



Frontispiece The Mughal empire, 1526 to 1707
 Source: F. Robinson, *Atlas of the Islamic World since 1500* (Oxford, 1982), p. 59.

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The Mughal Empire

JOHN F. RICHARDS

PROFESSOR OF HISTORY, DUKE UNIVERSITY



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Dedicated to the memory of my mother

ELLA HIGGINS RICHARDS

1908-1990

CHAPTER 3

AUTOCRATIC CENTRALISM

Buoyed by conquest and plunder, Akbar and his advisers built a centralizing administration capable of steady expansion as new provinces were added to the empire. The Mughal emperor presided over a system that moved money, commodities, men, and information freely throughout the empire. The emperor and his advisers were vigorous managers who creatively adapted and responded to changing circumstances. Building on this foundation, Akbar's successors oversaw steady growth in imperial effectiveness, power, and resources throughout the seventeenth century.

Akbar drew upon the rich Persian-derived administrative tradition of the Indo-Muslim states and the hard-edged, extraction-oriented, organizational tradition of the Turkic-Mongol conquest empires from the steppe. Within this context the emperor shaped a vertebrate structure characterized by centralized, hierarchical, bureaucratic offices. Filling these offices were technically qualified officials, functioning within standardized rules and procedures, who generated copious written orders and records. At the apex of this system the emperor acted as a vigorous and informed chief executive.

The first critical step occurred when Akbar allowed the position of chief minister or *vakil* to lapse and gathered all executive power in his hands. Thereafter he appointed four nearly co-equal central ministers. These officers occasionally came together as an advisory body, but they were in fact independent of each other within their own spheres. Their responsibilities were divided according to the most basic administrative functions as perceived by the emperor: finance and revenue; army and intelligence; the judiciary and religious patronage; and the royal household, with its central workshops, and buildings, and roads, and canals throughout the empire. Any omitted functions were left to the emperor and specially appointed officers. Thus, diplomacy and external affairs, often placed under a minister in charge of the chancery or official correspondence in earlier Muslim states, stayed under the emperor's personal control. These ministers and their higher-ranking assistants and specialized officers were drawn from the

body of imperial servants or *mansabdars*. Each branch maintained a large support staff of clerks, accountants, auditors, messengers, and other functionaries.

The division of functions established at the center was duplicated in the provinces. At each provincial capital a governor, responsible directly to the emperor, shared power with a fiscal officer or *diwan* reporting to the *wazir*; military paymaster and intelligence officer or *bakhshi*, reporting to the central inspector general of the army; and a *sadr* reporting to the minister for religious and charitable patronage. The governor was responsible for the overall peace, security, and tranquillity of his province. In this capacity he supervised the military intendants or *faujdars* and the commanders of military check points (*thanas*) who were deployed with contingents of heavy cavalry and musketeers throughout each province. The provincial *diwan* managed imperial revenues, expenditures, and the provincial treasuries. The separation of powers between the governor and *diwan* was an especially significant operating principle for imperial administration.

THE MUGHAL NOBILITY

Cutting across this bureaucratic structure was another, more diffuse institution. The emperor commanded the services of a body of warrior-aristocrats comprised of the mature royal princes and several hundred amirs (nobles) and higher ranking *mansabdars*. These officers served as provincial governors or filled other higher administrative positions throughout the empire. Alternatively they were employed as military commanders for armies in the field or as part of the central military. In their military capacity amirs or *mansabdars* also served as commanders of strategic fortresses reporting directly to the emperor. Paid lavishly, these grandees headed households and troop contingents ranging in size from several hundred to several thousand persons. When transferred from one posting to another, their establishments moved with them. The imperial system depended heavily upon the martial qualities, administrative skills and political and entrepreneurial strengths of this body. From this perspective one might well term the empire a "patrimonial-bureaucratic" system.¹

Members of this cadre and their privately employed officers and

¹ Stephen P. Blake, "The Patrimonial-Bureaucratic Empire of the Mughals", *Journal of Asian Studies*, 39 (November, 1979), 77-94.

servants carried out other major administrative tasks. Acting as military commanders the nobles recruited, trained, and equipped the bulk of the heavy cavalry which formed the main striking arm of the Timurid armies. They employed bodies of skilled musketeers both mounted and on foot. At its core each military contingent relied on a body of closely related kinsmen and more distantly related lineage mates. Additional manpower was readily recruited by turning to the vast military labor market in northern India and the Deccan. Well trained, professional cavalrymen, infantry, and gunners were available for employers prepared to offer cash.

As recipients of jagirs or salary assignments on the land revenue the nobles filled a critical role in tax collection from the countryside. Amirs and upper mansabdars employed their own staffs to collect the greater part of the massive land tax. Some of this went to pay their own generous salaries, but the greater share went to pay cash salaries to their troopers. The organization of that considerable effort was left up to the nobles themselves. The role of the central administration was confined to inspection, monitoring, and auditing.

As we have seen, Akbar took pains to recruit his nobility from diverse sources. The Mughal nobility became and remained a heterogeneous body of free men, not slaves, who rose as their talents and the emperor's favor permitted. Rajputs, Afghans, Indian Muslims, Arabs, Persians, Uzbeks, Chaghatais were some of the ethnic groups represented. Some nobles were natives of India; many were not. Most were Sunni Muslims; many were either Shi'ite or Hindu in religion. This flow of new recruits helped to prevent the growth of dissident cliques and factions within the nobility. No single ethnic or sectarian group was large enough to challenge the emperor. Instead much of the dynamism of the empire can be traced to newly recruited, capable, energetic men who sought the power, wealth, and high reputation possible in service to the Timurid dynasty in India. The service nobility's entrepreneurial drive and spirit was of inestimable value to Akbar and his successors.

