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## CONQUEST, MEMORY, AND POWER IN BABUR'S VISION OF HINDUSTAN

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**Abstract:** Zahir-ud-Din Muhammad Babur (1483–1530), a Central Asian prince of Timurid descent, is best known as the founder of the Mughal Empire in India. Before seizing Hindustān (as he called the Indian subcontinent), Babur spent his youth fighting to hold or regain his ancestral lands in Ferghānā and Samarkand. Eventually driven out by the rise of the Uzbek Shaibanids, he conquered Kabul in 1504 and reigned there for two decades. In 1526, Babur defeated the Delhi Sultan Ibrahim Lodi at Panipat and established himself as ruler of northern India. Throughout these tumultuous campaigns, Babur kept a detailed diary in his native Chagatai Turki language. This memoir, later known as the Baburnama (or Tuzk-e-Babri), offers an intimate first-person narrative of his life and conquests, including vivid observations on India. Translated into English by Beveridge in the early 20th century, the Baburnama remains an invaluable primary source for understanding the man behind the conquests and his perceptions of the newly conquered land. Babur's account of Hindustān is especially intriguing as a foreign outsider's lens on India during the early 16th century. Unlike indigenous chronicles, the Baburnama provides a candid, if heavily biased, commentary by a Central Asian Muslim king looking upon Indian society, geography, and polity with fresh eyes. This study examines Babur's perception of India as documented in the Baburnama, with a particular focus on how he justified the conquest and portrayed the land and its inhabitants. We will analyze Babur's own words to understand his motivations for invading Hindustan, his descriptive "idea of Hindustan" (both its beauties and defects), and the religious-racial ideology under-girding his narrative. We will also assess how Babur depicts his Indian adversaries (Lodi Afghans, Rajput kings, etc.) and consider what is omitted or glossed over in his telling. We shall arrive at an informed assessment of Babur's personality and ideological orientation as revealed in the Baburnama, and reflect on what his view of "Hindustan" tells us about the nature of conquest, memory-making, and power in early modern Asia.

**Index Terms** — Babur; Baburnama; Mughal Empire; Conquest; Memory; Beveridge; Historiography; Early Modern South Asia.

### I. WHY INDIA? BABUR'S MOTIVES FOR THE INVASION

Babur himself offers several explanations in his memoir, revealing a mix of strategic, personal, and historical motivations. By the 1520s, Babur's situation in Kabul had become a stalemate: his ancestral hopes in Transoxiana were thwarted by the powerful Uzbek state, and he faced pressure from the rise of Safavid Persia to his west. India, by contrast, was a vulnerable and wealthy frontier. Babur candidly notes the weakness of late Lodi Sultanate India. Sultan Ibrahim Lodi, who had usurped the Delhi throne in 1517, was unpopular and faced rebellions from within – "the eastern amīrs were in hostility to him" and his large army of perhaps 100,000 was thus divided and far weaker than it appeared. (Fol. 270)<sup>1</sup>

Babur contrasts this with the situation faced by earlier Central Asian conquerors of India: Sultan Mahmud of Ghazni (r. 997–1030) and Muhammad Ghuri (d. 1206) had each invaded Hindustan in times when no single power ruled all the land, and they met only disunited Hindu rajas as opponents. Now, although Ibrahim Lodi technically "was supreme" over much of North India, Babur observed that in practice the Sultan's authority

was hollow: regional warlords and nobles were defiant, and “at that time the Eastern chiefs were in revolt against him”. In short, India was a geopolitical prize ripe for the taking, lacking the unity or military efficiency of Babur’s foes in Central Asia (the Uzbeks).

Babur emphasizes that when he finally marched on Delhi in 1525–26, he did so with a relatively small but battle-hardened force (~12,000 men), even while “in my rear 100,000 old enemies such as the Uzbeks” threatened his base – an achievement, in his eyes, to the boldness of his enterprise and the providence that favoured it. Babur frankly credits divine aid for his victory over Ibrahim Lodi, given the risks he took: “as our trust was in Him, the most high God did not make our labour vain, but defeated that powerful foe and conquered that broad realm... not due to strength of our own, but purely from His mercy”. This depicts the religious zeal and the strong belief of the author in the Islamic Theology, as a devout Muslim.(Fol. 270a)<sup>2</sup>

Babur also appreciated the geographical and economic advantages that India offered, which might compensate for what it lacked in political unity. In a famous section of the Baburnama, he lists the “pleasant things of Hindustān” – first among them that “it is a large country and has masses of gold and silver”. (Fol. 291 b)<sup>3</sup> Hindustan’s fertility and resources impressed him: in the rainy season, “torrents pour down... the air is remarkably fine” and the land is lush. He marveled at the endless supply of skilled artisans and workmen in every field, noting “unnumbered and endless workmen of every kind” and specialized castes of craftsmen available for large projects. Indeed, after a few years of conquest, Babur proudly tallies the revenue yield of his new dominions “from Bhira to Bihar” at 52 kror (520 million) tankas, far exceeding what his meager Afghan and Central Asian domains could ever produce.

