{225} Although the endeavour to codify a medley of Islamic law and British law into an Anglo-Muhammadan legal system resulted in a bias towards the latter, the Company continued to propagate the rhetoric of \textit{Sharia} in the administration of law. Indeed, as a means to legitimise their authority over the new jurisprudence, the British criticised the Mughal legal system, accusing imperial state of leniency and an ineffective application of their own law.\textsuperscript{226} However, local district systems were also set up to cater for the different religious communities, allowing for scholars of each religious tradition to appear in court and provide a doctrinal position on the case at hand.\textsuperscript{227} The rule of the East India Company did not last, with the overtake of the British Raj in the wake of the 1857 mutiny. Yet, the conscious segregation of religious communities on a juridical level exacerbated the growing animosity, with the introduction of the colonial census further deepening the divides.

Religious classification existed within the Mughal Empire, long before colonial presence. Indeed, records of imperial service included the number of nobles of different religious communities employed – for example, statistics from various records show the rise in the proportion of Hindus in the Mughal administrative realm from 21 percent to 33 percent between Akbar and Aurangzeb’s rule.\textsuperscript{228} Additionally, there is evidence of religious census being conducted during the reign of Aurangzeb for the purposes of \textit{jizya} collection. Nonetheless, these methods of enumeration did not transcend the domain of imperial administration, unlike the colonial census. The categorisation of religious groups during the colonial period effectively defined these communities within the rigid boundaries of religious identity.\textsuperscript{229} As such, the tone of religious identity over a shared social and cultural identity was set, leading into the rise of nationalist sentiments during the later colonial period.


\textsuperscript{226} Kugle, “Framed, Blamed and Renamed,” 281.

\textsuperscript{227} Giunchi, “The Reinvention of the \textit{Shari`a},” 1126-1130.

\textsuperscript{228} Audrey Truschke, \textit{Aurangzeb: The Life and legacy of India’s Most Controversial King} (California: Stanford University Press, 2017), 56.

The 1947 Partition of the Indian sub-continent into two nation-states, Pakistan and India, was a result of conflicting religious interests between the two dominant religions that carried significant political power – Islam and Hinduism. In the years and decades leading into the Partition, the issue of self-representation for each respective community became an ideological battleground, with notions of ‘authentic’ representations emerging. Its impact is clearly visible in the local scholarship produced during this period, with nationalist agendas colouring the region’s historical past. The distortion of historical memory has resulted in serious implications in the religio-political imagination of both countries population. Contemporary events, such as the 1992 demolition of the Babri Mosque by Hindu nationalists in India, highlight the manifestation of religious conflict exacerbated by misrepresentations of the past. Likewise, misconstrued narratives of the region’s past have been embedded in Pakistan’s history curriculum as a means of developing a national identity, separate from its neighbour. The perpetuation of such misconceptions inevitably lead to political discord and a socio-cultural hostility not only between the two nations but also within the religiously diverse nation-states.


The history of relations between the two religious communities under imperial rule is central in the national narratives of the contemporary region. The current religio-political discourse between India and Pakistan is dominated by divisive narratives that stem from historical misrepresentations of Mughal rule. In popular imagination, the 1947 Partition is seen to be the result of tensions between Hindu and Muslim communities that date back to the late Mughal era. While this perception may hold a certain degree of truth, it is important to not isolate this factor from the larger context of nationalism fuelled by colonial rule. As demonstrated in this thesis, religious conflict has not always been the norm in the Indian sub-continent – rather, under the reigns of the likes of Akbar, policies regarding religious diversity have been one of tolerance and peaceful co-existence. As such, redirecting research on the region’s history, particularly on Mughal rule in the region, is essential in countering politically misinformed assumptions of religious relations. Additionally, a shift from central imperial narratives to a more localised and socially-driven experience of religious diversity is vital in exploring the socio-cultural response to pluralism. Case studies on social and cultural icons with no direct links to the imperial political centre, such as that of Bulleh Shah, allow for a more nuanced understanding of the dynamic between the forces from below (i.e. the social actor) and from above (i.e. the state power) in shaping the region. The example of Bulleh Shah contributes to Mughal scholarship by exploring the function of poetry, as medium of expression, in the historical representations of religious relations within the imperial polity. The strong Sufi influence on the region as a whole as well as the conceptualisations of Islam within the region, plays an integral role in linking the socio-cultural domain of the populace with the religio-political characterisation of the polity.

Bulleh Shah’s influence of Indian Sufism is drawn from a nuanced understanding of local indigenous philosophical thought and cultures, helping shape a powerful consciousness of religious pluralism in the region. This is reflected in his poetry wherein his overt observations of the religious climate and the subsequent socio-cultural divides amongst the common people demonstrate the power between the social and political dynamics. As a cultural icon, Bulleh Shah is ultimately a product of his time and environment, hence, allowing him to exercise his agency through his poetic works. An advocate of tolerance and coexistence, the relevance and impact of Bulleh Shah’s legacy remains strong in contemporary times. While the Partition of India and Pakistan has resulted in the very religious tensions that it sought to escape from, an increasing awareness of their cultural connection through historical icons, such as Bulleh Shah, can help foster a better
understanding between the two nations. Even today, Bulleh Shah’s poetry has permeated the cultural fabric of the region, particularly in Punjab, through popular musical renditions by prominent artists. The universality his work has allowed for people on both sides of the border to rekindle a socio-cultural connection. In a climate of religious antagonism, despite the presence of three dominating religious traditions, Islam, Sikhism and Hinduism, Punjab is ultimately united by its language and culture.

