

III. МАДАНИЙ ДИПЛОМАТИЯ АСПЕКТЛАРИ
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**INDIA AND CENTRAL ASIA: HISTORICAL LINKAGES AND NEW
INTERPRETATIONS¹**

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Abstract: Long-standing ties between India and Central Asia are just now being fully explored in several key areas. While the British and European narratives erased and misrepresented these Indo-Central Asian linkages as one of chaos and war, the obverse was true and in contrast to the dominant Eurocentric narratives, many aspects of cultural and material connections are still robust and found in the Classical and folk cultures of Central Asia and India. India is a country that prides itself on its diversity and plurality. Unlike many other countries, India has had a long history of diverse cultural, religious, social, and economic forms. This variety has allowed for the incorporation of numerous Central Asian ideas, cultures, and customs.

Keywords: India, Central Asia, cultural relations, Mughal Empire, Ottoman Turkish Empire

India and Central Asia have connections in date back many millennia, and only now some significant aspects of these ancient connections are being explored. While the British and European narratives erased and misrepresented these Indo-Central Asian linkages as one of disorder and war, the obverse was true and in contrast to the dominant Eurocentric narratives, many aspects of cultural and material connections are still robust and found in the Classical and folk cultures of Central Asia and India. Diversity and plurality constitute the essence of India, unlike many other regions, we find a fantastic array of plural cultural, religious, social, and economic formations in India from time immemorial till date. It is this diversity that has accommodated many aspects of Central Asian ideas cultures and practices on Indian soil. Therefore, the Indian engagement with Central Asia has to be primarily understood not through the

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engagement of India as a unitary entity but through a wide array of plurality and frames of diversity. It would be easier to understand this if one were to contrast the early Indian experience with the European and Chinese experience of understanding Central Asia, their consequent representations, and how the Indian ideas of Central Asia are at a considerable distance from them.

One of the earliest representations of Central Asia in world history comes from the Greek narratives. Later, the Roman narratives, primarily based on the works of Herodotus, who is called the father of history, talk about the wars between the Greeks and the Persians beyond the regions where the Persians stayed and talk of these regions of Central Asia as the great wastelands. Aristotle and many other Greeks also refer to this representation that was also significantly boosted by the unsuccessful attempt of Alexander to establish a durable Empire.² Alexander's armies met with significant setbacks in Central Asia. The Greeks invented this region with even more negativity as a land of the Gog and Magog, who are locked behind the iron gates left by Alexander. The exact representation of these two groups was taken over by the Biblical narratives and amplified further. We also find parallel representations of Chinese Asia as a barbarous region populated by wild people living in wastelands. Most Confucian thinkers including the Buddhist Travelers implored the rulers never to disregard this region as it would bring about negative returns to them.³ Ideas of desolation and wilderness were the hallmark of this region, and these are the representations where we have both the Chinese and the European representations imbued with a sense of negativity towards a different region and people⁴.

The earliest representations of Central Asia in the Indian tradition in the concrete form are established in the cartographic traditions. One of the unique features of Indian cartography, unlike both European and Chinese cartography, is the positive portrayal of all the regions of the known world. The world was conceived of as *Jambudwipa*, consisting of different continents. We have two major ideas of the four-continent framework and the seven-continent framework, both represented as petals of a lotus. The Northern regions that constituted the different continents, like *Bhadrasva* and *Ketumala*, are identified as the northern continents. These continents were represented as a place that is full of mountains and rivers in the Puranas which, constitute some of the most important in the

² Doherty, Paul. 2013. *Alexander the Great: The Death of a God*. Hachette UK. Chapter 1.

³ Ibid. p 53.

⁴ Ibid. p 52 -57, 75 -77.

Indian texts. They constitute what is known as the *Itihasa-Purana* tradition, and the term *itihasa* means history in Sanskrit. Therefore, the 18 major Puranas are understood as historical texts. They also primarily deal with the king lists of the various dynasties and the regions they ruled, along with the mythical and semi-divine beings and gods. Of our interest in Central Asia, many mountain ranges and river systems are represented very clearly. It is, therefore, at a considerable distance from both the Eurocentric narratives of the Greeks and later the Romans on one side and the Sino-centric narratives of the Chinese on the other side⁵. Both these narratives, the Eurocentric and the Sino-centric narratives, disparage this region of Central Asia. The Puranic narratives of ancient India always represent this region well and call the mountains the abode of Gods and also the source of many other medicinal plants and a place that is fit for living⁶. Why did the ancient Indians positively represent these regions in contrast to the European and Greek narratives? The answer may lie in the attitude of the Greeks and, later, the Romans on one side and the Chinese on the other side towards the region of Central Asia, which they wanted to dominate and conquer, as evidenced in the campaigns of Alexander. On the other hand, the Indians never had any expansionist ideas from the ancient period till date, and most of the collections to the outside world were through culture and trade. One can similarly understand the contrast between the Latin and the Sanskrit Cosmopolis created by the Roman Empire and the Indians, respectively. The might of the Roman armies and their occupation of large parts of Asia Minor, Northern Europe, and North Africa created the Latin Cosmopolis, it collapsed with the fall of the Roman army, and therefore this Latin Cosmopolis was created in a very violent way. In contrast, the Sanskrit Cosmopolis was created only through the travels of the various merchants, sages, and other actors who brought about some elements of the Sanskrit tradition of India and integrated it with the local traditions to bring about a hybrid. One of the best examples is the Ramayana tradition of ancient India, where we have not one Ramayana but multiple Ramayanas. Paula Richman, in her book "*Many Ramayanas*", maps the spread of the different Ramayana traditions all over India, primarily in Central and Southeast Asia. She argues that the spread of the Ramayana was largely facilitated by incorporating the local cultures as part of this and not as the erasure

⁵ Meserve, Ruth I. 1982. "The Inhospitable Land of the Barbarian." *Journal of Asian History* 16 (1): 51–89. P 55- 57,84 – 85.

⁶ Harley, John Brian, David Woodward, and Mark S. Monmonier. 1987. *The History of Cartography: Bk. 1. Cartography in the Traditional Islamic and South Asian Societies*. University of Chicago Press. p 336.

of the cultures.⁷ Therefore, what one gets in these local Ramayanas is that while the core of the story is retained, the local culture heroes and many other actors are incorporated into this and enabling the local rulers to transition from a pre-state to a state society and get access to a Great tradition that was useful in state formation and thus they could also incorporate their cultural heroes who had long historicity within a form of poetic verse.

One of the most important Ramayana of Central Asia that is oft quoted is the old Tibetan Ramayana which was taken up as a topic of research by the famed Tibetan Dhondup Gyal in a short lifetime and achieved so much of a status that he has become canonized on both sides of the border between India and Tibet.

A new chapter comes in medieval India with the establishment of the Delhi Sultanate, created by the invaders from Afghanistan who were basically of Turkic origin. Mahmud of Ghazni invaded India 17 times primarily to loot India's wealth. He was later followed by Muhammad of Ghor, ruler of another principality in modern-day Afghanistan. After his incursions to India and the victorious battles, the Delhi Sultanate was established. Though this was a period of a violent encounter, it did not see much into the Indian consciousness, and they soon proclaimed themselves as the rulers of India or Hind. While the rulers were of a different religion and ethnicity, primarily Muslim and of Turkic ethnicity, Delhi became one of the important places that attracted a variety of Muslims of different capacities like scholars, traders, administrators, military men, men of religion, et cetera as the conditions and Central Asia was unsettled because of the Mongol invasions⁸. Many of these people settled in Delhi and became truly Indianised.

A new chapter was more with the beginning of the Mughal Empire in 1526 CE, and it was established by Babur, who came from Ferghana in modern-day Uzbekistan. The Mughals were unlike any other earlier rulers and became truly Indianised to such an extent that they incorporated many Indian idioms in administration and also in cultural life. We also notice a divergence between India's Persian language, which incorporated many Indic elements, which gave birth to a new language known as Urdu or Hindustani. This became the language of the common masses all over North India and remained so until recently. However, Hindustani is a language understood both in India and Pakistan and is also the main medium of language in Bollywood and Hindi films. The divide

⁷ Richman, Paula. 1991. *Many Ramayanas: The Diversity of a Narrative Tradition in South Asia*. The University of California Press. p 28.

⁸ *ibid*, p 139-140.

between Hindi and Urdu was promoted by the British colonialists who identified Hindi as the language of the Hindus and the untrue Muslims. In this process, Hindi was reinvented by purging out many of the Persian and Arabic words and words of Central Asian origin and also by introducing Sanskrit words that had gone into oblivion. In a parallel situation, Hindustani was also reinvented by purging out many of the Hindi and Sanskrit words and, at the same time, reintroducing many new words from Persian and Arabic that were not part of the everyday life of the people⁹. This was part of the communal ploy of the British government to divide the people, known in Indian history as the policy of 'divide and rule', a policy that paid rich dividends to the British. The moot question now here is why did the British embark on such a policy of divide and rule?¹⁰

For this, one has to go to the 16th and 17th centuries, the heyday of the Mughal Empire in India, and evaluate the relative situation of both the British and the Mughals in the world. In the 1850s, 50% of the world trade was in India and China's hands, and India largely meant Mughal India. This is reflected in the ostentatious architecture of the Mughal emperors known as the Great Mughals. The European term Mogul originated from this period because of the travel writings of many European travellers like Thomas Roe, Bernier, the French traveller Tavernier and other travellers like Ralph Fitch. All these travellers had visited the Mughal court and were amazed by the amazing array of precious objects that included precious and semiprecious stones on the walls and the ceiling, whereas the floors were covered with carpets. Most of the wealth flowed from Europe to India and China. As the Mughal Empire was one of the most durable empires in India, its durability came from a wide variety of factors, one of which included understanding the mind of the Indian people and then creating a syncretic culture that included both Hindus and Muslims. One of the most important historians of the Mughal Empire, Harbans Mukhia, in a celebrated work, *The Mughals of India*, talks about the encounter between some Indian merchants who went to Russia through Central Asia from the Khanate of Astrakhan.

Peter the Great, the ruler of Russia at that time, asked the merchants how he should address the Mughals. Should they be addressed as the Mughals of India?

⁹ Lelyveld, David. 1993. "Colonial Knowledge and the Fate of Hindustani." *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 35 (4): 665–82. p 667

¹⁰ Jaswal, G. M. 2005. "Hindi Resolution: A Reflection of the British Policy of Divide and Rule." *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress* 66: 1140–51. P 1141. See also Christopher, A. J. 1988. "'Divide and Rule': The Impress of British Separation Policies." *Area* 20 (3): 233–40.

To this answer, the merchants replied that the Mughals were already of India and, therefore, they could best be addressed as the Mughals. This shows that the Indians already accepted the Mughals as one among themselves. The last of the great Mughal was Aurangzeb, who died in 1707, after which the Mughal Empire started slowly declining, and the final demise took place in 1857, which was also the year of the great revolt of 1857. During this long period of a century and a half, there were only six communal riots all over India which shows that the Indian people did not harbor any ill will against the Mughals regarding religion. However, some riots were largely peasant riots in which both Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs took part. However, from 1858 CE with the British Crown taking over India's administration, Hindu-Muslim riots became commonplace. These communal clashes were largely fermented by the British and greatly aided by them. It was a period that was the heyday of the divide-and-rule policy that enabled the British to keep the occupied subjects engrossed in internal warfare so that the British would take sides and rule over both of them. The regular production of communal violence aided by the British colonial state became an everyday affair. It ultimately led to the partition of India into two, which was promoted and patronized by the British.

One has to go a few centuries back to the heyday of the Mughal Empire and even during the period of the decline to understand why such communal riots did not occur then. The Mughal emperors took great care to ensure that they did not hurt the feelings of the Hindus, were in the majority, and were ruled. As Satish Chandra, one of the celebrated historians of medieval India, points out in his book 'partisan politics at the Mughal Court', there were four parties in the Mughal court, and they were the ruling class composed of the Turani, followed by the Irani, the Indian Muslims, and the Rajputs. The ruling element consisted of the Turani, the Mughal, and the Rajputs. The Mughal Empire, which was a gunpowder Empire along with the Persian and Ottoman Turkish Empire was affective largely due to the war machine of the Mughal-Rajput alliance¹¹. This alliance was so strong that most parts of the subcontinent came under the dominion of the Mughals. It would have been inconceivable to have such rule over large parts in a very orderly and prosperous fashion without having the ruled people's consent and the absence of communal riots is a pointer to the same.

¹¹ Asher, Catherine B., and Cynthia Talbot. 2022. *India before Europe*. Cambridge University Press. p 149.

After the disastrous attacks of Nadir Shah that laid Delhi, the capital city of the Mughals bare, in 1739, the glory of the Mughal Empire faded because military weakness was exposed. This was also when the British East India Company was making inroads into the Mughal Empire and had already secured passes to trade in the coastal regions of western and eastern India, like the famous port cities of Surat, and Hugli, and created new cities like Calcutta. The East India Company had only got permission to trade and establish factories. Still, it started employing its armed forces, getting into quarrels with the local rulers, and intervening in the political fights between the different rulers, thus trying to gain a foothold. Their main target was the Mughal Empire, one of the richest in the world, and as a result, they crafted many strategies to divide the Indian people, one of which was the divide-and-rule policy. Returning to the period after the attacks of Nadir Shah, the British East India Company intervened in the affairs of the Mughal court and sent a small force. A combined attack led by the Maratha horsemen defeated the British, and the Marathas installed Shah Alam as the Emperor of the Mughal dynasty once again in 1800. Therefore, the question arises as to why the Maratha, who were Hindus, did not take up the throne of Delhi and installed Shah Alam, a Muslim, as Delhi's ruler. The answer is that the Marathas, like most Indians, did not view other groups of people through communal frames of reference. These frames of reference were introduced by the British.¹² It was the prestige of the Mughal Empire in the mind of the people that made the Marathas take this decision.

How, then, did the Mughals manage such a vast, predominantly Hindu empire? One has to study the historiography of the early Mughal rulers beginning with Babur, who came from Ferghana in modern-day Uzbekistan. In his memoirs, which are written in Turkish language, one gets a clear idea of the difference between the regions of Central Asia and India, including the topography, landscape, produces, et cetera¹³. Babur was aware of the diversities and sensibilities of Indian society and advised the Mughals not to indulge in any actions that would lead to communal discord. As a result, the Mughals did not eat beef or sacrifice cows and they also restricted it. Akbar, the greatest of the Mughals, continued this policy and initiated marriages with the Rajput Hindu

¹² Christopher, A. J. 1988. “‘Divide and Rule’: The Impress of British Separation Policies.” *Area* 20 (3): 233–40.

¹³ Jr, W. M. Thackston. 2002. *The Baburnama: Memoirs of Babur, Prince and Emperor*. Random House Publishing Group. p 175.

women, after which the Mughal Rajput solidarity increased to a very large level.¹⁴ Akbar also commissioned the paintings of many Hindu deities as part of the Mughal patronage to artists, and they constitute a very important heritage of India that is popularly known by the name of Mughal paintings¹⁵. Akbar also drank water only from the Ganges river, and wherever he went, he had the water of the Ganges river carried. This was one of the most important Hindu beliefs since they believed that the water of the Ganges River was very holy¹⁶. Most Hindu epics, like the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, were translated into question under Mughal patronage. Many musicians of Muslim heritage took up the playing of musical instruments and started various gharanas or musical traditions that are in vogue even today. Therefore, a strong element of syncretic culture emerged under the Mughals.

