Keeping corruption at bay: A study of the VOC's administrative encounter with the Mughals in seventeenth-century Bengal
Sur, B.

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Chapter 3

Where Desires Remain Untamed: Mughal Bengal and Its Administrative World in the Seventeenth-Century

The VOC set up its trading bases, among other places in Mughal India, including Bengal in the seventeenth century. The presence of the Company there has been recorded in the existent historiography as one that was purely commercial, driven by motives of profit.[1] While that might provide a different perspective when seen in terms of the personal ambitions of the officials as detailed in the next chapter, what is true is that the VOC officials did interact frequently with the Mughal administrators in this province. Consequently, both the VOC and the Mughal officials were confronted with each other's administrative practices and ethics, which supposedly determined their actions, decisions and observations in this setting. This was especially complex in Bengal as it was a region that formed the crucial geo-political frontier of the empire to its east. Mughal rule had begun there from the end of the 1500s and was still evolving in the seventeenth century. The Mughal nobles governing in this province were not only far from the direct control of the court but also enjoyed open access to the commerce of the connecting seas. More importantly, they were the ones who were responsible for granting permission and supervising the activities of European companies and other foreign trading communities living and working in this territory. It is, therefore, necessary to study their administrative world in Bengal with respect to the region's specificities, before we dicuss their encounter with the VOC officials in the seventeenth century. What did the local administrative setting of Bengal look like within the larger administrative set-up of the Mughal Empire? How did the Mughal administrative culture flourish there and what was the perception of this region in Mughal narratives? In order to answer these questions, an attempt has been made in this chapter to study seventeenth-century Bengal and its administrative world by focusing on the Mughal perception of corruption.

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[1] Knaap, "De 'Core Business' van de VOC," 18.

The Appropriation of Bengal

The province of Bengal came to be annexed to the Mughal Empire by Emperor Akbar in 1576. After its annexation to the Mughal dominions, it was categorised in Akbar's administrative list as *subah* Bengal, consisting of twenty-four *sarkars* (territorial divisions within a *subah*) and 787 *mahals* (units within a *sarkar*). These included the *sarkars* of Tanda, Lakhanauti, Purniyah, Tejpur, Ghoraghat, Sonargaon, Sylhet, Satgaon and so on, including some *sarkars* from Orissa as it was part of *subah* Bengal. But Abul Fazl, one of the highest-ranking officials of Akbar's court and the author of his chronicle, *Akbarnama* wrote the following lines about the province –

> The country of Bengal is a land where, owing to the climate's favouring the base, the dust of dissension is always rising. From the wickedness of men families have decayed, and dominions been ruined.[2]

Abul Fazl, further went on to describe Bengal as being known to be a '*bulghakkhana*' (house of turbulence) from ancient times.[3] This tendency of the Mughal emperors to characterise Bengal as a rebellious place continued even to the time of Jahangir. The *Tuzuk-i Jahangiri* revealed the paranoia of Emperor Jahangir in appointing Ali Quli Istajlu, an official who had served Akbar and was known for his 'habit of making misschief', to a region as Bengal.[4] After granting Ali Quli a *jagir* in Bengal, Jahangir wrote – 'Thence came news that it was not right to leave such mischievous persons there, and an order went to Qutubuddin Khan to send him to Court, and if he showed any futile, seditious ideas, to punish him'. Similar anxieties of 'dissent' or 'rebellion' with Bengal also appeared in Aurangzeb's discourse towards the latter half of the seventeenth century. As an emperor, he wrote the following lines in his *firman* to Mir Jumla, when appointing him as the *subahdar* of Bengal –

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[2] H. Beveridge, ed., *The Akbarnāma of Abu'l-Fazl: History of the Reign of Akbar Including an Account of His Predecessors*, trans. H. Beveridge, vol. III (Calcutta: The Asiatic Society, 1939), 427.

[3] Beveridge, III:427.

[4] Alexander Rogers and H. Beveridge, eds., *The Tuzuk-i-Jahangiri or, Memoirs of Jahangir* (London: Royal Asiatic Society, 1909), 113.

On the whole the laxity in administration, slackness, disobedience and rebellion, which have become rampant there (in Bengal) for several years, are not unknown to you…In every district the din of rebellion is rife and ringleaders have raised their heads in tumult.[5]

These three different Mughal narratives emanating from the royal chronicles of Akbar and Jahangir and the official order of Aurangzeb to Mir Jumla belonged to different periods of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. But they consistently described Bengal in a negative tone as an outlawed seditious area which threatened their empire. It makes one wonder why Bengal came to be characterised in such a way repeatedly by the Mughal emperors. To address this question, one needs to begin first with the story of how the Mughals conquered Bengal and asserted their control there.

The conquest of Bengal in the sixteenth century was not an easy process, and as the above quotes show, retaining it under control throughout the subsequent century also remained an difficult task for the Mughals. This had partly to do with the geo-political set up of this region and partly with the active local forces present there. As a deltaic piece of land bordering on the north-eastern side of peninsular India, Bengal witnessed repeated changes of political boundaries and regimes. After its annexation to the Mughal Empire, the *Ain-i Akbari* (part of the official Mughal chronicle about Akbar written by Abul Fazl) described it as a region that stretched from Chittagong in the south-east (which was then in the possession of the Arakan ruler) to Teliagarhi in the west, close to the *subah* of Bihar.[6] There were mountains to its north and south, while it remained open to the sea in the east. The interior of this land was crossed by a network of rivers and rivulets that flowed into the high waters of the seas. The northern rivers especially were so well-connected that they provided cheap water transport facilities, which in turn made it possible to travel from Bengal to Agra, close to the Mughal capital.[7] These riverine connections made it a

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[5] Jagadish Narayan Sarkar, *The Life of Mir Jumla, the General of Aurangzeb* (New Delhi etc.: Rajesh Publications, 1979), 269.

[6] Abu'l Fazl Allami, *The Ain i Akbari*, ed. H.S. Jarrett, vol. 2 (Calcutta: Asiatic Society of Bengal, 1891), 115-21.

[7] Jos Gommans, *Mughal Warfare: Indian Frontiers and High Roads to Empire, 1500-1700* (Hoboken: Taylor and Francis, 2002), 25–26.

Fig 1: *Subah* Bengal portrayed under Hindustan/ The Empire of the Great Mughals made by Johannes Vingboons, 1665-1670. Reproduced from *Blaeu De Grote Atlas van de wereld in de 17de eeuw*, 89.[8]

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[8] For more information on this see, Gommans, Bos, and Kruijtzer, *Grote Atlas*, 6:89.

crucial zone for Mughal control as an 'eastern frontier'.[9] In Gommans' words – 'Between Agra and Bengal was the richest and most settled agrarian area of Hindustan. Of course, to control this area was of crucial importance to the Mughals. Although, through its rivers, naturally tied to the Delhi-Agra region, at times of political weakness in the latter area, the former tended to become autonomous…'.[10] This tendency of the region to become autonomous by cutting off from the Mughal rule was facilitated by its riverine terrain that was less accessible to the Mughal cavalry. It, therefore, meant that in order to maintain its connection with the political centre, the Mughal emperors had to be extra vigilant in this area.

Prior to the coming of the Mughals, the region of Bengal had a rich history of being ruled autonomously by various dynasties. In the eleventh century, there were the Sena rulers who patronised Brahmanism. Their rule was followed by a brief period of the Devas before being overrun by the Islamic newcomers at the beginning of the thirteenth century. During this time, Bengal remained under the control of different governors appointed from Delhi. It also witnessed a rise of independent sultanates like that of the Ilyas Shahi (Turkic origin) and Husain Shahi dynasties and a brief interlude of Habshi rule (Muslim rulers of African descent) in between.[11] But by the time the Husain Shahi dynasty had attained power, the Mughals were already present in the subcontinent. Babur, however, left Bengal undisturbed on account of the well-entrenched Afghan positions there (which later were co-ordinated under Sher Shah Suri), which neither the Hussain Shahi Sultans nor Babur wanted to encourage through their mutual conflicts. Yet the Afghans could not be suppressed for long. Sher Shah Suri's rise in 1537 posed a new challenge to the Mughal Emperor Humayun (Babur's son) and before long he was overthrown and Sher Shah went on to establish the Sur dynasty. From his stronghold in Bengal, he pressed onwards to reach as far as Agra.

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[9] Gommans, 170.

[10] Gommans, 26.

[11] Stan Goron, "The Habshi Sultans of Bengal," in *African Elites in India: Habshi Amarat*, eds. Kenneth X. Robbins and John McLeod (India: Mapin Publishing, 2006), 131–37.
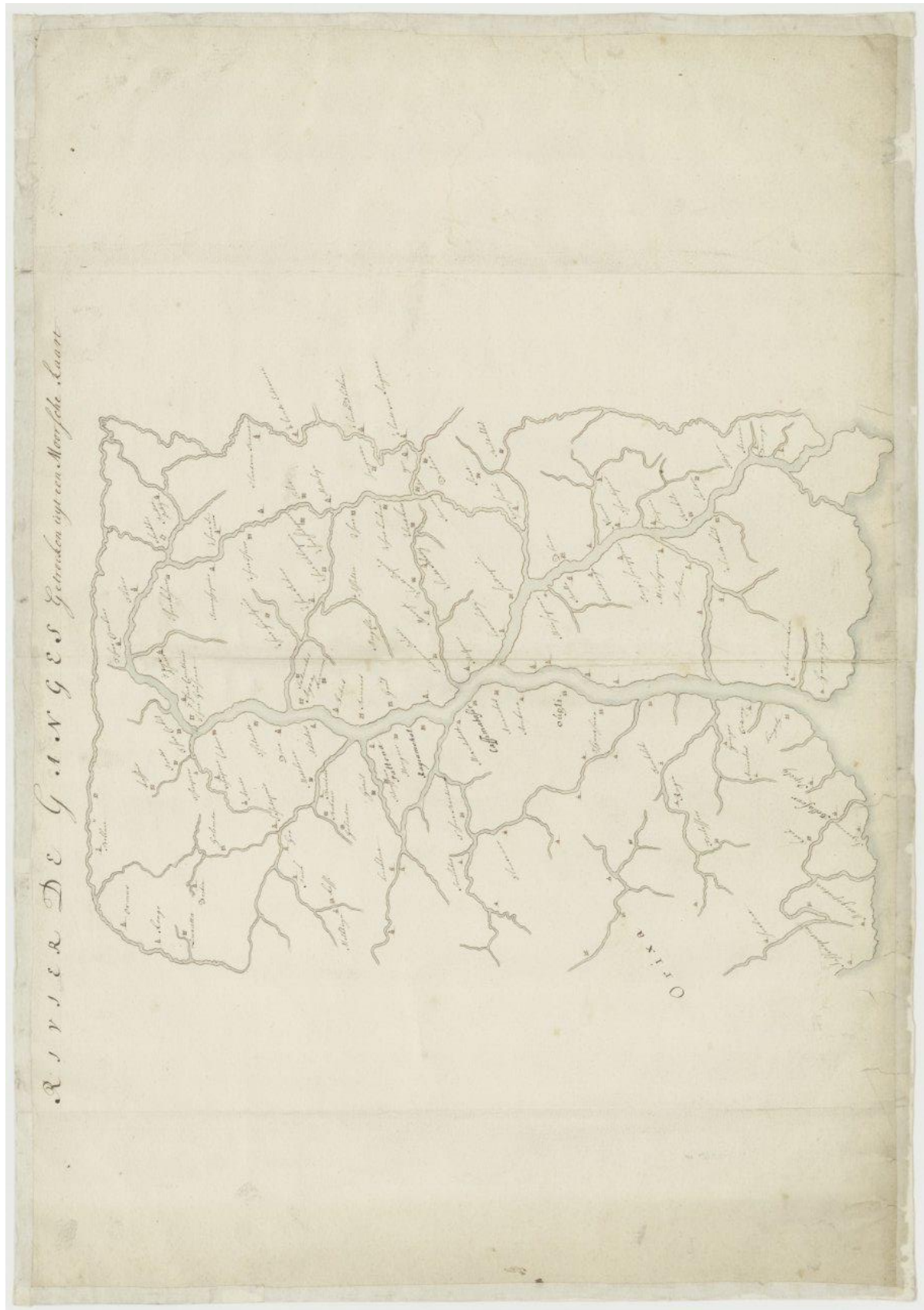
Fig 2: Map of the River Ganges in Bengal with its numerous tributaries, as copied from an Islamic map.
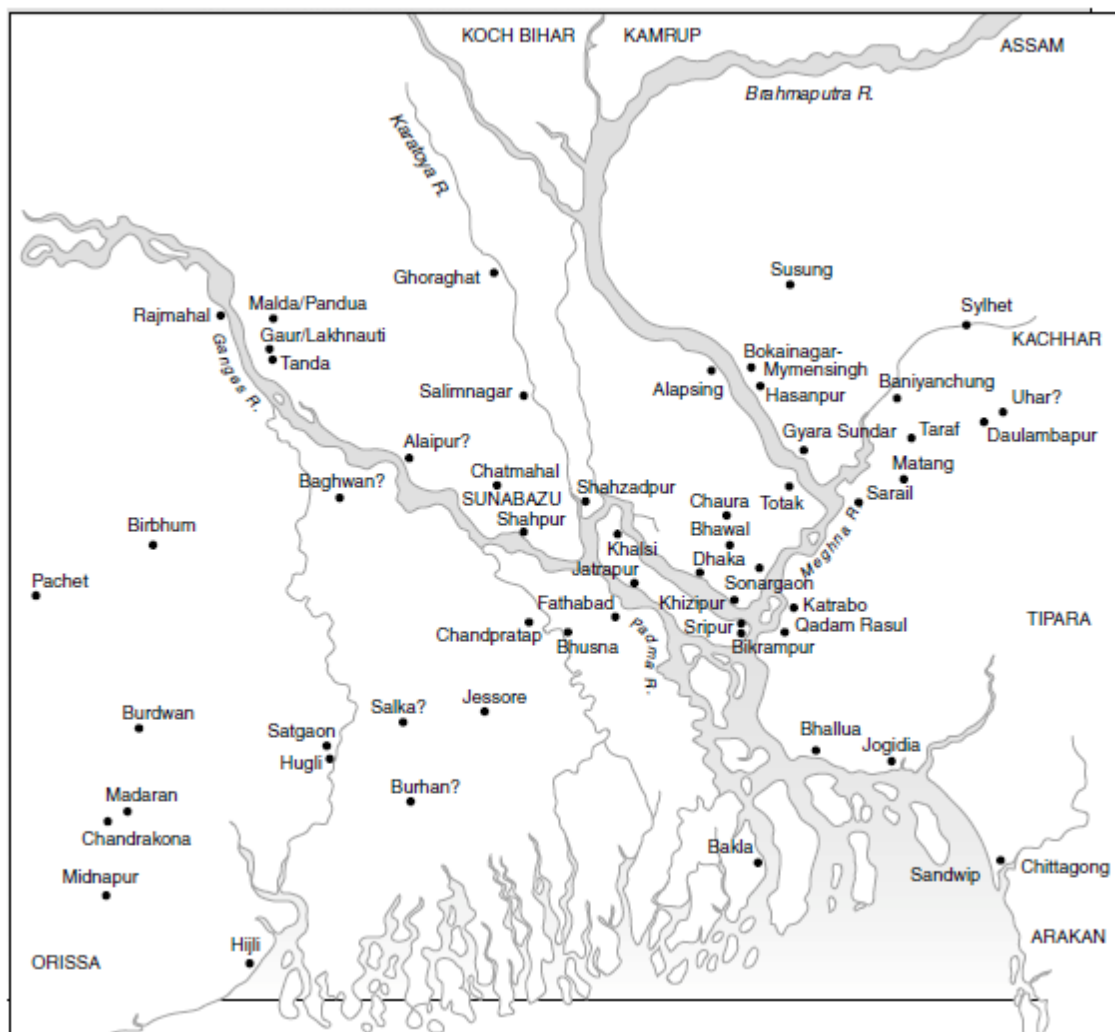NA, Kaarten Leupe, access number 4. VEL, inv. nr. 259.