Rewards and incentives rather than force and coercion were Akbar's preferred approach. Mansabdars were free men who enlisted voluntarily in the emperor's service. Most servants, craftsmen, soldiers, professionals, and lesser imperial officers were also free workers who were well-paid for their services. Numerous domestic and personal slaves were employed, but they were outnumbered by free employees.

Apart from harem guards no military slaves served the emperor. The system offered generous money rewards as well as lavish honors and preferments to those who performed well at all levels.

Possessing great wealth and power, these grandees were highly visible public figures. Their personalities, habits, and movements were the topic of endless rumor and speculation. The greatest amirs were objects of empire-wide attention. News of royal favor or disfavor, of illnesses, heirs, marriages, postings, and other information formed the stuff of countless reports that flashed across the empire. Lesser nobles were the objects of local and regional scrutiny. At the upper reaches of imperial society merchants and rival nobles employed spies and agents to obtain reliable information from the entourages of the great men. At the lower levels, in the bazaars and coffee houses of urban India, stories and gossip, often extremely accurate, chronicled the lives of these celebrities. Sexual habits and scandalous behavior were obviously staple fare. Those nobles known to be avaricious, capricious, and cruel were widely condemned for these traits; those known to be munificent, responsible, and humane were praised.

Wherever they were posted, whether at court or in the provinces, the patrimonial households of the nobles were a focal point for aristocratic life and culture. To the extent his resources permitted, each nobleman emulated the style, etiquette, and opulence of the emperor. Each held near-daily audiences or *durbars*, essentially public events, seated on his elevated cushion in the royal style, in which all manner of business was conducted. Officers and staff were publicly commended or rebuked for their performance. Supplicants and visitors, who surmounted the barriers imposed by the nobleman's officers, appeared in front of the great man to seek his favors or good will. As great men do who dispose of vast resources, nobles turned their attention to patronage. Artists and craftsmen found lucrative employment and presented their products to their patron in his audience hall. Noble households were the setting for lavish banquets and other gatherings where the male guests were offered a wide variety of music, dance, poetry, or other entertainments. For some nobles such occasions were the venue for poetry recitations; for some wine and opium were the main attractions.

Noble households were divided into the external, more public areas dominated by men and the interior, secluded space reserved for women. Behind the stone screens of the harem quarters was a domestic world with its celebration of births, marriages, and deaths, religious

festivals, and social occasions. The wives, concubines, and female relatives of the master were ranked by seniority, blood ties, and favor in a strictly prescribed hierarchy. Hundreds of female maidservants, often slaves, were employed. The harem was an ordered community with its own decorum and gentility. Ideally, the harem provided a respite, a retreat for the nobleman and his closest male relatives – a retreat of grace, beauty, and order designed to refresh the males of the household.

The Mughal household was also a world of domestic slavery. Numerous male and female slaves were maintained. Their status and tasks varied from the most mundane to those requiring skill, tact, and intelligence. Younger slaves of both sexes were available for discreet sexual services to their masters or mistresses. Slave-eunuchs, usually obtained as castrated young boys from the slave markets of Bengal, moved between the external and internal life of the household. They acted as guards, servants, and often as business agents for high-born women immured in the harem. Mughal noblemen also employed slave-eunuchs as personal confidants and assistants. These favored slave-eunuchs held the utmost confidence of their masters. Not infrequently, despite official and public disapproval, such relationships involved a sexual relationship between master and slave.

In Agra, Delhi, Lahore, Burhanpur, and other major cities, the morphology of urban life was determined by the settlement patterns of the Mughal nobility. The mansions of the higher nobles were the foci for urban quarters as lesser staff and troops built houses and straw huts nearby and vendors of goods and services clustered around a dependable market. Architects and builders found permanent employment in noble entourages. Mughal officers, and, frequently, their women-folk spent large sums of money for the construction of mosques, sarais, and other buildings. Stone bridges and wells were also favorite projects. In nearly every urban center such constructions served as testimonial to the wealth and charitable impulses of these grandees.

The origins of dozens of new towns and villages throughout north India can be traced to investment by Mughal nobles in the facilities for local markets. Seen as an act of public spirit and religious merit, these emporia also served the needs of each nobleman's entourage and increased his earnings from his jagir lands. In a less benign mode, less scrupulous princes or nobles ignored imperial regulations and intervened forcefully in local markets under their jurisdiction. Using the

weight of state power they were able to buy up goods at distress prices and sell them at exorbitant monopoly rates. More entrepreneurial nobles invested their money in commercial ventures: financing traders in the long-distance trades overland or by sea. Increasingly nobles began to lease or buy mercantile vessels and try their hand at the highest level of overseas trade.

