

Article

The Native's Reception of the War of Succession among the Sons of Shahjahan

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Abstract:

This article study series of battles fought between 1657 and 1659, the war of succession among Shahjahan's four sons ended with the accession of his third son, Aurangzeb, to the Mughal throne. This paper leaves aside the political and military course of that conflict, a subject already well covered in the existing scholarship, and asks instead how contemporary Indian observers understood it. The now-familiar image of the war as an exceptionally brutal and bloody affair rests almost entirely on the testimony of European travellers. Indo-Persian chroniclers, by contrast, treated the conflict as an inevitable feature of Mughal kingship and as the chief means by which a prince demonstrated his fitness to rule. That understanding, this paper argues, was rooted in a conception of dynastic legitimacy that took shape under Timur and remained operative through the reign of Aurangzeb and into that of his successors.

Keywords: Aurangzeb, Mughal Empire, War of Succession, Dara Shikoh, Shahjahan, Indo-Persian Chronicles, European Travel Accounts

1. INTRODUCTION

In September 1657, Shahjahan fell seriously ill. Dara Shikoh, hoping to prevent his rivals from learning of their father's condition, had their agents at court placed under arrest, but the measure failed: rumours of the emperor's death travelled out of the capital and through the empire, deepening an already volatile situation.¹ Aurangzeb, Shah Shuja, and Murad Bakhsh, uncertain of events in Delhi and wary that Dara might exploit the confusion to seize the throne outright, resolved to contest it themselves and marched on the capital. Dara moved to stop them, routing Shuja's forces at the battle of Bahadurpur, but he was in turn defeated by the combined armies of Aurangzeb and Murad at Samugarh. Further engagements followed: Shuja was

eventually driven into Arakan, while Dara and Murad were captured and executed.

Much of what is generally understood about this war, and about Mughal succession conflicts more broadly, derives from the accounts of European travellers, read through the assumptions of a modern moral framework in which a son rebelling against his father, and brothers making war on one another, appear as aberrant and self-evidently immoral. But no single ethical standard holds with equal force across every culture and period. As the American sociologist William Graham Sumner observed, no trans-cultural judgement of a society's morality can be sustained as universally valid, since different cultures at different

1 S.M. Azizuddin Hussain, *Structure of Politics under Aurangzeb 1658–1707*, New Delhi, 2002, pp. 13–4.

times operate by distinct moral standards.²

Mughal courtly culture was no exception. It developed under conditions far removed from those of early modern Europe or of the present, and its ideas about violence, kingship, and the state were conditioned by that context.³ To read medieval Mughal politics through the moral vocabulary of European observers, or of a later age, is to misread it from the outset. This paper sets that vocabulary aside and asks how the war looked to those who lived through it.

2. A NECESSARY WAR: SUCCESSION AND LEGITIMACY SINCE TIMUR

The scale and violence of the 1657–59 conflict startled contemporaries and later observers alike. Nothing in Indian history, nor in the experience of European travellers in India, had prepared them for a war of this magnitude, one that engulfed the empire and its administrative machinery in its course.⁴ Succession disputes, fratricide, and rebellion by princes against a reigning father were not unusual in Mughal India. What distinguished this war was that all four sons of a reigning emperor confronted one another at once, each commanding forces of considerable strength — the first time this had happened in Mughal history. The fighting was fierce enough that the smoke of massed artillery hung over the field, which, as Audrey Truschke writes, came to glisten “like a field of red tulips” with the blood spilled across it.⁵ The war remains, moreover, the only instance in Mughal history in which a reigning emperor was deposed by his own son.

Every chronicler writing under Aurangzeb’s reign accordingly found the conflict impossible to pass over, even in the briefest of accounts; it went on to generate more historical writing than any other episode in the dynasty’s history before the 1857 uprising.⁶ European travellers found the spectacle of a Mughal royal family locked in fratricidal

war especially shocking, and for many of them it became the defining episode of Aurangzeb’s reign.⁷ Fratricide, in the European moral imagination, ranked among the most heinous of crimes,⁸ and travellers who learned of the Mughal war frequently condemned it in unsparing terms. John Ovington called it “inhumane,” a “barbarous sacrifice,” a “bold and bloody enterprise,” and the “misfortune of the eastern courts.”⁹ The Italian traveller Gemelli Careri denounced it as “the unnatural war.”¹⁰ François Bernier attributed it to the “lust of domination among four brothers.”¹¹ Bernier nonetheless cautioned against judging the Mughals by the standards applied to European princes, since Indian custom differed from European custom on this point: after the death of a Mughal monarch, he observed, the succession was traditionally contested among all of his sons, each left with the choice of sacrificing his brothers to rule alone or being sacrificed himself for the sake of another’s stability.¹²

Native chroniclers took a markedly different view. Familiar with the workings of Mughal succession, they understood a war among the reigning emperor’s sons and other claimants as unavoidable, and treated it not as a moral catastrophe but as the mechanism by which the ablest ruler was chosen for the Mughal throne. They felt little need to pass judgement on these events, and generally confined themselves to recording what had happened.

