



The gendered ecology of empire: Women, nature, and the architecture of Mughal State Power, c.1526–1707

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Abstract

In this paper, I would like to suggest that in the Mughal realm, as in the rest of the premodern world, gender and ecology are the two themes that cannot be separated from one another without losing the sense of the Mughal imperial state's structure, functioning, and ideology. This paper argues two things based on Ruby Lal's work, Shireen Moosvi's, Irfan Habib's, Michael Fisher's, Pratyay Nath's, Emma Kalb's, and the foremost sources, the Humayun-Nama of Gulbadan Begum and the Ain-i-Akbari of Abul Fazl. First, that the elite and subaltern women of the Mughal court were active participants in the political, economic, and cultural life of the empire, and that gendered spaces like the haram sara were not places of isolation but of rule. Second, that the Mughal state in its very core was an ecological enterprise - the revenue system, the military organization, urban planning, and the ritual of the Mughals all depended upon the systematic mobilization, manipulation, and control of the natural world. Finally, the paper digs deeper into the overlaps between these two categories, as the gendered ecology of Mughal imperial culture, manifested in women's garden patronage, the symbolic masculinization of human-animal relations, and the differential allocation of environmental labour, exemplifies a power structure with a gendered and an ecological constitution.

Keywords: Mughal empire, gender and power, environmental history, women's patronage, state formation

Introduction

Recovering the Suppressed Dimensions of Mughal History

Until fairly recently, the dominant tradition of Mughal historiography has been a history of emperors, conquests, administrative systems, and religious policies — a history centred on the man as sovereign and the institutions by which his legitimacy was established, contested, and passed on. The tradition, which is traceable to the court chronicles of Mughal times, has resulted in a detailed and analytical account of the Mughal state, but also in a systematic disregard of the agency of women and the constitutive presence of the natural environment. If you write Mughal history without considering gender, you have to give in to the self-presentation of the court texts that were written by male literati for male patrons, and that encoded the invisibility of women, as a form of propriety. It would be rather wrong to write it without consideration of ecology, as it provided the material basis on which all of the Mughals' power was built. The methodological idea that gender and environment are not discrete, ancillary topics to be tackled alongside a focused study of any other theme is taken up in this paper seriously and has led to a different approach. The idea of gender and environment as analytical categories, rather than being subjects that can be added to a comprehensive narration of the Mughal state, has been taken seriously, and a new approach is created for this paper. The Mughal polity was not just a political and administrative system but also a gendered social order where masculine and feminine were mutually entangled, defining access to power, labour, property, and space, and an ecological enterprise where the ability to mobilize, classify, and control the natural world, its soils and waters, forests and animals, was as much as the ability to exercise sovereign authority. Together, these two dimensions—as this paper tries to

show—illustrate a Mughal government that is more complicated, more dynamic, and more internally contested than either a political history or an administrative manual can reveal. The time frame of this paper ranges from the reign of Babur (1526–1530) to the period of the rise of Aurangabad. This is the period of the long rule of Aurangzeb (r. 1659–1707). It spans the whole of the Mughal imperial formation and consolidation (1658-1707). It considers a variety of documents from texts such as the Humayun-Nama of Gulbadan Begum, the Ain-i-Akbari of Abul Fazl, the Tuzuk-i-Jahangiri, and farmans and administrative texts, which are read critically not only in the light of their explicit ideological stance but also in the context of a recent growth of modern scholarship in women's history, environmental history, and post-colonial theory that has shaped the field over the past 30 years.