THE CORPS OF MANSABDARS

All nobles held mansabs; but all mansabdars were not nobles. Generally officers bearing personal decimal ranks of 500 zat or above ranked as nobles during Akbar's reign. By the seventeenth century nobles were officers with personal ranks of 1,000 zat and higher. Nobles and lesser-ranked officers or mansabdars filled a variety of posts, but all were required on occasion to act in a military capacity. All maintained a contingent of mounted armored troopers specified by their suwar rank. In 1595, a total of 1,823 men held mansabs and commanded a minimum of 141,053 followers serving as heavy cavalry with their own horses and equipment.² Nobles were also required to support a specified number of war horses, war elephants, and transport animals and carts on a formula based upon their personal rank.³ This obligation was separate from that specified for their troopers. Toward the end of the reign mansabdars and their followers consumed 82 percent of the total annual budget (81 millions from a total budget of 99 million rupees) of the empire for their pay and allowances.

In their military role mansabdars fell under the jurisdiction of the army minister or *mir bakhshi*. Akbar structured the duties of the office so that the army minister was not chief commander of the Mughal armies. Instead he himself directed overall strategy and assigned field commanders for specific campaigns. The chief bakhshi was responsible for recruitment, recommendations for proper rank and assignment of correct pay and allowances (in cash or assignments on the revenues) for all mansabdars appointed.

The imperial bakhshi stood in open court at the right hand of the emperor. He presented all candidates for appointment, promotion or

² Shireen Moosvi, *The Economy of the Mughal Empire c. 1595* (Delhi, 1987), pp. 214–219. Her estimate of the minimum cavalry is given in Appendix 12A. The maximum is 188,070.

³ K. K. Trivedi, "The Share of Mansabdars in State Revenue Resources: A Study of the Maintenance of Animals", *The Indian Economic and Social History Review*, 24 (1987), 411–421.

commendation in the higher ranks of the mansabdars. The imperial bakhshi's office prepared and recorded written orders of appointment and transfer bearing his ink-stamp imprint which were signed by the emperor. The bakhshi was responsible for inspections of the mansabdars and their troopers, mounts and equipment. His certification was necessary to release cash payments or jagir assignments. Failure to pass inspection meant loss of pay and allowances for any mansabdar.

Each amir headed a cluster of kinsmen, salaried troops, and even slaves. Often, the private officers of higher-ranking mansabdars, although not members of the imperial cadre, held responsible, well-paid, military and administrative positions. Some of the men attached to a nobleman, especially his close relatives, bore ranks and titles as mansabdars obtained directly from the emperor. They, in turn, commanded their own, smaller, clusters of officers and troops. Generally, his entire entourage accompanied the nobleman from post to post. Stripped of dependents and servants they formed one unit of any army in the field.

All cavalry and musketeers commanded by mansabdars were at the disposal of the emperor. All had to meet strict imperial standards. Each officer was required to ensure that his troopers were properly equipped with weapons and chain-link armor. Mounts were to be larger horses of standard Central Asian or Persian breeds – not the scrub mounts of most of the subcontinent. A specified number of the commander's troopers had to bring an additional horse to the muster to serve as a remount. Horses found acceptable were branded on the flank by the imperial mark (*dagh*).

Each mansabdar was free to recruit men of his own ethnicity and religion. Later regulations tended to codify this by stipulating that commanders might not employ more than a fixed proportion of men outside their own group (e.g. Rajputs were to primarily employ Rajputs; Indian Muslims to employ their fellows). Apart from kinsmen, each commander found experienced and proficient troops, whether mounted or foot, available for hire in any sizable town or city. It was up to the mansabdar to negotiate pay and conditions with these men. Salary payments for horsemen were usually stated and paid in cash. The imperial administration calculated the average rate of pay for each horseman at twenty silver rupees per month.⁴ But the actual salary

⁴ Moosvi, *Economy of the Mughal Empire*, p. 216.

received by the horseman varied according to the bargain struck with his employer.

The dual zat and suwar numerical ranking system formally expressed the uniformity, discipline, and cohesiveness of the corps of mansabdars. In the historical chronicles of the time nobles and higher-ranking mansabdars are invariably identified by their titles and their two-part numerical rank. Ranked nobles became reliable instruments of the imperial will. The emperor personally reviewed all changes in rank, titles, and official postings for all save the lowest ranked officers. Changes in rank could come at any time – without reference to procedure or rules. The sole criterion remained the emperor's favor. Whenever possible, high-ranking officers appeared in person to express submission to the emperor in the public audience hall of palace or camp. Petty mansabdars received written orders in the name of the emperor, relayed through the office of the *mir bakhshi*. Only the emperor could confer and change rank; and no other person held the loyalty of this corporate body.

Written rules and procedures applied to all parts of the empire and to all servants – unless exempted for some special reason. Especially effective was the discipline of daily life at the imperial court, whether at the capital or in the mobile encampment. As that careful observer Antonio Monserrate noticed:⁵

[I]n order to prevent the great nobles becoming insolent through the unchallenged enjoyment of power, the King summons [them] to court ... and gives them many imperious commands, as though they were his slaves – commands, moreover, obedience to which ill suits their exalted rank and dignity.

Rigid rituals of submission were acted out daily as the body of imperial officers stood in rows by rank-order in the public audience hall before the seated emperor. Forms of address, titles, and carefully circumscribed speech at court – even in less formal circumstances – constantly conditioned noble behavior. Nobles resident at court shared the responsibility for night and day guard of the emperor and his household. Each week a noble mounted guard in person with troops from his own contingent at the palace or in the encampment. Whether at court or on distant service, all mansabdars worried about their rank, their jagirs, and their favor with the emperor.