It is accordingly difficult to find, among the native Indian sources, any expression of remorse or regret at the war between Shahjahan’s sons, or any suggestion that the conflict struck contemporaries as barbaric or unnatural in the way it struck European travellers; on this question, most native sources are simply silent. One exception is instructive. Ishwar Das Nagar, a chronicler from Gujarat,¹³ records Khalilullah Khan,¹⁴ a Mughal noble close to Dara Shikoh, telling the prince in the midst of the war:

- 2 William Graham Sumner, *Folkways: A Study of the Sociological Importance of Usages, Manners, Customs, Mores and Morals*, New York, 1906, p. 59.
- 3 Audrey Truschke, *Aurangzeb: The Life and Legacy of India’s Most Controversial King*, California, 2017, p. 18. One possible explanation for the modern tendency to accept European moral judgements of this period is offered by Noam Chomsky, who has argued that morality is in continuous progress: values once considered normal are now judged immoral, and vice versa. Present-day moral standards happen to be closely aligned with, and heavily influenced by, European values, which may be why European judgements of these events continue to feel intuitively persuasive.
- 4 Truschke, *Aurangzeb*, p. 31.
- 5 *Ibid.*, p. 37.
- 6 As Supriya Gandhi has observed, the succession struggle shook Hindustan and would go on to generate more books than any other episode in the dynasty’s history before the 1857 uprising against British rule. Supriya Gandhi, *The Emperor Who Never Was: Dara Shukoh in Mughal India*, 2020, p. 215.
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- 8 Sadiq Ali, *A Vindication of Aurangzeb*, Punjab, 1916.
- 9 John Ovington, *A Voyage to Surat in the Year 1689*, ed. H. G. Rawlinson, London, 1929, pp. 105–8.
- 10 ed. Surendranath Sen, *Indian Travels of Thevenot and Careri*, National Archives of India, New Delhi, 1949, p. 230.
- 11 François Bernier, *Travels in the Mogul Empire: A.D. 1656–1668*, ed. Vincent A. Smith, London, 1916, p. 115.
- 12 *Ibid.*, p. 199.
- 13 At the time of the war of succession, Ishwar Das was probably no more than four or five years old; he likely learned of these events later, during his service under Qazi Sheikh ul-Islam.
- 14 After Shahjahan’s illness, when Muhammad Amin Khan (son of Mir Jumla) was arrested, Khalilullah Khan was raised to the post of Mir Bakhshi. A close confidant of Dara, he took part in the war on Dara’s side; the chroniclers of the war accuse him of treachery and hold

Since the time of Sahib-i Qiran Amir Taimur, no one has been able to sit on the throne without waging a civil war against others, and whoever obtained it, procured it by the power of the sword.¹⁵

Khalilullah's remark reflects a broader understanding: that surviving claimants had always posed a standing threat to a reigning monarch, and that their presence had remained a matter of concern since the time of Timur, at the very inception of the dynasty. Ruling the Mughal throne in peace required that rival claimants be eliminated, which made war, in this framework, an inevitable feature of the succession system rather than an aberration from it. Only the strongest among the contenders survived the trial of battle, and in doing so earned the throne unambiguously.¹⁶ Khafi Khan gestures at the same logic when he notes that Bahadur Shah I, breaking with Timurid precedent, chose at first not to eliminate the other claimants to the throne, sparing the empire an unnecessary bloodletting among Muslims — a departure from what tradition would otherwise have demanded of him.¹⁷