Historiographical Bearings: Toward a Gendered and Ecological Mughal History

The historiographical shift toward the incorporation of gender in the study of the Mughals really started to take off after the 1980s and 1990s, when it became accepted to question the assumption of total seclusion of the haram and of womankind's political passivity, which had been both a part of traditional Orientalist studies and the nationalist history writing. Nur Jahan is a case in point, as Ellison Banks Findly proved in her study of the role of elite Mughal women, who had significant political influence, engaged in independent commerce, and were active in the patronage networks that produced imperial culture. A major methodological leap was taken by Ruby Lal in her *Domesticity and Power in the Early Mughal World* (2005), which not only claimed that some Mughal women were powerful but that the category of the domestic was a political production rather than a political exclusion in the

Mughal context. The postulation of the epistemological perspective of the Humayun-Nama as a historical document that embodies women's knowledge of political processes in a specific manner, through its focus on household matters, has been especially enlightening for Lal. Shireen Moosvi's work on labour in Mughal India introduced a parallel strand in the investigation, arguing that the gendered aspects of the Mughal economy were not confined to the elite group of imperial women, but also extended to the labour of peasant women associated with agriculture, of artisan women engaged in craft production, and of household women involved in domestic work that underpinned the demographic and productive core of the Mughal empire. The attention given by Moosvi to the evidence of the *Ain-i-Akbari* on women's roles in various aspects of the Mughal economy provided an important counterpoint to the tendency to focus on women's history as the history of royal women and showed a much more nuanced and complex picture of female agency and constraint. The framing of gender in Mughal South Asia, which Emma Kalb has recently explored in her work, has helpfully placed these questions in the context of the wider theoretical debates surrounding gender history, highlighting the need to focus on the creation and legitimation of imperial power through Mughal genders rather than merely their connection to social realities. In the Mughal period, the study of the environment, though shorter, is dynamic. Although Irfan Habib did not explicitly refer to the environment in his work, it was his pioneering research on the agrarian system of Mughal India that put the significance of land, water and ecological knowledge at the heart of the revenue and administrative structure of the Mughal Empire. The most detailed ecological history of India to date is Michael Fisher's *An Environmental History of India* (2018) ^[8], which focuses on the Mughal rule of the subcontinent and shows how much India's conquest was also a process of ecological change, both in the sense of deforestation, the diversion of water, and the domestication of new plant and animal species. The latest is Pratyay Nath's 2025 ^[15] essay on the Mughal 'multispecies empire', which has provided a theoretically ambitious way of considering non-human actors (elephants, horses, cows, and the rest of the sub-continental flora and fauna) both as political actors and as objects to be exploited. This synthesis of the scholarship is the basis for the analysis of the present paper.

Gender and the Mughal State: Power beyond the Chronicle

A study of gender in the Mughal state inevitably starts with the epistemological issue that the principal sources present. Male literati in a rhetorical tradition that systematically rendered women invisible or peripheral composed the great court chronicles of the Mughal era (the *Akbarnama*, the *Tuzuk-i-Jahangiri*, and the *Padishahnama*). The *haram sara* is mentioned in these texts largely as a space of housekeeping, and only indirectly and in crisis moments as a space of politics. To reclaim the agency of Mughal women, historians have to read these texts against their grain, take note of extraordinary sources like the *Humayun-Nama* written by Gulbadan Begum herself, and hedge chronicle evidence by administrative documents, legal records, and the letters of foreign travellers. The *Humayun-namā* is the most significant single document on the political aspects of the imperial family during the early Mughals.

