



Cover Page



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## HISTORIOGRAPHY OF GLORIOUS MEDIVAL PERIOD - A SPECIAL REFERENCE TO MOGHUL'S ERA

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### Abstract

"History is always written by the winning side", though a cliché, is an expression which points out imperfectness and dubiety of history that we learn today. In this respect, though history provides us with academic interest from its intrinsic attractiveness, historiography, a study of historical records, gives a different kind of scholarly amusement by focusing on the historical records themselves, analyzing them, and broadening the scope of our awareness of history. With historiography, this chapter aims to investigate historical records written by historians of the Mughal Empire, one of the most prosperous countries in South Asia throughout the history. A wide range of aspects about historical records will be dealt: historians who wrote the records, sources they used for historical records, purpose of historical writing, historical records in context of the time they were written and the time they are concerned with, and other different tendencies concerned with historical records such as perspectives, bias, etc. With in- depth analysis of historical records and comparing it with societal or cultural background of the Mughal Empire, this paper will try to find either individual historical approach used by Mughal historians or common tendencies regarding historical records of the Mughal Empire. When analyzing sources, this chapter will examine source by source in the order of the time it was written.

**Key Words:**Historiography, Moghuls Era , Glorious Past, Epic Literature, Ruling ability, administrative system.

### Statement of Problem:

*“Epic Literature is not history but is again a way of looking at the past.”*

**Prof. Romila Thapar**

The Mughal Empire ruled the South Asian region including current northern India, Pakistan, and Afghanistan from the early 16th century to the 19th century. As the name of the empire, Mughal, which means Mongol in Persian language indicates, the empire was built by a foreign tribe of Mongol origin. Babur, the progenitor of the Mughal Empire, is a direct descendant of Timur who descended from Genghis Khan.

The Mughal Empire was founded in 1526 when Babur defeated and superceded Delhi Sultanate. However, his son and successor Humayun was beaten by Sher Shah of Suri dynasty of Afghan origin and fled for Persia in 1540. In 1555, he retook Delhi and revived Mughal dynasty.

The next period from the following emperor Akbar to Jahangir, Shah Jahan, and Aurangzeb is considered as a golden age of The Mughal Empire. Akbar fired a flare of the golden age by achieving several great achievements. He largely expanded his empire by conquering Malwa Plateau (central part of India), Gujarat (western part of India), Bengal, Kashmir, Kandahar (southern part of Afghanistan), etc. Under his rule, The Mughal Empire established its centralization by organizing bureaucracy and administration. Moreover, with religiously tolerant policies such as giving government positions to Hindu, Akbar sought for solid integration within Mughal society. He announced Din-i-Ilahi, a syncretic religion which derives primarily from Islam and Hinduism, as the court religion although the religion could only get few adherents (including Abul Fazl) and disappeared.

The Mughal Empire continued to flourish both economically and culturally under the next two successors Jahangir and Shah Jahan. Prosperity passed its peak and started to decline under Aurangzeb. He achieved the largest territory



Cover Page



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throughout the history of India by conquering southern India. However, different from Akbar, he was intolerant of other religious, destroying Hindu temples, bringing a poll tax for other religions back, and forcing conversion to Islam. His uncompromising religious policies and expansionist policies enlarged resistance among his subjects and consumed a great amount of expense, threatening the cornerstone of the empire. After the death of Aurangzeb, the Mughal Empire continued to collapse. From the late 18th century, The Mughal Empire lost its effective control over India to the British. As the British East India Company took power of the Mughal Empire in 1805, Mughal emperors existed for only nominal ruler used for colonial domination. In 1857, Sepoy Mutiny rose up and Indian soldiers crowned Mughal Emperor Bahadur Shah II as an emperor, but the mutiny was repressed in two years and the Mughal Empire went out of existence.

Economically, commerce and fabric industry developed and monetary economy was vitalized. The establishment of a system of a law and communication network contributed to the exuberance of the empire. Trade with foreign countries such as those in West Asia and Europe developed, developing domestic industry and introducing its goods in European market. However, economy gradually declined from the late 17th century because of the decreased agricultural productivity by acidification of land, corruption of administration, and expansionist policy.

