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Mooring the Mughal Tazkiras:
Explorations in the politics of representation

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Generally among historians biography is considered as a 'lesser form of history'. Limited in its perspective to the investigation of the life of an individual, biographies are presumed to be of little relevance in exploring the larger forces of historical change, the main job of the historian. With the waning of the teleological, unilineal view of history, historians are now beginning to realize the need to place human experiences, emotions, and subjectivities in the historical narrative. And with it has come the realization that biographies are not simply individual life stories, but studies of the interaction between the individual self and the wider socio-cultural forces, in diverse temporal and spatial contexts.

In Mughal history, one of the results of the indifference to biographical writings has been a deep reticence among historians in utilizing the contemporary biographical accounts for studying the political process and the socio-cultural formations of the period. Several historians of Mughal India have studied the Mughal courtly norms (feast, polite manners, self-control, sexual modesty, equanimity and religious steadfastness) and their entangled relations with imperial sovereignty. However, their

works are largely dependent on either the normative didactic texts
or official court chronicles, and largely ignore the evidence found
in the biographical accounts written in the period. One of the
efforts of my paper is to look at the representation of political
culture and social life in the Indo-Persian *Tazkiras* (biographies)
in early modern South Asia.

The word 'Tazkira' means a 'memorial'[1] or a 'memorative
communication'. The early modern *tazkiras* were organized and
structured with the objective of constructing- and representing an
Indo-Islamic space in South Asia. In recalling the lives of powerful
persons, they reconfigured a new discursive space—urbane and
cosmopolitan, exclusive and elitist, and transcendental and sacred.
These collective biographies were usually hagiographical in
nature, and were largely concerned with representing the lives of
the elites in a manner that served to legitimize their social and
political dominance in society. At the same time, functioning
within a shared normative system, the *tazkiras*, as has been argued
by Bulliet, also preserved the view from the edge, as it were,
providing details about the lesser human beings,[2] as well,
particularly in cases where they reinforced the ideologies of
dominance.

The writing of biographies — a well-established vocation in
the Muslim world — was started by the Arabs as an adjunct to
religious studies or as an ancillary to the historical sciences. The
Persians then developed this tradition, but it reached its most
accomplished phase in the early modern period, under the great
Islamic empires of the early modern period: The Ottomans, the
Safavids and the Mughals. Ottoman scholars have shown that in
developing the co-relations between domesticity and power, the
Ottoman *tazkiras* represent the state as the extension of the

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[1] Hermansen, Marcia. 2002. 'Imagining Space and Siting Collective
Memory in South Asian Muslim Biographical Literature (Tazkirahs)',
Studies in Contemporary Islam, 4 (2):1–21.
[2] Ibid.

household, and vice- versa.[3] The Sufi *tazkiras* that were written during this period too preserved the collective memory of the Indo-Muslim elites and were mostly structured on the basis of Sufi orders/*tariqa*.[4] In representing the lives of the political and military elites, the *tazkiras* were also representing the state and also the domain of politics.

In early modern South Asia, the *tazkiras* were written in Persian, the language of the state and the socio-politically dominant classes.[5] *Tazkiras* reveal to us how the social norms and cultural practices were appropriated by the kings and nobles to unilaterally represent their authority before a subject population. At the same time, they also help us perceive the extent to which the ordinary people routinely contested those norms and strategies of domination. Their efflorescence in the 17th and 18th centuries reflected a new-found concern with proper deportment, issues of manliness, and gender relations.

In the *tazkiras*, lives are constructed within a normative frame of reference and hence are presented in highly idealized terms. My paper looks at the construction of lives in this genre of history writing and examines the nature of their representation of power relations. Within the constraints of evidence, I have looked at the

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[3] For details refer to Pierce, Leslie.1993. *The Imperial Harem: Women and Sovereignty in the Ottoman Imperial Harem*. New York: Oxford University Press.

[4] Hermansen, Marcia K. and Bruce B. Lawrence. 2000. 'Indo-Persian Tazkiras as Memorative Communications', in David Gilmartin and Bruce B. Lawrence (eds), *Beyond Turk and Hindu: Rethinking religious identities in Islamicate South Asia*. pp.149–175. United States: University Press of Florida.