The economic lure of India’s fabled wealth – its flourishing agriculture, lucrative trade, and accumulated treasure of centuries – cannot be understated. Babur, who had struggled to finance his ambitions in Kabul’s limited economy, saw in Hindustan a land of plenty that could reward a successful conqueror with riches and a stable power base.

Babur’s decision to invade India was also shaped by a sense of historical destiny and personal ambition, which he articulates by placing himself in a lineage of Muslim invaders. Notably, he invokes the legacy of Sultan Mahmud of Ghazni and Sultan Muhammad of Ghur, the two conquerors from the northwest who had previously subjugated Indian lands. “From the time of the revered Prophet down till now three men from that side have conquered and ruled Hindustan,” Babur writes, counting: “Sultan Mahmud Ghazi was the first... Sultan Shihabuddin of Ghur was the second... I am the third”. (Fol. 269)<sup>7</sup> By explicitly casting himself as the heir to Mahmud and Ghuri, Babur appeals to the prestige of ghazi warriors who spread Islam in India and founded dynasties (Mahmud’s descendants ruled Lahore; Ghuri’s slaves established the Delhi Sultanate).

## II. THE QUESTION OF “INVITATIONS” – ALLIES OR PRETEXTS?

Traditional narratives often mention that Babur was “invited” to invade India by factions unhappy with Lodi rule. How much did such invitations actually influence his decision? The context is that in 1523–1524, two prominent figures sought Babur’s help against Sultan Ibrahim Lodi: Daulat Khan Lodi, the governor of Punjab who had rebelled against Ibrahim, and ‘Alam Khan (aka Alauddin), an uncle of Ibrahim who aspired to the Delhi throne. Both men sent envoys to Kabul soliciting Babur’s intervention. Babur did use their appeals to justify his early forays – he writes that he sent a representative to Sultan Ibrahim on Daulat Khan’s behalf, though Daulat Khan stalled and never actually forwarded Babur’s message to Delhi. Ultimately, Babur’s 1524 expedition advanced into Punjab under the pretext of aiding Daulat Khan; Babur took the border city of Lahore but then found Daulat Khan’s loyalties dubious and on slippery slope. Babur unceremoniously ousted Daulat Khan and annexed his territory, making it clear that he intended to rule rather than restore the Lodi dynasty. Thus, while the Lodi rebel invitations were a convenient entrée, Babur’s own intentions went beyond mere assistance – he aimed for sovereignty. Historian William Erskine noted that Babur “soon determined to make good his own claims on Hindustan” regardless of what his ostensible allies expected.<sup>9</sup>

A more contentious debate in historiography concerns Rana Sangā of Mewar, the leading Rajput king of the age. Did Rana Sanga invite Babur to attack Delhi, as some colonial-era writers suggested, or is this a later myth? Babur’s memoir does record contact with Rana Sanga prior to their conflict. Babur says he received “best wishes and a proposal” from Sanga when Babur was advancing on Delhi, wherein the Rana allegedly promised, “While we were still in Kabul, Rana Sanga had sent an envoy to testify to his good wishes and to propose this plan : If the honoured Padshah will come to near Dihll from that side, I from this will move on Agra.”. (Fol. 298 b)<sup>6</sup> In other words, Babur implies that Sanga offered an alliance to jointly topple Ibrahim

Lodi – presumably with the understanding that Sanga would gain in Rajputana while Babur took Delhi. Modern historians remain skeptical of this being an “invitation” in the true sense

Historian Jadunath Sarkar flatly dismisses the notion that Sanga “invited” Babur in any submissive way, noting that Babur’s invasion was fundamentally driven by his own imperial ambitions and by alliances with disaffected Muslim chiefs (like Alam Khan and Daulat Khan), not by Rajput. In fact, far from colluding, Rana Sanga emerged as the principal champion resisting Babur once the Lodis were defeated.<sup>10</sup>

The so-called “invitation theory” thus appears more a retrospective justification than a cause. Babur himself, writing after his victory, might have magnified Sanga’s earlier cordial message to paint the Rajput as a faithless turncoat (to Babur’s benefit: portraying Sanga as initially friendly then treacherous). Irfan Habib and other scholars have pointed out that Babur had launched raids into India even before any invitations – as early as 1519 he took Bajaur and in 1520 he captured the fort of Bhira – showing that his eyes were on Hindustan irrespective of Indian encouragement. By 1525, Babur was determined to conquer the Delhi Sultanate, invitation or not. The appeals of Alam Khan and Daulat Khan gave him a useful fig leaf of legitimacy, and any contact with Rana Sanga was soon overtaken by events. In summary, Babur came to India not at someone else’s behest but to seize a prize he recognized as attainable. Weak Afghan rule and internal dissent in Hindustan provided the opening; Babur’s own lust for territory and glory provided the impetus. He leveraged whatever local alliances he could – and just as readily discarded them. As M. Athar Ali observes, Babur’s invasion can be best understood by “the logic of conquerors’ ambition and the conjuncture of political weakness in India,” rather than by any supposed invitation or altruistic intervention on behalf of Indian allies.<sup>12</sup>