The Mughal Empire also saw a cultural prosperity with its mixed culture. Although Islam was a dominating religion of the authority in the empire, tolerant policy in the early period led to Islamic culture fused with Hindu. In religion, Sikhism, a syncretistic religion integrating elements of Hinduism and Islam, had emerged in the 15th century and gained followership under Mughal rule, especially in the Punjab. Art, Literature, Architecture, etc, showing a blend of Hindu, Turkic and Persian culture, thrived. Mughal emperors such as Akbar, Jahangir, and Shah Jahan showed a great interest in culture and supported it. For example, the Taj Mahal, built by Shah Jahan, has a lotus pattern derived from Hindu art and spires, a mosque, arabesque from Muslim art.

The dominant and official language of the empire was Farsi (Persian), but Hindi and Urdu, a language of the elite derived from Persian and heavily influenced by Arabic and Turkic, were also widely used. Science including astronomy and technology such as gunpowder continuously developed.

### Mughal Empire – On Historian Concept

Writing history of a country is meaningful in many aspects. For great leaders of a country, history can be used as a mean to boast of their achievement to their descendants. For future generations, historical records are useful source to trace their origins and learn from the past. In addition, since writing history is both a scholarly work which needs much academic efforts and a cultural task intended for descendants, a quality and a quantity of historical records in one country are often considered as criteria which determine the cultural level of a country.

The Mughal Empire, once an economically and culturally prosperous country, also left many historical works. It is during the Mughal dynasty when Indian historiography reached its highest point of its growth and development. Historical books written in this period are great sources from which today's people can learn the history of South Asia and some other regions such as Afghanistan.

Mughal historians were often patronized by emperors or nobles and many of them had other original occupations such as courtiers under emperors, or poets, scholars. For example, Abul Fazl (Abu al-Fazl), the author of *Akbarnamah*, was a close vizier of Emperor Akbar. Similarly, Jawhar Aftabi, the writer of *Sah Jahannamah*, was an intimate friend of Shah Jahan. Mir Masoom Shah Bakhri (Mir Muhammad Masum), who wrote *Tarih-i Sind*, did his service under Akbar. Nimat Allah al-Harawi (Nimat-Allah ibn Habib-Allah Haravi), although he served Khan Jahan Lodi later, was a historian under Jahangir. Those historians were encouraged to write history of emperors themselves or history of the past including not only Mughal history but also history of other ethnicities. For example, Abbas Khan Sarvani (Abbas Han Sarvani), written at the request of Akbar, wrote history of Sher Shah in *Tuhfah-yi Akbar Sahi* (A Gift to Akbar Saha), a sultan of Suri Dynasty, who ruled South Asia from 1540 to 1545 when The Mughal Empire retreated. Sayh Rizq-Allah ibn Sad Allah Dihlavi in the name of Mustaqi wrote *Vaqiat-i Mustaqi* which contains the Afghan sultan.



Cover Page



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Some emperors who were learned themselves even wrote history by themselves. The founder of the Mughal Empire Babur wrote his autobiography *Vaqiat-i Baburi*. Jahangir, the fourth emperor, also wrote his autobiographical memoir called *Tuzuk-i Jahangiri*. In addition, Gulbadan Bigam, the daughter of Emperor Babur, wrote *Humayunnamah* which is an account of her brother, Humayun.

While in the earlier period of Mughal dynasty historians are often under the service of emperors, in the latter period during which the Mughal Empire declined, historians often served local government or East Indian Company. Although there were also historians serving local government in the earlier periods, there are less famous historians who served the emperors during the declining period of Mughal dynasty. For instance, Muhammad Ali-ibn-Muhammad Burhanpuri was a historian supported by the governor of Oudh and Muhammad Ali Han Ansari served the deputy governor of Bengal during the reign of Mughal ruler Shah Alam II in the 18th century. Hayr-al-Din Muhammad Ilahabadi and Gulam Husayn Zaydpuri are historians who were employed in the East India Company. Gulam Basit is a historian whose ancestors had been in the service of the Mughal Empire, tried to enter the service of the empire and who himself tried to serve the empire. However, in the periods of decline of the empire, he sought for employment under English who supported him greatly. Additionally, writing a historical book was often a cooperated work done by many different writers but led by one chief writer.