⁵ Monserrate, *Commentary*.

All officers were subject to assignment in any part of the empire. Akbar's nobles and mansabdars grew accustomed to frequent assignments to far distant provinces punctuated by periods of residence at the capital or at the imperial camp. The Timurid monarch aimed to divorce his imperial elite from local or regional power as much as possible. This was considerably easier to accomplish with the heterogeneous body of foreign recruits to Mughal service. Persian, Arab, Turkish, or Central Asian nobles were necessarily cut off from their native societies. They banded together with fellow countrymen, but had no direct access to home territory. Rajputs, Indian Muslims, and even Afghans (in small, but growing numbers) were a different matter. These men had multiple connections with kinsmen who controlled local domains as zamindars in the provinces. For them a policy that stressed active service outside their native regions was absolutely essential.

SALARY ASSIGNMENTS

The Mughal jagir traces its institutional lineage back to the medieval Islamic iqta or fief in India. Conquering Turkish rulers parcelled out tracts of land of varying size – some as large as a province – to be administered by their nobles and generals as the need arose. These *iqtadars* were responsible for maintaining order and collecting taxes within their domains. After meeting necessary expenses any surplus funds were to be returned to the central treasury. In theory the *iqtadars* held their fiefs at the pleasure of the ruler. In practice the dynastic shifts and political turmoil permitted iqta to remain with their holders over generations. Under the Lodis, and to a lesser extent, the Surs, the Afghan nobility held fiefs that permitted them local residence, local resources, and local identities.

Akbar's innovations reversed this trend. Unlike the iqta the jagir of the Mughals separated political and administrative responsibility from rights of tax collection. A mansabdar receiving lands in a salary assignment obtained only the right to collect the taxes assessed on that stipulated area. A jagir might consist of fields in a portion of a village; the entire lands of one or more named villages; or as much as one or even more subdistricts (parganas). The *diwan-i tan* (minister for salaries) matched assessed taxes with the specified salary and allowances of the mansabdar and issued an official jagir document in multiple copies.

Only mansabdars could hold jagirs. All other imperial staff were paid in cash. Receipt of a written assignment permitted a mansabdar to collect the taxes assessed on his lands in quarterly installments each year. Most save the lowest-ranking mansabdars sent personal agents to carry out this task on their behalf.

A jagir-holder possessed only fiscal rights stripped of rights of land-ownership, occupancy, or residence. This was not a fief. It was purely a fiscal instrument designed to meet a narrowly defined end. Only Rajput mansabdars were given more extensive rights of residence and local power within their homelands in Rajasthan. By special dispensation they received patrimonial (termed *watan*) lands as a part of the jagirs assigned them.

In theory the location of a jagir bore little relationship to the official posting or service of the holder. In practice, however, the mature system tended to assign jagirs either within or adjacent to the province of posting. *Jagirdars* frequently held more than one jagir. These were not necessarily contiguous. For example an amir of high rank might receive as many as two dozen separate jagir assignments scattered over several provinces.

The financial ministry further diluted ties between imperial officers and their assigned lands by means of frequent transfers. Deaths, transfers, promotions, and demotions in the imperial cadres necessitated continuing transfer of jagirs. Assigned lands could be transferred from one serving officer to another as often as every two to three years. But the higher ranked jagirdars tended to obtain and hold entire parganas for ten years or even more before transfer.

The financial ministry exerted strict controls over methods and levels of tax collection. Officers of the provincial diwan obtained information from the local intelligence-writer who sent near-daily reports to the provincial capital. They also relied upon complaints and petitions from aggrieved subjects to identify brutal or excessive collection of the revenues. Obviously imperfect, this system did prevent the worst abuses and kept a generally uniform standard for revenue collection in the areas under the regulation system.

The mature system of tax collection and salary payments was one of flexibility and efficiency. Some of the largest tasks of the imperial administration were thereby placed in the hands of the mansabdars themselves who were forced to become capable managers on their own behalf. The system also relied upon private agency in the form of

assistance from local moneylenders and currency dealers (*sarrafs*) who often advanced money to mansabdars pending arrival of funds from their jagirs. Local bankers also assisted jagirdars' agents to remit collections by means of private bills of exchange rather than cash shipments. The vast empire of the Timurids rested upon active central control over an essentially decentralized fiscal structure.

THE CENTRAL ARMY

The chief bakhshi generally remained in personal attendance on the emperor. He arranged for the security of the emperor's person, the imperial household, and the palace-fortress. Under Akbar, royal guard troops included over twelve thousand musketeers and several thousand more swordsmen and archers. Four to five thousand gentlemen troopers (*ahadis*) acted as household cavalry for the emperor. The bakhshi was responsible for the system by which nobles on week-long rotation personally commanded their troops on twenty-four hour guard at the emperor's palace or tents in camp.

The bakhshi and his assistants organized the sizable military units directly employed by the emperor. These included artillery men serving the central artillery park; companies of pioneers and sappers; infantry armed with matchlocks; companies of archers; handlers of war elephants and various laborers and porters. Artillery and infantry posted as permanent garrisons to strategic fortresses scattered around the empire were also the responsibility of the bakhshi. All central troops received cash salaries direct from the treasury. The army minister advanced funds against anticipated expenses to nobles designated as field commanders by the emperor. The bakhshi, in concert with the imperial fiscal minister, arranged to send treasure when needed to armies on campaign.