It can be asserted that Babur invaded Hindustan for a mix of strategic and self-aggrandizing reasons: the promise of a rich realm, the weakness of its rulers, and the chance to insert his name in the lineage of great Islamic conquerors. Contemporary “invitations” played a minor role – Babur was coming anyway. Once in India, he would justify his conquest as both opportunistic (securing his dynasty’s future) and ideologically ordained (fulfilling the role of a just Islamic ruler bringing order to a fragmented land). To understand how he rationalized and perceived the land he conquered, we must now turn to Babur’s own descriptions of Hindustan in the Baburnama.

### **III. BABUR’S IDEA OF HINDOSTAN: LANDSCAPE, PEOPLE, AND IDEOLOGY**

When Babur first encountered India, his reactions were those of a culturally confident outsider suddenly thrust into an alien world. The Baburnama records his often caustic comparisons between Hindustan and his Central Asian homeland. Babur divides his assessment into a litany of what he finds deficient in India and a shorter list of what he finds admirable. These observations go beyond mere travelogue; they are laden with implicit value judgments – “aesthetic yardsticks” drawn from Timurid Central Asia by which Babur measures the subcontinent and generally finds it wanting.

In a passage, Babur bluntly declares, “Hindustān is a country of few charms.” (Fol. 291)<sup>4</sup> He proceeds to enumerate the perceived failings of India’s people and culture in withering terms: “Its people have no good looks; of social intercourse, paying and receiving visits there is none; of genius and capacity none; of manners none... there are no good horses, no good dogs, no grapes, musk-melons or first-rate fruits... no ice or cold water, no good bread or cooked food in the bāzārs, no hot baths, no colleges, no candles, torches or candlesticks.” This sweeping condemnation shows us Babur’s cultural prejudice. Coming from the urban milieu of Samarkand and Herat (centers of Persianate high culture), Babur was appalled by what he saw as the absence of civilized amenities in North India. He ridicules Indian substitutes: for light at night, nobles employ “a great dirty gang of lamp-men” carrying crude oil lamps on poles, since they lack proper candles or lanterns. In place of baths, Indians (especially Hindus) ritually bathe in rivers, a practice perhaps unhygienic or perplexing to him. Babur’s condescending tone underscores that he saw Indian material culture as inferior to the Persian-Turkic standards he cherished. His criticism of the food – “no good bread or cooked food in the bazaars” – suggests he disliked the local cuisine and missed Central Asian staples like leavened bread, melons, and grapes (which do not flourish in the Gangetic climate).

Babur’s aesthetic disapproval extended to clothing and social norms. He was scandalized by the lack of clothing among the lower classes: “Peasants and people of low standing go about naked. They tie on a thing called lungūtā, a decency-clout... hanging two spans below the navel,” with only a strip of cloth passed between the legs for men. Women, he notes, wear a single long cloth (sāri or lungi), half around the waist and

half thrown over the head, with much of the body often exposed. To Babur's conservative Central Asian sensibilities, used to tunics, trousers and veils, this semi-nudity signified a lack of propriety. He frequently refers to Hindus as "pagans" (kafirs or Hindus in his terminology) and regards many of their customs – from dress to religion – as markers of an uncivilized people.

Though, Babur's depiction is not uniformly negative; it is nuanced by his natural curiosity and powers of observation. Alongside complaints, the Baburnama provides rich descriptions of India's landscape, flora, and fauna, which often fascinated him even when they did not meet his "yardsticks." He remarks that "everything is different" in Hindustan compared to his homeland: "its mountains, rivers, jungles and deserts, its towns, cultivated lands, its animals and plants, its peoples and their tongues, its rains and its winds, are all different. ...Once the water of the Sind is crossed, everything is in the Hindustān way – land, water, tree, rock, people and horde, opinion and custom." (Fol. 272 b)<sup>5</sup> His appreciation for nature's curiosities in Hindustan tempers the otherwise harsh cultural appraisal. In a sense, Babur admired the land more than the people: Hindustan's rains, rivers, jungles and biodiversity struck him as marvelous (if sometimes perilous), whereas he found the human society lacking by his standards.

A recurrent theme is Babur measuring Indian environments against the ideals of Central Asia (Mawarannahr and Khorasan). Take gardens and architecture: Babur was raised in the Timurid tradition of building sumptuous charbagh gardens with flowing water channels. In India, to his dismay, "there are no running waters in their gardens or residences". (Fol 291) The natural terrain of North India's plains meant palaces had to rely on wells or stagnant pools; to Babur, this absence of flowing waterworks made Indian residences "without charm, regularity or symmetry". He promptly imported his own aesthetics – after conquering Agra, Babur ordered the creation of Persian-style gardens with diverted river water (the Ram Bagh in Agra, for example). Such efforts imply that Babur saw it as his civilizing mission to remake some of Hindustan's spaces in the image of the beloved landscapes of Ferghana and Kabul (with vineyards, melon patches, clear streams).