[5] For details refer to Alam, Muzaffar. 2004. *The Languages of Political Islam in India c. 1200–1800*. Delhi: Permanent Black. pp. 115–133; Alam, Muzaffar and Sanjay Subrahmanyam (eds). 2012. *Writing the Mughal World: Studies on Culture and Politics*. Chicago: Columbia University Press; Busch, Allison. 2010. 'Hidden in Plain View: Brajabhasha Poets at the Mughal Court', *Modern Asian Studies*, 44 (2): 267–309 and Aquil, Raziuddin and Partha Chatterjee (eds). 2008. *History in the Vernacular*. Ranikhet: Permanent Black.

nature of contestation to dominant norms from marginalized social groups, in particular women, slaves, eunuchs, concubines and musicians. Of course, the core concern of my effort here is to see how these *tazkiras* function as representational tropes for the hierarchies or divisions that were structured/integrated in early modern societies. Furthermore, I have also attempted to see the shifts resulting from the socio-cultural changes from the 17th to the 18th centuries and their correlations with the imperial norms and hierarchies, rituals, *adab* (a cultivated way of living), and the 'moral economy of the state'.[6]

My first *tazkira* was written by an influential Mughal noble, Shaikh Farid Bhakkari called *Zakhirat-ul-Khawanin*. It claims to be the first 'dictionary' of the Mughal nobles, and was compiled sometime in 1651. Many of the later *tazkiras,* including *Ma'asir-ul-Umara* extensively relied on *Zakhirat,* and in several crucial respects it set the model that other *tazkira* writers later adopted and improvised on. My second *tazkira, Ma'asir-ul-Umara* was written by another influential Mughal noble, Shah Nawaz Khan in the late 18th century. It is actually a biographical dictionary of the Mughal officials from about 1500 to 1780 CE. There are several nobles whose lives are discussed in both the *tazkiras.*

While imperial chronicles delve on the political activities of the Mughal elites, indeed in great details, I hope that by shifting to the biographical works we would get a better understanding of their socio-cultural activities, and, more importantly, the

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[6] The term 'moral economy' was first used by E.P. Thompson to refer to the framework of local rights, norms and values that provided ideological justification to the resistance of subordinate social groups against their oppressors.Thompson, E.P. 1971. 'The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century', *Past and Present*, 50:76–136.The concept has been appropriated by scholars studying African political systems to emphasise the significance of political norms and expectations in legitimating and constraining state power. See Munro, William A. 1996. 'Power, Peasants and Political Development: Reconsidering State Construction in Africa', *CSSH*, 38 (1):112–48.

organization of their household. My effort here is to integrate human agency, in its creative engagement with the political and socio-cultural structures, into our understanding of the period. By doing so, I hope to outline the intricate interconnections between state and society, largely absent from the dominant Mughal historiography, by using *tazkiras* as the primary framework of analysis to construct the history of the period.

Representing an 'ideal man' and his 'ideal household'

In engaging with the contemporary *tazkiras,* my work delves into the issue of 'representation'. After all, the construction of lives in prosopographical accounts are based on certain ideal notions of manhood, and a critical scrutiny of the ideal life stories help us uncover norms of masculinity, as well. During the Mughal period especially from 17th century onwards, there was a widely accepted code of conduct on the basis of which a Mughal noble was characterized as a gentleman or a *mirza.*[7] A careful study of the two *tazkiras* makes it clear that 'manliness' in the 17th and the 18th century had come to be defined not just by performances in public spaces, but also by the conduct of men in the domestic sphere (comprising of a large number of slaves, attendants and eunuchs, apartments of wives, external apartments and kitchen)

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[7] In Mughal period, several didactic texts of different kinds were written, providing the necessary guidelines for an acceptable code of etiquette and comportment. One such text was Mirza Kamran's *Mirzanama*, a manual listing the criteria and norms of conduct for the gentleman who called himself a *Mirza* in the seventeenth century. According to the text, the three basic attributes of a 'gentleman' or *Mirza* were: A pure and high pedigree, a high (1000 *zat* and above) and dignified manners. Apart from these, the *Mirza* should have an elegant outward appearance and virtuous habits. He should be well-versed in ethics, history and poetry. He should be adept in the etiquette of dining, music, speech, riding, hunting and bathing. It was these norms of manliness and proper conduct, on the basis of which the texts of the period characterised a Mughal noble as a gentleman or a *Mirz*a. Refer to Ahmad, Aziz. 1975. 'The British Museum Mirzanama and the Seventeenth century Mirza in India', *Iran*, 13: 99–110.

as well. Thus apart from the nobles' financial administration and their establishments (*sarkar*), our *tazkiras* also provide details about the lives of these nobles in the domestic spaces. There are interesting details in our *tazkiras* about feasts at home, decoration of homes, guests and their entertainment, etc.