Fig 3: The *subah* of Bengal as the 'Eastern Frontier' of the Mughal Empire. Reproduced from Gommans, *Mughal Warfare,* 170.

After Sher Shah's death in 1545, the Mughal throne was restored to Humayun but the Sur dynasty continued to rule briefly in Bengal before being taken over by the dynasties of Muhammad Shah and the Karranis. The last ruler, Daud Khan Karrani (also Afghan) faced Akbar's armies and was defeated in 1576, allowing Bengal's political annexation by the Mughal Empire in the sixteenth century. It finally led to the carving out of *subah* Bengal on the Mughal map while retaining its reputation as an 'extremity of Hindustan' that was therefore difficult to control from the Mughal heartlands (in the Delhi-Agra region).[12] The city of Gaur-Lakhnauti had been the political capital of Bengal for a long time, before the Mughals came in, while Tandah

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[12] Abu'l Fazl, *The Ain i Akbari*, ed. H.S. Jarrett, vol. 2, 115.

served as the capital of the Karranis. But Man Singh, the Mughal *subahdar* moved the capital to Rajmahal in 1595, established a fort and a mosque there and renamed it as Akbarnagar.[13] This conquest was further consolidated little by little, owing to the challenges posed by the riverine terrain of Bengal where the unaccustomed Mughal fleet had to manoeuvre carefully to capture the capital at the head of the delta. Politically, thus, this province was known for displaying its independent character by having successful regional kingdoms in power for centuries, even before it was added to the Mughal dominions.

Added to these geo-political specificities and the independent streak of Bengal, there was also the presence of a large number of local political forces. Described as *zamindars*, which was the common term used for such regional potentates in the Mughal documents, they had ownership rights over villages called *zamindari* and jurisdiction over the rural inhabitants living there (see p. 136 for more information on *zamindars* in Bengal).[14] As such, bringing the province of Bengal under control meant having to contend with these regional *zamindars* and their administrative world. But the *zamindars* of Bengal were a group of well-entrenched overlords who could in no way be be uprooted or ignored by the Mughals. Some of them clashed with the Mughal administrators from time to time during their existence in the seventeenth century. The local *zamindars* called the *Bara Bhuyians* (12 landlords), for examples, resisted shortly after the conquest of Bengal under Akbar. Their 'rebellion' was eventually crushed around 1608 under Emperor Jahangir. This entire Mughal expedition in the trenches and waterways of Bengal has been recorded in detail by Mirza Nathan, the son of the then *subahdar* of Bengal, Islam Khan Chishti, in his *Baharisthan-i-Ghaybi*.[15] After this victory in 1612, Islam Khan was appointed as the

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[13] For Tandah, see *Banglapedia.org.*

[14] Habib, *The Agrarian System of Mughal India 1556-1707*, 173–74.

[15] Mirza Nathan, *Baharistan-i-Ghaybi: A History of the Mughal Wars in Assam, Cooch Behar, Bengal, Bihar and Orissa during the Reigns of Jahangir and Shahjahan*, ed. Rai Bahadur S.K. Bhuyan, trans. M.I. Borah, vol. 1 and 2 (Gauhati: Government of Assam in the Department of Historical and Antiquarian Studies, 1936); Gommans, *Mughal Warfare: Indian Frontiers and High Roads to Empire, 1500-1700*, 170–78.

subahdar of the region and he established his capital in Dhaka.[16] But Mughal Bengal could never entirely be a stable area and fresh expeditions again had to be launched here against the Arakan raids in the eastern part of the region (Bhati) at the time of the *subahdars*, Mir Jumla and Shaista Khan. Towards the closing years of the seventeenth century, further resistance was offered around 1696 at the time of Ibrahim Khan's tenure as the Mughal *subahdar* by Shobha Singh (debatedly either the *ijaradar* of the villages under Krishnaram Ray's Burdwan-*zamindari* or a petty *zamindar* from Chandrakona in Midnapore) who was allied with the Afghan chief, Rahim Khan.[17] This, too, was eventually curbed. But by the eighteenth century, Bengal had inevitably cut itself loose from the Mughal centre leading to the emergence of its independent *nizamat* with several powerful *zamindars*.

In addition to these active local forces, Mughal control was also challenged by an fluid and vast commercial setting. Bengal already enjoyed an enviable economic position in the Indian Ocean trading world prior to the seventeenth century.[18] Thanks to its numerous rivers and water channels, the maritime space of Bengal kept being 'frequented by a large number of East African, West Asian, South Asian, South-East Asian and Chinese merchants, shippers, sailors and pilgrims.'[19] It was reason enough to attract many foreign merchants who had to work alongside the Mughal merchant-administrators with their commercial enterprises there in the seventeenth century. More information on this will be provided in the next section. But besides these Mughal

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[16] For Dhaka, see *Banglapedia.org.*

[17] See under Shobha Singh in *Banglapedia.org.*

[18] Ranabir Chakravarti, "Early Medieval Bengal and the Trade in Horses: A Note," *Journal of Social and Economic History of the Orient* 42, no. 2 (1999): 194–211; B.N. Mukherjee, "Coastal and Overseas Trade in Pre-Gupta Vanga and Kalinga," in *Trade in Early India*, ed. Ranabir Chakravarti (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2001), 199–227; Ian Glover, *Early Trade between India and South-East Asia: A Link in the Development of a World Trading System* (Hull: The University of Hull, Centre for South-East Asian Studies, 1989); Kenneth R. Hall, "Ports-of-Trade, Maritime Diasporas, and Networks of Trade and Cultural Integration in the Bay of Bengal Region of the Indian Ocean, c. 1300-1500," *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 53, no. 1 (2010): 109–45; Rila Mukherjee, "Ambivalent Engagements: The Bay of Bengal in the Indian Ocean World," *The International Journal of Maritime History* 29, no. 1 (Feb. 2017): 96–110; Sanjay Subrahmanyam, "Of Imârat and Tijârat: Asian Merchants and State Power in the Western Indian Ocean, 1400-1750," *Comparative Studies in Social History* 37, no. 4 (Oct. 1995): 757.

[19] Ranabir Chakravarti, "An Enchanting Seascape: Through Epigraphic Lens," *Studies in History* 20, no. 2 (Aug. 2004): 306.

merchant-administrators, the local mercantile domain of Bengal was also populated with merchants of different ranks and types – right from the petty peddlers to intermediate brokers to powerful merchants with political allies.[20] There were not just Bengali-speaking but also Gujarati- and 'Hindusthani'-speaking merchants who had lived for generations in this region.[21] Many non-Muslim Bengali merchants also operated here as is evident from their presence as protagonists in the *Mangalkavya* literature.[22] The *Mangal* poems might deal with fictional content, but they reflect the commercial ambience and the socio-economic background of their times. These poems contain many ample examples of independent merchants like Dhanapati or Chand Sadagar with vivid descriptions of their boats and merchandise. Dhanapati, as a merchant in the *Chandimangal,*

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[20] Om Prakash, "The Indian Maritime Merchant, 1500-1800," *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 47 (2004): 435–57; Ashin Das Gupta, "Changing Faces of the Maritime Merchant," in *Emporia, Commodities and Enterpreneurs in Asian Maritime Trade, c. 1400-1750*, eds. Roderich Ptak and Dietmar Rothermund (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1991), 353–62; Jos Gommans, "Trade and Civilization Around the Bay of Bengal, c. 1650-1800," *Itinerario* 19, no. 3 (Nov. 1995): 82–108.

[21] NL-HaNA, VOC, OBP, inv. nr. 1422, Translation of the extract from the account book of the merchant Gangedas Kissendas, written in the Gujarati language and his own testimony with a signature, done during his service for the Company's factory at Kassimbazaar, June, 1686: f. 1139r; Translation of the extracts by the merchant Konsiouw Respoet from his account book written in the Gujarati language in Kasimbazaar, dated 20 June, 1686: f. 1140r; Translation of the extracts from the account book of the Company's broker, Caljandas Herriwollop written in the Gujarati language in the factory of Kasimbazaar, dated 21 June, 1686: f. 1144r; Translation of the extracts from the account book of the Company's broker, Dernider written in the Gujarati language in the factory of Kasimbazaar: f. 1145v. Furber points out that the Bengali merchant, Hari Shah helped the Frenchman, Jean de St. Jacquy in financing a voyage from Balasore to Achin. See, Furber, "Asia and the West," 715.

[22] There were many non-Islamic merchants in Bengal who had strong religious associations with Vaishnavism and Shaivism. This is evident from the distinct Shaiva and Vaishnava names that they bore. A close examination of the names of the brokers working for the VOC in Bengal in the late seventeenth century, show clear influences of Vaishnavism among these classes. For example, there are a group of names like Krishan Ram Harihar (Kirsten Ramherriher), Gourikanto (Gaurikant), Hariram Harikrishan Radhakrishan (Heeriram Herrikirsten Radakirsten), Harikrishan Kattayan (Herriekisten Kaitneijn) which provide typical manifestations of the following of Gaudiya Vaishanavism of Chaitanya. Names of merchants like Shivram Shankar (Siveram Sancker) were inspired by Shaivite influences. See, NA, VOC, inv. nr. 1422: f. 1135r, f. 1143r, f. 1148r. For more on Vaishnavism and its mercantile connections in Bengal see, Tapan Raychaudhuri, *Bengal Under Akbar and Jahangir (* (Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1969), 119–91; Jadunath Sarkar, *Gaudiya Vaishnavism: Chaitanya's Life and Teachings (From His Contemporary Bengali Biography the Chaitanya-Charit-Amrita)* (Calcutta: Orient Longman, 1988); Eugenia Vanina, "The *Ardhakathanaka* by Banarasi Das: A Socio-Cultural Study," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain & Ireland* 5, no. 2 (July 1995): 218–19; Satish Chandra, *Medieval India: From Sultanat to the Mughals*, vol. I (New Delhi: Har-Anand Publications Pvt. Ltd., 1997), 247.

is described as sailing to Singhal (Ceylon) with his seven boats.[23] Such connections have been corroborated by historical evidence showing vibrant trading connections between Bengal and Ceylon in these years.[24] Chand Sadagar's mercantile journey in the *Manasamangal*, is traced along the banks of the important trading centres like Tribeni, Saptagram, Akna Mahesh (Srirampur), Betore, Farashdanga (Chandannagore) and so on.[25] The presence of traders from Bengal in other areas, was noted by travellers in several ports like that of Mocha, Masulipatnam, the Coromandel Coast, Malacca and other places.[26] As such, commerce in Bengal was a space where Muslim as well as non-Muslim and Bengali as well as non-Bengali speaking merchants participated at different levels of intra-Indian, inter-Asian and Afro-Indian trade within the Indian Ocean.

Notwithstanding the Mughal annexation of Bengal in 1576, this commercial vibrancy was allowed to exist and grow by incorporating it within the Mughal governing structure. Both Eaton and Rila Mukherjee pointed out the changes in the commercial setting of the region in connection with the shift of rivers from the western to the eastern part of the delta.[27] As agricultural settlements grew in the east, Mukherjee argued that the former trading connections of eastern Bengal with areas like Ava, China and the Arakan started becoming less. New water channels appeared, connecting the eastern rivers to the western ports that resulted in the intensification of trade in western Bengal. It added to the presence of a large number of merchants of different types in the western ports, a number of whom were also political actors. The Portuguese in Bengal, for instance, were known for their commercial and political

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[23] Mukundaram Chakraborty, *Kabikankan Chandi*, ed. Nilmoni Chakraborty (Kolkata: Bengali Printing Press, 1868), 119.

[24] J.A. van der Chijs, ed., *Dagh-Register gehouden int casteel Batavia vant passerende daer ter plaetse als over geheel Nederlandts-India, anno 1659-61* (Batavia, 's Gravenhage: Landsdrukkerij, Martinus Nijhoff, 1889), 76, 118; Prakash, *The Dutch East India Company and the Economy of Bengal* 29, 238; Prakash, 'The Indian Maritime Merchant, 1500-1800', 451.

[25] Narayan Deb, ed., *Padmapuran: Manasha-Mangal* (Calcutta: Calcutta University Press, 1947), 156–68.

[26] Tõme Pirés, *The Suma Oriental of Tomé Pires and The Book of Francisco Rodrigues*, vol. 3 (London: The Hakluyt Society, 1944), 92–93; Wouter Schouten, *De Oost-Indische voyagie van Wouter Schouten*, eds. Michael Breet and Marijke Barend-van Haeften (Zutphen: Walburg Pers, 2003), 366, 369.