Perhaps the most striking aspect of Babur's perception of Hindustan is his open contempt for the local populace when viewed through the prism of religion and ethnicity. Babur and his Central Asian cohort self-identified as Turks (meaning Turkic/Mongol Muslims); they viewed the natives of India, especially the non-Muslims, as Hindu infidels – a fundamentally different (and in their eyes, lower) civilization. Throughout the Baburnama, Babur refers to the Hindu inhabitants as "Hindus" or "pagans" who worship idols and have "no sense of social etiquette." He notes, not without scorn, that "most of the inhabitants of Hindustan are pagans (Hindus); they believe in the transmigration of souls. All artisans, wage-earners and officials are Hindus." This observation shows that the governing class of Hindustan under the Lodis was largely composed of Afghans and various Muslims, but the masses (and skilled classes like artisans) were Hindu by faith. Babur seems to register surprise that in India, unlike in his lands, even city-dwellers and courtiers could be non-Muslim. In Central Asia, society was more uniformly Muslim and nomadic tribes were classified by lineage; in India, Babur notes "here the settled people of the cultivated lands and villages get tribal (caste) names," (Fol. 290 b)<sup>8</sup> indicating a complex Hindu caste society alien to him.

Babur's Turko-centric pride comes through when describing martial or personal qualities. He implicitly (and explicitly) compares the valour and discipline of his own Turki-Mongol warriors to what he perceives as the chaotic, ill-organized Indian armies. After his first raids, he remarked that Indian war elephants, while huge, were no match for well-drilled horsemen and artillery – implying the superiority of the Central Asian way of war. In one aside, Babur even alludes to a contest of oaths between him and an Uzbek foe: "Both men took oath in the Ghazi's mood – Babur set against the Hindu whom he saw as a heathen, 'Ubaid (the Uzbek) set against Babur whom he saw as a heretic" (for Babur had Shia allies). This remark (coming from a later commentator or footnote) highlights that Babur consciously saw himself as a Ghazi fighting Hindus, while others saw him differently. Indeed, once Babur's campaign in India began to focus on defeating the Rajputs (who were Hindus), Babur's language became starkly bigoted: he paints it as Islam versus infidels. On the eve of the decisive battle against Rana Sanga (Battle of Khanwa, 1527), Babur famously renounced alcohol and proclaimed a jihad. He smashed the wine vessels in his camp and exhorted his men to purify themselves for holy war: "My servants... dashed upon the earth the flagons and cups... They dashed them in pieces as, God willing, soon will be dashed the gods of the idolaters." In this dramatic gesture (which Babur himself relates with pride), we see how he equated his victory over the Rajput Confederacy with the triumph of Islam over idolatry. The breaking of wine jars symbolically prefigures the breaking of Hindu idols. Babur's language left no doubt that he regarded the Rajputs under Sanga as "infidels" to be crushed in a righteous war. The

Baburnama thus provides unvarnished evidence of Babur's jihadist rhetoric: "I declared Jihad against Rana Sanga and the infidels," he wrote in effect, and assumed the mantle of Ghazi after emerging victorious. True to the brutal practices of medieval war, Babur ordered a victory pillar built from the heads of the Rajput dead – "an order was given to set up a pillar of pagan heads" to commemorate the win. This grisly tower of skulls (reminiscent of Timur's own terror tactics) was meant to send a message of Islamic triumph and to cow any other Hindu rulers. Babur's chroniclers note that he adopted the title "Ghazi" (slayer of infidels) after Khanwa and had the victory commemorated in chronograms and verse.<sup>12</sup> [Two years after Khanwa, coins were struck in Babur's name styling him al-sultan al-ghazi. The Baburnama appendix also records a quatrain Babur composed celebrating the victory: "For Islam's sake, I wandered in the wilds, / Prepared for war with pagans and Hindus, / Resolved to meet the martyr's death; / Thanks be to Allah – a Ghazi I became." This quartet, quoted by later historians, encapsulates Babur's self-conception as a holy warrior.] The religious motive was not just a façade – Babur's own words (and poems) reveal genuine zeal at least in those confrontations that pitted him against non-Muslim forces.