With the centralization of the Mughal Empire, the emperor's body had become the location of sovereignty and the king had come to be seen as a patriarch and the kingdom his personal household.[8] The imperial authority was legitimated by paternalism, and the state was represented in familial/household terms. Similarly, a man's authority in the household was buttressed by the state, and within this 'state-household compact of authority', lavish feasts, festivities, intimate relations, etc. were crucial for the maintenance of both the state and the household.[9] The Mughal 'state-household compact' has an interesting convergence with the nature of state in early modern Europe, particularly France. It has been argued by Elias that the 'court' of the ancient regime was the vastly extended household of the French kings and their dependants, and served as a model for the aristocratic households in terms of its structure and distribution affect.[10]

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[8] Blake postulated that the Mughal State was somewhere between a pre-modern state (Patrimonial, as according to Weber) and a modern state (Bureaucratic), and hence it can be termed as a Patrimonial Bureaucratic State. The ruler of such a state governs on the basis of a personal, traditional authority whose model is the patriarchal family. The empire is conceived as a huge household, over which the emperor tries to exercise power in an absolute and unrestrained way. (Blake, Stephen. 1979. 'The Patrimonial-Bureaucratic Empire of the Mughals', *JAS*, 29: 278–303 and Blake, Stephen. 1991. *Shahjahanabad: The Sovereign City in Mughal India*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press. Also look at Alam, Muzaffar and Sanjay Subrahmanyam (eds). 1998. *The Mughal State, 1526–1750*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, Alam and Subrahmanyam (eds). 2012. *Writing the Mughal World*.
[9] Hanlon, Rosalind O'. 1997. 'Issues of Masculinity in North Indian History: The Bangash Nawabs of Farrukhabad', *Indian Journal of Gender Studies*, 4 (1): 1–19.
[10] Elias, Norbert (trans. from French by Edmund Jephcott). 1983 [1969]. *The Court Society*. England: Basil Blackwell Publisher Ltd. p. 41.

During the late 17th century in Mughal India, masculinity inhered in the maintenance of gentlemanly prestige, elite hospitality, shared attractions of personal refinement which drew like-minded men to each other, and intense concern to establish spatial and physical boundaries with the culture of servants, menials and the bazaar.[11] The *tazkiras* are replete with detailed descriptions of Mughal culture of feast and the grand parties that were hosted by the nobles in their households, occasionally in the honour of the emperor, but more often as a means to develop and strengthen friendships and networks of alliances with other members of their social class. Bhakkari gives details of the preparations that a Mughal noble Zain Khan Koka made when he hosted a party in the honour of Akbar. Large tanks were filled with rose water, a syrup made by mixing milk with sugar and rose water was served to the guests, and the entire sitting space was sprinkled with rose water.[12] Clearly, the spaces of the household were utilized to build political alliances and display loyalty and service before the rulers.

Knowledge about music was also an attribute of manliness that was desirable in a *mirza*. A *mirza,* marked by his polite, civil manners, had to have both aesthetic tastes and bodily discipline. *Zakhirat-ul-khawanin* mentions a large number of nobles who were patrons of musicians and men of letters. Isa Beg Tarkhan composed Hindi and Sindhi songs and was well versed in vocal and instrumental music.[13] Shah Nawaz Khan, the author of *Ma'asir-ul-Umara*, himself had a special liking for music, and repeatedly organised musical gatherings where a large number of specialist singing communities, such as the *kalawants* and accomplished musicians would come to display their skills.[14]

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[11] Hanlon, Rosalind O'. 1999. 'Manliness and Imperial Service in Mughal India', *Journal of Economic and   Social History of the Orient,* 42 (1):68.
[12] Bhakkari, Shaikh Farid. *Zakhirat-ul-Khawanin*. Vol.1. Haq, Syed Moninul. (ed.). 1970 [1651]. Karachi: Pakistan Historical Society. pp. 123–4.
[13] Ibid.,II, p. 207.
[14] Ibid., p. 217.