Provincial bakhshis, who were generally higher-ranked, but not noble, officers, conducted inspections to certify fitness for mansabdars and their contingents on duty in that province. Inadequacies turning up in the muster were penalized by partial deductions of pay and allowances, or in the case of jagirs, by claims imposed by the provincial diwan against the delinquent commander's treasury accounts.

The chief bakhshi supervised the corps of public newswriters who sent near-daily reports to provincial bakhshis from every sizable town in the empire. Secret observers reported clandestinely to the provincial

bakhshis who forwarded their observations to the center as well. News reports and important official documents travelled rapidly by imperial post. Relays of foot-runners, posted at intervals along the main roads, carried papers rolled up in bamboo containers at a rapid pace around the clock. The emperor received reports from even distant provincial capitals within a few days. The most important news reports were read out daily in the public audience hall. Agents of nobles posted outside the capital or Rajput princes and tributary rulers all assiduously copied these announcements and sent their contents by messenger back to their masters. The empire was connected by a surprisingly rapid information loop for public news.

IMPERIAL FISCAL ADMINISTRATION

Rapid imperial expansion meant that growing revenues from plunder, tribute and taxation poured into the imperial treasuries every year. The imperial finance minister, the wazir or *diwan-i kul*, was responsible for all revenues, the treasury system, the mints and currency, and, directly or indirectly, all expenditures. The first wazir under Akbar was Muzaffar Khan, who had been serving as chief fiscal officer of the imperial household when he became imperial diwan. Towards the latter part of Muzaffar Khan's eight-year term a small group of extraordinarily talented financial officers emerged at Akbar's court. Khwaja Shah Mansur, Mir Fathullah Shirazi, and one Hindu of great ability, Raja Todar Mal, became dominant figures in the Mughal fiscal system. Each served as imperial finance minister for one or more periods, but, more importantly, worked closely with the others to find creative solutions to problems encountered.

When Mir Fathullah Shirazi died Abul Fazl recorded the emperor's mourning for his servant:⁶

[Akbar] grieved at the departure of this memorial of former sages. He often said that the Mir was his *vakil*, philosopher, physician, and astronomer, and that no one could understand the amount of his grief for him. "Had he fallen into the hands of the Franks, and they had demanded all my treasures in exchange for him, I should gladly have entered into such a profitable traffic, and have bought that precious jewel cheap."

⁶ Abul Fazl, *The Akbar-Nama*, translated by H. Beveridge (Calcutta, 1907-39) III, 848.

This utterance reflects more than conventional panegyric. The emperor's lamentation suggests the intensity with which he and his closest advisers collaborated. It suggests also the high degree of intimacy and emotional involvement between Akbar and his most valued officers at court. We can sense only dimly the exhilaration produced among the architects of the new empire. Much of this intense organizational work occurred in the Fatehpur Sikri years (1571-1584).

Under these men the Indo-Muslim fiscal system inherited by Akbar became a powerful, flexible instrument. Mounting burdens on the central ministry encouraged division of labor in the office. The finance minister himself assumed direct responsibility for the operation and staffing of the central, provincial, and local treasuries. (In his capacity as administrator of the central treasury and mints the minister of the imperial household or *mir saman* reported to the diwan.) Three principal officers served as his direct assistants. The minister of crown revenues (*diwan-i khalisa*) took responsibility for all lands and tax-producing entities whose revenues were reserved for direct deposit in the central treasury. The minister for compensation (*diwan-i tan*) was responsible for all salary drafts or jagir assignments. Finally, the auditor general commanded a body of auditors who continually monitored and reviewed the records of fiscal transactions.

Akbar's finance ministers took great pains to develop a smoothly functioning pyramidal treasury system. The base was formed by treasuries at the leading towns of larger parganas. At the next level treasuries were located in each provincial capital, and finally central treasuries at the apex of the pyramid. At each level salaried officials – treasurers, accountants, cashkeepers, clerks – presided. The treasuries were more than safety deposit vaults for currency or other valuables. They were vital nodes for the intake, reporting, transfer, and disbursement of funds. Akbar tapped ample reserves and moved funds quickly from his chain of treasuries to support his field armies. On more than one occasion swift dispatch of treasure gave his armies the means and morale for victory. Mughal treasure, effectively deployed, was one of the most potent weapons the emperor possessed. Imperial field commanders were virtually invulnerable to bribery or purchase.

The Mughal system imposed strict accountability on its officials. Treasurers reported their balances in writing every fifteen days and gave written receipts for deposits and demanded written receipts for disbursements. The regime made firm distinctions between private and

state funds for all save the emperor. Access to imperial funds was only by written authorization – even for royal princes. Mansabdars obtained cash advances from treasuries, but they had to clear their balances and at times pay interest under the terms of a complicated set of regulations. Their accounts were rigorously audited at death and monies owed the treasury were seized.

