
From Outside the Persianate Centre:

Vernacular Views on “Ālamgīr”

Introduction



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In an unprecedented show of efficiency, workers of the New Delhi Municipal Corporation worked overnight on September 3, 2015 to change signposts of Aurangzeb Road to A. B. J. Abdul Kalam Road. This renaming had been decided on roughly a week earlier, prompted by a proposal from Members of Parliament from the BJP (Bharatiya Janata Party).¹ The move proved popular, but was followed by a degree of soul-searching in the Indian press about whether Aurangzeb’s image as a villain is justified.² Discussion of the figure of Aurangzeb in South Asian history has not abated since then, with scholars intervening in the debate.³ The popular reaction to such interventions has been equally contentious, with vituperative web-based responses too numerous to cite.

¹“Aurangzeb Road is now Abdul Kalam Road” in *The Hindu* 4 September 2015. <http://www.thehindu.com/news/cities/Delhi/aurangzeb-road-is-now-abdul-kalam-road/article7613198.ece> <Accessed 15 April 2016>; “Delhi’s Aurangzeb Road to be renamed as Abdul Kalam Road, report says” in *The Times of India* 28 August 2015 <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/delhi/Delhis-Aurangzeb-Road-to-be-renamed-as-Abdul-Kalam-Road-report-says/articleshow/48711593.cms> <Accessed 15 April 2016>; Aditi Vatsa “Simply put: The procedure of renaming roads, and reasons for seeking change” in *The Indian Express* 7 September 2015. <http://indianexpress.com/article/explained/simply-put-the-procedure-of-renaming-roads-and-reasons-for-seeking-change/> <Accessed 15 April 2016>

²Manimugdha S Sharma “Aurangzeb to Kalam: A road to history revisited” in *The Times of India* 30 August 2015. <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/Aurangzeb-to-Kalam-A-road-to-history-revisited/articleshow/48735388.cms> <Accessed 15 April 2016>; Shoab Daniyal “Was Aurangzeb the most evil ruler India has ever had?” 2 September 2015 on Scroll.in <http://scroll.in/article/752358/was-aurangzeb-the-most-evil-ruler-india-has-ever-had> <Accessed 15 April 2016> As of this date, the page had been accessed 133.8 K times.

³Audrey Truschke has been particularly active in this discussion. Rajeiv Mani “Aurangzeb gave temples grants, land: Historian” in *The Times of India* 15 September 2015 <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/Aurangzeb-gave-temples-grants-land-Historian/articleshow/48940506.cms> <Accessed 15 April 2016>; Anuradha Raman “‘Aurangzeb is a severely misunderstood figure’ Interview with Audrey Truschke” in *The Hindu* 14 September 2015 <http://www.thehindu.com/opinion/interview/scholar-audrey-truschke-aurangzeb-is-a-severely-misunderstood-figure/article7648723.ece> <Accessed 16 April 2016>; Audrey Truschke “What We Can Learn From India’s Medieval Past” on *The Wire* 20 September 2015 <http://thewire.in/2015/09/20/what-we-can-learn-from-indias-medieval-past-11106/> <Accessed 16 April 2016>. See also Truschke’s *Aurangzeb: The Life and the Legacy of India’s Most Controversial King* (Stanford, 2017).

Negative press for the Mughal emperor Aurangzeb, whose regnal name was actually Alamgir (r. 1658–1707), is neither new nor unusual: he has often been cast in scholarly and popular representations alike as a tyrant who antagonised his Shi'a, Sikh and Hindu subjects through his religious fanaticism. Some, such as J. Sarkar in his seminal work (5 vols. 1912–24), see this as a root cause for the decline of the Mughal Empire.⁴ He is often held up in opposition to other “liberal-minded” monarchs and would-be monarchs, such as his great grandfather the emperor Akbar or his brother and rival Dara Shikoh. Rajeev Kinra has called attention to the ways in which this opposition functions rhetorically to produce “an effect... whereby the two [Akbar and Dara] are treated not only as exceptional individuals, but in fact as *exceptions* to an implied default position of Islamic orthodoxy—an orthodox stance to which Aurangzeb is often very simplistically viewed as some sort of logical ‘return’”.⁵ The figure of Aurangzeb has thus been mobilised rhetorically to allow the indictment of Mughal and other Muslim rulers more broadly.