Recovering the marginalized voices from within the ambit of power and dominance

The imperial norms of manliness reinforced social hierarchies, but in the process of doing so hierarchised gender norms as well, discursively creating a range of parameters that defined men and women as gendered subjects.[15] This brings us to the issue of sexuality and household and the latter's complicitous relations with imperial power. In examining these issues here, I would be looking at the way Nur Jahan has been represented in the *tazkiras*. Bhakkari's *tazkira*, *Zakhirat-ul-Khawanin* contains an entire chapter on Nur Jahan which in itself is very crucial given the fact that 'bringing women to life', were never thought of as concerns of serious mainstream histories, nor even as an important part of thinking 'Mughal history'.[16] Bhakkari praises Nur Jahan for the tact with which she managed the Mughal domestic politics as well as for handling the issues concerning external diplomacy.[17] The inclusion of Nur Jahan's biography in Bhakkari's account becomes more significant when we notice that Shah Nawaz does not devote a separate chapter for her. Shah Nawaz does indeed describe Nur Jahan, but only under the section marked for her father. Unlike Bhakkari, Shah Nawaz Khan clearly saw women as dependent subjects of their male kin, and did not see Nur Jahan's

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[15] Mills, Sara. 1997. *Discourse*. London: Routledge. p.16.

[16] Lal, Ruby. 2005. *Domesticity and Power in the Early Mughal World*. New York: Cambridge University Press, p. 8.

[17] Bhakkari says: "The number of elephants, horses, *saropa* and cash which she (Nur Jahan) gave away has not entered the mind of anybody." She collected duties on goods from merchants, traded with Europeans who brought luxury goods, engaged in international diplomacy with high placed women of other countries and controlled all promotions and demotions that issued from the royal government. She even managed to tackle Shah Jahan's revolt against her father at Balochpura with both courage and tact, which again were manly attributes. In doing so, says Bhakkari, "the Begum made name in statesmanship and all manliness". For further details refer to Bhakkari. *The Zakhirat*. Vol II. p. 49 and Findly, Ellison Banks. 1993. *Nur Jahan Empress of Mughal India*. United States of America: Oxford University Press. p. 46.

achievements—commendable though, he admits they were—as meriting a separate and more detailed treatment. Within a courtly culture defined by martial ethos and masculine virtues of honor and chivalry, the independence of action and political authority that Nur Jahan enjoyed in her period was indeed quite commendable. Even as she held the reins of administration in Jahangir's reign, interestingly, Mughal sources are either silent or lightly dismiss her role in no more than a couple of lines. In contrast, the *tazkiras* provide a detailed, and largely appreciative, discussion of her crucial role in the shaping of Mughal imperial sovereignty. In recovering the reconstructed memory of imperial women, and their significant role in the shaping of the Mughal political structure, the *tazkiras* are indeed distinctly different from the other better known sources, in particular the court chronicles, which often treat imperial women with derision or silence.

Bhakkari, attentive to the details of lives in the household, also provides interesting information about the conjugal relations in familial relations. At one place, while writing about the life of one Qadi Imad Kerori of Chandwar, a scion of an elite family of Turan, he refers to his intimate relations with his spouse. Actually, he was so deeply in love with his wife, Bibi Makkhan, that all matters relating to the organization of his household were handled by his wife.[18] Indeed, instances such as these, and their remembrance in the biographical sketches, reflect the shifts that were taking place in the domain of the household, marked by the development of companionate, conjugal intimacy.

Nonetheless, a woman meddling in the state affairs was still a source of considerable anxiety. One such incident reflecting such an anxiety is recorded by Bhakkari: A Begum, the mother of Mirza Muhammad Hakim, was killed by one Shah Abu'l-Ma'ali because he had come to believe, instigated by his courtiers that his political career would not make any headway for as long as she was alive.[19] This, at the same time, is also a testimony to the strength of

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[18] Bhakkari. *Zakhirat.* II. p. 401.
[19] Bhakkari. *Zakhirat.* I. pp. 78–9.

imperial women's political agency during the period. Bhakkari
mentions Bibi Kishna (a Brahmin lady), wife of Shaikh 'Abdu'r-
Rahim Lakhnavi who after her husband's death 'kept the name
and fame of her husband alive' by laying out gardens, populating
villages, building *sarais*, shops, reservoirs, tanks, mausoleum and
a palatial mansion.[20] Our *tazkiras*, indeed, reveal the usually
ignored voices of the imperial women. Unlike the court chronicles,
they help us understand the meaning of women's participation in
the political process.