Written by Gulbadan Begum, who was a daughter of Babur and sister to Humayun, the text uncovers the *haram sara* as a place of constant political discussion, negotiation, and decision-making. During the reading, Ruby Lal shows how the apparently domestic rhythms of the household imbue the text with a subtle awareness of the political implications of imperial issues of succession, diplomacy, and the control of imperial personnel. In this regard, the political role of Khanzada Begum, the elder sister of Babur, is very instructive. Her involvement in the conflict between Humayun and his half-brothers, and her trip to Qandahar to deal with the Uzbek ruler Ubaid Khan, who occupies a masculine world of inter-polity diplomacy, serves as an example of how far the political agency of elite Mughal women was able to extend beyond the domestic realm. It is crucial to note another facet of female power in the Mughal political system, the institution of the wet nurse and foster mother, and the elaborate system of milk kinship it entailed. The quasi-kinship bond between a prince and his milk-mother (*daya*) had political significance within the Mughal political culture: her family acquired a quasi-kinship status and thus was entitled to a special claim to imperial favour and patronage. Maham Anga, who had a great influence on the young Akbar during the early years of his reign, is the most outstanding example. Her effective control of the administration during the minority years of Akbar, through her influence over access to the emperor and the politics of court factions, was recognised, and her eventual ousting from power when Akbar consolidated his personal power was one of the great political dramas of the Mughal court in the sixteenth century. The case of Maham Anga demonstrates one aspect of the structure of Mughal politics: the arbitrary division of household and court, and the resulting power of the women who occupied the domestic arena of the sovereign, who, in practice, wielded power indistinguishable from political power. The reign of Jahangir (r. These years (1605-1627) saw the most dramatic case of female political power in the entire history of the Mughal state, when the emperor's chief consort, Nur Jahan, held such sway over the running of the state that her closest followers were referred to by her contemporaries as a 'Nur Jahan junta'. Nur Jahan's usurpation of power was multidimensional and institutional; she minted coins in her own name, promulgated imperial *Farmans*, exercised significant powers over the appointment of the highest offices in the Mughal government, and was involved in a wide-ranging business life, such as the export of indigo and textiles. Emma Kalb has suggested that Nur Jahan's power may not have been a deviation or a surprise but a sign that the political agency of the imperial house had been suppressed and was now visible, in other words. This animosity towards Nur Jahan in later accounts (based on the falsehood of her illegitimate interference and her political agency as disorder) serves as evidence of the ideology of her labour.

The gendered nature of the Mughal state was also manifested beyond the court, in property, law, and labour, making it hard to simply narrate the story of the subordinate female subject. Based on her work on middle-class women in Mughal India, Yasmin Angbin has shown how women of various social statuses had legally valid rights to land, inheritance, and contractual terms. Although they were not necessarily gender-specific in their implications, marriage contracts in Mughal legal practice included some elements

which gave women some economic autonomy and legal protection, such as the institution of *mahr* – a mandatory gift given by the husband to the wife. Angbin's record of cases where women won divorces based on failure to pay maintenance and where the concept of *mahr* was extended to non-Muslim females in the culturally syncretistic world of the Mughal commercial society is evidence that the legal situation is much more complex than what is traditionally presented to the West by Orientalists or nationalists in the context of female oppression under Islam. The work carried out by Shireen Moos on the subject of labour of Mughals has also uncovered the role of women's productive labour in the agricultural and artisanal economy of the Mughal empire, which was vital for securing livelihood and revenue for the state. The *Ain-i-Akbari's* detailed descriptions of agricultural practice show that, at the very least, women's contribution to agriculture — in the planning, cultivation, harvesting, and threshing of agricultural produce — was an integral part of the productive process, and not merely a supplement to male agriculture. Women's economic involvement in places other than agriculture, such as brick carriers in urban construction, weavers and dyers in the textile industry, and traders at local markets, further shows the extent of women's economic involvement throughout the social spectrum. This participation was systematically undervalued in the documentation of the period, as well as in subsequent historiography, in the sense that it echoed ideological ideas of domestication of women rather than the reality of their economic lives.

The Ecological Foundations of Mughal Imperial Power

From the material point of view, the Mughal state was an agrarian empire, and its financial, military, and cultural resources were all tied to the surplus of production from the Indian subcontinent's uniquely varied ecology. The revenue system developed under Akbar and organized in the *Ain-i-Akbari* was, amongst other things, a bold attempt to have an ecological knowledge, defining land quality, deriving agricultural production capacity per crop type and region, and calculating the fiscal demand (*jama*) based on it, all of which necessitated an elaborate and systematic understanding of the natural environment, which was in the strictest sense, the bedrock of imperial power. In Irfan Habib's analysis, the Mughal revenue system was based on an extensive mapping of the ecological diversity of the subcontinent that was embedded in its administrative categories, with the knowledge of generations of cultivators, revenue officers, and regional administrators. However, the Mughal state's interaction with the natural environment was not limited to knowledge and extraction, but also involved transformation. The agricultural frontier, defined as the transformation of forest and wasteland to agriculture by both Irfan Habib and Michael Fisher, was an economic policy as well as a political project. The new territory was fertile land, new populations were brought into the empire's political system, and the sovereign power was asserted by harnessing the natural world for human ends. Clearing forests for agriculture, building irrigation canals to control the flow of water in the region, and draining wetlands for urban expansion were not only economic transactions, but expressions of imperial control of the natural environment: statements in ecological terms of the same drive to order, classify, and control that propelled imperial political and administrative projects. Animals have been increasingly the