Babur's attitudes did not soften when describing the aftermath of conquest. At the fortress of Chanderi in 1528, which was held by Medini Rao (a Rajput ally of Sanga), Babur took the fort by assault and then carried out a general massacre. He writes with cold satisfaction: "We made general massacre of the pagans in it and... converted what for many years had been a mansion of hostility into a mansion of Islam." This line is especially revealing. By "mansion of hostility" he likely means a fortress or garrison of infidels that had long resisted Muslim power; turning it into a "mansion of Islam" implies either repurposing a temple or palace into a mosque or otherwise firmly establishing Islamic control. Babur is explicitly glorifying temple destruction and slaughter of Hindus as acts of piety. It is the rhetoric of a conqueror who sees himself as an instrument of holy war. Later chroniclers in the Islamic world often omitted or downplayed such episodes to present a more magnanimous image of victors, but Babur – writing for himself – is blunt. As Koenraad Elst observes, Babur's memoir unabashedly "glorifies temple destruction" and treats the annihilation of idolatry as a sacred duty, making it unsurprising that Babur's officers "broke Hindu temples in many parts of the country" including (allegedly) at Ayodhya.<sup>13</sup> Similarly, historian K. S. Lal notes that the Baburnama is "laced with the idiom of religious fanaticism which betrays the psychology developed by the ideology of jihad".<sup>14</sup> These scholars, focusing on Babur's own words, underline that Babur's conquest was accompanied by a pronounced strain of Islamic iconoclasm and supremacism.

To be sure, Babur was not uniformly cruel to all natives – he could be pragmatic. He mentions that there were many Hindu rajas "on all sides" of India, "some obedient to Islam, some not subject to Muslim rule". Those who submitted (e.g. some minor rajas who paid tribute or joined him) were treated as vassals; those who resisted were "noted as pagans" destined for holy war. Thus, Babur's contempt had gradations: it was fiercest towards proud "pagans" like Rana Sanga who dared challenge him, while more distant or pliant Hindu chiefs were simply the uncivilized other to be ruled or tolerated at convenience. Toward Indian Muslims (like the Afghans of Lodi's regime) Babur's attitude was different – he saw them as rivals but not infidels, and indeed tried to win many to his side by emphasizing Sunni solidarity (even though many Afghans remained hostile). Babur's prejudices, therefore, were twofold: ethnic (Turk vs Indian) and religious (Muslim vs Hindu). In his ideal vision, Turkic Muslim mastery should replace Afghan Muslim rule (hence his derision that the Lodi Sultans' ancestors were mere servants, and that upstart Indian Muslim dynasties like the Gujarat Sultanate had lowly origins) and subjugate the Hindu population. He saw himself as bringing a more noble and vigorous lineage of kingship to Hindustan, fused with a zeal to exalt Islam.

Local Reactions – Guru Nanak's Lament: What did the subjects of this conquest think of Babur's jihad and his "mansion of Islam"? The Persian chronicles written under Babur and his successors remain silent on the sufferings of common people, but a powerful indigenous voice survives in the verses of Guru Nanak (1469–1539), the founder of Sikhism. Guru Nanak lived in Punjab during Babur's invasions (he was an eyewitness to Babur's sack of Saidpur in 1520 and the brutal sack of Lahore in 1524). Deeply moved by the carnage, Nanak composed four hymns known as Bābar-vāñī ("Babur's utterance") included in the Sikh scripture Guru Granth Sahib. Babur's idea of Hindustan – as gleaned from his memoir – is a complex. It is part ethnography, part diatribe, and part manifesto of Islamic conquest. He saw India as physically rich but culturally impoverished (from his biased perspective).

#### **IV. ENGAGEMENT WITH LOCAL RULERS**

Babur's military engagements in India pitted him against a variety of ruling groups – Afghan Muslims of the Lodi dynasty, Rajput Hindu kings, and other regional chiefs (e.g. the Muslim Sultanates of east and west). In the Baburnama, Babur not only recounts the battles but also frames his enemies in particular ways that serve his propaganda. His interactions with local rulers are consistently described to enhance his own legitimacy and downplay that of his foes. A critical reading of these passages reveals how Babur sought to justify the displacement of the existing powers and project himself as the rightful sovereign of Hindustan.

The first major hurdle in Babur's path was Sultan Ibrahim Lodi of Delhi. Ibrahim Lodi is not extensively personalized in the Baburnama; Babur had never met him except on the battlefield. Instead, Babur characterizes Ibrahim through the prism of the Sultanate's weakness. In describing the First Battle of Panipat (April 1526), Babur emphasizes his tactical ingenuity and the courage of his outnumbered army to further diminish Ibrahim's stature. He details how he drew up carts (Ottoman-style *tábūr* arrangements) as barricades and used matchlock muskets and cannons to terrify the Afghan forces – techniques novel to northern India. Babur's artillery and firearms wrought havoc among Ibrahim's war-elephants and massed troops, a fact he notes with satisfaction, as it proved the superiority of his methods. One can sense Babur's slight contempt for the old-fashioned valor of Ibrahim who personally fought and died on the field: Babur does acknowledge that Sultan Ibrahim died fighting, but he treats it as a futile gesture from a bygone era. After the battle, Babur took possession of Delhi and Agra with surprising ease.