Recent scholarship has suggested the need for a more nuanced understanding of the emperor and his rule, and his interaction with his diverse subjects. At times, a reassessment of the Mughal period in broad terms has allowed for a new understanding of the emperor: Munis Faruqui's reassessment of the role of imperial princes in the Mughal state overall provides a portrait of Aurangzeb as a prince and his subsequent treatment of his own sons that allows us to appreciate in a new way how he came to power and the contributing causes for the subsequent denouement of Mughal power after his reign.⁶ His analysis of Aurangzeb's triumph over his brother and rival Dara Shikoh follows on Kinra's earlier analysis along such lines, which showed that despite Dara Shikoh being “certainly beloved and revered by many, there was also a widely shared sense that he had been too immature to win the throne and govern effectively”.⁷ In the context of Faruqui's broader exploration of the dynamics of competition and alliance-building among Mughal princes overall, it becomes clear that Dara Shikoh's demise resulted ultimately from a failure “to cultivate wide-ranging and diverse sets of allies across the empire. As a result, it was Aurangzeb's superior alliance building and corresponding strong public image that won out over the controversial and comparatively isolated public figure struck by Dara Shukoh”.⁸ Aurangzeb, then, garnered a broad base of support that is often ignored in modern representations and Dara was not quite as popular and beloved as he is now often remembered. Kinra in recent publications has furthermore explored the broad contours of an “atmosphere of cultural hospitality, of bureaucratic and administrative meritocracy, of value for scholarly inquiry and the arts, and of respect not only for the diversity of the subcontinent itself but also for the intellectual and commercial capital brought by travellers from around the world” that was manifest in diverse and numerous

⁴See discussion of scholarship along these lines: Rajeev Kinra, *Writing Self, Writing Empire: Chandar Bhan Brahman and the Cultural World of the Indo-Persian State Secretary* (Berkeley, 2015), pp.19–20.

⁵Rajeev Kinra, “Infantilizing Bābā Dārā: The Cultural Memory of Dārā Shekūh and the Mughal Public Sphere” in *Journal of Persianate Studies*, 2 (2009), pp. 165–193, see p. 167.

⁶Munis D. Faruqui, *The Princes of the Mughal Empire, 1504–1714* (Cambridge, 2012).

⁷Kinra, “Infantilizing Bābā Dārā,” p. 190.

⁸Faruqui, *Princes of the Mughal Empire*, p. 164.

historically documented encounters in the Mughal context.⁹ As Audrey Truschke's earlier work has shown, it was in this "multicultural" environment—albeit one that does not directly map to modern ideas and practices by the same term—that up until the middle of the seventeenth century "the Mughal imperium, particularly its central court, was defined largely by repeated engagements with Sanskrit thinkers, texts, and ideas".¹⁰ While Sanskrit cultural production in the Mughal court did decline after the reign of Shah Jahan, as Truschke shows, Kinra argues that a general milieu of hospitality "continued well into Aurangzeb's reign".¹¹

The degree to which we can verify the extent of Aurangzeb's intolerance has also been questioned: Katherine Butler Brown, for example, has argued that there is "overwhelming evidence against a ban on musical practice" under Aurangzeb, suggesting "that the nature of his state was less orthodox, tyrannical and centralised than has previously been thought".¹² As Faruqi argues elsewhere, there is "little evidence to suggest that questions of religious identity played a significant role in determining resistance to or collaboration with Awrangzīb" and, ultimately, his actions "point to his determination to maintain a broad balance between the interests of competing groups and communities, including religious ones".¹³ This does not mean that there were not issues that emerged for religious minority communities during the reign of Aurangzeb, as some of the essays in this volume attest, but suggests that a focus solely on such points of conflict may occlude our full understanding of these historical interactions, as well as our view overall of Aurangzeb's reign and the workings of tolerance and intolerance within it. Several of these essays show that rather than taking for granted the centrality of empire in the history of the subcontinent, we should avoid sidelining the diversity and historical specificity of the "regions" in their own historical becoming and in the idea and working of the empire itself.

A central issue in the construction of the image of Aurangzeb relates to the sources. On the one hand, a negative view of Aurangzeb has been based on European travel accounts and a group of Persian sources that reflect the views of those who did not support his reign.¹⁴ Such sources in themselves provide only one side of the story; however they are often treated as authoritative without attention to context and perspective. On the other hand, state-centred accounts of Aurangzeb's rule that emphasize positive aspects are often dismissed as propaganda. As Audrey Truschke has argued, "Mughal histories... [in general] project an idealised image of strong, unwavering imperial authority that... elides the consistently

⁹Rajeev Kinra, "Handling Diversity with Absolute Civility: The Global Historical Legacy of Mughal *Sulh-i-kull*" in *Medieval History Journal*, 16, 2 (2013), pp. 251–295, p. 253. See also his book-length study *Writing Self, Writing Empire*.