The financial administration was run by a cadre of technically proficient officials and clerks. By the sixteenth century Hindu service castes – Khatris, Kayasths, Brahmins, and others – had learned Persian and become indispensable in the operation of government. These caste and family networks came to monopolize the subordinate, but lucrative, positions in all ministries save that of the Muslim *sadr*. They supplied young recruits to serve as apprentices who already, through training in the family, had been schooled in official Persian terminology, accounting, and reporting methods as well as the difficult chancery script. Generally these Hindu clerks and secretaries were efficient, reliable and loyal.⁷

These family groups, anxious to retain their prosperous circumstances, were the primary means by which the newly forged administrative traditions of the finance ministry were transmitted and refined over time. As the empire added territory, members of these groups formed the cadres that set up regulation fiscal administrations in the conquered kingdoms.

IMPERIAL COINAGE

In 1556 Bairam Khan, acting for his young Timurid charge, struck new Mughal coin in the Indian silver and copper types favored by the defeated Sur dynasty. Bairam Khan adopted the monetary policies of the Surs instead of the Central Asian traditional Timurid style of coinage. By the early 1560s the new regime possessed a fully functioning trimetallic currency: silver, copper, and gold.

Akbar's first silver rupees, similar to the thousands of Sur rupees still in circulation, issued from central mints at Lahore, Delhi and Agra. The new Timurid rupees bore the title "Jalal-ud-din Muhammad Akbar Badshah, Ghazi" on the reverse. The front displayed the Islamic

⁷ See John F. Richards, "Norms of Comportment among Imperial Mughal Officials" in Barbara Daly Metcalf ed., *Moral Conduct and Authority* (Berkeley, California: UC Berkeley Press, 1984), pp. 267-281 for a description of Bhimsen, a prominent member of such a service family.

statement of faith "There is no God but Allah and Muhammad is his Messenger" bordered by the names of the four Companions of the Prophet. The legends were struck only in Arabic script, not in the dual Devanagari and Arabic style employed by the Surs.⁸ In the public display of his coinage, the young Akbar presented a conservative, Muslim profile.

Akbar's moneymen decided to continue the 21 gram copper *paisa* coins of the Surs, now called *dams*, as the primary issue for ordinary transactions. These coins, bearing only the date of issue and mint name in Persian, were struck at the imperial capital, at mints adjacent to copper mines in Rajasthan or at several towns serving as entrepôts for the overland Nepal trade in copper.⁹ Shortly after he had asserted his independent rule, in 1562, Akbar revived a gold issue, called a *muhr*, weighing 10.9 grams, based upon the old Delhi Sultanate standard. This marked the first issue of gold coins in Hindustan since the mid-fifteenth century.¹⁰

In the late 1570s Akbar undertook monetary reforms coinciding with his revenue reforms. In 1577-78 the emperor appointed the mintmaster at Fatehpur Sikri executive officer in charge of all the imperial mints. The well-known calligrapher, Khwaja Abud-us Samad, assumed these new responsibilities.¹¹ Gold and silver issues were confined to the Fatehpur mint and mints in Punjab, eastern UP, Bihar, Bengal, and Gujarat, to which senior financial officers were sent as mintmasters. For a brief period the emperor and his moneymen flirted with a dramatic style of square coins in a tradition indigenous to western India. In 1580-81 the number of mints striking gold and silver coin was further reduced to two: the mint at Ahmadabad in Gujarat and the Urdu or mint of the imperial camp – the seat of the sovereign. Copper issues continued uninterruptedly from several mint-towns located next to the source of supply of the metal. The intent of these measures was to consolidate imperial control over the minting process.

In 1584 Akbar ordered a new coinage to reflect the ideological and political changes underway in his reign. The new coins bore the single legend: "God is great, splendid is His Glory" (*Allahu akbar jalla jalalubu*) with the ambiguous play on the emperor's name and titles. The date was stamped with solar, Ilahi years under the new era with the

⁸ John S. Deyell, "The Development of Akbar's Currency System and Monetary Integration of the Conquered Kingdoms" in John F. Richards, ed., *The Imperial Monetary System of Mughal India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1987), p. 19.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 22. ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 23. ¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 30.

old Persian names of the months added. Calligraphy, dies, and stamping all improved visibly on the new coin. Floral decorative touches appeared on the borders. Special issues with portraits of wildlife were struck.¹² In short, the coinage ceased to be indisputably Islamic in its design. The new Ilahi coins, however, remained conservative in reverting to the round shape and customary weights.

Throughout these changes Akbar's minters were careful to maintain a high-quality coinage in each of the three metals. Gold was nearly pure; silver never dropped below 96 percent pure and copper coins remained of high purity. This was a free or open minting system in which anyone willing to pay the prescribed mint charges could bring metal or old or foreign coin to the mint and have it struck. Mints were widely distributed. In 1595 four mints produced gold coins, fourteen produced rupees and forty-two copper coin.

Millions of coin were produced by this system. Minting expenses determined the premium by which coin was valued over bullion – ranging from a high of 10.77 percent for copper to a low of 5.63 percent for silver bullion.¹³ Newly minted rupees (*sikka*) circulated at an additional premium of 5 percent over older rupees. Mughal treasuries willingly accepted out-of-date Suri and other coin in payment of taxes, but at a discounted rate that pushed its value down to that of bullion. As a result the huge corpus of Afghan coinage flowed into Akbar's mints, was demonetized, melted down, and reissued as new Timurid coin.