[27] Richard M. Eaton, *The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier, 1204-1760* (Berkeley etc.: California University Press, 1993), 226-27; Mukherjee, *Strange Riches*, 59–60.

engagements with the local forces as well as the Mughal officials.[28] This 'amphibious' nature of Bengal – the active force of *zamindars* on land and the vast number of commercial actors on water – supported by its elusive geo-political landscape made it an increasingly volatile and problematic region for the Mughal Empire to control.[29] If this uncontrollability was the reason that led to this region being known for nurturing 'dissension' in the Mughal chronicles, it might be worth examining how 'dissension' came to be perceived in the Mughal administration. For this, it is essential to know the larger mechanism of Mughal administrative functioning and how Bengal fitted into the set-up.

The Mughal Administration

The Mughal Empire was founded in the sixteenth century and spanned a major part of the Indian subcontinent.[30] It started from the north west of the subcontinent and expanded eastwards towards Bengal and Assam. By the end of the seventeenth century, the empire had extended to the Deccan in the south and the Punjab in the west. The question of how such a large empire retained its control over all the provinces has given rise to a debate that originated in the late colonial times in British-India and continues to be a bone of contention in academia right to the present day.[31] There is a spectrum of different perspectives that revolve around the centrality of the Mughal state. Nationalist historians in the 1940s and 50s disagreed among themselves on the beneficial or ruinous impact of the Mughal rule in India but agreed with the Aligarh school of historians on the central power of the Mughal state. Pioneered by Irfan Habib in the 1960s, this school of historians enforced the image of a strong and centralised state

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[28] Faruqui, *The Princes*, 216; Sanjay Subrahmanyam, *Europe's India: World, People, Empires, 1500-1800* (Cambridge etc.: Harvard University Press, 2017), 286-90.

[29] For the relevance of the term 'amphibious' for littoral societies living in the liminal area between land and water see, Rila Mukherjee, *Strange Riches*, 39.

[30] I. H. Qureshi, "India Under the Mughals," in *The Cambridge History of Islam: The Indian Sub-Continent, South-East Asia, Africa and the Muslim West*, vol. II A (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), 35–66.

[31] Muzaffar Alam and Sanjay Subrahmanyam, "Introduction," in *The Mughal State, 1526-1750*, eds. Muzaffar Alam and Sanjay Subrahmanyam (Delhi: Oxford University Publishers, 1998), 3; Muzaffar Alam and Sanjay Subrahmanyam, *Writing the Mughal World: Studies on Culture and Politics* (New York etc.: Columbia University Press, 2012), 27–32.

extracting revenues ruthlessly from impoverished peasants.[32] However, this argument of a strong and organised Mughal state apparatus was countered by Stephen Blake at the end of the 1970s through his idea of a 'patrimonial' or 'household' bureaucracy. Taking Weber's theory of the ideal patrimonial-bureaucratic empire as a standard for describing the nature of many large empires, Blake argued that the Mughals too easily fitted into this model. Based on the information obtained from Abul Fazl's *Ain-i Akbari,* he concluded that – 'In its depiction of the emperor as a divinely-aided patriarch, the household as the central administration of a loosely structured group of men controlled by the Imperial household, and travel as a significant part of the emperor's activities', the Mughals deserved to be labelled as the quintessential 'patrimonial-bureaucratic' empire.[33]

The centralised state approach came to be questioned by more revisionist scholars, who revealed the weakness of the argument of a rock-solid central empire of the seventeenth century suddenly disintegrating into regional pieces in the eighteenth. Instead, alternative approaches were suggested for studying the Mughal Empire.[34]Alam and Subrahmanyam in 1998 penned down a summary of these approaches (comparative, systemic, spatial diversity from the south and the east, regional centralisation in the eighteenth century) and suggested that – (a) it would be useful to see the Mughal administration as a constantly evolving machinery rather than a static one, as much as (b) understanding that the empire expanded and adjusted itself to the dynamics of the regions annexed and appropriated to its dominions.[35] As revisionists focused their

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[32] Habib, *The Agrarian System of Mughal India.*

[33] Stephen P. Blake, "The Patrimonial-Bureaucratic Empire of the Mughals," *Journal of Asian Studies* 39, no. 1 (Nov. 1979): 94.

[34] Chetan Singh, "Centre and Periphery in the Mughal State: The Case of Seventeenth Century Punjab," *Modern Asian Studies* 22, no. 2 (May 1988): 299-318; C.A. Bayly, *Rulers,Townsmen and Bazaars: North Indian Society in the Age of British Expansion 1770-1870* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983); Muzaffar Alam, *The Crisis of Empire in Mughal North India: Awadh and the Punjab, 1707-48* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1986); André Wink, "Land and Sovereignty in India under the Eighteenth-Century Maratha Svarajya" (Phd diss. Leiden University, 1984).

[35] Alam and Subrahmanyam, "Introduction"; Sanjay Subrahmanyam, "A Tale of Three Empires: Mughals, Ottomans, and Habsburgs in a Comparative Context," *Common Knowledge* 12, no. 1 (Winter 2006): 66–92,

attention on the regional perspectives, Farhat Hasan extended it to Surat in his work published in 2004. In it, he argued that the strength of regional forces, exerted at the bottom, worked its way up to impact the Mughal administrative policies. Through his analysis of Surat, he showed how resources could be cut off and mobilised against the Mughals by the joint network of local merchants and kings, at a time that the region was put under a Mughal siege.[36] Harbans Mukhia in the same year introduced another dimension to this historiography by analysing the Mughals from a 'bottom-up', 'post-colonial' perspective.[37] He showed the different ways the Mughal Empire sought legitimacy at the court and its reflections in the popular cultures of the diverse regions of the empire. At the same time, he showed how the ideals of loyalty and patronage of the administrators were fluid enough to form a stable Mughal reign. It was this intersection between order and chaos (fluidity yet stability), Mukhia argued, that captured the totality of Mughal history. Munis Faruqui, in 2012, went back to the top-down approach, emphasising the factional aspect of the Mughal rule as one of the prominent factors for sustaining the empire.[38] By arguing that the personal networks of the princely households kept the notion of an indivisible Mughal state intact, he showed how a central authority worked in combination with factional politics. He in fact revisited André Wink's work where Wink argued that the sustenance of the Mughal state depended on the *mansabdari* system (more on this appears later in this chapter), which unleashed the mechanism of '*fitna*' meaning 'sedition' or 'rebellion' as the dominant form of control.[39] Although the royal chronicles condemned '*fitna*' in theory, Wink explained that *fitna* in practice was institutionalised by the Mughal Empire. It implied 'forging of alliances' and extraction of allegiance to the state through 'a mixture of coercion and conciliation'

Project MUSE; Sanjay Subrahmanyam, "The Mughal State – Structure or Process? Reflections on Recent Western Historiography," *The Indian Economic and Social History Review* 29, no. 3 (Sep. 1992): 291–321.

[36] Farhat Hasan, *State and Locality in Mughal India: Power Relations in Western India, c. 1572-1730* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

[37] Mukhia, *The Mughals of India*, 13.

[38] Munis Faruqui, *The Princes of the Mughal Empire, 1504-1719* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

[39] André Wink, *Akbar* (Oxford: OneWorld Publications, 2009), 71-76; Other words used for the meaning of '*fitna*' is 'insurrection caused by factionalism', 'chaos', 'dissension' or 'civil war'. See, Wink, "Land and Sovereignty," 19.

by intervening into 'existing local conflicts'.[40] The politics of *fitna* allowed the Mughal rulers to control their Empire by using conflicts that existed among their *mansabdars* (including Mughal princes) and regional power groups.

The framework of personal networks and factional politics definitely opened up a nuanced and new way of looking into the Mughal administration beyond blunt communal, class and nationalist analyses. However, it also at times entailed the risk of confining the understanding of Mughal Indian governance solely to terms of negotiations and personal alliances for administrative survival, albeit in conjunction with regional loyalties.[41] The factional approach needs to be analysed in the light of Alam and Subrahmanyam's contention of a growing formalisation of the Mughal administrative culture, with the *munshis* and their flourishing set of administrative ethos. Such developments, as Alam and Subrahmanyam argued, could already be discerned from the time of Shah Jahan's rule and became more conspicuous under Aurangzeb through his administrative policies.[42] Moreover, they also stressed the need to understand the nature of the Mughal administration as a constantly evolving and experimenting apparatus that adjusted to its diverse regional dynamics.[43] What seems to be evident from the existent historiography, therefore, is that the Mughal administration needs to be studied in the context of its theory and practice. There existed a precarious equilibrium between the way the Mughal emperors fashioned and refashioned themselves in theory, and their practice of delegating political power to their administrators in the provinces. It is in this context of the formal administrative theory and informal practices, therefore, that the Mughal *mansabdars* in Bengal has been studied.

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[40] Wink, "Land and Sovereignty," 21-2.

[41] J.C. Heesterman, "The Social Dynamics of the Mughal Empire: A Brief Introduction," *Journal of Economic and Social History of the Orient* 47, no. 3 (2004): 296; Dirk Kolff, "Retrospection," *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 47, no. 3 (2004): 459–60.

[42] Alam and Subrahmanyam, "Introduction," 31.

[43] Muzaffar Alam, "State Building Under the Mughals: Religion, Culture and Politics," *Cahiers d'Asie Centrale* 3, no. 4 (1997): 105–28.

Administrative Practices in Mughal Bengal

The governing machinery of the Mughals in practice, revolved around the informal mechanism of political factions and regional alliances in the seventeenth century. This mechanism was, however, made possible through the formal edifice of the *mansabdari* system. Initiated and implemented from the time of Akbar, the *mansabdari* system was developed further by the successive Mughal emperors.[44] Every noble or high official was granted a *mansab* determining his rank in the administrative hierarchy and was called a *mansabdar*.[45] *Mansabdars* were required to offer military support (contingents of mostly cavalry) to the emperor in times of need, in return for emoluments that were either received in cash from the imperial treasury or through the system of granting territorial assignments called *jagirs* throughout the empire. The revenue from these *jagirs* worked as the financial compensation for the *mansabdar,* and those entitled to such *jagirdaris* (land holdings) came to be known as *jagirdars*. It was also a common practice to sublet one's *jagir* to subordinate officials, who could also become *jagirdars*. For instance, *mansabdars* holding several *jagirs* in different places were not always residing in provinces where they had their *jagirs* and, therefore, sublet these land holdings to other intermediate *jagirdars*.[46] Apart from revenue collection, *jagirdars* were not bound to any other administrative or judicial functions in their *jagirs* and were also not obliged to reside there. *Jagirs* were temporary assignments and were subject to the emperor's final approval. In fact, the entire *mansabdari* system with appointment, allotment and assignment of *mansabs* was regulated by the emperor. A dual division of the *mansabdari* rank started off in Akbar's time with the intention of controlling and keeping the *sawar* (military contingent rank) under surveillance, that in turn, determined the *zat* rank (personal rank) of a *mansabdar*.[47] As Wink in fact summarised it, the *mansabdari* system allowed for the

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[44] Abul Fazl Allami, *The Ain i Akbari*, ed. H. Blochmann, vol. 1 (Calcutta: Asiatic Society of Bengal, 1873), 248–49.

[45] Habib, *The Agrarian System of Mughal India*, 310–11.

[46] Habib, 310–11; Alam and Subrahmanyam, "Introduction," 43–44.

[47] Gommans, *Mughal Warfare*, 85–86.

conversion of 'the rank, payment, and the military and other obligations of their holders (*mansabdars*) into exact numbers', ranging from 10 to 10,000, indicating the number of men that the *mansabdars* were to bring in.[48] This helped in keeping the persons with the largest military network under the ruler's control by entering them into high *mansabs*. With time, under the Emperors Jahangir and Shah Jahan, a third incentive called the *do-aspa-o-sih-aspa* was introduced to provide extra pay for larger contingents. These incentives, formalised through the *mansabdari* system, continued successfully and became more and more standardised, until by the time of Aurangzeb its very success became the cause of its crisis.

The *mansabdari* system connected all *mansabdars* to the emperor and kept them tied to his sovereign authority. With a large number of political actors stretched over the entire empire and a hierarchy of administrators created by this *mansabdari* system, the seeds of factionalism were inevitably sown in the Mughal administration. With cut-throat competition among the officials for promotion and better administrative positions, intrigues and court politics intensified. This politics in turn led to factional groups being formed among the administrators through patron-client ties (more about factionalism in the Mughal administration has been dealt with on p. 130). Although not officially sanctioned, political factions existed and operated under the formal façade of the Mughal *mansabdari* system. From the royal court to the provincial *subahs,* factionalism was present wherever the *mansabdari* system entrenched itself. But when it came to the regions or *subahs*, there was another difficulty that encountered the *mansabdari* system. Every province had their own local power magnates or *zamindars* (known by different names in different regions) who despite not being *mansabdars,* continued to coexist simultaneously with the Mughal administrators. In fact, as Habib shows, some of them could informally penetrate the *mansabdari* system and participate in it.[49] With the help of recommendations from Mughal nobles, certain *zamindars* in fact managed to climb the bureaucratic ladder and turn into *mansabdars*

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[48] Wink, *Akbar,* 71.

[49] Habib, *The Agrarian System of Mughal India*, 209–11.

(mostly Rajputs) holding *mansabs* in the seventeenth century.[50] Apart from this there were *ijaradars* or revenue-farmers who were also informally assigned villages by *mansabdars* in provinces to be farmed for revenue.[51] *Ijaradars* however had no jurisdiction over the villages leased out to them unlike the *zamindars* with their hereditary rights over their *zamindaris*. Neither the *zamindars* nor the *ijaradars* were officially part of the Mughal *mansabdari* system but they did exist and find ways of surviving in the formal Mughal administrative machinery.[52] The entire *mansabdari* system, in this way, theoretically connected the emperor, through formal or informal bonds, to all administrators in his empire from the top to the regional level. On one hand, it held the Mughal administrative factions together under one edifice and on the other hand, it created an informal Mughal-*zamindari* nexus at the regional level.