### Sources of Mughal Historians

There were several ways in which Mughal historians could get sources to write historical works. Sometimes, one's direct experience became a primary source of a historian. The autobiography written by Babur, *Vaqiat-i Baburi*, the memoir of Gulbadan Bigam, *Humayun-namah*, and Jawhar Aftabci's *Tazkirah al-vaqiat*, which gives an account of Humayun, are examples which use historians' personal observations.

Many other historians seem to have depended on existing written sources. For example, when Abul Fazl wrote *Akbar-namah*, he used Sanskrit texts and knowledge system which he could have accessed through intermediaries, likely Jains favored during Akbar's reign to access Indian knowledge of geography, cosmography, etc. Hwajah Nizam al-Din Ahmad ibn Muhammad Muqim Haravi, when he wrote *Tabaqat-i Akbari*, a celebrated history book which for the first time deals with the history of India, cited twenty-nine authorities. *Tabaqat-i Akbari* itself became the major historical sources which later historians copiously extracted from and relied on. Muhammad Tahir Asna, the author of *Sah Jahan-namah*, relied on *Padsah-namah* by Abd al-Hamid Lahuri when he wrote about the first twenty years of the rule of Shah Jahan. It seems that there existed plenty of historical collections made by the authority; when Muhammad Kazim ibn Muhammad Amin wrote about Aurangzeb, he was permitted to use the Royal Records guarded by officers. It seems that with few sources of history, some historians sometimes relied on their guess.

### Reasons for Historical Record-Keeping

Surely, pure scholarly interest would be one of the reasons why Mughal historians wrote history books. However, there existed other reasons which made Mughal historians want to write history.

Loyalty to their patrons was one major reason of historical work. Historians, often serving under emperors or authority, wrote history dedicated to them. It is possible to find several major historical books which starts with the name of the emperor and ends in *namah* such as *Akbar-namah*, written by Abul Fazl, also referred to as *Sah Jahan namah*, written by Muhammad Salih Kanbu Lahuri, *Alamgir-namah* (The Book of Awrangzib) written by Muhammad Kazim ibn Muhammad Amin, *Sah Jahan-namah* written by Muhammad Tahir, *Humayun-namah* written by Hwandamir, Giya al-Din ibn Humam al-Din, etc. These works, as their names indicate, are dedicated to the emperors and mostly dealt with the accounts related to the emperors. Historical books were also written at the direct request of the patrons. *Tuhfah-yi Akbar Sahi* (A Gift to Akbar Saha) by Abbas Khan Sarvani (Abbas Han Sarvani) was made at the request of Akbar.

Abdul Hamid Lahori (Abd al-Hamid Lahuri)'s *Padshahnama* was written at the request of Shah Jahan. A historian in the



Cover Page



DOI: <http://ijmer.in.doi./2022/11.02.80.1>

period of decline of the Mughal Empire, Mirza Abu Talib Han Isfahani wrote *Tafzih al-gafilin* as Captain Richardson of the East India Company asked Talib to write a history of the time of Asaf al-Dawlah. Some history books are written because of the historians' individual interest such as in *Tarih-i salatin-i Afaginah*, which is about a history of the Lodi and Afghan dynasties, written by Ahmad Yadgar who claim he was a servant and witness to the last days of the Afghan kings in Bengal and *Tarih-i Sind* (the history of Sind) by Mir Muhammad Ma who was a native of Sind.

### Establishment of the Mughal Empire (1526-1556)

One of the earliest historical works during the Mughal Dynasty is probably the autobiography of the emperor Babur *Vaqiat-i Baburi* (The Events of Babur) which extends to 1529 before his death in 1530. Originally written in Turkic and later translated into Persian during his term, his autobiography takes an important position in the early Mughal Historiography. Babur, a learned and precise man as well as a great politician, shows detailed and faithful but simple description of his history in his autobiography. He uses bountiful statistical accounts; his description of Hindustan for example, "contains, not only an exact account of its boundaries, population, resources, revenues, and divisions, but a full enumeration of all its useful fruits, trees, birds, beasts, and fishes, with such a minute description of their several habitudes and peculiarities as would make no contemptible figure in a modern work of natural history." His accurate and close records provide us with important knowledge of the political, social, and cultural situations of The Mughal Empire in the first quarter of the 16th century. A details account on Baburnama is dealt here in a separate section.