Babur also takes pains to delegitimize the prior Muslim rulers of Hindustan in terms of lineage. While he respected Sultanate dynasties as fellow Muslims, he nonetheless highlights that many were of low origin who rose through servitude. For example, writing of contemporary rulers around 1525, Babur says the founders of the Sharqi dynasty of Jaunpur “had been cup-bearers in the presence of Sultan Firoz Shah Tughluq” before carving out their own kingdom. Of the Gujarat Sultanate, Babur notes Sultan Muzaffar Shah II (who died right before Babur's invasion) was learned and devout, but “his dynasty people call Tank” and “his ancestors also will have been wine-servers to Sultan Firoz Shah... they became possessed of Gujarat after his death.” Likewise the Malwa Sultanate under Sultan Mahmud Khilji II: Babur records that Rana Sanga had defeated this Sultan and “his dynasty also has become feeble... [Mahmud's] ancestors must have been cherished by Sultan Firoz Shah; they took Malwa after his death.” The refrain is notable – Babur is stressing that these Indian Muslim dynasties (Jaunpur, Gujarat, Malwa – and by implication the Lodis too, who were originally Afghan nobles under Bahlul Lodi) were upstart regimes of recent provenance, sprung from service rather than lofty birth. By contrast, Babur the Timurid had the prestige of Genghis Khan and Timur in his blood. This propagandistic framing sought to convince even the Indian Muslim elites that Babur's rule was a restoration of high, centralized kingship after generations of fractious parvenus. It is as if Babur is saying: I, a true Padshah of noble descent, have come to replace these low-born sultans who squabbled among themselves. This would have been an argument aimed especially at attracting the Persian-speaking intelligentsia and bureaucrats of Delhi, who might look favorably on a Timurid renaissance.

After defeating the Lodis, Babur's hardest fight was with Rana Sangram Singh (Sanga) of Mewar, who led a coalition of Rajput clans and some Afghan remnants against the Mughals. In Babur's memoir, Rana Sanga is both acknowledged and vilified – a formidable adversary cast as the arch-kafir. Babur introduces Sanga in the context of listing the powers of Hindustan: he notes that among the “pagans,” Rana Sanga “had in these latter days grown great by his own valour and sword”, having expanded from his base at Chittor to take much of the Malwa kingdom (including the fort of Chanderi). This is a rare moment where Babur actually praises an enemy's prowess (“grown great by his own valour”). It suggests Babur respected Sanga as a warrior – indeed, Babur was sufficiently alarmed by Sanga's reputation that he made serious preparations and invoked jihad to stiffen his soldiers' resolve, as discussed earlier.

In the lead-up to the Battle of Khanwa (March 1527), Babur's memoir conveys a palpable tension. He records ill omens and the initial fear in his camp when faced with Sanga's huge army, reputed for fierce Rajput fighters and including allies like Hasan Khan Mewati (a Muslim ruler of Mewar who joined Sanga's cause). Babur does not shy from stating that his troops were daunted by the Rajputs' numerical superiority and fanatic courage – some Mughal soldiers even began to desert or talk of retreat. This admission sets the stage for Babur's dramatic moral effort: he gathered his men, gave an impassioned speech urging them to embrace death if necessary, and performed the aforementioned renunciation of wine and declaration of jihad. In Babur's telling, this turned the tide psychologically. He describes the battle itself in terms of disciplined

Mughal firepower versus Rajput valor. The Rajputs and their allies (whom Babur calls a force of “pagans and renegade Muslims”) charged repeatedly but were broken by cannon and musket volleys and flanking maneuvers (the Mughal *tulghuma* tactic). Rana Sanga was wounded and barely escaped; thousands of Rajputs fell. Babur’s account exults that this victory was even more significant than Panipat, as it annihilated the power of the proud Rajputs.

Babur’s portrayal of Rana Sanga after the battle is dismissive. He notes that Sanga fled the field – thus staining the Rajput code of honor in Babur’s eyes – and later makes a brief note that Rana Sanga died not long after, allegedly poisoned by his own chiefs when he planned to fight Babur again (this detail comes from later Mughal sources). In the *Baburnama*, Babur does not dwell on Sanga’s death, but the implication is that Sanga’s coalition fragmented and that fate removed Babur’s greatest foe. Babur quickly moved to mop up Rajput strongholds like Chanderi (as we saw, resulting in massacre) to ensure no resurgence. Interestingly, Babur does acknowledge another Hindu power he never met: the Raja of Vijayanagar in far South India, whom Babur calls “the greatest of the pagan kings” with the largest territory and army among Hindus. He places Rana Sanga as the second after Vijayanagar’s ruler in terms of might. This shows Babur had some knowledge of the broader Indian political landscape and a grudging respect for certain Hindu regimes (Vijayanagar being beyond his reach, he never derides it as he does closer enemies). But these distant observations serve mainly to heighten Babur’s own achievements: by defeating Sanga, Babur implies he bested the strongest Hindu military leader of the North, securing a dominance that even the mighty southern Raja did not challenge.