¹⁰Audrey Truschke *Culture of Encounters: Sanskrit at the Mughal Court* (New York, 2016), p. 2; the term 'multicultural' is one Truschke broadly employs, but she discusses the particular valences of the use of term for the Mughal context on pp. 230 ff.

¹¹Kinra, "Handling Diversity with Absolute Civility", p. 287. Truschke attributes waning interest in Sanskrit intellectual production in the Mughal court not to Aurangzeb's cultural and religious interests, but rather to the increasing presence of Hindavi and other vernaculars and the strong association of his rival, Dara Shikoh, with Sanskrit cultural production. See Truschke *Culture of Encounters*, pp. 234 ff.

¹²Katherine Butler Brown, "Did Aurangzeb Ban Music? Questions for the Historiography of His Reign" in *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol. 41, No. 1 (Jan., 2007), pp. 77–120; see p. 116.

¹³Munis Faruqi "Aurangzīb" in the *Encyclopedia of Islam* 64–76, p. 67 first quote, p. 71 for second.

¹⁴For a survey of the Persian sources, see Sajida S. Alvi, "The Historians of Awangzeb: A Comparative Study of Three Primary Sources" in *Essays on Islamic Civilization Presented to Niyazi Berkes*, D. P. Little, (ed.), (Leiden, 1976), pp. 57–73.

evolving and threatened quality of Mughal power”. As such, “court chronicles must be read as limited, politically charged documents”.¹⁵ This is certainly the case. Yet, such sources are not inherently *more* biased than others, which (as are shown in the essays here) are shaped their own interests.

The field of Mughal historical studies has overwhelmingly privileged Persian and state-centred accounts (both negative and positive). Perspectives from the periphery and in the vernaculars are only now beginning to be taken into account. As Allison Busch has elsewhere noted, “archival monolingualism clearly cannot capture the complexities of a multi-lingual, multi-literary realm like Mughal India”; vernacular sources therefore offer a relatively untapped resource of perspectives on the Mughal empire.¹⁶ It is in the spirit of broader recent efforts to understand the complex array of sources in the Mughal period, in multiple languages and at diverse locations that the essays here are presented. This special issue seeks to complicate understanding of the Mughal emperor Aurangzeb, and the Mughal context more broadly, through an exploration of less-commonly referenced vernacular sources. The essays in this issue contribute to a fuller and less state-centric view of the emperor, allowing us to explore diverse views from various vantage points and peripheries, and embed these views within the social and political circumstances of their formation. We can thus appreciate great diversity in both contemporary and historical accounts of Aurangzeb’s reign, reflecting sometimes radically divergent interests in different historical and regional contexts. Indeed, many times the emperor and the Mughal state are effectively decentred; while at present, they are not the main concern. Such a perspective on Mughal history has a broader value in delineating the limits of state-centered and centralised accounts of what is called the “Mughal period”.

This special issue presents eight articles, each exploring vernacular sources from different regions and different perspectives, approached by scholars from different disciplines. They coalesce in their concern about representations about the Mughal emperor, and the Mughal state, from the peripheries. The “view from Bundelkhand” is introduced by Allison Busch (Middle Eastern, South Asian and African Studies, Columbia University), who explores how Braj court poetry for Chatrasal of Panna depicted Aurangzeb. As the latter’s first military commission in 1634 had been the capture of the stronghold Orccha from the rebellious Bundelas,¹⁷ one could expect the enmity to be a long-standing and bitter one. As it turns out, the preoccupation of Lāl Kavi’s *Chatraprakāś* (1710s) is less the emperor’s religious policies than Chatrasal’s successful pursuit of *bhumiyāvaṭ* in Bundelkhand.

The “view from Mewar” by Cynthia Talbot (History, University of Texas, Austin), presents a bardic record from the Rajput rebellion as it was unfolding in 1680, read in relation to two contemporary Sanskrit texts. The much-quoted depictions of Aurangzeb as villain in the bardic text contrast with the much softer depiction of the Sanskrit texts. Talbot argues that they fit the bard’s purpose of upholding morale in Raj Singh’s Mewar camp during the ongoing war through hyperbolic celebration of the heroic deeds of specific Mewar nobles.

¹⁵Truschke, *Culture of Encounters*, 17.

¹⁶Allison Busch “Hidden in Plain View: Brajbhasha Poets at the Mughal Court” in *Modern Asian Studies*, 44, 2 (March 2010), pp. 267–309; see p. 305. The recent work of Busch and Cynthia Talbot, both of whom are represented in this volume, has contributed much to a greater appreciation of vernacular sources on the Mughal court.