Alliances, Friendships, Theatre and the Imperial Sovereignty

The late 17th and the early 18th centuries saw the rise of elite
cultures of conspicuous consumption. Now, the royal courts sought
to tie their nobles more firmly to a culture of competitive display,
and the consolidation of urban centres around the court made the
wealthy a more prominent feature of social life.[21] Consequently,
merchants and gentry are also beginning to be noticed in the
tazkiras of the period, reflecting the changes that this 'culture of
consumption' brought about in the Mughal courtly norms. In both
Zakhirat- ul-Khawanin and *Ma'asir- ul-Umara*, there are repeated
references to the merchants and gentry.[22] This highlights the fact
that Mughal imperial sovereignty was no longer confined to the
courtly circles but systematically incorporated other social groups,
in particular the merchants and the gentry. [23]

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[20] Ibid., p. 238.
[21] Hanlon, 'Manliness'. 69.
[22] There is an appreciative discussion of the extremely touching and
humane behaviour of a Jaina jewellery merchant, who went out of his
way to pay to the royal exchequer two lakh rupees in four installments
as requital charges for the release of a large number of Muslim Meyo
women and children who had been captured by Riza Bahadur Khidmat-
Parast Khan. Refer to Shah Nawaz Khan and Abdul Hayy. *Ma'asir-ul-
Umara*. Vol. I. Ali, Maulawi Mirza Ashraf and Maulawi Abd-ur-Rahim
(eds). 1888–91[1780]. Calcutta: Asiatic Society. pp. 713–16 and Bhakkari.
Zakhirat. I. p. 52.
[23] For details refer to Alavi, Seema (ed.). 2002. *The Eighteenth Century
in Indian: Debates in Indian History and Society.* India: Oxford University

One of the important differences that set these *tazkiras* apart from the imperial chronicles is their preference of human agency over rigid and formalised structures. Moving beyond positivist frames of reference, these *tazkiras* view the history of the period in terms of the correlations between forms of representation and the historical reality. They provide details about the role of natal affiliations, marriage alliances and affect and emotions in the political process, which help historians in recovering the Mughal State as a cultural formation. To take an instance, the biographical narrative of Mirza Aziz *Koka* in both Shah Nawaz Khan's *Ma'asir-ul-Umara* and Sheikh Farid Bhakkari's *Zakhirat- ul- Khawanin* brings to fore certain issues which have been rather neglected by the historians. These *tazkiras*, in their representation of the life of Aziz *Koka*, highlight fosterage and its role in the political process.[24] The internal dynamics of milk kinship/foster affiliations was not only the major generator of power politics in the Mughal court but also created friction and contestation within the court nobility. Mirza Aziz *Koka*'s narrative in both the *tazkiras* open with an account of how influential his family was at the Mughal court. Both the texts hint towards the fact that this bestowal of high status was due to the existence of the ties of fosterage between them.

Shaikh Farid Bhakkari's *Zakhirat-ul-Khawanin* makes this point quite blatantly, when he says:

Press, Bayly Christopher Alan. 1983. *Rulers, Townsmen, and Bazaars: North Indian Society in the Age of British Expansion, 1770–1870.* India: Cambridge University Press; Alam, Muzaffar. 1986. *The Crisis of Empire in Mughal North India: Awadh and the Punjab 1707–1748*. India: Oxford University Press and Hasan, Farhat. 2004. *State and Locality in Mughal India: Power Relations in Western India, c. 1572–1730*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press. Also look at Leonard, Karen. 1979. 'The "Great Firm Theory" of the decline of the Mughal Empire', *CSSH*, 21 (2): 151–67. For a view contrary to Leonards', look at Richards, J.F. 1981.'Mughal State Finance and the Pre-Modern World Economy', *CSSH*, 23 (2): 285–308.

[24] Refer to Bhakkari. *Zakhirat.* I. pp. 81–99 and Shah Nawaz, *Ma'asir.* I. p. 319.