There remains much to be researched and explored, and gaps of knowledge to be filled well beyond the boundaries of this thesis. Further research into the socio-cultural discourse of religious relations in the Mughal Empire will help shape a better understanding of the region’s unique cultural milieu. The didactic function of poetry has proven to be a meaningful tool in analysing the reciprocity of the propagation of imperial authority with the social reality of the populace. While this thesis is a short study bound by the parameters of time and a word limit, it opens the door to future research. The impact and legacy of Bulleh Shah needs to be explored in relation to the current environment of the region in order to encourage a shift in the perception of Punjab’s shared past. Examining questions of historical (mis)representation and memory are vital in creating an informed historical awareness of the region’s past. The Indian sub-continent has an enriched history that needs to be appreciated and understood in order to foster inter-religious and inter-cultural dialogue between the two nations of a single region.
Bibliography


# Glossary

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Definition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Alif</strong></td>
<td>The first letter of the Arabic alphabet. It also holds great metaphorical value in the Sufi tradition.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Allah Ghani</strong></td>
<td>Literally translated into “the self-sufficient God.” <em>Al-Ghani</em> is also one of the attributable names of God in Islam.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Allah</strong></td>
<td>The Arabic term for God.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Asabiyah</strong></td>
<td>The concept of social cohesion that was further developed and refined by Ibn Khaldun, a 14th century Arab philosopher and historian.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Bhakti</strong></td>
<td>Refers to the devotional worship of a deity in the mystical tradition of Hinduism.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Charbagh</strong></td>
<td>A Persian style garden that consists of four parts which was popular amongst the Timurid cultural tradition. It’s literal translation is “four-gardens.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Din-i-Ilaahi</strong></td>
<td>The Religion of God founded by Akbar in 1582. It is also translated into the Religion of the Divine.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Ghazal</strong></td>
<td>Plural - ghazals. A form of poetry used to express feelings of pain, separation and love.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Ghazi</strong></td>
<td>An honorific title given to a Muslim warrior fighting for Islam. This term has spiritual connotations and is often translated as a “holy warrior.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Guregeniyya</strong></td>
<td>A title used to indicate the status of “son-in-law” to the Mongol lineage.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Ibadat Khana</strong></td>
<td>The House of Worship built by Akbar in 1575 where he would hold inter-religious discussions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Ilahi</strong></td>
<td>Literally means “God.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Term</td>
<td>Definition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------</td>
<td>------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Imam</td>
<td>A title given to a Muslim leader, mainly used to refer to worship leaders.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jihad</td>
<td>The struggle for Islam. Can refer to both a political sense and spiritual sense.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jizya</td>
<td>A poll tax levied upon non-Muslims who reside in Muslim lands in return for protection.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kafi</td>
<td>A form of classical Sufi poetry in the Indian sub-continent originating from the regions of Punjab and Sindh.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mahzar</td>
<td>A religious decree passed in 1579 that declared Akbar as the Imam of the Mughal Empire, effectively giving him power over the ulema.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Musalman</td>
<td>The Persian word for “Muslim” which has been linguistically adopted by the Indian sub-continent.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Qawwali</td>
<td>A form of devotional Sufi music specific to the Indian sub-continent. It is often sung in lyrical prose.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sama</td>
<td>Sufi ceremony where the participants whirl around in the ecstatic remembrance of God (dhikr).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sharia</td>
<td>A broad term for religious law in the Islamic tradition. While it refers to wide range of permissible and non-permissible acts, it is commonly defined as canonical law that is implemented through legislative procedures.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shi’a</td>
<td>The second largest denomination of Islam who believe in the successorship of the Prophet’s cousin and son-in-law, Ali, at the demise of the Prophet Muhammad. The term literally translated into “the adherents of Ali.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suf</td>
<td>The Arabic term for “wool.” It used to denote the ascetic appearance of Sufi followers who don a woollen garment.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Suhl-i-kul

A policy of universal peace, derived from the Sufi tradition, introduced by Abkar during his reign to encourage religious tolerance.

Sunni

Commonly used to refer to those who adhere to the Sunni sect of Islam, the largest denomination of Islam. The term is often conflated with orthodoxy due to their differing understanding of the religion’s theological and judicial aspects.

Tasawwuf

Refers to the mystical dimension of Islam and often defined as “the inward dimension of Islam” (i.e. referring to the soul and heart). The term Sufism is derived from it.

Tawhid

Refers to the “oneness of God.” It is a central concept in Islam upon which the religion centres on.

Ulema

A body of Muslim scholars who are well-versed in the Islamic law and theology.