Another historical account of Babur made in this period is *Tabaqat-i Baburi* (Generations of Babur) by Sayh Zayn al-Din Hwafi. Work of Shaikh Zain, Babur's secretary, which describes Babur's fifth invasion of Hindustan, is contrasted to Babur's autobiography in that his work lacks simplicity and intelligent style found in Babur's but is rather pretentious. *Tabaqat-i Baburi* is not as detailed as *Vaqiat-i Baburi* but more descriptive and dramatic as seen in "The shrill blast of the clarion of destruction, and a scene like that of the day of judgment, full of awful and tremendous strife, now operating together, the meaning of the text, 'When the heavens shall be rent,' became manifest; and the heads of the leaders of the armies of the time, like shooting-stars falling from the sky, fell like balls in the arena, and the meaning of the words, 'The stars shall be scattered,' became apparent" which describes Babur's victorious defeat of enemies. *Humayun-namah* completed in 1534-1535 by Hwandamir, Giya al-Din ibn Humam al- Din Muhammad, is an account of a cultural and social condition of Humayun's reign. Especially, his work is marked by the account of rules and ordinances made under Humayun, and poems.

### Period of Prosperity (1556-1707)

#### Akbar (1556-1605)

Gulbadan Bigam, as a daughter of Babur and a sister of Humayun, gives a direct account of Humayun in *Humayunnamah* which was requested by Akbar. Since she was in a royal family herself, she narrates the history in a personal voice.

"At the time when his Majesty Firdaus-makani passed from this perishable world to the everlasting home, I, this lowly one, was eight years old, so it may well be that I do not remember much. However, in obedience to the royal command, I set down whatever there is that I have heard and remember."

"At these words hearers and onlookers wept and lamented. His own blessed eyes also filled with tears."

As shown in the above quotes, her narrative style is quite emotional. She does not include much political information but she gives a detail account of what happened within her royal family.

Abul Fazl's *Akbarnamah*, considered one of the monumental historical works in the Mughal historiography, contains history from Timur, ancestors of Akbar, to Akbar's reign. Originally added with a number of painting related to the texts, the book helps the understanding of history with visual. It consists of three volumes: the first deals with the history of Timur's family, Babur, Humayun and the Suri sultans of Delhi, the second is about the history of the reign of Akbar till 1602, and the third gives a detailed description of the political, economic, geographical conditions of the Mughal Empire. He also gives bountiful information about other philosophies or religions. Though he relates Hinduism in the view of



Cover Page



DOI: <http://ijmer.in.doi./2022/11.02.80.1>

Muslim, he shows relatively more rational and secular approach and tries to explain the history of India not as the conflict between religions but as the conflict "between forces of nationalism and regionalism, secularism and religious fanaticism, stability and disintegration", which makes him a great historian of his age.

Another significant historical work written in similar period is *Tabaqat-i-Akbari* (Generations of Akbar) written by Hwajah Nizam al-Din Ahmad ibn Muhammad Muqim Haravi. It is the first general history whose subject matter is solely on the history of India. The Ma-asiru-l Umara says, "This work cost the author much care and reflection in ascertaining facts and collecting materials, and as Mir Masum Bhakari and other persons of note afforded their assistance in the compilation, it is entitled too much credit. It is the first history which contains a detailed account of all the Muhammadan princes of Hindustan. ... From this work Muhammad Kasim Firishta and others have copiously extracted, and it forms the basis of their histories, deficiencies being supplied by additions of their own; but the Tabakat occasionally seems at variance with the accounts given by the celebrated Abu-l Fazl. It is therefore left to the reader to decide which of the two authors is most entitled to credit." According to above quote, it seems that the author could produce celebrated standard history of India which is based on strict historical research. With its special focus and historical value, *Tabaqat-i Akbari* is considered one of the greatest works which largely influenced the future generations.

### Jahangir (1605-1628)

In this period, another autobiography of emperors, after Babur's, was written by Jahangir. Jahangir's *Tuzuk-i Jahangiri* (The Memoir of Jahangir) is also considered important historical source with its lively and comprehensive record of the political and socio-cultural developments in the 17th century and supplement to *Akbarnama* written by Abul Fazl. Although Jahangir's memoir provides relatively frank and honest description of wars, rebellions, imperial regulations and the emperor's daily life, its literary value, objectivity, and historical value are less than his forefather, Babur. His account of himself has an implicit tendency to highlight his achievement or gloss over his faults such as his rebellion against his father. However, just like Babur's, Jahangir's autobiography has its value in that it provides faithful account of others including his father Akbar.