His (Mirza Aziz *Koka*'s) mother was the wet-nurse of His
Majesty 'Arsh-Astani. Through the good offices of that lady
— the Ataga-clan acquired such dominance that more than
them, none in the August court acquired as much rank and
glory.[25]

Shah Nawaz Khan is a bit more subtle about it and writes:

He (*Koka*) was always his (Akbar's) intimate and always an
object of his grace and favour…the king always passed over
the insolences of the Khan A'zam. He used to say "between
me and Aziz there is a link of a river of milk which cannot
pass away".[26]

The ties of fosterage in the political process highlight the role
of the mother, real or foster, to state formation. More importantly,
it draws our attention to the role of emotions and affect in the
shaping of imperial sovereignty. We are led to a view of the state
that is vastly at odds with the one that we receive from the state
archive, where the state activity is presented as largely masculine,
formal and bureaucratic. Our *tazkiras*, on the other hand, present
it as imbued with relations based in the household and one in
which intimate; also informal relations had a crucial role.

In Mughal India, marriages played an important role in the
maintenance of political alliances. Exchange of women between
community and kin groups was an exchange of, what Levi-Strauss
terms as, the "supreme gift".[27] Structural anthropologists,
borrowing from Levi-Strauss see the exchange of women as an
evidence of their subordination and lack of agency. A crucial
limitation of the exchangist theory is that it ignores women's

[25] Bhakkari. *Zakhirat.*I. p. 81.
[26] Shah Nawaz. *Ma'asir.* I. p. 319.
[27] This term has been taken from the work of Strauss, Claude Levi (trans.
from French by James Harle Bell, John Richard Von Sturner and Rodney
Needham). 1969. *The Elementary Structures of Kinship*. Boston: Eyre &
Spottiswoode. It is based upon Marcell Mauss' influential 'Theory of
Gift'.

subjectivity. Referring to the case of Mughal India, Farhat Hasan argues that during the early modern period, women 'exploited their role in the kinship system to challenge and resist their ritual and material marginalization within the power structure'.[28] They could do so because imperial sovereignty could not be sustained on the basis of military superiority alone; it required the creation of deep and enduring political alliances between the communities of the powerful elites, where women played the prime role.

Many Mughal court chronicles and other historical texts[29] testify to the fact that by entering into marital alliances, the royal women managed to mould the normative systems/codes in their favor and even succeeded in establishing their distinct identity in political spaces that were otherwise dominated by the male members of the household. In fact, if one recognizes the significance of marriages in the structure of the Mughal ruling class, the implication of influential alliances for imperial sovereignty becomes evident. Afzal Husain views marriages among Mughal nobles as an index of status and aristocratic integration that helped them gain *mansabs*, assignments of *jagirs* and special status at the court.[30]

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[28] Hasan. *State and Locality*. p. 77.

[29] *Baburnama* mentions the fact of women offering themselves/being offered for political reconciliation. For e.g., when Shiybani Khan Uzbeg besieged Babur in Samarqand for 6 months, he sent a message to Babur saying that if he would marry his sister Khanzada Begum to Shiybani Khan, there might be peace and a lasting alliance between them. (Gulbadan Begum. *Humayun nama* [trans. from Persian by Annette S. Beveridge]. *The History of Humayun*. London 1902, Indian Reprint. Delhi, 1972. p.85). Abu'l Fazl. *Akbarnama* II [trans. from Persian by H. Beveridge]. Reprint, Delhi, 1993. p.76 mentions Akbar marrying the elder daughter of Jamal Khan (one of the great *zamindars* of India). This move of Akbar's along with his marital alliances with many Rajput women shows his desire of seeking allies for himself to create a strong political base in India. This was very important in helping the Mughal Empire gain legitimacy among the local elites as well as the regional power holders.

[30] Husain, Afzal. 1972. 'Marriages Among Mughal Nobles as an Index of Status and Aristocratic Integration', *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress*, pp. 304–312.