One cannot see a distinctive break very clearly after 1857 when the East India Company's rule over its territories in India ended, and the British Crown took it over. India then became the jewel of the British Crown as it contributed most of the riches to the British Empire. This marked the downfall of India and the transfer of power to the colonial state. The legitimization of the colonial state rested on very flimsy grounds, unlike the Indian princes, Hindu, Muslim, Buddhist, Sikh, or any other religious tradition as they had a genealogy of claim. On the other hand, the British were understood to be outsiders by the Indians, and it was for this purpose that they engineered fissures within the Indian society. One of the main reasons for the lack of communal riots was that India was not a theocratic state. During the 13th century, when the Delhi Sultanate was ruling over North India under the rule of King Iltutmish, a group of ulemas approached the king and asked him to declare the Delhi Sultanate as an autocratic Islamic state based on the sharia. Iltutmish promptly declined and asserted that instead of the sharia, it would be the role of the jahandari system where the rule of the royalty and largely secular laws would be established and enforced. This episode continued during the reign of many other Sultans of the Delhi Sultanate. Though many were pious Muslims, they did not implement the sharia and did not declare Delhi to be a theocratic Islamic state, and the same followed for both the Mughals of India. This points to a clear sense of accommodation with the majority of the people and also by co-opting the ruling elite among the Hindus who were part of

¹⁴ Mukhia, Harbans. 2009. *The Mughals of India*. John Wiley & Sons. P 117,151.

¹⁵ Das, Asok Kumar. 1998. *Mughal Masters: Further Studies*. Marg Publications. p 53

¹⁶ Sen, Sudipta. 2019. *Ganga: The Many Pasts of a River*. Penguin Random House India Private Limited.

the administrative setup of the Delhi Sultanate and later the Mughals also. Further, like many other premodern kingdoms of India, the Delhi Sultanate and the Mughal Empire were no doubt autocratic in nature but had space for diversity. This element of autocracy led to the union of both the Hindu and the Muslim landed elite as their interests converged. There was also no union of the peasantry as the ruling classes prevented any assertion by the peasantry on religious grounds. This was possible because the livelihood of the peasantry depended on the benevolence of the landowners, the Hindu and the Muslim Zamindars. The British created a class of people, mainly schoolteachers and bureaucrats were not dependent on royalty, or the traditional landed elite for their sustenance and thus could not be controlled by these two groups.

On the other hand, these people were employed by the colonial state and had a guaranteed income and therefore were pliable by the colonial state and thus were the first agents of communalism in modern India. While the common masses of North India understood and employed the language of Hindustani, the British created an artificial divide between Hindi and Urdu. While the former became more Sanskritised, the latter moved in the direction of Arabic and Persian. This led to mobilization based on language, equated with communal identities. The material interest was that the people who were educated in Hindi would get jobs as schoolteachers in schools run by the colonial state, and as most of the posts of teachers posts were filled up by the Hindu population, there was a relatively larger share of unemployment among the Muslims. Urdu was promoted as a language of Muslims by the colonial British state, which in reality it was not and thus the clash of material interest was welded to the imagined ideas of two separate nations.

Another intervention made by the British was the communal narrative of history, where the ancient period was equated with the Hindu.¹⁷ the medieval period with the Muslims. Implying that both these periods were ruled by kings with communal identities, and theocratic periods and were thus not in a position to advance. As an antidote, the modern period of Indian history was equated with the British period, which was seen as an end to the chaos and backwardness of India. The ultimate price that the country had to pay was the partition of India based on the religious identities that were largely created by the British based on

¹⁷ Ali, Daud. 2012. "The Historiography of the Medieval in South Asia." *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 22 (1): 7–12. P 7.

the deliberate demonization of the medieval period and joining it with the other socio-economic grievances during their rule. However, the colonial narrative of history is being disregarded and new facts are emerging that document the cooperation of the peoples of India and Central Asia. The lasting testimony to the legacy of the Mughals and India's composite culture stands at the site of the Red Fort in New Delhi where the Indian tricolour is unfurled every year on August 15th, the day when India attained independence in 1947.

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