subject of scholarly interest in recent years, most recently the focus of Pratyay Nath's theoretically advanced study of the Mughal 'multispecies empire'. Nath's thesis that non-human species were not just resources to be mobilized by an imperial order of humans alone, but that they were political actors whose presence, capacities, and interactions with humans influenced the nature and dynamics of imperial power, opens up new avenues of interpretation of the Mughal state. The elephant is the most symbolic of them all. The elephant, with its 5,000 elephants in Akbar's personal stable and an additional 7,709 elephants given to his commanders, as mentioned in the *Ain-i-Akbari*, was an important material expense, an essential military resource, and an emblem of royal authority. All the institutional framework and machinery surrounding elephant management – of the *fauji*, mode of training, elephant quality and capability – demonstrated the importance of these animals in the operation of Mughal military and political power. The elephant was not only a tool; it was additionally a subject whose capacities, character, and social interactions with human handlers could influence the practical prospects of the Mughal military organization in ways that an anthropocentric interpretation of the imperial power would not be able to capture. In the Mughal military economy, horses played a similar role, but also because they were not indigenous to the Indian subcontinent and were therefore imported into India via long-distance networks that the Mughal state had a major stake in controlling and maintaining. The horse trade, especially with Central Asia, Iran, and the Arabian Peninsula, was an important component of Mughal foreign commercial policy, and the state's ability to provide for its cavalry with suitable mounts was a frequent logistical and diplomatic concern. Michael Fisher has focused on the extent to which the arrival, acclimatization, and breeding of horses were an ongoing ecological intervention that had measurable effects on how pastures were managed, the use of water, and the regional pattern of agriculture, where imperial stables were concentrated. The forest, for instance, was both a resource for production and a source of consumption for the Mughals, and warrants specific consideration. Forests were also places of ecological extraction: timber to build with, medicinal plants for the imperial pharmacopoeia, elephants and other wild beasts necessary for the army and ceremony. Forests, however, were the boundary of settled agrarian order: the area outside of the revenue system, occupied by tribal communities with varying degrees of autonomy from imperial power. The Mughal practice of deforestation was therefore an economic policy of agricultural expansion, as well as a political policy of territorial incorporation, bringing the administrative arm of the state into areas which were hitherto beyond its economy and jurisdiction. His analysis of the process of clearance and incorporation indicates that this increased in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, as population increased, fiscal pressures mounted, and ideology close to the heart of the Mughal state focused on maximising productive agricultural land.

The Mughal state was also challenged by nature's most formidable expressions, such as the famines, droughts, floods, and epidemics, which periodically wracked the entire population of the subcontinent and shook the fiscal and demographic base of imperial power. Perhaps the most iconic or extreme examples of the extent to which the Mughals struggled to control the environment are the