The *tazkiras* are replete with examples that show the significance of these marriages. Shah Nawaz Khan's *Ma'asir-ul-Umara* describes marriages as an "Indian custom through which blood feuds are wiped off".[31] Even the 17th century *tazkira, Zakhirat-ul-Khawanin* by Shaikh Farid Bhakkari praises Nur Jahan's ability for being able to find good bridegrooms for the ladies of the Mughal court. He writes:

> …she [Nur Jahan] arranged the marriages of the daughters of His Majesty Jahangir Shah, late prince Shah Murad, Dan Shah and Sultan Khusraw with great men and she married the lady attendants (*saheliyan*) of the royal harem ranging in age from twelve to forty to the *ahadis* and *chelas* of the king.[32]

In understanding the political system in the Mughal period, we need to recognize the agency of women. It is equally important to understand the state as a cultural formation, where literary and cultural activities were crucial to the shaping of the political structure. Women, of course, played a crucial role in the economy of affect, but so did the poets, scholars, saints etc. It is through a critical scrutiny of the extant *tazkiras* that we can explore the extent of their participation in the system of rule. *Tazkiras* are very useful in exploring the lives of the people in the Mughal period in greater depth and intensity, but, more importantly, they unravel the nature of their relations with imperial sovereignty. In the Mughal Empire, the norms and the institutions governing the relationship between the emperor and the nobility were crucial for the imperial fabric. The emperor enjoyed a position of supreme symbolic power, buttressed by paraphernalia of court etiquette and royal prerogative. The authority of the emperor, however, was legitimated and reinforced by symbols, rituals, and forms of communication that served to routinely highlight the difference—the distance, as it were—between the king and the nobility on one hand, and between the ruling class and the subjects, on the

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[31] Hasan. *State and Locality*. p. 77.
[32] Bhakkari. *Zakhirat.* II. p. 49.

other. With detailed descriptions of routine lives in the court and among the ruling classes, the *tazkiras* provide us with evidence of the entangled relations between cultural practices and political lives in Mughal India.

Creating inclusive participatory spaces

In order to study the politics of representation as found in such early modern writings in South Asia as the *tazkiras*, one needs to look at the dialectical relationship between discourse and the socio-cultural milieu of the period in which a particular text was produced. No discourse can entail the possibility of the speaker's absence. It is in fact the speaker or the author of a particular text who decides the spaces that 'power' will occupy and it is these spaces that are constantly appropriated by the social actors in their political conflicts and struggles.[33]

These biographical narratives created norms of acceptable behaviour and civility. Interestingly, they also reveal the extent of the participation of marginalized social groups, in particular, dancing girls, slaves and musicians. Through their performances and relations of service, these groups had created spaces of participation in the political process. For instance, Baqi Khan Chela Qalmaq, a slave[34] of Shah Jahan, was given a rank of 100 *zat* and 1000 horses because of his loyalty and was eventually made the *faujdar* of Catra.[35] Dancers, musicians and poets are remembered in the *tazkiras* as receiving patronage from the nobles

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[33] For details, refer to Fraser, Nancy. 1989. *Unruly Practices: Power, Discourse and Gender in Contemporary Social Theory*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. From a historical point of view the debate is best summarized in Bonnell, Victoria E. and Lynn Hunt (eds). 1999. *Beyond the Cultural Turn: New Directions in the Study of Society and Culture*. Berkeley: University of California Press Ltd. and Biersack, Aleta and Lynn Hunt (eds). 1989. *The New Cultural History: Studies on the History of Society and Culture.* London: University of California Press.
[34] The *tazkiras* repeatedly use the word *chelas* for the slaves. For e.g., refer to Shah Nawaz. *Ma'asir.* I. p. 623.
[35] Shah Nawaz, *Ma'asir.* I. pp. 380–381.

and aristocrats. This brought the elite in contact with the
professional groups involved in dancing and music. Finding
themselves excluded from the *musha'iras* (or poetry recitation
assemblies which were usually inter-elite affairs and were
convened in the houses of respectable and learned elites), the
common people created alternative spaces—in the bazaars, the
fairs, *qahwa khanas* (coffee houses), *mehfil*, the festivals (and
later in the 19th century the *kothas* of dancing girls or *tawaifs*) —
to express themselves in the domain of textuality and culture.[36]
These were spaces where the common people could participate in
instituting, maintaining and contesting the elite norms, and several
historians have flirted with the idea of calling them the 'public
sphere'. Though its existence in pre-colonial India can be debated,
there are innumerable examples of the existence of spaces of inter-
subjective communication and dialogue in the form of *bazaars*,
mushairas etc. These spaces became arenas of debate on the events
and policies at the Mughal court and provided an opportunity to
the subordinate sections to discuss/institute/contest the elite
normative structure and framework of values and in the process
manipulate its ambiguities in their favor.[37]