This makes us wonder what the world of these *mansabdars* looked like and on what basis were they selected to be appointed as Mughal administrators. A large number of the *mansabdars* constituted the group of professional administrators called *munshis* who were responsible for lending the Mughal administrative framework its unique character. The *munshis* were men trained rigorously from a young age in the Persian language and in other administrative and fiscal skills that were required for entering the administrative service of the Mughals. The *munshis* could vary from being very powerful administrators at the court, enjoying the highest level of *mansabs* like Abul Fazl under Emperor Akbar, to intermediate levels of provincial *munshi* families, trained in administrative skills and serving individual Mughal officials. A *munshi* could either hold a prominent *mansab* in the Mughal governing structure in the position of the *wazir,* the *diwan*, the *amin*, the *bakshi* and other such offices or intermediate positions in the provinces as revenue-farmers, military generals and court poets. These *munshis* were expected to be proficient in providing not just excellent services of the pen for their employers but were also to be skilful with their swords. Rajeev Kinra has focussed his study of such positions on the *munshis* in the

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[50] Gommans, *Mughal Warfare*, 68–69.

[51] Habib, *The Agrarian System of Mughal India*, 275-76.

[52] Habib*,* 274-75.

Mughal realm. Using the example of Chandar Bhan Brahmin, one of the most successful *munshis* of his time who served the Emperors Jahangir, Shah Jahan and Aurangzeb, Kinra has shown how these administrators were required to have basic military and bookkeeping skills along with a poetic flair and scholarly sophistication. It made some of them, to borrow Gommans' words, 'administrator-warriors' or 'officials-cum-soldiers' in the Mughal Empire.[53]

The middle-level *munshis* came from all backgrounds and despite being well-versed in Persian were still able to preserve their own religion or local language, on acquiring their positions.[54] Alam and Subrahmanyam have written about these *munshis* and their rigorous dedication in maintaining themselves as professional administrators, through several generations.[55] There were similar professional scribal families in western, northern and southern parts of India for which there have been meticulous researches done by Rosalind O'Hanlon and Sumit Guha.[56] On account of their combined functions, Kumkum Chatterjee also called them 'military-cum-revenue entrepreneurs'.[57] All of these scholarly works demonstrate that there was clearly a distinguished class of administrative elites with a characteristic education and training that flourished in the Mughal society. They served as the vanguards of the governing machinery in the seventeenth century. In the Mughal style of fragmented administration, they operated by combining their formal skills with their personal allegiances to become the ruling force of the empire. For the non-Muslims who wanted to make it to high offices, the position of the *munshi* was a coveted one as it opened up important political connections at the court and in the

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[53] Gommans, 42.

[54] Kumkum Chatterjee, "Scribal Elites in Sultanate and Mughal Bengal," *The Indian Economic and Social History Review* 47, no. 4 (Oct.-Dec. 2010): 464.

[55] Muzaffar Alam and Sanjay Subrahmanyam, "The Making of a Munshi," *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 24, no. 2 (2004): 64–70.

[56] Rosalind O' Hanlon and David Washbrook, "Introduction," *The Indian Economic and Social History Review* 47, no. 4 (Oct.-Dec. 2010): 441–43; Rosalind O' Hanlon, "The Social Worth of Scribes: Brahmins, Kayasthas and the Social Order in Early Modern India," *The Indian Economic and Social History Review* 47, no. 4 (Oct.-Dec. 2010): 563–95; Chatterjee, "Scribal Elites," 445–72; Sumit Guha, "Serving the Barbarian to Preserve the Dharma: The Ideology and Training of a Clerical Elite in Peninsular India, c. 1300-1800," *The Indian Economic and Social History Review* 47, no. 4 (Oct.-Dec. 2010): 497–525.

[57] Chatterjee, "Scribal Elites," 455.

provincial administration. It was also not uncommon for certain *munshis* to appropriate the surnames of their patrons as their own family names.[58] All *mansabdars* formally operating within the Mughal governing machinery were subject to the administrative ethos and etiquette prescribed by these *munshis,* which will be dealt with in the subsequent section. *Munshis*, thus, formed a vital part of the Mughal administration and the *mansabdari* system in the seventeenth century.

The *mansabdars* were not just political administrators but also integrally connected to trade and commerce. Ashin Das Gupta argued that the Mughal nobles 'flirted with commerce', while Chris Bayly and Subrahmanyam went on to propose the concept of 'portfolio-capitalism' for these merchant-officials.[59] They argued that the political administrators and the merchant magnates in India did not always exist in two estranged domains but were in fact often united in the same person of the 'portfolio-capitalist' who ran large enterprises, in addition to discharging their political duties. Satish Chandra focused further on the royal family to show how Mughal princes, queens and the emperors possessed several trading vessels and large ships and had extensive stakes in commerce.[60] Biographical case studies on individual Mughal nobles like Mir Jumla have also helped to explain this aspect further.[61] The *munshis* were known for their connections to the mercantile world. While Chandrabhan Brahmin wrote about the eminent merchants who belonged to his friendly circle; Banarasi Das as an ordinary merchant, talked about his deep friendship with the *subahdar* of Jaunpur, Chin Qilich Khan.[62] The Mughal

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[58] Muzaffar Alam and Sanjay Subrahmanyam, "The Making of a Munshi," *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 24, no. 2 (Aug. 2004): 65.

[59] Sanjay Subrahmanyam, "Introduction," in *The World of the Indian Ocean Merchant, 1500-1800: Collected Essays of Ashin Das Gupta* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 1–20; Sanjay Subrahmanyam and C.A. Bayly, "Portfolio Capitalists and the Political Economy of Early Modern India," *The Indian Economic and Social History Review* 25, no. 4 (Dec. 1988): 401–24.

[60] Satish Chandra, *Essays on Medieval Indian History* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2009), 227–34.

[61] Sarkar, *The Life of Mir Jumla, the General of Aurangzeb*.

[62] Rajeev Kumar Kinra, 'Secretary-Poets in Mughal India and the Ethos of Persian: The Case of Chandar Bhān Brahman' (PhD diss., University of Chicago, 2008), 18, 340; Banarasidas, *Ardhakathanak: A Half Story*, eds. Rohini Chowdhury and Rupert Snell (New Delhi: Penguin Books India, 2009), 191. One also encounters in the Mangal poems, the character of the merchant, Dhanapati who too takes an interest in reciting poetry and the

mansabdars as *munshis*, thus, simultaneously occupied the dual worlds of politics and commerce in the seventeenth century. To sum up the *mansabdari* system in Mughal India once more, it can be argued that this system linked all levels of administrators, formally or informally, to the emperor and his sovereign authority. The formal system was woven with the informal arrangement, which allowed it to retain factionalism and networks of regional forces in the provinces. Moreover, it also made the *mansabdars* a part of both the political and the commercial administrative worlds.

Given that this was the general structure of the Mughal administration, it is imperative to see how this functioned in the fluid and challenging space of Bengal. The Mughal regional politics in Bengal remained connected to the court politics at the centre to a certain extent through factions. Factionalism revolved around royal princes or prominent *mansabdars* who often held the position of *subahdar* and formed powerful links between the court and the province. But how did this factionalism work in the first place? Faruqui in his work, *The Princes of the Mughal Empire* has shown how the royal princes, as sons sharing the blood ties of the reigning emperor had to compete with each other as potential successors from a very young age. They were expected to develop their own princely households with their political allies. Every noble, every woman in the harem, every servant and soldier had to choose to join one of these princely households and prove their allegiance to their patron, besides serving the emperor simultaneously. During a succession dispute, these men and women in the princely factions had to provide their support with military and financial aid (directly or indirectly) for their chosen princes, so that the princes as possible successors could return the benefits received as soon as they became the next emperor. This was such an intricate process, that to borrow Faruqui's words – 'the best "networked" prince inevitably emerged as the next Mughal emperor'.[63] He argued that the balance in an efficient administration was therefore maintained through these

mention of the land of Dhanapati's king as being well known for its study of poetry. See, Kavikankan Mukundaram Chakravarti, *Chandimangal*, trans. Edward M. Yazijian (Haryana: Penguin Random House India, 2015), 145.

[63] Faruqui, *The Princes,* 10.

patronage and friendship relations which ensured the interdependency of the officials on each other, including the ruler himself.

Beyond the emperor and the princes, the high ranking *mansabdars* too had their own political factions. They built strategic alliances by offering patronages to aspiring sons of nobles and others willing to enter the Mughal service. It required them to put forward recommendations for these men to the emperor. While talking about the types of letters and the epistolary modes of Mughal administration, Chandar Bhan wrote about his delight as a *munshi* in writing recommendation letters to help his acquaintances to get a job.[64] That this was common practice is also evidenced by the formal rules for appointment in certain posts that required recommendations, before being confirmed by the imperial order. Abdullah Khan Firuz-Jang wrote to the Emperor Jahangir with a list of recommendations for his servants who accompanied him to suppress the rebellion of the Rana.[65] Likewise, Iftikar Khan was promoted after the *subahdar* of Bengal sent in his recommendation to the emperor.[66] Patronage relations were, therefore, indispensable to acquiring a position in the Mughal administration.

But within this administrative setting, family also conveyed a sense of political solidarity. There are hundreds of such examples where fathers, sons, grandsons, uncles, nephews, cousins and sons-in-laws worked as colleagues in the imperial service, though they often occupied different hierarchical positions. Raja Man Singh's nephew, Madho Singh was granted an office by Jahangir.[67] Baz Bahadur was employed on account of his father, Nizam's reputation as being an efficient librarian during Humayun's rule.[68] Mirza Aziz Koka's son-in-law was Prince Khusrau and all of them were tied to the royal administration.[69] It would be an exhausting task to name all, but it suffices to say that nobody could have made a career at court without familial political

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[64] Kinra, "Secretary-Poets in Mughal India", 104.
[65] Rogers and Beveridge, *The Tuzuk-i-Jahangiri*, 177.
[66] Rogers and Beveridge, 177.
[67] Rogers and Beveridge, 17.
[68] Rogers and Beveridge, 21.
[69] Rogers and Beveridge, 80–81.

connections.[70] What is interesting though, is that the concept of the *family* as a political unit remained a relatively looser and more flexible entity in Mughal India than its Dutch counterpart. Being part of the royal family, in itself, did not always imply connections established through blood ties with the emperor, supported by the obligation of unquestioning loyalty. Political opponents could be members of the same family fighting each other for power and positions. For instance, fathers, brothers and sons, although related by blood, could nevertheless belong to rival factions in the administration. Mirza Nathan not only received Islam Khan's recommendation for an administrative position but also offered his help in annexing Bengal despite his father, Ihtimam Khan's temporary clash with the latter (Islam Khan).[71] Mirza Shah Nawaz Khan, who was Aurangzeb's father-in-law did not support Aurangzeb in his war against his brother, Dara Shukhoh. Later, he fought for Dara Shukhoh at Ajmer, despite having no blood ties with the latter.[72] When princes within the royal family set the example of murdering their own brothers and the emperors imprisoned their 'rebellious' sons, one could imagine that families represented political units but were not the epitome of trust within the Mughal Empire.

At the same time, there were instances when the bond of ink proved thicker than that of blood. A Mughal *munshi* could sometimes gain greater proximity to his patron than those belonging to the patron's direct bloodlines. The emperor, for example, could verbally extend his royal family to such an extent that he could embrace as many people as possible within its fold. This ensured that his favourites remained close to him and also were marked out with a high honour for their loyalty. Akbar called his *wazir*, Bairam Khan, *baba* (father) since his childhood days and continued to do so even after being made emperor.[73] Jahangir trusted Islam Khan, his foster cousin with the *subah* of Bengal and called him his *farzand* (son), even though he was

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[70] It should be made clear here that anybody with the required skills from any ethnic or religious background could enter the political system. But they had to do it through the recommendations of their patrons by subscribing to the patronage system.

[71] Nathan, *Baharistan-i-Ghaybi*, 1:38, 51.

[72] Jadu Nath Sarkar, ed., *Ahkam-i Alamgiri (Anecdotes of Aurangzib): Persian Text, with an English Translation, Notes and a Life of Aurangzib* (Calcutta: M.C. Sarkar & Sons, 1912), 48–49.

[73] Mukhia, *The Mughals of India*, 54.

actually the son of Jahangir's foster-brother.[74] Aurangzeb, too, addressed Mir Jumla, his *wazir* as

baba while Akbar had equal regards for his foster-mother, Jiji Anaga as for his own mother,

Hamida Banu.[75] Shah Jahan after attaining the throne with the help of one of his loyal nobles,

Yamin al-Daula Asaf Khan addressed him affectionately as his *ammu* (uncle).[76] Redefining

relations that were distant by blood but closer in terms of loyalty with personal titles like that of

farzand (son), *ammu* (uncle) or *koka* (foster-brother) was an indication that one was gaining entry

into the royal administration and household.

This labyrinth of factional relations, emanating from the higher courtly level, percolated

down to the provincial level of Bengal. The Mughal emperors always sent their trusted high-

ranking *mansabdars* to govern the province as *subahdars*. Man Singh was the *subahdar* under Akbar,

Islam Khan Chishti. Ibrahim Khan and Mahabat Khan were prominent *mansabdars* under

Jahangir. Mir Jumla and Shaista Khan were powerful *mansabdars* during the reign of Aurangzeb.

On their recommendation, other *mansabdars* were also given important positions in the Mughal

administration of Bengal. At Islam Khan's request, for example, Jahangir increased the *mansab*

rank of Iftikar Khan in Bengal.[77] It was also at his request that the rank of Ghiyas Khan, a

mansabdar in Bengal was increased to 1500/800 with the conferring of the title of Inayat Khan in

1609.[78] Mirza Nathan was requested by another *mansabdar*, Shah Quli Khan in Orissa to appoint

someone for maintaining a cavalry of 5000. Nathan then appointed his official, Bhimsen as the

bakshi of this *mansab*, which was further sanctioned by the emperor.[79] Besides, connecting

Mughal officials in the province, it also acted as the link between the local political forces and the

Mughal administrators in the region. *Zamindars* and other administrative elites in Bengal, for

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[74] Islam Khan had no direct blood ties to Jahangir, as he was family to Jahangir's foster mother. See, Beveridge, *The Akbarnāma of Abu'l-Fazl*, III:142–43.

[75] Mukhia, *The Mughals of India*, 54–55.

[76] Mukhia, 54.

[77] Wheeler M. Thackston, ed., *The Jahangirnama: Memoirs of Jahangir, Emperor of India* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999)*,* 113.

[78] Nathan, *Baharistan-i-Ghaybi,* 2: 796.

[79] Nathan, 2: 744.

example, could align themselves with certain Mughal factions and enter the Mughal administrative world as *munshis* by paying their allegiance to powerful *mansabdars*.[80] Bhabeshwar Simha, a *munshi* working for the *subahdar* of Bengal also became the *zamindari* of Chanchra in the seventeenth century for helping the Mughals.[81] Raja Narayan Mal Ujjainiya, a *zamindar* from Bihar (which was then part of *subah* Bengal) became a Mughal *mansabdar* for having helped Shah Jahan with his rebellion in his princely days as Khurram.[82] On the recommendation of Islam Khan under Jahangir, Raja Kalyan became incorporated into the Mughal administration by acquiring a position in the *sarkar* of Orissa for a *mansab* rank of 200/200.[83] These factional ties that created *zamindar*-cum-*munshis* at the provincial level also helped strengthen the Mughal-*zamindari* nexus in Bengal, and helped sustain the region within the Mughal Empire. The administrative world of Bengal thus consisted of powerful *mansabdars*, high-ranking *munshis* as well as middle-level *munshi* families, several *zamindars* and other active local forces. The Mughal emperor had to be vigilant therefore to keep a control over this mosaic of administrators in this region. A vast number of Mughal *mansabdars* in fact worked in Bengal and their offices changed, evolved or were often combined in the same person.[84] The basic offices for general administration consisted of the provincial *subahdar* (governor of a *subah*), *faujdar* (superintendent of troops or police), *karori* (the chief revenue collector), *kotwal* (police and prosecutor), *diwan* (chief financial officer), *qazi* (Mughal judge), who had to work under a similar set of chief administrators at the Mughal court. Bengal, also, had special positions like that of the *gomashtas* (appointed by higher nobles for collecting market dues) in the Mughal political set-up. It was this group of *mansabdars* who had to coordinate their administration in Bengal with the regional political forces and the local networks. This *mansabdar-zamindar* alliance in the provinces were

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[80] Kumkum, "Scribal Elites," 460.

[81] Kumkum, 455.

[82] Faruqui, *The Princes*, 211.

[83] Nathan, *Baharistan-i-Ghaybi*, 2: 797.

[84] M. P. Singh, *Town, Market, Mint and Port in the Mughal Empire, 1556-1707* (New Delhi: Adam Publishers and Distributors, 1985), 41, 51, 96.

kept in check by a bevy of superior officials like the royal *wazir*, the chief *diwan*, *qazi*, *karori* and other administrators at the centre who kept an eye on and co-ordinated the activities of their subordinates in the provinces. Besides this, a host of other administrators like the *waqai-nawis* (news-writers), *harkaras* (spies), *sawanih-nigars* (reporters) and *daks* (runners) were sent frequently to the provinces to report about the governance of the *subah* to the central administration of the Mughal emperor.[85] In the midst of multiple factional links, these check and balances were aimed to preserve an appropriate share of power between the centre and the Mughal administrators in Bengal.

But the most widespread group within the *mansabdari* system were the *munshis* who worked for the Mughal administration in Bengal. They were often synonymous with the term *Kayasthas* as a group who stuck to this profession and were already present from the pre-Mughal generations, before embracing with alacrity the new form of Mughal political training to enter its service.[86] Their prompt response to the Mughal administrative demands by learning Persian and adapting to the changing situation, gave them the image of a clever and quickly adaptable group of professionals. In the local *Mangalkavya* literature of Bengal, one can get plenty of examples of this group and their relations with the Mughals. The *Chandimangal* captures the quintessential image of a *munshi* in Bengal in a humorous manner. While in one place, a *Kayastha* (the group that were in this profession for so long that they almost became synonymous with a *munshi*) is described as someone with 'a pen tucked behind his ear and inkpot in hand' recording accounts on paper, at another place (in a metaphorical discussion) the panegyrist of the lion king in the jungle is said to be the clever jackal with his diplomatic and witty countenance as a *munshi*.[87]Such

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[85] Gommans, *Mughal Warfare*, 93.

[86] Chatterjee, "Scribal Elites," 454. A good example is furnished by the case of Devidas Khan, of the Barendra Kayastha community who served Daud Khan Karrani, the last Afghan sultan of Bengal, and was also associated with the subsequent Mughal administration. Chatterjee, *The Cultures of History in Early Modern India*, 80.

[87] The *Chandimangal* is a text belonging to the genre of the *Mangalkavya* poems, where the protagonist is a devotee of the goddess Chandi (the snake god). See, Kavikankan Mukundaram Chakravarti, *Chandimangal*, trans. Edward M. Yazijian (Haryana: Penguin Random House India, 2015), 113.

characterisations emanated from their acquiescent nature to learn and adapt quickly to new rulers and new administrative needs which further led them to attain an elevated status in society. For when Kalketu (the fictional ruler of Bengal) chided his dishonest minister Bhangru Dutta in the *Chandimangal*, his words were – 'You make everyone call you a *Kayastha*…but (you) are actually a Rajput. You are a person of low class with a desire for high status and are not worthy to be my servant.'[88] Most of these families that worked as administrators for the Mughals were, however, not spared from military duties. The aforementioned Bhabeshwar Simha, who secured a revenue-military post under the Mughal *subahdar* of Bengal, distinguished himself in the Mughal military action against Raja Pratapaditya of Jessore. In return, he got to keep four *parganas* and the title of '*chowdhury*' which later formed the basis for his *zamindari* in Chanchra. Bhabeshwar's descendants also continued to serve the Mughals in various capacities in subsequent years.[89] It is again from Mukundaram (the author of *Chandimangal*) that one gets an insight into the surnames of certain families of *Kayasthas* who served as accountant-administrators in Bengal like the Ghosh, Basu, Mitra, Pal, Nandi, Sinha, Sen, Datta, Das, and other such clans.[90] These *munshi* families in Bengal brought the Mughal *mansabdars* and their political factions closer to the local administrative elites .

As mentioned earlier, it was not uncommon for these *munshis* (middle-level scribal elites) to acquire *zamindari* rights in Bengal, thus forming an overlapping regional bond. The '*zamindars*' in Bengal encompassed a group of local overlords from various origins. They could either be autonomous chiefs at the 'frontiers', or simply those with exclusive *zamindaris* ranging from big to petty landlords in the province. *Zamindari* rights were mostly hereditary and were also open to sale and purchase. The *zamindars* as the regional power magnates were indispensable to the Mughal administrators for several reasons. At the same time, they thrived on Mughal recognition and were simultaneously obliged to pay their allegiance to the Mughal emperor. In this relation,

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[88] Chakravarti, 163.
[89] Kumkum Chatterjee, "Scribal Elites," 455.
[90] Cited in Chatterjee, *The Cultures of History in Early Modern India*, 94.

both tried to administer Bengal together at different levels while retaining their respective character and power. The *zamindars* alone could either facilitate or make it difficult for the Mughal administrators to access the depths of the Bengali countryside. The local rulers, *zamindars* or chieftains controlled their own region and people and levied *bankar* (forest tax) and *jalkar* (water tax) as actual taxes in the areas of their *zamindari*.[91] They were also the ones who contributed to the performing of civic duties voluntarily, resulting in a number of tanks and *bandhs* (embankments) being built for facilitating agriculture in drought prone areas.[92] While the Mughal *subahdars* tried to control the major trade routes and urban centres, they still remained dependent on these *zamindars* for the local administration of Bengal and for revenue collection.[93] Unlike other Mughal provinces, in Bengal (much like Bihar and Gujarat), instead of revenue assessments, fixed annual claims were made by the local *zamindars* based on the information of the *qanungos* (intermediate *pargana* level revenue administrators) working there.[94] In the Mughal revenue set-up, the *jagirs* were assigned by *jagirdars* to officials called *amils* who in turn were not allowed to forge local ties with the *zamindars*. To mediate between these *amils* and the *zamindars*, a

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[91] Habib, *The Agrarian System of Mughal India 1556-1707*, 181. To get an idea about the presence of dense forests and the river system in Bengal see Habib's economic map of Bengal (Plate 11B). Habib, *An Atlas of the Mughal Empire: Political and Economic Maps with Detailed Notes, Bibliography and Index.*

[92] Rachel Fell McDermott, *Mother of My Heart, Daughter of My Dreams: Kālī and Umā in the Devotional Poetry of Bengal* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 17–20; Momtazur Rahman Tarafdar, *Husain Shahi Bengal, 1494-1538 A.D.: A Socio-Political Study* (Dacca: Asiatic Press, 1965), 125. For an overview of the *zamindari* duties in the localities of Bengal see, Chatterjee, *The Cultures of History in Early Modern India*, 233–34.

[93] Alam and Subrahmanyam, "Introduction," in *The Mughal State*, 39–46.

[94] The creation of the *subah*, *sarkar* and *pargana* as administrative units was integrally connected with the system of revenue assessment and appropriation. The revenue of all areas under the Mughal administration were normally assigned as payment for its governing class. Territorial units called *jagirs* (or less commonly used *iqta* or *tuyul*) were divided among the nobles for revenue appropriation, who would then become temporary holders of these *jagirs*, known as *jagirdars*. There could be numerous *jagirs* within a particular *subah* of the Mughal empire. Besides these units, there were lands that waited to be assigned as *jagirs* called *paibaqi* and lands called *in'-am* that were granted to nobles without any obligation for payment (reward). The other important areas were the *khalisa-i sharifa* lands which were territories or sources of revenue reserved directly for the royal treasury. All of these lands were mostly assessed during harvest at their crop rates (*rai*) to determine their *jama* (standing revenue assessed). The actual amount collected was called *hasil* and this entire process of revenue administration was known as the *zabti* system. For this enormous task of revenue assessment and appropriation across all areas of the Mughal empire, a huge number of administrators like the *amil*, the *fotadar*, the *karkun* etc. were employed at *pargana* levels. They all worked under the supervision of the *karori* (the chief revenue collector) of a *subah* who in turn worked with the *faujdar*, the *kotwal*, the *diwan* and others under the control of the *subahdar*. See, Habib, *The Agrarian System of Mughal India 1556-1707*, 300.

second layer of local revenue administrators called the *qanungos* was created.[95] Most of the times these *qanungos* had hereditary status and came from the accountant class of *Kayastha*s or *Khatris* who served as *munshis* for the Mughal administration. The *qanungos* were a part of the Mughal revenue machinery and therefore their appointment and removal were officially subjected to the emperor's ratification. In Bengal, they were the ones who were responsible for providing information about the assessed revenue (*jama*) and thereby had the opportunity to form alliances with either the local *zamindars* against the *amils* and their agents, or with the provincial *faujdar* to hinder the process of revenue exaction.[96] There were significant other exceptions that applied to Mughal Bengal, when it came to the administration of revenue collection.[97] What is important though is the informal alliances that were developed through this dependency of the Mughal administrators on the local *zamindars*. Since the *zamindars* paid tribute themselves and helped in collecting the revenue for the Mughal administrators, their help was crucial to the political sustenance of the Mughals in Bengal.[98]

The *zamindars*, on the other hand, also sought approval and acceptance of their authority from their Mughal overlords. The *rajas* of Nadia, the *zamindars* of Burdwan were among the few *zamindaris* that began emerging from the late seventeenth century onwards in Mughal Bengal and became more prominent later under Murshid Quli Khan, as the *nawab* of the eighteenth-century Bengali *nizamat*.[99] There were also new *zamindars* who emerged in the seventeenth century like the *rajas* Srihari and Janakiballabh in Jessore, on the southern part of Bengal.[100] The Mughal-*zamindari* regional accord was crucial for garnering military labour from this area in times of

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[95] Habib, 331–37.

[96] Habib, 336.

[97] Habib, 309, 215–17.

[98] Habib, 217.

[99] Rachel Fell McDermott, *Revelry, Rivalry, and Longing for the Goddesses of Bengal: The Fortunes of Hindu Festivals* (Columbia: Columbia University Press, 2011), 17. John R. McLane points out about the thinness of information about *zamindars* in Bengal in the Persian sources of seventeenth century Mughal India. See, John R. McLane, *Land and Local Kingship in Eighteenth-Century Bengal* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 159.

[100] Chatterjee, *The Cultures of History in Early Modern India*, 30.

need.[101] To be able to garner this support, the Mughal administration incorporated the *zamindars* informally in their *mansabdari* arrangement through certain incentives. According to a passage in the *Fathiya-i Ibriyya,* claimants to the throne of Arakan who sided with the Mughals during Shaista Khan's Chittagong expedition, were said to have hoped for something, at least: 'If they could not become *rajas,* they might become *zamindars*; if not *zamindars,* then *ta'alluqdars*.'[102] Instances of *zamindars* working for the Mughal administration by helping the *qanungo* or functioning as the *wakil* are recorded frequently in the genealogical charts called *kulagranthas* of high-status Bengali Brahmins (as *zamindars*) and Kayasthas (*munshis*).[103] One comes across at times even rare examples of *zamindars* taking pride in wedding alliances with lineages of Muslim noblewomen or the Barendra Brahmins as powerful *zamindars* trying to copy the elite Muslim customs, manners and lifestyle.[104]

Despite resting on a precarious balance of power, the fact that this Mughal-*zamindari* nexus in Bengal was successful to some extent is evident from the positive characterisation of the Mughals in contemporary Bengali literature. The Mughal *subahdar* of Bengal, Raja Man Singh and a few other *mansabdars* were hailed as *nawabs* in Bengal and have often found a favourable place in the local literature and folk tales, owing to their patronage of Vaishnava temples and small mosques in this region.[105] The regular vocabulary of the Bengali literary productions in the seventeenth century also included several Mughal words. Owing to the training of several *munshis* and *zamindars* in Persian, many Arabic and Persian words such as the Mughal administrative terms of '*sarkar*', '*pargana*' and so on snuggled comfortably into the Bengali vocabulary.[106] On their part, the Mughal administrators too did their best to accommodate the specificities of the *zamindars* and their political culture. Most of them participated visibly in the local festivities like

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[101] Gommans, *Mughal Warfare*, 170–78.