catastrophic famines of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, which Habib notes occurred throughout vast regions of the empire, including the period 1595-1598. The large-scale movement of about 30,000 families from Kashmir to Lahore after running out of grain due to heavy snowfall in the area and subsequent crop failure, as recorded in Jahangir's memoirs, is an example of how harsh the environmental crises are and how much social disruption they can cause. During the 17th century, there was also a demographic pressure caused by the plagues that periodically swept the empire's population. They were not only humanitarian crises but also political crises that affected the Mughal state in that they not only endangered revenue streams, but also the military manpower, and led to situations of social unrest that might pose a threat to the legitimacy of imperial rule. The state's responses to ecological crisis, such as grain price regulation, remission of revenue demands, and organisation of public works for employment, show the extent to which the Mughal administrative apparatus understood the political importance of ecological management, if it could not go far enough to tackle the underlying causes of ecological vulnerability. The Columbian Exchange—the global transfer of plant and animal species that began with European oceanic expansion in the late fifteenth and sixteenth centuries—lays another ecological layer on the Mughal history, one that has been understudied. The introduction of American crops, such as maize, tobacco, chillies, tomatoes, and potatoes, by the Portuguese traders in the early sixteenth century is one of the most important ecological shifts of the Mughal era, which has had long-term implications on crop patterns, diet culture, and demographic capacity, extending well beyond the Mughals themselves. Fisher's environmental history has recorded the slow and uneven spread of these new crops over the subcontinent, which was not in every case uniform or rapid and was dependent on the existing agricultural knowledge, soil and climate conditions, and on the commercial networks along which seeds and information travelled.

The Gendered Ecology of Imperial Power: Intersections and Implications

Having reviewed gender and environment in their separate contexts, here the study focuses on the more interesting and theoretically fruitful topic of their interaction: how gender and ecology were intertwined elements of Mughal imperial culture and practice. The intersection of these is evident in various domains that bring to light the paper's central argument. The char bagh, or fourfold garden, designed by the Mughals to reflect the principles of Timurid Central Asia and modified for the ecology of the Indian subcontinent, is possibly the most material site in which gender and environment converged in Mughal imperial order. Garden construction and design were one of the most significant patronage activities of royal women throughout the Mughal period, and their gardens were not only works of art but also political statements, claims to property rights, and means of ecological control. The garden works of Nur Jahan at Agra and Lahore, of Jahanara Begum in Delhi, and countless smaller garden projects sponsored by the imperial women during the seventeenth century are evidence of imperial women's agency in shaping the natural world. In its design rationale, the char bagh was an attempt to impose human order on the natural space, its geometrical divisions, its controlled water circuits, its cultivated planting – all in

the language of sovereignty over nature. These women used this language as often as men throw any easy equation of environmental control into masculine imperial power, into the realm of the male. Another gendered aspect of Mughal environmental management is the disparity among the genders in relation to human-animal relationships. The documentation of the intricacies of the royal institution for the care of elephants, horses, and hunting animals always depicts these as activities of men: the training of war elephants, the imperial stables, and most importantly, the royal hunt (shikargah) are all described as a masculine realm of the royal institution. It was not just a leisurely pursuit; the pursuit was a political statement of the Mughal emperor's courage, skill, physical strength, and dominion, enacted as a political ritual in Mughal political culture, one in which he was a hero of the Turco-Mongolian political tradition. This dichotomy of gendered roles – the “man” is responsible for the big, powerful, and militarily relevant animals, and the woman is responsible for the domestic animals and the care of agricultural livestock – is a reflection of a wider tendency towards the ideological association of masculine power with the regulation of the most politically potent aspects of nature. Gender-environmental nexus is also noticeable in the sector of agricultural labour, where women's role in the production process was connected to an ecological reality, both influenced by state interventions. As the agricultural frontier expanded, the need for labour in agriculture grew, with women being the primary workers in forest clearing, building of irrigation channels, and planting of new crops. Women's role in the entire range of agricultural activities—from sowing till post-harvest—was never recorded in the official and chronicle accounts of imperial accomplishments, yet Moosvi has documented women's participation and attributed them to the Mughal state's ecological vision. Gender and ecology also make for an interesting nexus in the Mughal context, and provide clues to the nature of Mughal sovereignty. The Mughal emperor's notion that he was the origin and focal point of moral and political good was articulated in a language of divine right to rule a natural and political world that depended on the emperor's own moral rectitude and wisdom. This ideology, most fully developed in the idea of the farr-i-izadi (divine effulgence) that surrounded the person of the Mughal emperor, placed the emperor at the center of the world and placed him as a mediator between heaven and earth, whose just rule was expected to ensure the fertility of the land and the prosperity of its people. Drought, famine, and epidemic, as labels of environmental crisis, were understood to be signs of what the emperor was doing wrong, and the emperor's actions in response to the environmental crisis were given a political and a theological sense. Women themselves played a role in this ideology in complicated and sometimes contradictory ways; they were the ones in charge of the domestic realm, thus subordinate regulators of an ecologically controlled natural order whose ultimate rule was vested in the sovereign male; yet as garden patrons, as managers of the natural environment, and, in some instances, as sovereign rulers in their own right, they also had a stake in the authority to control the natural world, which was reserved for the emperor by imperial ideology.

