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THE KING AND THE PEOPLE

Sovereignty and Popular Politics in Mughal Delhi

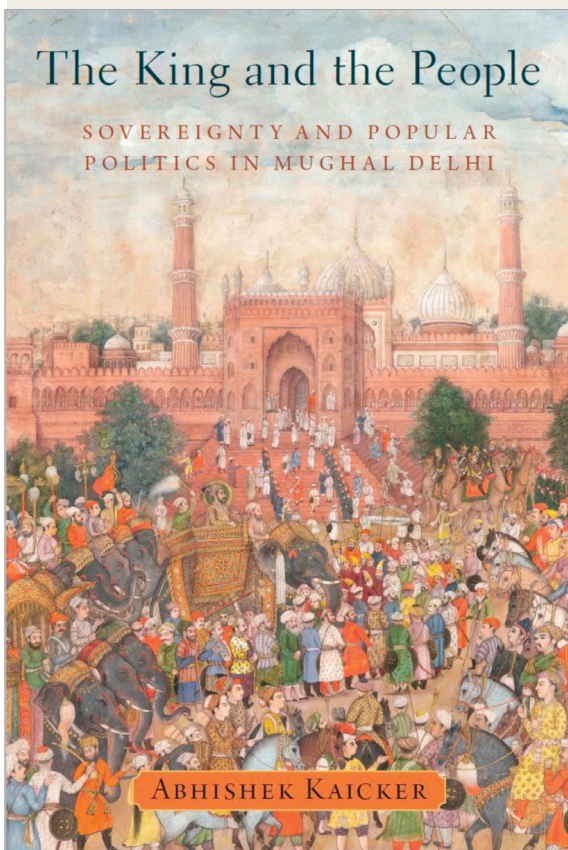
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An original exploration of the relationship between the Mughal emperor and his subjects in the space of the Mughal empire's capital, *The King and the People* overturns an axiomatic assumption in the history of premodern South Asia: that the urban masses were merely passive objects of rule and remained unable to express collective political aspirations until the coming of colonialism. Set in the Mughal capital of Shahjahanabad (Delhi) from its founding to Nadir Shah's devastating invasion of 1739, this book instead shows how the trends and events in the second half of the seventeenth century inadvertently set the stage for the emergence of the people as actors in a regime which saw them only as the ruled.

Drawing on a wealth of sources from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, this book is the first comprehensive account of the dynamic relationship between ruling authority and its urban subjects in an era that until recently was seen as one of only decline. By placing ordinary people at the centre of its narrative, this wide-ranging work offers fresh perspectives on imperial sovereignty, on the rise of an urban culture of political satire, and on the place of the practices of faith in the work of everyday politics. It unveils a formerly invisible urban panorama of soldiers and poets, merchants and shoemakers, who lived and died in the shadow of the Red Fort during an era of both dizzying turmoil and heady possibilities.

As much an account of politics and ideas as a history of the city and its people, this lively and lucid book will be equally of value for specialists, students, and lay readers interested in the lives and ambitions of the mass of ordinary inhabitants of India's historic capital three hundred years ago.



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



ABHISHEK KAICKER is Assistant Professor of History at UC Berkeley. He is an historian of Persianate South Asia (c. 1200-1900) with expertise in the history of the Mughal empire. He is interested in questions of intellectual history and the history of concepts; early modern global history; religion, politics and the city; and more generally in the continuities between precolonial and postcolonial south Asia. Prof. Kaicker is engaged in two new major research projects: one, a prehistory of the British conquest of Bengal in 1757 from the perspective of the Mughal empire; and another on the transformation of Mughal modes of popular politics into modern modes of communalism in North India under colonial rule in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Together with Asad Ahmed (Berkeley) and Lawrence McCrea (Cornell), he is an editor of the *Journal of South Asian Intellectual History*, a new peer-reviewed venue for emerging conversations on the intellectual history and culture of premodern South Asia.

PRAISE FOR THE BOOK

The King and the People offers an invaluable story of the intersection of popular politics and Mughal sovereignty in the city of Delhi between the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Complex, insightful, and drawing on little known Persian-language materials, this book will inform and excite specialists of South Asian history as well as early-modern world historians. Engagingly written and filled with colorful characters and anecdotes, this book will also delight lay readers.