### Shah Jahan (1628-1658)

*Ma-asir-i Jahangiri* (Literary Works about Jahangir) written by Kamgar Husayni, who served both Jahangir and Shah Jahan, is an account of early life and reign of Jahangir completed in 1640-1641. It does not have much detailed descriptions and its description on the period before Jahangir's rule is thought as very independent and free-spoken compared to contemporary historical work on similar subject, *Ikbāl-nama* by Nawab Mutamad Khan which was made for Imperial favour. Nevertheless, it still has much flattery to the emperor and hides his misdeeds.

*Padsahnamah* (The Book of Kings) is a work led by Abdul-Hamid Lahuri who completed his part in 1648 on the request of the emperor and finished later by his pupil. With a minute detail and beautiful illustrations, *Padsahnamah* is a major source of information about the Shah Jahan's rule which describes imperial lifestyle vividly. A notable aspect about the author Abdul-Hamid Lahuri's description is that the author adopted styles of Abul Fazl very much. The author, who studied and greatly admired Abul Fazl, in fact states himself as an imitator of Abul Fazl's style and use verbose, turgid description if asked eloquence. However, when he describes simple facts, he uses simple language. His work also contains lots of information about the nobles and courtiers of the time, which were not a commonly dealt historical matter. Later historians drew historical sources related to nobles from his work.

### Aurangzeb (1658-1707)

*Sah Jahannamah* (The Book of Shah Jahan) was written by Muhammad Tahir "Asna" deals with the reign of Shah Jahan. In the preface, the author reveals the purpose of his works. "it seemed to the writer of these pages that, as he and his ancestors had been devoted servants of the Imperial dynasty, it would be well for him to write the history of the reign of Shah Jahan in a simple and clear style, and to reproduce the contents of the three volumes of Shaikh Abdu-l Hamid in



Cover Page



DOI: <http://ijmer.in.doi./2022/11.02.80.1>

plain language and in a condensed form."

As the description of *Padsahnamah* by Abdul-Hamid Lahuri is verbose, he states that he gave a more simple and reduced account of Shah Jahan. He also mentions, "And as only a selection has been made of the events recorded, this work is styled *Mulakhkhas* (abridgement)". As the historian himself indicates in previous quote, *Sah Jahan-namah* gives a simple account of Shah Jahan, though maybe a summarized history.

*Alamgirnamah* (The Book of Aurangzeb) by Muhammad Kazim ibn Muhammad Amin is a typical historical work dedicated to the emperor Aurangzeb, full of panegyrics. With great support from the emperor himself, Muhammad Kazim ibn Muhammad Amin was encouraged to collect extraordinary events related to the emperor, use any available sources, and ask any questions about omitted information even to the emperor himself. Because of its nature of purpose of the works, *Alamgirnamah* has a panegyric, verbose, and strained style.

Sujan Ray Bhandari's *Hulasah-al-tavarih* (Summary of Histories) is concerned with a general history of India from the earliest times to the accession of Aurangzeb. His work includes a good account of the products and geography of Hindustan. As the name implies, the author tends to condense history to a great extent that he does not include much details. However, his work sometimes shows poetical remarks and unnecessary digression. He gives abundant account of the first four Mughal Emperors but does not give separate history of other monarchies of India, about which he gives only brief information of each king. In his narrative of the history, he includes many verses some extracted from various authors, and some to be original.

### **Decline of the Mughal Empire (1707-1857): Bahadur Shah I to Bahadur Shah II**

*Burhan al-futut* (The Demonstration of Victories) by Muhammad Ali ibn Muhammad Sadiq Husayni Nisaburi Najafi Burhanpuri is a short general history of India. It is considered as a very useful book of reference as it shows close attention to dates, though it is too short. The *History of Hindustan* by Rustam Ali *Sahabadi Tarih-i* is another Mughal historical work which deals with the history of India. Divided into ten chapters, this work provides much information about Muhammad Shah and the contemporary poets of the author. There are poetical quotations, sentences from Koran, and moral reflection in his work. His work, different from previous Mughal historical works, provides direct and critical evaluations on Mughal emperors. Followings are parts of his work about a Mughal emperor: "This Prince was a lover of pleasure and indolence, negligent of political duties, and addicted to loose habits, but of somewhat a generous disposition. He was entirely careless regarding his subjects."