A notable figure in Khanwa’s context was Hasan Khan Mewati, the Muslim lord of Mewat (a region south of Delhi), who allied with Sanga. Babur considered such Muslims traitors to Islam. In his eyes, by siding with infidels against a fellow Muslim ruler (Babur), they had become apostates or at least ignoble. Babur’s chroniclers later wrote with scorn of Hasan Khan’s demise alongside “idol-worshippers.” In the *Baburnama*, Babur mentions the “Mewatis” as part of Sanga’s host and after the victory, he sent punitive expeditions into Mewat to subdue it. He gave Mewat’s lands to his own followers, punishing that house for their rebellion. This episode is telling of Babur’s political strategy: he would show no mercy to Muslim lords who opposed him, treating them as harshly as Hindu enemies (though he might not frame it as *jihad* in their case, since the religious rationale was trickier). Instead, he framed it as retribution for disloyalty and obstruction of his royal right.

Medini Rai was a Rajput chieftain (of the Tomar or Bhil tribe, often labeled a “great pagan” by Babur) who had become the *de facto* ruler of Malwa after Rana Sanga installed him there. When Babur turned to Chanderi (Medini’s stronghold) in early 1528, he offered Medini Rai terms to surrender the fort in exchange for another territory – possibly a rare gesture of negotiation. Medini, bound by Rajput honor, refused and chose to fight to the end. Babur’s assault on Chanderi was successful and, consistent with Rajput tradition, Medini Rai’s garrison committed *jauhar* and perished almost to the last man. Babur’s description, as cited earlier, celebrates this as a religious victory, converting a “house of hostility” into “a house of Islam”. He even mentions that he took the title of “Ghazi” formally after this campaign (some sources suggest he did so after Khanwa, others after Chanderi). The propaganda value was clear – Babur was solidifying his image as the champion of Islam in Hindustan. By highlighting the destruction of Medini’s resistance, Babur sent a message to all remaining Hindu or Afghan lords: further resistance was futile and would be met with the sword and the Quran in equal measure.

Babur’s narrative thus consistently devalues his opponents to elevate himself. The Lodis are depicted as weak and illegitimate, the Rajputs as brave but ultimately heathen foes destined for defeat. Interestingly, in some cases Babur also shows a modicum of admiration: for example, he calls Rajput warriors “brave infidels” and notes their suicidal courage (many Rajputs fought to death rather than flee, except their leader Sanga). He was impressed that Rajputs would perform *saka* (last stands) and that their women would commit *jauhar* (mass immolation) to avoid capture – customs alien to Babur’s culture. These observations, though tinged with disgust (he considered *jauhar* an awful pagan practice), also signaled to him the fanatical devotion of Hindu warriors to their cause, which Babur had to overcome by even greater fanaticism of his own troops.

Babur also deployed propaganda by genealogy and epithet. He often refers to Indian rulers not by personal name but by generic labels that diminish them. For example, Ibrahim is usually just “Sultan Ibrahim Lodi” with no royal epithets, whereas Babur refers to himself with grand titles. He calls Sanga “Rana” (king) but

ensures to append “kafir” or “pagan” in contexts that matter. When listing the Muslim kings, he carefully appends their clan names (Sayyid, Afghan, etc.) to indicate they are not of Timurid blood. When describing the Rajput-held regions, he writes that many areas in the hills are ruled by “rāīs and rājās held in little esteem” – essentially belittling the small Hindu chieftains as minor, inconsequential figures (even if some of them were fiercely independent, Babur chooses to portray them as insignificant bandits).

The effect of Babur’s portrayal is to craft a narrative where all roads lead to Babur’s supremacy. If a ruler was Muslim, Babur was more illustrious by birth and more competent as a leader of the ummah (community). If a ruler was Hindu, Babur was the instrument of divine justice to punish their arrogance and idolatry. Any virtues his enemies had (courage, local legitimacy, etc.) are shown to be either misused (in the case of Afghans fighting fellow Muslims) or ultimately futile (in the case of Rajput heroism). Babur’s engagement with local powers as described by himself is thus not an impartial chronicle but a carefully weighted story: a story of how a noble outsider toppled a series of unworthy regimes, often with God’s clear favor.

## **V. A JEHAD OR NOT**

Babur’s own account of his conquest, as we have seen, is unapologetically self-aggrandizing and colored by his biases. Modern historians have studied Baburnama and Babur’s career from various angles – military, cultural, religious – sometimes corroborating Babur’s claims, other times challenging or reinterpreting them. Comparing Babur’s narrative with later historical analyses gives contradictions, silences, and subtexts that enrich our understanding of this complex figure.