3. WAR AS THE ONLY YARDSTICK

Khalilullah gave this logic a memorable phrase: *ya takht ya taboot*, "either the throne or the coffin."¹⁸ A Mughal ruler's claim rested on the strength of his sword, and winning the throne on the battlefield against rival claimants was, by this point, an established part of dynastic tradition.¹⁹ Political power was in principle available to any male member of the ruling family; birth order carried little weight. Whoever proved able to seize the throne did so, and needed no justification beyond royal blood and demonstrated strength. The choice, in this framework, was stark: take up the sword and win, or perish. There was no accepted third option, no path of reconciliation among rival claimants. An attempt at exactly such a reconciliation was made among the four sons of Bahadur Shah after his death, and it too collapsed into a fratricidal war in which three of the four sons ultimately reached their coffins.²⁰ Even Shahjahan and, later, Aurangzeb himself sought a peaceful settlement for the succession of their own sons; both attempts failed.²¹

Contemporaries understood that in the Mughal succession, war was the only real measure by which a new monarch would be chosen. Whenever a reigning emperor died, it was understood that his sons and other kinsmen would contend for the throne. Since the timing of a monarch's death was unpredictable and the outcome of any contest depended on a claimant's vigilance and resilience, everyone concerned was, in effect, waiting and quietly preparing for the moment when it would arrive. Shahjahan's illness supplied that occasion, and his sons duly entered the field.

Not every prince welcomed this logic. Murad Bakhsh favoured a peaceful division of the empire, under which Dara and Shuja would receive Punjab and Bengal respectively, while he and Aurangzeb would share the capital and the remaining territory. He pressed this proposal insistently, and his advisor, Shahbaz, cautioned him in response:

Nothing is better than that which has crossed your sublime mind, but such a thing is difficult to translate into action, and it has never happened before, nor is it likely to happen again.²²

The remark reflects a genuine wish, shared by some nobles and princes, for a cordial resolution rather than war. But in the absence of a law of primogeniture — which would otherwise have made every prince an equally rightful claimant — few believed such an arrangement could succeed. Ishwar Das records Shahbaz's advice with evident approval, describing him as *door-andesh*, "farsighted,"²³ a judgement that signals the chronicler's own agreement: any attempt at reconciliation, in his view, was bound to fail, since even a negotiated settlement would remain vulnerable to a single brother breaking it and reopening the war. Aurangzeb himself, at one point apparently open to compromise, offered Shuja the empire's eastern territories in a letter; Shuja rejected the offer and answered with a challenge to war.²⁴ Dara held a comparable view of reconciliation: he is reported to have said that, given the chance, he would have had Aurangzeb's body quartered and displayed on the four gates of Delhi.²⁵

his conduct partly responsible for Dara's defeat at Samugarh. He later joined Aurangzeb's court, was raised to the mansab of 6,000 *do-aspa si-aspa*, and served as governor of Punjab until his death from illness that same year. Shah Nawaz Khan, *The Maasir ul Umara*, ed. Maulvi Abd ur Rahim, vol. i, Kolkata, 1888, pp. 775–6.

- 15 Ishwar Das Nagar, *Futuh-i Alamgiri: English Translation and Persian Text*, tr. M. F. Lokhandwala and Jadunath Sarkar, ed. Raghbir Singh and Quazi Karamtullah, Vadodara, 1995, p. 45 (Persian text).
- 16 Ali, *A Vindication of Aurangzeb*, p. 206.
- 17 Bahadur Shah wrote letters urging Azam Shah to accept the division of the empire decreed by Aurangzeb. Khafi Khan, *Muntakhab ul Lubab*, ed. K. D. Ahmad and Wolseley Haig, vol. ii, Kolkata, 1874, p. 586.
- 18 A related phrase, *ya takht ya takhta*, was popularised by the Mughals as a war cry used by claimants to the throne during succession struggles, to assert their claim against rival contenders. Khan, *Muntakhab ul Lubab*, p. 596.
- 19 Nagar, *Futuh-i Alamgiri*, p. 45 (Persian text).
- 20 Khan, *Muntakhab ul Lubab*, pp. 685–8.
- 21 Shahjahan had proposed dividing the empire among his four sons — Dara to receive Punjab, Murad and Shuja to receive Gujarat and Bengal respectively, and the rest of the empire, along with the capital, to go to Aurangzeb. Years later, Aurangzeb's sons discarded a similar arrangement he had proposed. Lisa Balabanlilar, *Imperial Identity in the Mughal Empire*, 2016, pp. 132–5.
- 22 Nagar, *Futuh-i Alamgiri*, pp. 64–5 (Persian text).
- 23 Ibid., p. 64 (Persian text).
- 24 Truschke, *Aurangzeb*, p. 37.
- 25 Ibid., p. 40.