Analytical Assessment: Gender, Environment, and the Limits of Imperial Power

The analytical coupling of gender and environment provides a set of interesting insights that defy and complicate the

received narrative of Mughal imperial history. First, it shows a state that was much more embedded in social and ecological relations than a political history that concentrates on the process of sovereign choice and military success. The strength of the Mughal empire during almost two centuries was not only the genius of its emperors and the efficient performance of its administrative machinery, but the productive labour of millions of agricultural workers, many of whom were women, in combination with the ecological resources of the subcontinent (soils, waters, forests, and animals) which were actively mobilized for the service of the imperial ambition. Secondly, the inclusion of gender in the study of Mughal history also highlights that the political was much wider and more permeable than androcentric history has suggested. The evidence suggests that gender relations were always an integral part of political organization, and that there was no single model of gender relations that was universal across all social groups, from the household politics of the early Mughals through the business and administrative work of women such as Nur Jahan and Jahanara, to the rights to inheritance and legal autonomy enjoyed by women across all social strata. This does not, however, mean that the Mughal state was not a patriarchal one, that the limitations on women's agency were not material, pervasive, and ideologically embedded, but it does mean that the exercise of imperial power was gendered in complex ways, which upheld and depended on female agency, yet nonetheless obscured women's visibility. Third, the ecological view shows how much Mughal imperial ambition was indistinguishable from ecological change – and, therefore, from the ecological vulnerabilities that change produced. The empire's productive capacity and its military strength were part of the benefits of deforestation for agriculture, of the construction of irrigation systems, of the close contact between animals and humans in imperial stables, which facilitated epidemic diseases, of soil degradation, of water scarcity, and so on. The famines and plagues that hit the Mughals every once in a while were not just natural calamities, but in part, the side effects of the ecological changes that had facilitated the creation of imperial power.

Conclusion: Toward an Integrated History of the Mughal State

In this paper, I have contended that gender is not an add-on or an additional theme to be tacked on to the “full” explanation of the Mughal state, but constitutes an integral part of the way in which the Mughal state was organized, sustained, and eventually remodelled. The Mughal state was a gendered ecological enterprise—one that involved the organisation of both human and non-human productive capacities according to the social hierarchy of gender and class, and one in which imperial power and the natural world were not only exploited but also productive, violent, and creative. The two primary sources used for this analysis, Humayun-Nama of Gulbadan Begum and Ain-i-Akbari of Abul Fazl, are very different in their rhetorical tactics and ideological beliefs. When read together, however, in the analytical frameworks of gender history and environmental history, they uncover complementary aspects of a single imperial project: one in which the ordering of social relations was seen as the ordering of the natural world, and vice versa, both were linked to the sovereign. Gulbadan's text is in a domestic and kin language, but it is a language that encodes the politics of succession, diplomacy, and factional competition. Abul Fazl's text is the expression of a

theory and practice of sovereignty, in which the emperor's control over nature (land, water, animals, and the surplus of food they produce) is the basis of his political power. It is not just a richer and more inclusive Mughal imperial history that emerges from this reading, however, but a more analytically precise account of the work of empires: how they mobilize the labour of their subjects, human and otherwise, how they manage their ecological resources on which their survival depends, and how the ideological categories of gender, nature and sovereignty are utilized for the sake of power. The Mughal state in this view was more than an administration; it was a comprehensive social and ecological order, whose aspirations were as expansive as the subcontinent it attempted to rule, and whose boundaries were marked by the social relations it could not fully manage and the nature it was never able to fully conquer.

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