— Munis D. Faruqi, Associate Professor of South and Southeast Asian Studies, UC Berkeley

A strikingly original and extraordinarily vivid account of the making and unmaking of Mughal sovereignty through centuries of power and poetry, regicide and revolution. Crucial to Kaicker's narrative is the emerging voice of ordinary people in Mughal history, one that both dooms and yet paradoxically preserves it for posterity.

— Faisal Devji, Professor of Indian History, University of Oxford

INTRODUCTION

Seeing the People

pages offer, by way of introduction, an argument to the contrary. While premodern urbanites in South Asia have received little historical attention, the common people of the city of Delhi—regarded as little better than animals by the imperial elite—nevertheless emerged as subjects in a regime that had no conception of their place in politics. Offering an analysis of the evolving relation between sovereignty and popular politics in the period, this book lays out in the starkest terms the heretofore-unrevealed potential of Delhi's urbanites for concerted action in extraordinary circumstances. This introduction sets the stage in precolonial India and outlines the subjects of each of the book's seven chapters.

That the ordinary people were merely the passive objects of sovereign authority has long served as a chief axiom in the study of precolonial India. The following

CHAPTER 1

ANATOMY OF A MASSACRE

Nadir Shah in Delhi, 1739

Nadir Shah's brief time in Delhi is remembered for his sanguinary massacre of the city's inhabitants, this chapter demonstrates that Nadir Shah's violence was driven by a forgotten but large-scale popular uprising against his troops. Through a close analysis of the uprising and its aftermath, this chapter shows that by 1739, elites and commoners in Delhi had developed divergent views about Mughal kingship: While the nobility were happy to cooperate with Nadir Shah, the ordinary people of the city would not consent

In 1739, the Iranian ruler Nadir Shah spearheaded a rapid invasion of the Mughal realm, which culminated with his occupation of the Mughal capital of Shahjahanabad (Delhi) and the extraction of a vast tribute from the Mughal king Muhammad Shah and his nobles. While

to any ruler other than their own.

CHAPTER 2

SOVEREIGNTY, CITY, AND THE PEOPLE

city of Shahjahanabad was an enunciation of the discourse of sovereignty in bricks and mortar. A site of imperial power, Islamic piety, commercial prosperity, and urbane pleasure, the city was built to mediate an idealized relation between the king and the people. The second part of this chapter traces the unintended consequences of this act: the growth of a prosperous city, in which the forces of commerce caused the rise of new elites and the growth of a large and unruly underclass.

In 1638 the Mughal emperor Shah Jahan embarked on his most ambitious architectural project: the building of a new Delhi in his own name. Beginning with a discussion of the development of a distinctly Mughal discourse of sovereignty centered on an ideal of the ruler's heaven-granted fortune to rule (daulat), this chapter shows how the new

CHAPTER 3

POETRY AND THE PUBLIC IN AURANGZEB'S DELHI

the law (sharia). This process, which was accompanied by an increasing emphasis on Sunni piety at court and the broader development of a bureaucratic juridical infrastructure for the empire, was designed to subordinate the realm's many Muslim communities into a unitary 'Community of Muslims' obedient to the emperor. But such interventions in Mughal society would also provoke a critical response, couched in the language of satire, and is apparent in the works of the poets Nimat Khan-i Ali and Mir Jafar Zatali, which are compared here. More broadly, this chapter argues, the forces of commercialization powered the circulation of the practices of satirical poetry between courtly assemblies and the wider world of the city, shaping an urban domain of public criticism that lay outside the control of imperial authority.

In 1658, the emperor Aurangzeb began his long reign on the Mughal throne. This chapter shows how Aurangzeb's vision of sovereignty diverged from that of his predecessors, in lessening the emphasis on the otherworldly gift of daulat and more on adherence with

CHAPTER 4

AURANGZEB'S LAW AND POPULAR POLITICS

The discourse of sovereignty enunciated at the Mughal court had no place for the participation of its subjects. Yet, by the early eighteenth century, political protests had become visible in the cities of the empire across the historical record. How did this come to be? This chapter shows how Aurangzeb's

discourse of sovereignty privileging of the application of law (sharia) set the terms of the relationship between the king and his subjects. While such legal intervention was designed to impose discipline on a society populated by unruly elites and commoners, an unintended consequence was the creation of new avenues through which urban communities engaged the state: Whether around questions of “justice” in urban disputes, or protests against the prices of food, or the imposition of the poll tax, the people of the empire’s cities began to increasingly demonstrate a capacity to challenge the king in the terms of his own discourse of sovereignty.