4. WAR AS THE MEASURE OF KINGSHIP

European observers, for their part, largely attributed the war to Aurangzeb's own treachery, holding that he had seized an opportunity to occupy the throne and eliminate his rivals through deceit and bloodshed, and assigning him responsibility for the war's tragedies.²⁶ Gemelli Careri described it as the "artifices, fraud and cruel practices" of "the Moghul," meaning Aurangzeb; Thévenot wrote that "blood and rebellion raised him," and that he had merely repeated his father's crimes; John Ovington called his ascent "infamy," and his path to the throne "bloody and treacherous." Bernier likewise called him "cruel," though he conceded that had Aurangzeb stood aside, one of his brothers would very likely have done to him what he was accused of doing to them, at the cost of his own life. On Bernier's reading, Aurangzeb had little real choice: he fought either to defend his life or to compete for the throne, and in the Mughal system these amounted to much the same thing.²⁷

Native observers read the same events differently, as evidence of Aurangzeb's bravery and skill. They praised his conduct on the battlefield and treated his performance in the war as proof that they had gained a capable ruler. The conflict offered a rapid means of assessing a future king: his patience, firmness, presence of mind, and vigilance, qualities expected of any ruler, alongside his weaknesses. Contemporaries saw in his conduct — his resolve in the face of repeated setbacks, his tactic of chaining his elephants' legs to prevent them from bolting, his willingness to fight on despite commanding a smaller force than his rivals — the signs of the ruler he would become. When a brother won a battle, native writers accordingly praised his personal virtues and the strength of his arm as much as the outcome itself. Victory was read as the verdict on a claimant's fitness to rule. Aqil Razi Khan wrote of Aurangzeb that "the Creator has not bestowed so many qualities and virtues on any member of the Mughal dynasty";²⁸ Ishwar Das called him "an example of bravery."²⁹ Such praise no doubt carried a measure of flattery, but it was not confined to native writers: European travellers offered similar assessments of Aurangzeb's abilities even as they condemned his methods. Rahul Sapra has observed that European accounts, while denouncing the war Aurangzeb waged to gain the throne, nonetheless portray him as an efficient and capable ruler, and that their assessments of him grew steadily more favourable as his political position stabilised.³⁰

This was not unqualified approval. Native Indians did not treat the war's outcome as simple fate or providence, and some resentment did surface, particularly over the treatment of Shahjahan and Dara after the fighting ended, and over the conduct of the nobles implicated in their capture — Nuruddin Khawas³¹ and Jiwan Khan³² among those blamed for Murad's and Dara's arrests, and Nazar among those held responsible for their deaths. Yet the same public that voiced this resentment also crowded the streets of Delhi to cheer Aurangzeb when he visited his imprisoned father, greeting him with evident warmth.³³

5. THE NOBILITY'S CODE OF NEUTRALITY

Ishwar Das describes a further convention that governed noble conduct during succession wars, something akin to an unwritten constitution: no noble was to take the lead in supporting a prince's bid for the throne. Many nobles accordingly kept themselves apart from the fighting. Those who held forts prepared to defend them until a successor was settled, or until one of the princes took the fort by force, but in no case did they surrender a fort before the outcome of the struggle was clear.

Even during so consequential a war, no noble was expected to lay hands on, still less harm, a member of the royal family; to do so was considered among the gravest of offences. This is why Jaswant Singh, at Dharmat, first tried to avoid direct confrontation with Aurangzeb and Murad, and, once battle proved unavoidable, aimed only to capture the two princes rather than harm them, even as he lost most of his men in the attempt. Raja Jai Singh observed the same restraint after defeating Dara: rather than move against him, he sent Dara a secret warning that allowed him to escape. Mir Jumla followed an identical policy in his pursuit of Shuja, tracking him only until he had left Mughal territory altogether.

Other nobles, among them Shaista Khan, Jafar Khan, and Raja Raghunath, remained neutral throughout the war and waited on its outcome; once the fall of Agra fort settled the question of who would rule, they hastened to submit to the new emperor. Raja Jai Singh, Dilir Khan, and Bahadur Khan, who had been accompanying Sulaiman Shikoh, abandoned him in similar fashion and made their way to Bagh-i Dhira.

For the ordinary soldier, service in these wars was governed by a comparable logic. His engagement with

26 This assessment likely followed from the mistaken premise, common among European travellers, that the war of succession was Aurangzeb's doing from the outset — a premise that shaped their conclusions about his culpability.