"to the great mortification of poor people and all good subjects, the Emperor became master of his own will, and, actuated by his youthful passions and folly and pride, resigned himself to frivolous pursuits and the company of wicked and mean characters."

*Tarih-i mamalik-i Hind* (The History of the Lands of Hindustan), written when the Mughal dynasty met its decline, is a short history of rulers of India by Gulam Basir. Requested by General Charles Burt to write a short account of the rulers of Hindustan based on books and oral traditions, the author produced brief historical accounts with the help of his father, who was also a historian. He not only gives information about the rulers of different regions in India but also includes cultural or social elements such as customs, religions, classes, etc.

*Tarih-i Ibrahim Han* by Ali Ibrahim Han Bahadur Nasir-Jang Azimabadi written in the late 18th century is a history of the Maratha's campaign for the control of the Mughal Empire. The author, who served the Nawab of Bengal, gives a clear and succinct account of the Marathas in his work. He describes the failure of the Mughal Empire in subverting the Maratha objectively and lucidly.

Sarup Cand Hattri's *Sahih al-Ahbar* (Owner of Notices) is another general history of India extended to the author's time. He gives the reason of his work in the following quote:



Cover Page



DOI: <http://ijmer.in.doi./2022/11.02.80.1>

"It is owing to the curiosity and perseverance of the English that the tree of knowledge is planted anew in this country; and it is also to the inquisitive spirit of that people, and particularly to the zeal and liberality of Sir John Shore, Governor-General of India, that I, an old servant of the State, am favoured with the honour of compiling a work on the History of the Hindus, together with an explanation of the names of days, months, years and eras; the reigns of the Kings of Dehli, with an explanation of the words raja, zamindar, chaudhari, taallukdar, hawaladar, and the mode of administration, both ancient and modern, together with the names of the subadars of Bengal and the revenue and political affairs of the province."

As the above quote about the purpose of his writing indicates, his work contains fair definitions of revenue terms, and explains administration systems and political affairs of the Empire for English.

### Other Significant Aspects

One noticeable aspect seen in many Mughal historical works is that they include lots of verses while narrating the history. They could be either from already existing poems or authors themselves. Here is a description of Sujan Ray Bhandari's *Hulasah al-tavarih* (Summary of Histories) in the History of India by Sir Henry Elliot. "Many verses, some said to be original, and some extracted from various authors, are inserted in different passages of the narrative, to which they were considered appropriate." Sometimes, they were from Koran. It is thought that through verses, Mughal historians may have wanted to give vivid and beautiful description of history to readers. The fact that many Mughal historians were also poets must have contributed to this aspect. Although limited to only small number of historical works, beautiful paintings or illustrations which support narratives in *Akbarnamah* and *Padsahnamah* are what appreciate values of those historical works. Such visual methods must have helped readers to get the sense of history much more easily and contributed to the fame of those two works. With such various methods to deliver history, Mughal historians may have wanted to accomplish both historical and artistic achievements while narrating the history as easily as possible.

### Conclusion

In accordance with flourishing The Mughal Empire, historical works by Mughal historians also were abundant and impressive. Under the patronage of either emperors or local government, early historians such as Abul Fazl who wrote *Akbarnamah* and Hwajah Nizam al- Din Ahmad ibn Muhammad Muqim Haravi who worked on *Taqat-i-Akbari* left great expectations which enable later historians to work on other great histories and become the base of current knowledge of the history of India. A wide range of subject matters which include ancestors of Mughal emperors, Mughal nobles, independent countries, geography, governmental systems, religions, and many others in India, Mughal historiography is truly respectable. Although some historical works contain a great deal of flattery to authority and religious prejudice, such aspects are also common in other countries and many other historical works try to show relatively detailed and verified history cited by various historical sources. Moreover, it is interesting to read historical accounts in literary language and with visual materials. The Mughal Empire, one of the most prosperous empires in South Asian territory, probably owes its fame partly to the efforts of its great historians.

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Cover Page



DOI: <http://ijmer.in.doi./2022/11.02.80.1>

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