CHAPTER 5

DAULAT’S FLIGHT

Regicide and the Popular Intervention, 1719

violence against the kingly body shook the established ideals of imperial authority. The regicide was understood, explained, debated, and justified in the admonitory histories that were written by observers of this moment of crisis, who vainly struggled to establish a new ideal of sovereignty. Yet the king and his nobility were not the only actors in this drama. For, as this chapter demonstrates, this convulsion of politics at the highest levels of the empire witnessed the forceful intervention of a new actor: the people of the city. While the popular action was dismissed by elite observers, these pages demonstrate how the city’s ordinary folk rejected the attempt by the nobility to change the structure of power.

In 1719, a group of high noblemen from the clan of the Sayyids of Barha deposed the Mughal ruler Farrukh Siyar and replaced him with another prince. Such an act of unprecedented

CHAPTER 6

ISLAM AS A LANGUAGE OF POPULAR POLITICS

protests appeared to have become an integral part of urban life in Delhi. This chapter shows how such tumults of the city marked acts of everyday political assertion by ordinary people. Relying on the gestures and practices of Islam to publicly demand “justice” in the face of “oppression,” such protests appropriated the ideal of the ‘Community of Muslims’ for their own ends. Accordingly this chapter examines a central gesture in such political protests: the popular interruption of the Friday sermon. Although it emerged in a moment of sectarian controversy in 1711, the act of interrupting the Friday sermon quickly came to serve as the key symbolic means by which the people challenged the enunciation of imperial sovereignty when it did not lend its support to them.

By the 1720s, disorderly gatherings and

CHAPTER 7

THE SHOEMAKERS’ RIOT AND THE LIMITS OF POPULAR POLITICS

urban tumult that led to fierce fighting and much bloodshed in the courtyard of the city’s congregational mosque. Offering a detailed study of the shoemakers’ riot, as the event came to be known, this chapter explores the possibilities—and the limits—of everyday popular politics in the Delhi of the early eighteenth century. Despite their artifactual nature, accounts of the riot offer invaluable insight into the actions and intentions of the city’s lowest inhabitants at a moment of urban crisis, and the goal of the historical reconstruction in this chapter will be to illuminate the tangled happenings of March 1729, while still preserving the multiplicity of meanings assigned to them. The shoemakers’ agitation cannot be neatly subsumed into the standard categories of economic conflict or sectarian hatred that have given us the conventional understanding of the period. Instead of closing the meanings of the event in narratives of “larger significance,” this chapter attempts to behold the city of the eighteenth century from the eyes of the shoemaker.

EPILOGUE

The dynamic relation between enunciations of sovereignty and the rise of a popular politics that emerged over the course of the Mughal empire’s history was disrupted in the years after Nadir Shah’s invasion of 1739. Yet, even as the empire was reduced to a purely nominal entity, both the visions of sovereignty it engendered and the popular politics it enabled would persist for much longer. These concluding pages sketch the longer life of both conceptions of sovereignty and the workings of a popular politics, tracing their final manifestation in the great revolt of 1857.

PRAISE FOR THE BOOK

The King and the People is an exemplary exploration of the relationship between the Mughal emperor and his subjects in the empire’s newly-built capital, Shahjahanbad. Spanning a period of a hundred years, Kaicker tells an enthralling story of how trends and events in the second half of the seventeenth century inadvertently set the stage for the emergence of the people as actors in a regime which saw them only as the ruled. A major intervention in the field of state sovereignty and popular politics.

— Shahid Amin, Delhi University

In describing how people woke from a powerful fantasy about the omnipotence and sacrality of Mughal rule to start asserting themselves as a political force in the eighteenth century, Abhishek Kaicker’s extraordinary and beautifully crafted book conjures up the often cacophonous voices of Mughal Delhi, both Hindu and Muslim, as they worked out their complicated allegiances to sovereign, city, family, and faith.

— Samira Sheikh, Associate Professor of History and Asian Studies, Vanderbilt University

The Institute for South Asia Studies (ISAS) at the University of California, Berkeley, one of the world's foremost institutes for research and programs on South Asia, works with faculty members, graduate students, community members, private institutions, and non-profit organizations to both deepen understanding of the region and create new generations of scholars of South Asia. South Asia Research Notes (SARN) is published by ISAS to promote dialogue and exchange between scholars who work in interdisciplinary fields related to South Asia, as well as to convey to the wider public the variety of exciting projects going on at Berkeley. It is published annually every Spring. Its e-version is available at southasia.berkeley.edu/publications.

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