27 Bernier, *Travels in the Mogul Empire*, p. 199.

28 Aqil Razi Khan, *Waqiat-i Alamgiri*, ed. Zafar Hasan, *Waqiat-i Alamgiri of Aqil Khan Razi*, Delhi, 1946, p. 40.

29 Nagar, *Futuh-at-i Alamgiri*, p. 86 (Persian text).

30 Rahul Sapra, *The Limits of Orientalism*, Newark, 2011, pp. 133–63.

31 Ishwar Das describes Nuruddin as a "black-natured creature," utterly desperate and faithless, who forgot all the kindness shown to him by his former master. Nuruddin had been Murad's personal servant before becoming one of Aurangzeb's supporters. Nagar, *Futuh-at-i Alamgiri*, p. 68 (Persian text); also in Aqil Khan, *Waqiat-i Alamgiri*, p. 32.

32 Bihisti calls Malik Jivan ill-fated and curses him, wishing "his face blackened"; he further records that the people of Delhi hurled stones at Malik Jivan and cursed him from every door and rooftop in the city. Bihisti, *Ashob-i Hindustan*, quoted in Gandhi, *The Emperor Who Never Was*, p. 237.

33 Jadunath Sarkar, *History of Aurangzeb*, vol. ii, Calcutta, 1912, p. 84.

a prince or claimant was, in effect, a contract for pay, not a commitment to a ruler or a cause; the fighting was neither a war against a foreign power nor a struggle for the nation's freedom from foreign rule. Once one side had been defeated, a soldier's obligation to it ended, and he was free to re-enter imperial service without any stigma attaching to his change of allegiance.³⁴ When Dara's army broke and fled at Samugarh, Aurangzeb's forces were ordered not to pursue them, and hundreds of Dara's officers and men laid down their arms and joined Aurangzeb's camp on the spot.³⁵ Once the war had ended, the whole of the Mughal army, whichever claimant it had served, was reabsorbed into the imperial establishment and welcomed without reservation. Even nobles such as Jaswant Singh, who had opposed Aurangzeb at Dharmat and later abandoned him while fighting Shuja, were pardoned and restored to their former rank.³⁶ Aurangzeb left his brothers' households unharmed, and Jahanara, who had actively supported Dara throughout the war, was treated with due respect.³⁷

6. CONCLUSION

Read against the Indo-Persian record, the war of 1657–59 looks rather different from the brutal aberration described by European travellers and inherited, largely unexamined, in much later writing on the subject. For contemporaries who understood the workings of Mughal kingship, the war was neither scandalous nor unnatural. It was the expected,

and in that sense inevitable, consequence of a succession system that had no law of primogeniture to fall back on, and it functioned, in practice, as the test by which a claimant demonstrated the qualities a throne required: resolve, skill in the field, and the capacity to command loyalty in defeat as much as in victory. Khalilullah Khan's invocation of Timur made explicit what most native chroniclers took for granted, that this understanding of legitimacy through arms was not new to Shahjahan's reign but had governed Mughal succession since the dynasty's founding.

That the same logic persisted after Aurangzeb's own accession is equally telling. The failed reconciliation among Bahadur Shah's four sons, which collapsed into the same fratricidal pattern and left three of them dead, shows that neither Aurangzeb's victory nor his own later, unsuccessful attempt to arrange a peaceful succession for his sons broke the underlying pattern. Read together, these episodes suggest a Timurid conception of dynastic legitimacy, tested and confirmed through combat among royal claimants, that ran through the reign of Shahjahan, shaped how Aurangzeb's own rise to power was understood by his contemporaries, and continued to structure Mughal succession politics well after his death. The brutality that so struck European observers was, for the natives who lived through it, simply how a Mughal emperor.

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³⁴ Ali, *A Vindication of Aurangzeb*, p. 210.

³⁵ Ibid., p. 211. Masum's brother-in-law, Muhammad Said, who had served as paymaster in the army of Sipihir Shikoh, remained in imperial territory after Samugarh and later took up the same post in the army of Muhammad Sultan. Masum, *Tarikh-i Shah Shujai*, quoted in Gandhi, *The Emperor Who Never Was*, p. 230.

³⁶ Nagar, *Futuh-i Alamgiri*, p. 97 (Persian text); Saqi Must'ad Khan, *Maasir-i Alamgiri*, ed. Agha Ahmad Ali, Calcutta, 1871, p. 13.

³⁷ Balabanlilar, *Imperial Identity in the Mughal Empire*, p. 133.

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