Perspectives on Mughal India
Rulers, Historians, ‘Ulamā’ and Sufis

Sajida Sultana Alvi
Foreword

The era of the Mughal Empire is one of the most fascinating periods of premodern history, whether the scene is limited to South Asia or enlarged to the global level. The panorama of this spectacular empire awed even visitors from Europe, and its immense wealth and patronage attracted, talented and ambitious, scholars and adventurers, from Central Asia and Persia. The monuments left behind by this Timurid dynasty include some of the most famous historical buildings in South Asia, including of course, the Taj Mahal at Agra, which must be familiar to nearly everyone in the world, who has access to the global information network.

Yet, despite the seemingly significant access to the Mughals, as seen for instance in their many lavishly illustrated, miniature paintings, which are available today in high-quality publications of the art historians, the intellectual legacy of the Mughals remains in a very important sense, underappreciated, and even, misconceived. Part of the blame for this situation inevitably falls on the peculiar lens of colonial historiography which was created by the British rulers of India, who for good reason, viewed themselves as the successor-state to the Mughals.

The British closely studied the Mughal administrative practices, and published editions and translations of the chief historical chronicles of their predecessors. Yet it was unavoidably the case that the British viewed the Mughals with a jaundiced eye, considering their own ascendancy in India as the necessary consequence of Mughal decadence.

The colonial officials who whiled away the hot season at hill stations, by translating the works of Abu al-Fazl and Shahnawaz Khan, did not hide their contempt for the alleged stylistic and ethical shortcomings of those authors. This, understandable, if regrettable, need for self-justification, could blind the colonial scholar to the broader cultural and political contexts that framed the writings of Mughal authors. Thus, Beveridge could condemn Abu al-Fazl, both for his Oriental rhetorical extravagance, and for his servility in praising Akbar’s every action. He did not find any merit
in the extensive prologue to the Akbar Nāmah, in which Abu al-Fazl engaged in praise of the cosmic pen which is the basis of all intelligence and creativity. Yet as Marshall Hodgson showed in his sensitive analysis of this passage that far from being an idle example of poetic conceit, Abu al-Fazl’s complicated prose offers a powerful symbolic illustration of the philosophical insights, going back both to Greek philosophy and Sufism, that undergirded the intellectual universe of the Mughals. In short, there is much to be gained by an appreciation of Mughal writings in terms of the deeper concerns and contemporary issues faced by their authors.

It has taken the laborious scholarly work by many experts in recent years to initiate a shift in the understanding of Mughal history away from the prejudicial approach of the colonial era. Ironically, the writings of nineteenth-century authors continue to have an undeserved afterlife, thanks to their copyright-free status that permits unending reprints. What is called for is an extensive effort to bring to light the many unexamined writings that await investigators in manuscript collections around the world, while also offering fresh interpretations of some of the better-known texts. Few contemporary scholars can be better equipped for this task than Dr Sajida S. Alvi, who is distinguished not only for her work on Mughal historical texts (particularly her critical edition of Bakhīwār Khān’s Mīr’at al-‘Ālam), but also for her engagement with the important class of political texts known as mirrors for princes as evidenced by her translation of Muḥammad Bāqir Najm-ī Thānī’s Advice on the Art of Governance. Dr Alvi has organized her researches in this volume into three separate categories: first, an examination of historical sources on specialized topics which focuses on the regions of Sindh and Awadh, and the history of Awrangzib; second, Sufism and reform, especially as seen through the development of the Mujaddidi-Naqshbandi Sufi order; and third, issues of religion, politics, and Shi’ism, during the reign of Jahāngīr.

There are many valuable observations to be found in Dr Alvi’s essays, which represent significant contributions to the field of Mughal studies. After the problem of the colonial British legacy, the greatest distortion bedeviling this subject has been the constant projection of the communalist politics of the twentieth century back onto the Mughal era. This has had the unfortunate result of converting everything into a version of conflict between Hindus and Muslims, thereby, prefiguring the Partition of British India into two nations as well. Dr Alvi, ably and sensibly, points out the shortcomings of these ideological readings, and persuasively situates the reader back in the actual context of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, when a different set of complex interactions held sway. She also mines the rich terrain of writings on political theory in the mirror for princes tradition, pointing out that such texts offered a rare opportunity to send subtle messages of criticism to rulers who all too often went unchecked in the assertion of their own authority. By balancing different sources on dynastic history, she demonstrates the multiplicity of perspectives that were in fact brought to bear on different rulers, resisting in the process the easy target of deciding which historian ‘got the facts right’. At the same time, she demonstrates the real utility of local histories, for providing a fine grain of detail and local perspective that is missing from the histories focused on the central narrative of empire.

Dr Alvi has rightly focused on the reformist movement associated with the work of Shāh Ismā‘īl Shahīd as a pivotal moment, which has generally been interpreted in an overly simplistic manner; future researchers will do well to follow her hints for exploring this rich but, so far an, underexamined topic. Likewise, she has drawn attention to some of the exaggerated views of the political impact of the later Naqshbandi Sufi leaders, as well as the error of overemphasizing the anti-Shi‘ī views of those shaykhs. And these are only some of the more salient contributions found in this volume.

Readers keen to learn more about the Mughal history than what is offered by the standard textbooks will find much to reflect on in these essays, and the more attentive ones will find additional nuggets of insight in the footnotes themselves. Dr Sajida Alvi has enriched our appreciation of this key phase in global and South Asian history, and it is to be hoped that other researchers will follow in her footsteps by continuing to find, hitherto, unexamined sources, and thereby attempt continuously to throw fresh light on the history of the Mughals.

Carl W. Ernst
The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill