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Relations Of Afghans With Mughals

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Abstract:

Inhabiting the strategically significant north-western frontier of the Indian subcontinent, Afghans maintained continuous contact with and influence in South Asia. This paper examines their relationship with one of the most powerful imperial formations in the region, the Mughal Empire. Mughal–Afghan interactions began with the defeat of the Afghan Lodi dynasty at the foundation of Mughal rule and continued through to the later years of the empire, during which Afghan presence in the political affairs of Delhi remained significant. Drawing upon both historical accounts and Pashto literary sources, including the works of contemporary Pashtun poet Khushal Khattak, this paper argues that Afghan–Mughal relations cannot be understood as uniformly antagonistic or cooperative. Rather, they were characterized by a complex interplay of resistance, accommodation, and cultural expression, also varying with the social and aristocratic positioning of the individuals, reflecting the dynamic nature of frontier politics and identity in early modern South Asia.

Keywords: Afghan- Mughal Relations, Pashto, Khushal Khattak, Pashtun, Frontier

Introduction:

The north western frontier of the Indian subcontinent has historically functioned as a dynamic zone of political interaction. The most numerically dominant among the inhabitants of this volatile region are the Pashtuns, historically referred to as Afghans before the definition of the word “Afghan” changed to refer to “all citizens of Afghanistan “. Evolving as a unified group in early middle ages, Afghans have both been influenced by, and influenced South Asia , with their primary influence being political and martial one, reaching its peak in 1450s when the Afghan warlord of Lodi tribe became the Ruler of Delhi, marking the Afghan rule in the heart of India. With the establishment of Mughal Empire in 1526, developed a complex relationship between Afghans and Mughals marked by both conflict and accommodation.

Most of the existing scholarship on this topic has often portrayed the Mughal-Afghan relations by the lens of militant resistance at tribal regions, and frontier instability, and often cover only the period till mid 18th century as their scope.

This paper seeks to move beyond this limitation by observing the significance of Afghans in Mughal bureaucracy and their collaborations as well, along with the hostile military resistances; and by extending the analysis of Afghan–Mughal relations to the late Mughal period, all the way to 1857. This study employs a historical-analytical approach , observing the political developments as well as literary expressions of identity and resistance, to examine how these interactions evolved over time. The discussion proceeds first by discussing the early encounters between Afghan groups and Mughals, both in the core subcontinent and frontier, followed by the discussion on Afghan literary expressions about Mughals and literary-resistance style among Afghan poets, and finally discussing the reconfiguration of these relations in the chaotic events of 18th and 19th century.

In this paper, the term ‘Afghan’ is used in its historical Mughal-era sense to refer broadly to Pashtun groups, irrespective of their location in present-day Afghanistan or Pakistan.

1. Initial Encounters of Mughals and Afghans

Driven away from his homeland in Ferghana by Uzbeks, Babur established his base at Kabul, a region with strong presence of Northern Afghan tribes like the Yusufzais. His prolonged presence in Kabul heavily influenced his military and diplomatic strategies, immersing him completely in the intricacies of Afghan tribal politics. The most strategic route from Kabul to Delhi ran through the mountainous tough regions of Swat and Peshawar Valley that were controlled by the Yusufzai Afghans, leading Babur into an alliance with the Yusufzais.

Babur was invited by the dissatisfied Afghan nobles of the Lodi Sultanate, to join them in their rebellions against the ruling Sultan Ibrahim Lodi. Lodis were Afghan warlords of the Lodi tribe of Bettani confederation

who established their rule in Delhi under their chief Bahlul Lodi, and their kingdom reached its peak under Sikandar Lodi. The son of Sikandar Lodi was Ibrahim Lodi who became the ruler in 1517, and who's attempt at royal absolutism in order to protect the Empire from tribal disintegration led to dissatisfaction among several Afghan nobles. These Afghan nobles then invited Babur who defeated the numerically superior Lodi army in the First Battle of Panipat (1526) ending the Afghan rule in Delhi. However, the defeat of the Lodis established a persistent psychological and political rivalry that would haunt the Mughal state for a century. Lodis, driven by the tribalistic pride common in Afghan warlords, appointed Afghan nobles of their own tribe as the generals, and governors across their ruled provinces. This scattered Afghan nobility spread across Bihar, Bengal and North-Western provinces was left with a lingering and potent revanchist sentiment after this defeat.

As Humayun ascended the throne of Mughal Empire after his father Babur's death in 1530, he inherited an empire completely surrounded by the hostile Afghan factions. This hostility was finally realised in the battlefield in 1539.

2. Sur Interregnum (1540-1555)

Farid Khan, popularly known as Sher Shah Suri was an exceptional Afghan warrior who had *jagir* (fief) in Bihar. He belonged to the Sur tribe of Afghans which interestingly is a sub-tribe of the same Lodi tribe, whose rulers had ruled Delhi before Mughals. Operating initially from his strongholds at Bihar, Sher Shah unified the scattered Afghan nobility while Humayun was engaged into his Gujarat campaign. In the battle of Chausa in 1539, Sher Shah launched a surprise attack on Humayun's forces after a long standoff, and in the subsequent Battle of Kannauj in 1540, Mughal army suffered a huge defeat and Humayun was forced into exile in Sindh, from where he marched towards Persia where he got refuge in the court of Shah Tahmasp of Iran.

The Sur Empire was now established in Northern India, with its emperor Sher Shah Suri introducing monetary and agricultural reforms.

Taking the advantage of internal fracturing in the Sur Empire after Sher Shah's death, Humayun recaptured Delhi with the aid of Persian army.

3. Relations with Afghans under Akbar

Akbar, being suspicious of the independent Afghan sovereignties in the subcontinent, adopted the policy of Complete Pacification towards both Afghans inside the subcontinent and in the frontier. In order to permanently subjugate the Yusufzais for securing the strategic mountain passes, he sent an army led by several of his trusted generals including Raja Birbal in 1586. The campaign turned out as catastrophic when in the Battle of Malandari Pass, Yusufzais led a massive ambush killing the Mughal soldiers along with the generals including Raja Birbal, an event which gave a distressing shock to emperor Akbar who then sent Raja Todar Mal for a retaliatory campaign.

Another expression of Afghan resistance that arose under the rule of Akbar was led by Bayazid Khan Pir Roshan from Waziristan. A Sufi and Pashto poet, he combined mystical ideas with active resistance, giving rise to the Roshaniyya movement. His followers not only challenged Mughal authority through armed actions such as plundering caravans, but also promoted beliefs that differed from the established Islamic orthodoxy upheld by the Mughal ulema. In this way, the movement posed both a military and an ideological challenge to the Mughal state.

4. Bureaucratic Assimilation under Jahangir

Under Jahangir, a more conciliatory approach was adopted towards the Afghans, moving away from the earlier policy of suspicion. This led to the greater inclusion of Afghan nobles into the Mughal administrative system, many of whom rose to important positions. The most notable among them was Khan Jahan Lodi, an Afghan noble who rose to high rank and served as governor in regions like the Deccan and Multan. Acting as a link between the Mughal court and Afghan tribal networks, his presence helped in maintaining relative stability, with no major Afghan uprisings during this period apart from a few isolated cases.

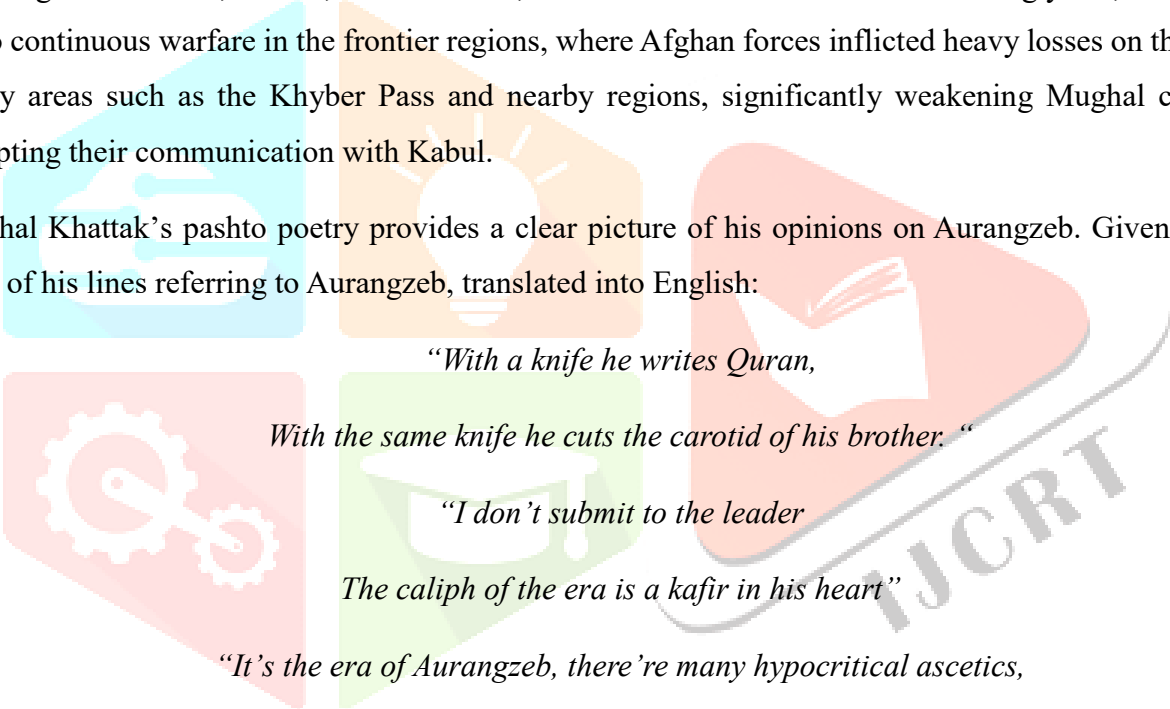
However, this stability did not last during the reign of Jahangir's son Shah Jahan when Khan Jahan Lodi eventually rebelled against the Mughal authority, largely due to growing mistrust and fear of imperial action against him. His revolt once again reflected the fragile nature of Afghan loyalty within the Mughal system. Around the same time, the Mughals also lost control over Kandahar, an important Afghan stronghold to Safavids, which further weakened their position in the north-west.

5. Aurangzeb's reign and Khushal Khattak

The most significant phase of Afghan resistance during the reign of Aurangzeb is associated with Khushal Khan Khattak, a tribal chief of the Khattaks and a major figure in classical Pashto literature. The Khattaks had long been loyal to the Mughals, dating back to alliances under Akbar, and Khushal himself served faithfully as a Mughal mansabdar under Shah Jahan and in the early reign of Aurangzeb, taking part in several imperial campaigns. However, in 1664, Aurangzeb, suspecting his growing influence, ordered his arrest and imprisonment, an act which deeply alienated him and broke the long-standing ties between the Mughals and the Khattak tribe.

After his release in 1668, Khushal Khan completely turned against the Mughal state and dedicated himself to resisting their authority. Rejecting all offers of reconciliation, he attempted to unite various Afghan tribes, including the Khattaks, Afridis, and Yusufzais, into a broader alliance. In the following years, this resistance led to continuous warfare in the frontier regions, where Afghan forces inflicted heavy losses on the Mughals in key areas such as the Khyber Pass and nearby regions, significantly weakening Mughal control and disrupting their communication with Kabul.

Khushal Khattak's pashto poetry provides a clear picture of his opinions on Aurangzeb. Given below are some of his lines referring to Aurangzeb, translated into English:



*"With a knife he writes Quran,
With the same knife he cuts the carotid of his brother. "
"I don't submit to the leader
The caliph of the era is a kafir in his heart"
"It's the era of Aurangzeb, there're many hypocritical ascetics,
In their sleeves they hide full decanters of wine"*

These lines reflect Khushal Khan Khattak's deeply critical view of Aurangzeb and the religious authority associated with his rule. He portrays the emperor and his supporters as hypocritical, outwardly pious but inwardly corrupt, thereby questioning the sincerity of their Islamic legitimacy. By even referring to the ruler as unworthy in faith, Khushal expresses open defiance and rejection of Mughal authority. This shows that his resistance was not only political but also ideological and theological.

6. Later Mughal Period

In the later Mughal period, several powerful Afghan nobles rose to prominence in the Ganga–Yamuna Doab region of present-day Uttar Pradesh. These Afghan groups came to be known as the Rohillas. During the reign of Farrukhsiyar, Afghan noble Muhammad Khan Bangash established the Kingdom of Farrukhabad in 1714. Ali Muhammad Khan, the adopted son of Afghan noble Daud Khan Rohilla, established the Pashtun-dominated Kingdom of Rohilkhand in 1721, despite not being ethnically Afghan by blood.

The political situation changed drastically after the invasion of Nader Shah in 1739, who sacked Delhi. Accompanying him was his Afghan commander Ahmad Shah Abdali, who closely observed the political conditions of North India during the campaign. Nader Shah also seized the north-western frontier regions from the Mughals, weakening their control. In the following years, Ahmad Shah Abdali, after establishing his independent Durrani kingdom in Kandahar, began his repeated invasions into India starting from 1748.

These invasions, combined with the rising power of the Marathas in North India, severely weakened the central authority of the Mughal Empire even in its core regions like Delhi. Taking advantage of this situation, the Afghan Rohilla warlords became immensely powerful, with some even exercising more authority than the Mughal emperor himself. One of the most prominent among them was Najib Khan Yusafzai, also known as Najib-ud-Dawlah. By this time, the Mughal emperor had largely become a puppet under Maratha influence, and the real power struggle was between the Rohillas, the Mughal Wazirs, and the Marathas. In 1757, Najib invited Ahmad Shah Abdali to intervene in order to protect Delhi and the Afghan and Mughal territories of North India from the advancing Marathas. This led to the Third Battle of Panipat, where the combined forces of Abdali, the Rohillas, the Mughal emperor Shah Alam II, and Nawab Shuja-ud-Daulah of Awadh defeated the Marathas.

However, the relations between the Mughals and the Rohillas remained unstable. While Najib maintained an alliance with the Mughal court, his son Zabita Khan came into conflict with the emperor, leading Shah Alam II to launch a campaign against him, during which Zabita Khan's son, Ghulam Qadir, was taken hostage. In later years, Ghulam Qadir avenged this by launching a brutal attack on the Mughal court, subjecting the imperial family to humiliation and even blinding the emperor. This act, however, generated public sympathy for the Mughals, and Ghulam Qadir was eventually captured and executed by the Marathas in support of Shah Alam.

This entire episode clearly shows how Afghan–Mughal relations in this period had become deeply divided and complex, where even within the same Afghan family, one generation could remain an ally of the Mughals while the next turned into a bitter enemy.

7. Final Days of the Empire

By the later years of Shah Alam II, the British East India Company had established its dominance over most of North India, leaving the Mughal emperor with only nominal control over Delhi. During the reign of his grandson Bahadur Shah Zafar, the sepoys of the Company rose in revolt in May 1857, leading to the Indian Rebellion of 1857. The rebel forces marched to Delhi and proclaimed Bahadur Shah as their leader against British authority.

In this phase, the final expression of Afghan–Mughal relations emerged through the Rohilla leader Bakht Khan Rohilla, who arrived from Bareilly to organize and discipline the rebel forces. The mutineers engaged the Company's army, which was positioned along the Delhi Ridge, in prolonged fighting. However, the British forces eventually recaptured Delhi in September 1857 after a decisive siege. Bakht Khan retreated towards the Doab, where he continued resistance before dying in battle. With the suppression of this revolt, 1857 ultimately marked the end of the Mughal Empire.

CONCLUSION

By the observation of Afghan–Mughal relations across the Mughal period, we can conclude that these relations cannot be understood in a simple binary of hostility or cooperation. Instead, they were complex and constantly changing, shaped by political circumstances, imperial policies, and the position of different Afghan groups within or outside the Mughal system. In the tribal frontier regions, Afghan groups such as the Yusafzais and leaders like Khushal Khan Khattak (in his later phase) often resisted Mughal authority in order to preserve their autonomy, giving rise to continuous military and ideological conflict. At the same time, many Afghan nobles within the settled regions of the empire were integrated into the Mughal administrative structure, as seen in figures like Khan Jahan Lodi and later Rohilla leaders, where relations were largely cooperative, though not free from tensions.

Over time, these relations further evolved with the weakening of Mughal authority, as Afghan warlords emerged as powerful political actors, at times acting as allies and at other times as rivals, as seen in the case of Najib ad-Dawlah and his successors. By the final phase of the empire, Afghan involvement continued to remain significant, with figures like Bakht Khan Rohilla playing an important role in the events of 1857. Thus, Afghan–Mughal relations throughout this period were dynamic and situational, reflecting a broad spectrum of interaction ranging from resistance to alliance, rather than a fixed or uniform pattern.

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