[102] Habib, *The Agrarian System of Mughal India*, 212. For the history of the book see under *Fathiya-i-Ibriyya* or the *Tarikh-i Assam* in Bangalpedia.org.

[103] Chatterjee, *The Cultures of History in Early Modern India*, 80.

[104] Chatterjee, 81–82.

[105] Atish Dasgupta, "Islam in Bengal: Formative Period," *Social Scientist* 32, no. 3/4 (2004): 30–41.

[106] Chatterjee, *The Cultures of History in Early Modern India*, 133–39.

that of the raft ceremony called *Bera Bhashan*.[107] They provided room for the continuation of vernacular literature in Bengali. The Bengali poet, Alaol who hailed from Gaur and moved to Arakan, was known for receiving generous patronage from the king for composing poems in a mixture of languages producing the '*Musalmani Bangala*' form.[108] Daily conversations, too, were carried out in vernaculars and an ambience developed where Bengali authors composing Brahmanic texts were also fluent in Persian.[109] The Mughal administrators also allowed the customary laws and other parallel forms of local judicial dispensations in Bengal to be adhered to, although as Nandini Chatterjee pointed out, most of all the major civil and criminal cases were registered at the Mughal *qazi's* court.[110] It showed that the state of plural jurisdiction where the *zamindars* held on to the jurisdiction over their own *zamindaris* while also being subject to the jurisdiction of the Mughal *qazi* in the province. The *zamindars* in Bengal, on their part, accepted the Mughal authority but retained their local world within it. The fluidity and complexity of this administrative situation of Bengal – that was Mughal and yet local – is best evident from a reference in the *Mangalchandir Geet* composed by Madhabacharya in the 1640s. The author here

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[107] Rila Mukherjee, "Putting the Rafts out to Sea: Talking of "Bera Bhashan" in Bengal," *Transforming Cultures* 3, no. 2 (2008): 125.

[108] David L. Curley, "A Historian's Introduction to Reading *Mangal-kabya*," in *Poetry and History: Bengali Mangal-kabya and Social Change in Precolonial Bengal,* ed. David L. Curley (Washington: Western Washington University), 15; Thibaut d'Hubert, 'Pirates, Poets, and Merchants: Bengali Language and Literature in Seventeenth-Century Mrauk-U,' in *Culture and Circulation: Literature in Motion in Early Modern India*, eds. Thomas de Bruijn and Allison Busch (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2014), 47–74.

[109] Bharatchandra Ray, the composer of the Annadamangal was thoroughly versed in Persian see, Sribrajendranath Bandyopadhyay and Srisajanikanto Das, "Introduction," in *Bharatchandra Granthabali: Annadamangal* (Kolkata: Bangiya Sahitya Parishad, 1943), 17; Chatterjee, "Scribal Elites," 464.

[110] Eaton, *The Rise of Islam*, 181–83; Chatterjee, "Reflections on Religious Difference," 396–415. Most of Chatterjee's references however come from the latter half of the seventeenth century, while it should be noted that *The Ain-i-Akbari* recorded that Akbar ordered all cases between Hindus to remain under the jurisdiction of the Brahmins and not be judged by the Muslim *qazis*. This could possibly indicate a gradual change in the Mughal administrative stretch from Akbar to Aurangzeb's time, though lack of proper compilation of court cases make this a problematic aspect. For more on the availability of judicial sources in Mughal India see, Alam and Subrahmanyam, "Introduction," 32. It is also important here to include Mukhia's contention that in terms of jurisdiction and application of the *Sharia* law, the Mughals imposed it on criminal offences but when it came to civil cases like weddings, inheritance rights and so on, the different religious codes of different communities were respected. But that still meant that they were registered at the *qazi*'s court. See, Mukhia, *The Mughals of India*, 40.

referred to Akbar as '*Ekbar badshah, Arjuna avatara*'.[111] Similar was the reference to Emperor Aurangzeb by the poet, Krishnaram Das who called him '*Ram Raja*', indicating the king Rama from the epic, Ramayana.[112]

Beyond political incentives, the interest of the Mughal administrators to forge ties with regional potentates also lay in their need for earning commercial profits. Om Prakash pointed out the presence of Mughal merchant-officials in Bengal, whose active presence was further highlighted by Alam and Subrahmanyam.[113] Trade in Bengal, in their words, became a major preoccupation of 'a series of powerful *subahdars* and court-based grandees' from the 1630s onwards.[114] Mughal administrators like Prince Azam-ush-Shah, Shaista Khan, Mir Jumla attempted to monopolise trade in Bengal, as the *subahdars* of that region.[115] The Dutch records talk about Prince Shah Shuja, as the *subahdar* having three to four ships in the year 1661 for sailing to trade in Persia, Achin and Tenassery.[116] Malik Kasim as the *faujdar* of Hooghly had ships being sent to the Maldives and other regions for his trade.[117] Nurullah Khan, the *faujdar* of Jessore, Hugli, Burdwan and Mednipore was mentioned by Ghulam Hussain Salim and *munshi* Salimullah as being a rich man and a merchant by profession (*mutamawwil-o-tijarat pasha*).[118] All these commercial activities of the Mughal *mansabdars* required them to have control and

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[111] Chatterjee, *The Cultures of History in Early Modern India*, 34.

[112] Chatterjee, 34.

[113] Prakash, *The Dutch East India Company and the Economy of Bengal*, 32–34.

[114] Muzaffar Alam and Sanjay Subrahmanyam, "Introduction," in *The Mughal State, 1526-1750*, eds. Muzaffar Alam and Sanjay Subrahmanyam (Delhi: Oxford University Publishers, 1998), 28.

[115] Chandra, *Essays on Medieval Indian History*, 233–34.

[116] Chijs, *Dagh-Register gehouden, anno 1659-61*, 391.

[117] F. De Haan, ed., *Dagh-Register gehouden int casteel Batavia vant passerende daer ter plaetse als over geheel Nederlandts-India, anno 1681* (Batavia, 's Gravenhage: Landsdrukkerij, Martinus Nijhoff, 1919), 125–27.

[118] Alam and Subrahmanyam, "Introduction," 54.

Fig 4: Mirza Abu Talib, Amir-ul-Umara, Shaista Khan, c. 1765-73 by Mehr Chand. Courtesy Berlin State Museums or Staatliche Musueen zu Berlin (artstor.org), accession nr. I. 4594 fol. 21r.
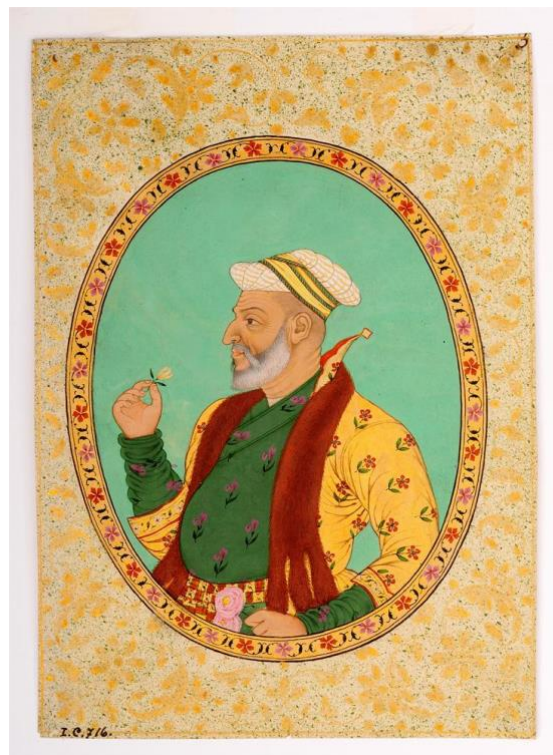

Fig 5: Mir Jumla, end of the 17th century. Courtesy Berlin State Museums or Staatliche Museen zu Berlin (artstor.org), accession nr. 83.967.

Fig 6: Prince Shah Shuja, c. 1686. Courtesy Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam (online collection), object nr. RP-T-00-3186-9.

knowledge of local merchants, brokers and ordinary villagers along with the *zamindars*. It is particularly interesting to think about the VOC in this case, which also held jurisdiction over certain villages in Bengal and engaged in several commercial dealings with the *diwan* of Hooghly, Rai Balchand, the *diwan* of Udayganj, Rai Kesudas, and other significant Mughal administrators.[119] Was the VOC than holding a semi-*zamindari* status (excluding ownership rights or *milkiyat*) in Bengal and interacting in that capacity with the Mughal *mansabdars*? Of course, the VOC reports on the Mughals did not eulogise the Mughals unlike the local *zamindars* of Bengal, but the Company remained subservient to the Mughal authorities and offered on several occasions naval and mercantile assistance to Mughal *mansabdars*. This aspect of the VOC-Mughal

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[119] F. de Haan, *Dagh-Register gehouden int casteel Batavia vant passerende daer ter plaetse als over geheel Nederlandts-India, anno 1680* (Batavia, 's Gravenhage: Landsdrukkerij, Martinus Nijhoff, 1912), 724; Chijs, *Dagh-Register, anno 1659-61*, 390.

relation in Bengal has been dealt in detail in the next chapter. In any case what is clear here is that these compulsions and beneficial exchanges of profit and power ensured that the Mughal administrators adjusted to regional dynamics of Bengal as long as the local *zamindars* there accommodated the former.

The Mughal Administrative Theory in Ruling Bengal

While informal personal relations developed under the canopy of the *mansabdari* system, the theoretical model of Mughal governance never approved factionalism and favouritism on paper. Discord among the royal family members were rarely recorded (only inevitable personal frictions) in the imperial chronicles, suggesting that factionalism was formally not acknowledged in the Mughal administration. What guided the Mughal administrators instead in their daily functioning was the theoretical ethos of the *munshi* code of conduct. Mukhia argued that this represented the embedded Mughal idea of eternity, so that 'the Person of the King and the Princes changes, but their conduct, mores, even disposition, are in a large measure standardized and follow the impersonal, normative eternal format of kingship, princehood and so on.'[120] It is not to suggest that the Mughal emperor did not or could not change administrative rules, which in fact they very much did throughout their reign. But it is rather to suggest that, the rituals, norms and etiquette of the sovereign ruler which helped to establish his authority in the Empire had to be upheld all the time by all administrators as well as the Mughal emperors.[121] This impersonal code of Mughal conduct was encapsulated in the ethos of a *munshi*, in which devotion to the governing figure of the emperor constituted a central part. Investiture of sovereignty in the emperor and the proclamation of his divine rule, along with his administrative apparatus became the base for the Mughal administrative ethos. But along with it there were also other rules of administrative skill and etiquette that added to the code of conduct of a Mughal *mansabdar*.

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[120] Mukhia, *The Mughals of India*, 57.

[121] Alam, *The Crisis of Empire*, 19.

This code of conduct was set out in the *dastur al-amals* which was a collection of royal manuals listing administrative codes of conduct. According to these rules, the primary norm of conduct for all Mughal administrators was to demonstrate their love for the emperor and their loyalty towards him. Muhammad Baqir Najm-i Sani, an eminent noble who served in both the courts of Jahangir and Shah Jahan, emphasised the exemplary role of the king whom the subjects were expected to love and obey, as divine.[122] He wrote –

> Therefore, it is necessarily incumbent upon the Almighty's chosen creation, whom they call an emperor (*padshah*), to inculcate in himself the morals of the custodian of the *Shari'ah* (Prophet Muhammad)…Know that the empire and kingship constitute exalted rank and high station…One may attain the position [of sovereignty] only with divine assistance, perpetual felicity, Almighty God, Praise be unto Him, bestows favour upon one of His servants by putting a crown of authority on his head, he in turn must hold the empire dear and venerable.[123]

Akbar on becoming the emperor, was known for his efforts to enforce the language of religious politics surrounding his divine kingly figure. This had its roots in Nasir al-Din Tusi's *Akhlaq-i Nasiri* written in 1235, copies and reproductions of which were already circulating in Mughal India from the time of Babur.[124] Though it caused much discontent in his court politics, with Mulla Abdul Qadir Badauni and others voicing their unwillingness to accept Akbar's tenet, Abul Fazl (the opponent of Badauni and one of Akbar's most powerful *munshis*) provided the document of the *ulemas* (led by Shaikh Mubárik and others, some of whom signed it against their will) in his *Ain-i Akbari* that sanctioned this aspect.[125] The administrative etiquette revolved, theoretically, therefore around the emperor as the central figure, giving the impression that the Mughal state remained entirely under his influence.

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[122] Muhammad Bāqir Najm-i Sani, *Advice on the Art of Governance: Mauʾizah-i Jahāngīrī of Muhammad Bāqir Najm-i-Sānī: An Indo-Islamic Mirror for Princes*, ed. Sajida Sultana Alvi (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989), 12.

[123] Muhammad Bāqir Najm-i Sani, 42–45.

[124] Muzaffar Alam, *The Langugaes of Political Islam: India 1200-1800* (London: Hurst, 2004), 50–51.

[125] Mukhia, *The Mughals of India*, 7.

This condition of love and loyalty to the sovereign institution of the emperor became the primary element of the *munshi* code. In the words of Muhammad Baqir, a *munshi* in Jahangir's court –

> Every prudent ruler…will find his country (*mamlakat*) prosperous and his subjects contended and happy. The hearts of the people will come together in the bond of his loyalty and obedience [if the ruler is prudent], and the garden of his empire (*saltanat*) will flourish.[126]

This sentiment was also echoed in the *Tuzuk-i Jahangiri* which claimed that 'Behind the duty that lies on all people is the duty to the/ Sovereign and benefactor.'[127] Mirza Nathan, an administrator under Akbar wrote that there 'was no heavier burden on the neck of a Muslim than the burden of being true to the salt (of the emperor).'[128] Loyalty, in fact, was the incentive for the very sustenance of the Mughal administration. It was so much so that even after hard-fought wars, those who pledged their loyalty to the throne were immediately incorporated into the empire, regardless of their regional, ethnic and sectarian backgrounds.[129] Thus, even though Abul Fazl was murdered on Jahangir's instigation (during Jahangir's princely days when Akbar was the ruler), the latter patronised Abul Fazl's family and children after he became the emperor on the condition that they pledged their allegiance to him.[130] Consequently, it became an absolute condition for a *munshi* par excellence to be able to demonstrate this loyalty in his literary, scholarly and military duties to the sovereign emperor.

The royal texts, in this respect, often penned by the *munshis* of the highest order, expressed fervently the love of the Mughal nobles for their patrons and for their emperor. In an anecdote where Jahangir's cup broke when Qasim Khan (his close friend as mentioned in the *Ain-i Akbari*) handed it to him, Jahangir retorted with a poem, 'The cup was lovely and the water

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[126] Muhammad Bāqir Najm-i Sani, *Advice on the Art of Governance*, 42.

[127] Rogers and Beveridge, *The Tuzuk-i-Jahangiri*, 138–39.

[128] Nathan, *Baharistan-i-Ghaybi*, 1:197; Eaton, *The Rise of Islam*, 162.

[129] Rajeev Kinra, *Writing Self, Writing Empire: Chandar Bhan Brahman and the Cultural World of the Indo-Persian State Secretary* (California: University of California Press, 2015), 91.

[130] Rogers and Beveridge, *The Tuzuk-i-Jahangiri*, 17.

lost its rest'. To this, Qasim Khan promptly replied – 'It saw my love's grief and could not suppress its tears.'[131] On the other hand, the emperors too were shown to reciprocate and admire this love and devotion of their trusted nobles. The epitaph on the grave of Shaikh Abul Fazl, one of the *munshis* closest to Emperor Akbar, holding massive political power at his court, read as follows – 'may God Almighty preserve him! – in the shadow of the majesty of the just king, whom power, auspiciousness, and generosity follow'.[132] Mir Shihabuddin, a nobleman in Aurangzeb's service collected information for his emperor about the rebellious prince, Muhammad Akbar. Aurangzeb was pleased with his service and wrote – 'Whosoever drinks, like the ruby, the blood of the liver and grows patient, / Becomes the ornament of the top of the crown of Fortune.'[133] This idea of adoration and 'honour' in serving the emperor meant more than the political power and status that came with it.[134] It was embraced not only by all the Mughal *mansabdars* but also sometimes in the provinces by regional powerlords as did the Bengali *rajas* and *zamindars* through reverence to portraits of emperors and their turbans portraying the Timurid genealogical tree.[135]

But the Mughal rhetoric did not stop at displaying allegiances to the emperor only. Functioning in a world of informal political networks with the responsibility of revenue collection having been placed on merchant-minded administrators, the Mughal administration also needed a pervading administrative ethos that had to be upheld by everyone, including the emperor himself. For this purpose, standard moral codes of conduct came to be written down by the *munshis*, and all the administrators with the emperor himself complied with these codes. They became increasingly more rigid and crystallised, as the Mughal Empire began growing,

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[131] H. Blochmann, ed., *The Ain i Akbari by Abu'l Fazl 'Allami*, trans. H. Blochmann, vol. I (Calcutta: The Baptist Mission Press, 1873), 498–99. There is evidence in the chronicles of Jahangir that Qasim Khan was very close to the emperor because of which he enjoyed a high mansab position. Rogers and Beveridge, *The Tuzuk-i-Jahangiri*, 176.

[132] Allami, *The Ain i Akbari*, 1873, 1: xxxv.

[133] Sarkar, *Ahkam-i Alamgiri*, 90.

[134] Gommans, *Mughal Warfare*, 61.

[135] Chatterjee, *The Cultures of History in Early Modern India*, 35.

along with its professional class of *munshis* who regulated the laws, accounts and all other tasks required for governance. It is baffling but true that despite the informal set-up of factional connections, one of the vital aspects that these codes recommended was the ideal of appointing men on the basis of merit rather than random favourites. Although factionalism remained the informal mechanism of the Mughal administrative functioning, there is some truth in the fact that official positions were not allowed to be distributed on the basis of religious or ethnic bias. Abul Fazl once observed, 'May merit have an open market' and this meritocracy in appointing one's favourites was reasonably honoured. [136] The Emperor Jahangir also recorded his conversation with his favourite noble, Sharif Khan on this subject of merit in a person deserving honest attention –

> One day the *Amiru-l-umara* (Sharif Khan) greatly pleased me by an incidental remark. It was this: "Honesty and dishonesty are not confined to matters of cash and goods; to represent qualities as existing in acquaintances which do not exist, and to conceal the meritorious qualities of strangers, is dishonesty."[137]

In this way, political power did not remain concentrated in the hands of a particular religious or ethnic group in the Mughal administration. [138] What determined this merit depended on the administrative capabilities of the interested groups in accordance with the skills prescribed in the *munshi* manuals.[139]

These *munshi* manuals or the *dastur al-amals* provided a guide to such skills that were required for Mughal administrative service. Chandar Bhan Brahman, one of the leading *munshis* of his times, laid down the following points for his son, Khwaja Tej Bhan (with a wider readership in mind) that were to be mastered before entering the service of the Mughals – (i) being acquainted with the Mughal system of norms (*akhlaq*), (ii) listening to the advice of elders

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[136] Mukhia, *The Mughals of India*, 59.

[137] Rogers and Beveridge, *The Tuzuk-i-Jahangiri*, 26.

[138] Gommans points out that despite certain ethnic labels being present, they were not 'rigid, ascriptive categories indicating inbred loyalty or cohesion'. Jos Gommans, *Mughal Warfare*, 69.

[139] Those social groups whose development had been stunted in the pre-Islamic Indian society as well as the Brahmins were allowed to enter the Mughal administration. Kinra, *Writing Self*, 25, 38, 64–65, 162–63.

and acting accordingly, (iii) being able to compose and write in a coherent manner with good calligraphy, (iv) being deft at accountancy (*siyaq*) and scribal skills (*navinsindagi*) simultaneously (v) being discreet and virtuous and (v) above all, having a solid grasp of Persian.[140] In a similar vein, the *dastur al-amal-i-Alamgiri* (manual of bureaucratic conduct) highlighted the essential qualifications of an aspiring official that included – (a) mastering the art of writing (*insha*), that is composing letters and drafting documents conforming to the seventeenth-century imperial standards, (b) knowledge of special techniques of accountancy (*siyak*) and arithmetic (*hisab*), (c) fluency in spoken Persian and, (d) full knowledge of all types of record kept in the various departments (tax, mint, market etc.) and all thirty-six workshops (*karkhana*).[141] Such formal eligibility criteria were combined with a generous dose of moral advice on governance, as found in the contemporary 'Mirror for Princes' literature. In this a great deal of focus was placed on the personal character and individual qualities of a *munshi*.[142] According to Chandar Bhan Brahmin, an efficient *munshi* was supposed to be authoritative [*zabit*], well-mannered [*khwush-suluk*], unenvious [*ser-chashm*], open-minded [*wasi-mashrab*], courageous [*sahib-i hausala*], tolerant [*mutahammil*], sincere [*durust-i khlas*], experienced [*azmudakar*], and of pleasant demeanour [*shigufta-peshani*].

But with it, he also had to have the desired qualities of aloofness from material wealth and detachment from greed, like a Sufi saint or a yogi. Abstinence from material wealth was, therefore, the other vital aspect of administrative behaviour recommended for Mughal nobles. Kinra called it the idea of 'mystical civility' that was combined with the knowledge of *akhlaq* (political ethics), to reflect the phenomenon of, what in the existent historiography has been

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[140] Alam and Subrahmanyam, "The Making of a Munshi," 62–63.

[141] Najaf Haider, "Norms of Professional Excellence and Good Conduct in Accountancy Manuals of the Mughal Empire," *International Review of Social History* 56, no. 19 (Nov. 2011): 270–71.

[142] Alam and Subrahmanyam, "The Making of a Munshi," 71.

identified as, 'political Islam'.[143] It was the practice whereby critical components of the wider Mughal perspective on literature and larger societal matters like civility, religious tolerance, and the role of the state came to be highlighted through Indo-Persian Sufi idioms.[144] Literary flair, administrative integrity, political discretion and scholarly sophistication was to be combined with a saintly detachment (*bitaluqi*) from worldly affairs. Chandar Bhan wrote that to be a *munshi* in Mughal parlance, one had to have among other things the humility of the 'great men' (*buzurgan*).[145] Not only would that have helped in staying away from decay through attachments (*aluda-yi taluq*), but also prevented corruptibility in administration. The emperor was, first and foremost, expected to adhere to these ideas himself which is evident from the various acts of respect paid to Sufi saints on different occasions by almost all the Mughal emperors.[146] And in so doing he also obliged all the other administrators to follow this rule of mystic aloofness from material attachments.

Afzal Khan, the *wazir* of the Mughal Empire under Emperor Shah Jahan, once wrote a missive to one of his close friends, Aqa Rashid, in which he hoped that God would sever them of their 'worldly attachments (*alaiq-i dunyawi*)' and guide them on the path of the divine. He expressed his wish of having an aversion to all 'worldly affairs (*dil-sardi az umur-i dunyawi ba ham rasida*)' at his old age in order to attend to the calling of God. This idea was also reflected on another occasion when Afzal Khan recieved an *ainak* (eyeglass, possibly a kaleidoscope or spectacles) as a gift from Mu'izz al-Mulk, the *mutasaddi* at the port of Surat. This gift was not related to any official business, for which despite having accepted it out of courtesy, Afzal Khan wrote back a witty reply saying –

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[143] On the idea of 'Political Islam' see, Shahram Akbarzadeh, "The Paradox of Political Islam," in *Routledge Handbook of Political Islam* (London etc.: Routledge, 2012), 1–8; Kinra, *Writing Self, Writing Empire*, 4. For the idea of 'mystical civility' see, Kinra, 65.

[144] Kinra, *Writing Self, Writing Empire*, 3–4.

[145] Kinra, 62.

[146] Gommans, *Mughal Warfare*, 44; Kinra, *Writing Self*, 8; Nile Green, *Sufism: A Global History* (West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 141–47.

> The viewing glass (*ainak*) that you sent (as a gift) – which shows one thing as a multiplicity – has arrived. [But] this inmate of the prison of multiplicity is looking, rather, for a viewing glass that will turn such panoply into a unity. If you come across anyone who has such a glass, do give me some indication so that I can enlighten my eye by meeting him, and, having gotten hold of such a glass, can look through it and deliver myself from the prison of all this multiplicity.[147]

Afzal Khan's reference to the 'unity' could be his reference to the cosmic unity of God that he deemed was superior than the 'multiplicity' of all worldly objects, such as the *ainak* that was gifted to him. Kinra argued that this anecdote was proof of the reluctance of Afzal Khan to accept a gift that could be perceived as a bribe, as it was not necessarily needed for any specific administrative purpose.[148] It was the customary duty of the Mughal *diwan* to pass on a set of administrative advice to a newly appointed *qazi*, one of which read as follows – 'Do not accept presents from the people of the place where you serve, nor attend entertainments given by anybody and everybody…Know poverty (*faqr*) to be your glory (*fakhr*).'[149] The *Mirzanama,* a manual on aristocratic etiquettes, described a refined *mirza* to be the one who was 'not… greedy for more', 'not…beguiled by the attraction of the greater *mansabs*' and 'love of money' and was into 'the study of ethics' rather than 'in quest of digging more' wealth 'out of the earth'.[150] According to the *Mau'izah-i Jahangiri,* it was the duty of the emperor to ensure that his men 'do not neglect their affairs, are not overpowered by their whims and desires, and do not get involved in wanton pastimes, prohibited things, and corruption.'[151] Thus, the Mughal Empire endorsed an overarching administrative ethos, that demanded a combination of advanced skills in Persian language, accounts, aloofness from material wealth and a scholarly flair with a dash of individual panache. This suited the requirements of *munshigiri* (the art of being a *munshi*), which was also accompanied by military skills (*imarat*) and participation in wars.

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[147] Cited in Kinra, *Writing Self, Writing Empire,* 72–73.

[148] Kinra, 73.

[149] Jadunath Sarkar, *The Mughal Administration* (Patna: Patna University, 1920), 18.

[150] Aziz Ahmad, "The British Museum *Mirzanama* and the Seventeenth Century *Mirza* in India," *Iran* 13 (1975): 100.

[151] Muhammad Bāqir Najm-i Sani, *Advice on the Art of Governance*, 42.

To combine the views laid out so far, it can thus be concluded that factionalism and regional alliances were informal practices of the Mughal administrative system that thrived under the formal framework of the *mansabdari* system. In theory, the *mansabdars* were expected to adhere to an impersonal code of *munshi* ethics (such as recommendations on the basis of merit instead of personal friendships, refraining from bribery in making recommendations etc.) while remaining loyal to the sovereign institution of the emperor. This meant that the personal loyalty of an administrator to his patron prince or noble, could not override or go against the general loyalty that he was to exhibit to the sovereign head on the Mughal throne (no matter whoever occupied the throne and became the emperor) as per the *munshi* code. All administrators were bound to this impersonal ethos of *munshigiri,* including the emperors themselves and no occupant of the royal throne could scrap or disregard these codes.

Perceptions of Corruption in Mughal Bengal

What did this mean for perceptions of corruption in the Mughal administration when factionalism formed the empire in practice but was not formally acknowledged in the chronicles? As seen before, the impersonal ethic of *munshigiri* which required loyalty to the emperor and his laws condemned attachment to material wealth and undue favouritism in the Mughal administrative world. At the same time, the elaborate gift-giving ceremonies had to be maintained as part of the court rituals that marked the act of paying allegiance to the emperor.[152] This was justified and balanced by the fact that gifts and money were meant for the royal treasury to run the governance of the empire and not to be unduly appropriated by the nobles in the provinces. In a didactic passage, Chandar Bhan wrote –

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[152] Jos Gommans, "For the Home and the Body: Dutch and Indian Ways of Early Modern Consumption," in *Goods from the East, 1600-1800: Trading Eurasia*, eds. Maxine Berg et al. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 342; Balkrishnan Shivram, "Islamic Court Dress and Robing Ceremony in Mughal India," *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress* 66, no. 1 (2005-2006): 404–22; Neha Varmani, "Mughals on the Menu: A Probe into the Culinary World of the Mughal Elite" (presentation, Symposia Iranica, Cambridge, June 1, 2017). In this connection, Lambton's work on the Persian gift-giving rituals with certain meanings and status of the giver and the receiver ascribed to it is particularly relevant. See, Ann Lambton, "Pīshkash: Present or Tribute?," *Bulletin School of Oriental and African Studies* 57, no. 1 (Feb. 1994): 145–58.