During Akbar's reign the heavy copper dam was the coin of ordinary exchange and the preferred metal in the trimetallic system. Copper coins were issued in enormous quantities. The regime set its land revenue demand in terms of copper dams. Purchasers when acquiring zamindari rights paid for them in copper coin. Prices for ordinary commodities in city markets and wages for laborers, soldiers, and artisans were expressed in copper coin.¹⁴

Extension of the uniform coinage accompanied imperial conquest. Some newly conquered kingdoms did not immediately adhere to the new standards. Some anomalies were permitted for a transitional

¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 36-37.

¹³ Marie Martin, "The Reforms of the Sixteenth Century and Akbar's Administration: Metrological and Monetary Considerations" in J. F. Richards, ed., *The Imperial Monetary System of Mughal India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1987), p. 71.

¹⁴ Irfan Habib, "The Economic and Social Setting" in Michael Brand and Glenn D. Lowry, eds., *Fatehpur Sikri* (Bombay: Marg Publications, 1987), pp. 144-147.

period. But the imperial financiers insisted on a centralized, uniform, monetary system. For any particular type of coin, the design, weight standard, and fabric was identical from one end of the empire to the other. Moreover imperial coins travelled from one end of the empire to the other in rapid fashion. Copper coin found in coin hoards circulated from the heartland of the empire to the frontier in the year of their manufacture. In John Deyell's apt phrase "Mughal currency had currency".¹⁵

Throughout his reign Akbar seized older silver and gold coin found in the treasure hoards of dozens of Indian dynasties. Mughal mintmasters thereby had ample supplies necessary to expand silver and gold currency in normal types. They also cast giant coins and ingots for Akbar's fast-swelling monetary reserve – his central treasure described above.

Paradoxically, although it did not lack for stocks of gold and silver, India produced only minimal amounts of gold from alluvial sources in the northeast. The silver mines of Mewar found in the early sixteenth century were rapidly exhausted. In spite of this disability, unlike contemporary rulers in other parts of the world, Akbar did not have to worry about a trade deficit or bullion famines. Quite the contrary, for the strength of the Indian economy drew a steady stream of precious metals to pay for Indian industrial and agricultural exports. In the medieval and early modern worlds, whatever the available sources of gold and silver, India was the ultimate sink for these metals. When minted, Mughal silver and gold coin did not circulate beyond the Indian subcontinent – not because of inferior quality, but because foreign traders needed Indian coin to pay for exports.

By the latter years of the sixteenth century surging imports of New World silver offered new sources of supply for the Timurid mints. The copper price of silver rose from 48 dams to the rupee early in the reign to as high as 35 dams to the rupee in the late 1580s.¹⁶ The copper price of silver continued to rise throughout the early seventeenth century as new industrial uses for copper in bronze cannon and brass utensils increased its value as well. In succeeding reigns the silver rupee, supported by new fractional *anna* (sixteenth part) coins, replaced the copper dam as a common medium of circulation for most of the empire.

¹⁵ Deyell, "Akbar's Currency System, p. 45.

¹⁶ Habib, "Economic and Social Setting," p. 141.

THE BUDGET OF THE EMPIRE

Akbar's advisers did not have to overcome budget deficits. The imperial reserves of the Mughals – in currency, precious metals, and set and unset gems – swelled during Akbar's half century. In 1605, the imperial treasuries contained gold, silver, copper coin, and uncoined bullion valued at between 139 million to 166 million silver rupees.¹⁷ The mass of set and unset precious stones in the treasury and other precious objects was probably as valuable.

Continued territorial expansion and good management ensured that revenues exceeded expenditures. Plunder from victory swelled the imperial reserves. In 1566 the Mughals at Panipat seized dozens of elephants laden with gold as the wife of the defeated general Hemu tried to flee the battlefield. This was just the first of many such treasures that more than repaid the costs of military conquest. Thereafter additional taxes levied within a more rigorous imperial assessment brought fresh revenue streams into the imperial treasuries. Shireen Moosvi's recent estimate of Akbar's revenues for 1595–96 puts the total at just under four billion copper coins (dams) or the equivalent of 99 million silver rupees per year.¹⁸

Certain features of this financial reconstruction are immediately apparent. First, an annual surplus of between four and five million rupees was generated late in the reign. Second, expenditures made directly by the emperor were relatively small. The annual expense of the imperial household with its conspicuous display and thousands of dependents was less than five percent of the total budget. The central military establishment, including stables and artillery, as well as the corps of musketeers and ahadis consumed less than 10 percent of the total. Lastly, by far the largest item of expenditure, 81 million rupees, was allotted to the mansabdars. Of this just over half of imperial expenditures, 51 million rupees, supported the cavalry and musketeer contingents of the mansabdars. In other words by far the greater part of this budget was devoted to supporting a massive military establishment.

¹⁷ Moosvi, *Economy of the Mughal Empire*, pp. 198–200.

¹⁸ Moosvi, *Economy of the Mughal Empire*, p. 195. This is the *jama* from the *Ain-i Akbari* revised downward to reflect revenue-free land grants and areas whose revenues were listed but not fully subjugated at this date. It also adjusts for costs of revenue collection to arrive at net revenue realization.