¹⁷An event proudly depicted in the Padshahnama produced for Shah Jahan in 1736 and preserved in the Royal Library at Windsor.

Her work demonstrates the historically contingent nature of these representations, reflecting the specificity of the circumstances of their creation. This report from the seventeenth-century battlefield is well complimented by an anthropological contribution on Mewari contemporary festivals for Rajput heroes or *Sagasjis* by Lindsey Harlan (Anthropology, Connecticut College). One of the most important *Sagasjis* is Sultan Singh, a son of Raj Singh, killed, not in the war, but on command of his own father due to court intrigue. Together with him is also worshiped Abdul Ghani Pir, who actually died fighting for Aurangzeb during the Rajput rebellion of 1680. Again, this evidence suggests the complexity and contingency of representations of the past related to Aurangzeb. These Mewar-focused articles have several converging points with the “view from Braj” by Heidi Pauwels and Emilia Bachrach (Religion, University of Washington, Seattle Oberlin College respectively). Given the commonplace understanding that several of the images of Krishna in Braj fled Aurangzeb’s iconoclasm, one would expect much rhetoric of religious persecution in the devotional Braj hagiographies about the famous Śrī Nātha-jī. Yet, here too, the evidence is not unequivocal. The anonymous emperor, later footnoted as Aurangzeb, during whose rule Śrī Nāthajī flees to Mewar is cast as a crypto-devotee of Krishna, pursuing him in his desire to be close to him and keep him inside the borders of the imperial territories. Véronique Bouillier (Anthropology, EHESS, Paris) represents a Shaiva ascetic view of the emperor in her anthropological study of Nāth Yogī Hindi sources, mostly oral narratives circulating at various shrines. She finds both stories of antagonism, foregrounding the emperor’s destruction of temples, as well as of accommodation, foregrounding his uneasy discipleship of yogī gurus.

A view from Amer based on Kachvaha sources is provided by Monika Horstmann (Indology, University of Heidelberg, Germany). Comparing bardic, mixed Braj and Dhūṇḍhārī court poems, and genealogies with Sanskrit sources, she investigates the justifications for the Kachvaha support for Aurangzeb during the succession war as well as the strained relationships in the wake of the escape of the Maratha leader Shivaji, all written well after Aurangzeb’s death. The article by Anne Murphy (Asian Studies, University of British Columbia, Vancouver) explores a Punjabi Braj source from the mid-eighteenth century that offers a re-centred view of Mughal power, coalescing around Punjabi and Sikh interests and local power struggles, but which at the same time reveals far broader transformations in Sikh communitarian imaginaries. It has several points of convergence with the next article, by Samira Sheikh (History, Vanderbilt), which foregrounds “the view from Gujarat”. Sheikh’s analysis reveals how local power politics in Gujarat influenced the strained relationships with Gujarati Shi’as. At the same time, she stresses how Aurangzeb’s preoccupation with administration in accordance with Hanafi law, for which he sponsored a codex, meant a surprisingly “modern” shift away from the millenarian kingship of his predecessors.

These papers were first presented at the European Conference of South Asian Studies in Zürich (July 23–6, 2014) as a part of an interdisciplinary panel organised by Monika Horstmann and Heidi Pauwels that explored perspectives on Aurangzeb within historical and contemporary vernacular sources; we bring some of the finished papers together here to enhance our nascent conversation and allow for a wider audience of readers. We do not undertake this work with the aim of white-washing or vindicating Aurangzeb, nor do we seek to condemn him. Instead, our aim is to recentre the conventional focus of examination of the crucial period of Aurangzeb’s reign and allow for a more textured and regionally

responsive view of the period. We do this through making available little-known vernacular sources as well as contributing a fresh perspective based on classical sources, and by shifting perspectives on the Mughal state to the outer lying reaches of empire. There is something important revealed as much by the limits of Mughal power as there is by its centres, and by the multiple engagements of such centres within the diverse linguistic communities of the empire.

Note on Conventions

We have added diacritics for all names of authors and texts, following the conventions for Sanskrit as in M. Monier-Williams' *A Sanskrit-English dictionary* (Oxford, [1899] 1981), and for Hindi as in R. S. McGregor's standard *Oxford Hindi-English Dictionary* (Oxford, 1993). Persian and Punjabi are presented along parallel lines, with modifications of the conventions of Hindi for the usage of nasalisation in Punjabi. So as not to overload the visual image of the text we have omitted diacritics for place names, common technical terms, names of major historical figures, such as emperors and courtiers, Marathas, Rajput rulers, and so on. <anne.murphy@ubc.ca>

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