> More than anything, a powerful monarch requires an abundant treasury. If he does not have wealth, he cannot mobilize an army. If he does not have an army, there can be no law and order [*zabt*] in the realm. If there is no law and order, wealth cannot accumulate, and the state's treasury can grow only if the country itself is prosperous. The realm can therefore flourish only if it has a capable administrator [*sahib-i mu'amala*] who is attentive to imperial business and derives a sense of personal satisfaction from it.[153]

It was meant to urge the administrators in the provinces not to tamper with the revenue supply, the responsibility for collecting which lay largely with them at all times. Refusing to forward the due revenues amounted to outright denial of the emperor's suzerainty and was thereby perceived as 'rebellion'.

And in this declaration of 'rebellion' lay one of the most crucial elements that constituted perceptions of corruption in the Mughal administration. 'Rebellion' against the emperor or disloyalty to the sovereign authority of the emperor was perceived as corrupt thought and behaviour. As for the way it came to be described in the Mughal political vocabulary, it is not possible to find a neat equivalent for the word 'corruption'. The reason for this can be partly attributed to the fact that several local languages were used, along with the elite administrative language of Indo-Persian. But even within the administrative language of the Mughal Indo-Persian, there is no single word but many words conveying meanings close to 'corruption'. One of the most prominent among them is the word *fasad* (mischief/corruption) which conveyed the meaning of cultivating corrupt thoughts in a political context. In the administrative sources, it was mostly used in the sense of a state of mind and thought rather than any actual act of corruption. Actions that challenged the sovereign authority of the emperor and his laws such as *irtisha* or *rushwa-khwari* (bribery), *haram-khwari* (malversation), *bad-diyanati* (dishonesty), *al fitnatul* (fraud, deceit), *hilat* or *hila* (deception or fraud), *makr* (plotting, fraud or deceit), *aubashi* (depravity, profligacy), *sharr* (being wicked or wickedness) and so on counted as 'rebellion' or

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[153] Kinra, *Writing Self, Writing Empire*, 75.

fasad.[154] The act of forcible usurpation or seizure, mostly in terms of embezzlement like *tasarruf* (misappropriation or embezzlement) or *taghallub* (embezzlement) also indicated corruption.[155] These, and more of such actions were used to refer to administrative corruption, and the corrupt were described as having succumbed to *adbar* (fall from grace and allegiance). There was, thus, in the Mughal administrative vocabulary, a way of condemning certain actions as (im)proper for official attitude and conduct.

Much of the impropriety was directly connected and used in the context of disloyalty or rebellion against the emperor. It appeared almost as a supplement to the word *fitna* (civil strife). In the *Akbarnama* written by Abul Fazl, for instance, there is repeated use of the word '*fasad*' hinting at bad or corrupt thoughts as in the phrase – '*bekhayali fasad*'.[156] Such thoughts in this context implied intentions of dissent and disloyalty. During his audience with Prince Salim (later Emperor Jahangir), Saiyid 'Abd-ul-Khalil, a resident of Qannauj warned the prince about the 'unrest (*shorish*) [that] was sweeping Qannauj on account of the corruption *(fasad)* of local officials.'[157] Another time, when Prince Khurram (later Shah Jahan) had taken harsh measures against his rebellious half-brother, cousins and nephews, the *Amal-i Salih* justified it by suggesting 'that Khurram's actions were necessary to avoid future *fasad*' (contagion or corruption).[158] From these examples, it can at least be discerned that 'rebellion' in all forms came to be portrayed as a corrupt thought or action, against the administrative ideal of loyalty to the emperor and his laws. Acts of bribery, embezzlement or sedition through non-payment of revenue were all forms of violation of the general *munshi* code of conduct. Any disruption thus of this code of conduct

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[154] Sarkar, *Ahkam-i Alamgiri*, 129, 96, 109, 105.

[155] Sarkar, 104.

[156] Abu'l-Fazl, *Abu'l-Fazl: The History*, 1:38–39, 244–45. For the phrase '*bekhayali–fasad*' or 'corrupt notions' specifically see, 446–447. I am grateful to Reza Hussaini for his help with and insight into these Persian phrases and words.

[157] Faruqui, *The Princes*, 161.

[158] Faruqui, 252.

which thrived on, as Abul Fazl put it – 'a share of skill and loyalty', amounted to allegations of corruption.[159]

This brings us back to the situation in Mughal Bengal that was frequently associated with such perceptions of administrative corruption. As has been explained earlier in this chapter, *subah* Bengal offered several challenges to the Mughal empire. Its elusive geo-political composition facilitated the region's tendency to be autonomous, encouraged by the presence of a vast number of local *zamindars* and other political and commercial actors. It is true that with time, the *mansabdari* system fostered factional connections which led to a precarious balance of the Mughal-*zamindari* nexus. But at the same time, such informal connections also came to be increasingly brought under Mughal scrutiny following the consolidation of the *munshi* ethos and the rise of a 'paper-empire'. It strengthened the check on the Mughal *subahdars* as well as the local *zamindars* manifold by the time of Aurangzeb, at least on paper. As long as the informal mechanism of maintaining factional relations and forming a stable Mughal-*zamindari* alliance in the province worked in harmony with the formal *munshi* code, the governing machinery in the region operated relatively well. This meant that even though such factionalism and informal administrative arrangements were officially disapproved, they still continued in practice without the intervention of the emperor. However, allegations of rebellion or corruption arose the moment such informal norms were broken and the system was disrupted. Bengal was particularly prone to such disruptions because of its fluid and elusive nature, as mentioned earlier, which made it difficult to control. Failed factional alignments and unstable Mughal-*zamindari* alliances could at times lead to rude disruptions in the administrative system of the region that triggered alarming allegations of rebellion or corruption.

A classic example of this was the case of Prince Shah Shuja as the *subahdar* of Bengal who tried to assert his power in the region against his brother, Aurangzeb in the struggle of succession. Shuja's alliance with the local *zamindars* was not formidable, as the Rajas of

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[159] Beveridge, *The Akbarnāma of Abu'l-Fazl*, III:428.

Coochbehar and Assam started making inroads into Eastern Bengal due to a depletion of military resources in their own area, that Shuja was using for his pursuit to the throne.[160] On a factional level too, Shah Shuja was in a disadvantageous position as he opposed Aurangzeb in whose faction were high-level *mansabdars* like Mir Jumla who were close to their father, Emperor Shah Jahan. Consequently, Mir Jumla was sent to Bengal to pursue Shah Shuja as well as launch Mughal expeditions in 1658 for conquering Cooch Behar and Assam. This is the moment that Aurangzeb's *firman* to Mir Jumla characterised Bengal as a place infested with 'slackness, disobedience and rebellion.' Such dissension also occurred earlier in the Mughal Empire due to the failure of being able to forge a successful Mughal alliance with the local political forces of Bengal. One of the *zamindars*, Isa Khan, for instance, united with the Afghans and other local *zamindars* to resist the Mughal *subahdar* Khan Jahan in 1578. Later Musa Khan, the son of Isa Khan, resisted the *subahdar*, Islam Khan along with other local *zamindari* forces. This was when Akbar was trying to conquer Bengal and add it to the Mughal dominions. Abul Fazl, one of Akbar's powerful *mansabdars*, at this moment described the region as a '*bulghak-khana*' (house of turbulence). There were also occasions of strong Mughal-*zamindari* nexus formed in Bengal that threatened the Mughal emperor at the centre. While the *subahdar* of Bengal, Ibrahim Khan failed to maintain his local connections with the *zamindars*, Shah Jahan as Prince Khurram, on the contrary, took the help of certain *zamindars* and other active local forces in this region to stir dissension against his father, Jahangir as the emperor.[161] They provided him with military support and financial resources in return for administrative sanctions, profits and better positions. It resulted in an interruption in revenue payment as Khurram like Shah Shuja drenched Bengal of its resources for his military support.[162] Consequently, his act was declared as an outright rebellion and a demonstration of corrupt behaviour by Jahangir which led him to send his army to Bengal.

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[160] Faruqui, *The Princes,* 248.
[161] Faruqui, 208, 210.
[162] Faruqui, 205.

All the three instances of 'rebellion' discussed above were marked by the acts of non-payment of revenue (also some form of embezzlement in terms of misappropriation of revenue for individual needs) and disloyalty to the emperor, that showed clear violation of the *munshi* code of conduct. The equilibrium between the Mughal administrative theory and practice in Bengal rested on the ideal of the Mughal administrators remaining loyal to their emperor and paying their revenues by forging informal ties with the local *zamindars*. Whenever this equilibrium was disturbed, the region tended to cut loose from the Mughal control which made it a seditious or corrupted zone in the Mughal chronicles. In the *Jahangirnama*, Jahangir repeatedly expressed his concerns about the region of Bengal. On one occasion, he wrote that having heard nothing good of Bengal and the *subahdar*, Qasim Khan there, he summoned Qasim Khan to the court and sent in his place another trusted *mansabdar*, Ibrahim Khan Fath-Jang to govern the province.[163] In another instance, he mentioned about the 'indiscretions' of the *diwan* and *bakshi* of Bengal, Mukhlis Khan whom Jahangir demoted from his *mansab* by 1000/200.[164] It almost gave the impression that the emperor was constantly aware of the situation in Bengal and took care to prevent the existence of too autonomous Mughal *mansabdars* in the province. When prince Khusrau rebelled against Jahangir, it is reported in the *Jahangirnama* that the emperor and his officials suspected Khusrau to have first headed towards Bengal where his uncle, Man Singh was stationed.[165] Also, while talking about the rebellion of Mirza Hindal in Agra against his father, Humayun, Jahangir located the origin of such corrupt ideas in Bengal. He wrote that after Humayun conquered Bengal, some of his more 'avaricious servants who were naturally disposed to sedition and rebellion proved disloyal and left Bengal' to go to Mirza Hindal and provoke an insurrection in Agra.[166] This frequent association of Bengal with corrupting notions was linked to its riverine terrain that was difficult to control, and therefore highlighted as perilous and

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[163] Thackston, ed., *The Jahangirnama*, 218-19.

[164] Thackston, 222.

[165] Thackston, 49.

[166] Thackston, 290.

responsible for nurturing rebellions. This idea was echoed in Mughal accounts like that of Mirza Nathan's *Baharisthan-i-Ghaybi*. Nathan fought in the Mughal expedition under Islam Khan in Bengal (at the time of Akbar) and gave vivid accounts of the dangerous rivers and swamps that he had to cross throughout the day and sometimes in the middle of the night in Bengal.[167] Eaton remarked that such descriptions of Bengal and its dangerous rivers were strangely echoed later in the colonial stereotypes of the British accounts.[168] What suffices to say here, nevertheless, is that *subah* Bengal remained a fluid region with a complex administrative matrix under the Mughals. Consequently, this fluidity led to its inclination of being autonomous or 'rebellious' which fitted the Mughal perception of administrative corruption and earned the region the notoriety of being corruptible in the Mughal narratives.

Conclusion

This chapter has shown the fluidity of the Mughal administrative world in Bengal and how and why this region featured as corrupt in the Mughal narratives. Bengal as a Mughal *subah* formed a crucial geo-political frontier of the Mughal Empire. Added to this, were a large number of regional *zamindars* and other commercial actors in the province who made the area politically active and challenging for administration. Consequently, Bengal remained difficult to control and contain within the Mughal Empire. Through the *mansabdari* system, which was the core of Mughal administration, the *mansabdars* began penetrating into the regional politics and *zamindari* networks. Factional alliances between Mughal *mansabdars* and local potentates led to the incorporation of local *munshi* families into the Mughal administrative fabric. Moreover, the regional potentates, such as the wide range of *zamindars* also increasingly had more interactions with the Mughal *mansabdars*. Both political and commercial incentives, induced the Mughal *mansabdars* and the *zamindars* in Bengal to assist each other. It led to factionalism and the Mughal-*zamindari* nexus as becoming the primary mechanism of sustaining this region within the Empire.

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[167] Nathan, *Baharistan-i-Ghaybi*, 1:44, 46.
[168] Eaton, *The Rise of Islam*, 168–69.

However, none of these were formally acknowledged in the Mughal administrative chronicles. In theory, there was the *munshi* code of conduct which provided an outlay of how a *munshi* or a Mughal administrator should behave and administer his *jagirs*. It advocated loyalty to the sovereign authority of the emperor and his rules, detachment from material wealth, prohibition of undue favouritism and the development of bureaucratic skills such as accounting, poetic flair, scholarly panache and military deftness. Accordingly, corruption came to be perceived as those thoughts and actions which violated this code of conduct. It included acts of rebellion as disloyalty to the emperor, non-payment of revenue or embezzlement, bribery and such other thoughts and actions that demonstrated a transgression of the *munshi* code of conduct.

The Mughal administrative world, thus, functioned on a precarious balance struck between the administrative theory of the formal *munshi* code of conduct and the practice of informal factional ties and regional alliances. As long as this balance was maintained, the informal practice despite being condemned as corrupt, persisted and was not intervened by the emperor. But the moment there appeared disruptions in this balance, allegations of corruption arose. In Bengal, owing to the region's specificities, such chances of disruption were higher and there were frequent occasions when the province threatened to cut loose from the empire. Consequently, ideas of corruption came to be associated more with this *subah*. Caused either by a strong *zamindar-mansabdar* nexus against the Mughal throne or a failure in fostering successful regional alliances, Bengal came to be seen as an area of disobedience and rebellion, non-payment of revenue and embezzlement. It soon earned the province a notoriety of being corrupt in the Mughal royal discourse. The Mughal authorities blamed the marshy landscape of this region with its numerous rivers as a perilous setting which led to the nurturing of rebellions. The riverine terrain of Bengal and its fluid administrative space with several local political actors and networks, therefore, became the reason for its uncontrollability and association with corruption in the Mughal administrative world. The next chapter shows what happened under these

circumstances when the VOC arrived in Bengal and started interacting with the Mughal *mansabdars* there in their capacity as a Company with administrative status.