Table 1¹⁹ *Imperial revenue and expenditure, 1595-96*

Income	Millions damns	Millions rupees
<i>Effective jama 1595-96</i>	3960.3	99.01
<i>Expenditure: salary bill of mansabdars</i>		
Zat salaries	827.5	20.69
Animal allowance	371.4	9.29
Suwar payment	2038.9	50.97
<i>Total</i>	3237.8	80.95
<i>Central military establishment</i>		
Cavalry and foot	142.9	3.57
Animals/stables	194.0	4.85
Arsenal and armor	22.1	.55
<i>Total</i>	359.0	8.97
<i>Imperial household (including harem/building construction)</i>		
<i>Total</i>	187.4	4.69
<i>Total expenditures</i>	3784.2	94.6
<i>Balance</i>	176.1	4.41
<i>Grand total</i>	3960.3	99.01

IMPERIAL CROWNLANDS

Crownlands (*khalisa*) under the direct administration of the imperial finance minister generated funds that flowed directly to the central treasury. Revenues from these crownlands as well as from a pool of temporarily unassigned jagir lands referred to as *paibagi* were the mainstay of the center. From these returns the emperor defrayed the costs of his central household, military, diplomacy, and the cash salaries of the lesser mansabdars. Plunder, ceremonial gifts, and escheat from estates of deceased nobles constituted substantial, but irregular, alternative sources of income for the central treasury. A recent estimate for the latter years of Akbar's reign puts *khalisa* revenues at between 24 and 33 percent of the total assessed revenues.²⁰

¹⁹ Adapted from Moosvi, *Economy of the Mughal Empire*, Table 11.5, p. 270.

²⁰ Moosvi, *Economy of the Mughal Empire*, p. 197.

All remaining revenues were shunted directly to the holders of salary assignments.

The minister of crownlands (diwan-i *khalisa*) presided over a sophisticated fiscal device. No specific lands adjacent to the capital were demarcated for the *khalisa*. The Mughal *khalisa* was instead a fiscal mechanism, a pool of sequestered revenues, that set aside tax collections from designated villages or parganas scattered throughout the empire. *Khalisa* tracts, usually designated in fertile and untroubled areas, were found in nearly every province of the empire. Cadres of salaried revenue officers directly employed by the minister of crownlands collected crown revenues. The proportion of revenues placed in the crown treasury accounts varied according to the perceived needs of the central treasury. In effect the emperor was awarded a set of jagir assignments, larger than, but comparable to those given great nobles. The emperor's own agents were sent to make collections just as the jagirdars did from their jagirs.

By 1605 Akbar and his advisers had created an autocratic and centralized system. A half-century long territorial build-up brought resources to the center far greater than those available to any regional ruler or provincial governor. The emperor routinely deployed tens of thousands of men, millions of silver rupees, and vast quantities of material throughout his domains. Orders from the emperor or his immediate subordinates flowed outward from the center; written and verbal reports regularly flowed in to the imperial capital. Akbar, the epicenter, actively absorbed reports and issued orders on a daily basis. Relatively quick official communications were essential to centralized power.

Although clearly centered on Akbar, to an outside observer the imperial structures and procedures were complex and confusing. From one perspective the Mughal empire appeared to be a properly bureaucratic system, fully centralized and run by technically proficient bureaucrats moving vast amounts of paper in well-regulated transactions. From another perspective, however, the empire appeared as a series of great patrimonial households dominated at its apex by the massive establishments of the emperor. Akbar drew upon vast revenue to build up his treasure and to support his lavish expenditures on luxurious display. It is equally clear, however, that the great amirs of the empire absorbed a huge proportion of official revenues – monies

which were directed, but not directly received by the center. To an unprecedented degree the centralized, autocratic system created by Akbar relied upon private organizational skill, entrepreneurial spirit and energy to carry out the vital tasks of ruling a multi-regional empire. The Timurid empire was both centralized and decentralized, both bureaucratic and patrimonial in its structure and operation.

CHAPTER 4

LAND REVENUE AND RURAL SOCIETY

Despite centuries of Muslim dominance in the Indo-Gangetic plain, Akbar's officials found consolidation of state power incomplete. In the second half of the sixteenth century both force and diplomacy were needed to subdue and pacify rural society. Even within the zone of direct administration, in the most fertile hinterlands of the towns, supposedly inhabited by subjects regulated by a tax system, the Mughals confronted only partially subdued local polities. In more distant regions were barely tributary areas that had been recently settled and colonized by Hindu and Muslim armed warrior-pioneers. Extension of centralized administrative control over these areas would be unprecedented.

In one pargana after another armed, potentially hostile, warrior lineages – Rajputs, Jats, and other locally rooted caste elites – ruled the cultivating peasantry. These local aristocratic lineages and their lineage heads or chiefs dominated individual parganas, or segments of parganas by virtue of conquest, migration and colonization. Parganas in the north were miniature kingdoms containing from as few as twenty to as many as two hundred contiguous villages. These were the primary building blocks of political control in Indian rural society – not individual villages.¹

Local elites had performed a key role in organizing, financing, and leading peasant-cultivators in a process of jungle-clearing and settlement. Often this expansion required armed battle with indigenous “tribals” or non-Hindu groups who cultivated and settled much less intensively than the newcomers. This same militance that drove agricultural expansion also drove lineage leaders into bloody, treacherous episodes of local warfare. The question for the state was how to channel energies for expansion that would yield increased revenues without permitting internecine warfare in the countryside.

The boundaries of most parganas defined the limits of domination

¹ See Richard Fox, “Rajput ‘Clans’ and Urban Centers in Northern India,” in Richard G. Fox, ed., *Urban India: Society, Space and Image*, and Richard G. Fox, *Clan, Raja and Rule*, (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1971).