In Indo-Persian historical narratives, wine, women and music
are often used to signal a person's imminent downfall.[38] Since
these were no more than the irrational whims of the lower self
(the *nafs*), they were a threat to masculinity and should be avoided
by men at all cost. Elite masculinity was defined in opposition to
the weaknesses of the *nafs,*[39] to which women and socially inferior

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[36] See Hasan, Farhat. 2005. 'Forms of Civility and Publicness in Pre-
British India', in Rajeev Bhargava (ed.).2005 *Civil Society, Public Sphere
and Citizenship: Dialogues and Perceptions*. New Delhi: Helmut Reifeld;
Sage Publications. pp. 102–103.
[37] Ibid., pp. 84–105.
[38] Orsini, Francesca. 2006. *Love in South Asia: A Cultural History*.
Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press. p. 63.
[39] In Muslim mystical thought, *nafs* is usually understood as the site of
Eros and bodily desires. For details, refer to Schimmel, Annemarie. 1975.
Mystical Dimensions of Islam. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina
Press.

people were supposed to be naturally suspect.[40] Expressing these norms of manliness, Shah Nawaz Khan in *Ma'asir-ul-Umara* suggests that wine should be consumed only during certain seasons and in fixed quantity. Similarly, music should only be sanctioned at the time of melancholy and care. Wine and music should not be made the great objects of life, and nobody should be wasting away precious hours on it.[41] The author then moves on to attribute the defeat of Baz Bahadur by Rani Durgavati and decline in his overall power to his habit of drinking and engagement in all kinds of pleasures. He says:

> he (Baz Bahadur) let the foundation of his power go to the winds and the waves, that is, he became so addicted to wine and music…employed all his energies in collecting dancing girls, particularly Rupmati (the head of the troop) for whom he wrote Hindi love songs.[42]

Even so, there are a large number of references to musicians, poets, dancers and entertainers in both the *tazkiras*. Their presence suggests that the political and cultural processes in Mughal India were fluid and diffuse, and if indulgence in music and art was viewed by some as amounting to compromising masculinity, there were others who saw them crucial to their perception of masculinity. There were certainly no uniform norms of masculinity, but men chose from a wide variety of prevailing frameworks, their own vision of manhood and identity. At the same time, disputes and contestations over norms of manliness and civility created inclusive participatory spaces in the Mughal court culture. Largely absent in the court chronicles, it is the *tazkiras* that bring to light the depth and intensity of these spaces, and their significance for the political process.

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[40] Hanlon, 'Manliness': 53.

[41] Shah Nawaz. *Ma'asir.* I. pp. 394–395.

[42] Ibid.

Conclusion

The biographical writings in Mughal India reveal to us the dynamic interaction between human agency and the larger socio-political structures. They encourage us to move beyond structures/systems, and look at the individual as an agent in shaping historical developments. This is where the *tazkiras* differ from the court chronicles, and other literary genres, for unlike them they present the political structures, including the Mughal state, as a fluid and malleable social formation, constantly modified and compromised by individuals. Unlike the official imperial archive, the *tazkiras* also reveal to us the entangled relations between socio-cultural formations and the political process, highlighting, for example, the complicit relations between the state and the household in early modern India.

At the same time, we need to bear in mind that the *tazkiras* cannot be studied within a positivist framework, and the life-stories found in them are actually representations of ideal lives. Working within an idealized frame of reference, they provide interesting clues to contribute to our understanding of the norms and values in the Mughal court culture. Since these norms were articulated along gendered lines, the *tazkiras* are interesting sources for the study of the imperial norms of masculinity. My study here has, hopefully, shown important shifts in these norms, which are revealed to us when we study these *tazkiras* within a diachronic frame of reference. One of the important shifts concerned the growing significance of household and family in the articulation of masculinity. In looking at these issues, we should indeed be attentive to the constructed nature of discourse in Mughal biographies. Mughal *tazkiras* constituted social and political realities, and if they also represented these realities, one must not forget that every act of representation is simultaneously an act of creation, as well.