One key debate is over the role of religion in Babur’s conquest. Babur’s memoir, especially in the Hindustan chapters, is replete with religious rhetoric (jihad, ghazi, idol-breaking). Some scholars argue this was largely propagandistic flourish rather than Babur’s primary motive. The Marxist historian Irfan Habib, for instance, stresses the material and political factors behind Babur’s invasion: the superior organization and horse-archery of the Mughal army, the effective use of gunpowder weapons, and the fissures in the Lodi empire were, in Habib’s view, the decisive elements. Habib notes that Babur’s main military strength lay in his mounted archers, drilled in steppe warfare, and that firearms – while used – were one of many tools in a broader strategy of mobility and tactics. From this angle, Babur’s calls to jihad at Khanwa can be interpreted as an expedient means to galvanize troops rather than evidence that he invaded India for religious conversion or crusade. Habib and similarly oriented scholars remind us that Babur was a pragmatist: after conquering India, Babur did not attempt to forcibly convert his new Hindu subjects en masse, nor did he establish a theocratic state – he remained interested in revenue collection, consolidating power, and enjoying the fruits of his new empire (gardens, art, etc.). They often cite Babur’s on-and-off piety (he famously had a quick temper and love of drink, which he renounced and then partially resumed) to argue that Babur was not a consistent religious zealot, but a worldly monarch who deployed piety when useful.<sup>11</sup>

On the other hand, scholars like Koenraad Elst and K.S. Lal emphasize Babur’s own words as evidence that his mindset did include a strong strand of religious fanaticism. They point out – as we have earlier – Babur’s jubilation in smashing idols and his self-description as “Ghazi”. They argue that Babur initiated what would become an enduring pattern of Mughal policy: glorification of Islam through imperial ideology, even if outright forced conversions were rare. Lal, for example, describes Baburnama as shot through with the “ideology of Jihad”, contending that Babur’s actions were influenced by the desire to emulate Mahmud Ghazni’s legacy of temple destruction and holy war. These scholars often operate in a nationalist framework (Lal and Elst wrote in the context of late 20th-century debates on Muslim rulers in India) and can be polemical. They have been critiqued by more secular historians for cherry-picking Babur’s worst utterances to paint him as a caricature of a “Muslim invader.” Nonetheless, their work serves as a counterbalance, ensuring that Babur’s violence and bigotry are not whitewashed under the glamor of his sophisticated image. For instance, Elst highlights Babur’s pride in demolishing a Hindu shrine at Ayodhya and frames it as part of Babur’s self-perception as an “Islamic iconoclast” fulfilling a sacred duty. This interpretation aligns Babur with a long tradition of invaders who legitimated conquest through religion.

Between these poles, other historians offer more nuanced views. Stephen F. Dale, Babur’s biographer, portrays Babur as a Renaissance prince in some respects – a man of letters, a lover of art and nature – who nevertheless was a product of his time, capable of ruthlessness and zeal. Dale notes that Babur “shares with his Renaissance contemporaries the cultivation and refinement of aesthetic sensibility amidst a brutal life of constant political and social violence.”<sup>15</sup> In other words, Babur could pen exquisite poetry about a bird’s song one day and order a massacre the next, without seeing contradiction. Dale and others emphasize that Babur’s

memoir is unusually frank and introspective for its era – Babur doesn't shy from confessing his own emotions, whether it's homesickness for Ferghana's fruit or love for a youth in the Herat bazaar (famously, Babur writes of a boy he fell in love with, showing a personal side quite apart from war). This has led some to label the Baburnama "oddly modern" in its psychological depth. But as Dale also points out, Babur transcended the genres of his culture to give a retrospective self-portrait that is at once candid and calculated. There is a self-fashioning going on: Babur is performing the role of a cultured yet conquering king. The modern reader senses both the human and propagandist sides in the text. For instance, Babur's poignant descriptions of natural beauty and his honest admission of fear or mistakes are disarming – not typical in royal chronicles. Yet the same Babur will silence those human moments with a triumphant verse about becoming a Ghazi, reminding us that this memoir was also meant to secure his posthumous fame as a great Islamic monarch.

André Wink situates Babur in the broader pattern of Islamic expansion into India. In Wink's analysis, Babur's conquest was part of the third major wave of Central Asian invasions (after the Ghaznavids and Ghurids) and coincided with the era of gunpowder empires. Wink acknowledges Babur's call to jihad and use of the title Ghazi, seeing it as emblematic of a new kind of imperial ideology.<sup>16</sup> He notes that unlike earlier Turkish conquerors who often integrated fairly swiftly, Babur's generation (which includes the founders of the Safavid and Ottoman empires) made conscious use of Islamicate symbolism – for the Mughals, framing their kingdom as a dar al-Islam (abode of Islam) was important to legitimize rule over a majority non-Muslim populace. Wink also discusses technology: Babur's victory is sometimes dubbed the first significant "Gunpowder victory" in South Asia. While Babur did not have a technological edge in everything (mounted archery remained his core strength, as Habib mentioned), his effective deployment of cannons at Panipat and Khanwa was a game-changer. Peter Jackson and other military historians note that Babur likely learned new artillery tactics from the Ottomans and from his Persian ally Ustad Ali Quli; thus Babur's success can be partly attributed to this adaptation of warfare techniques.

Peter Jackson, a scholar of medieval India, has examined the silences in Babur's narrative. For example, Babur scarcely mentions the local peasantry or the devastating impact of battles on the countryside.<sup>17</sup> Jackson and others compare Babur's account with indigenous evidence like revenue records or architectural remains. They find that Babur's chronicle, for all its detail, omits mention of certain atrocities or actions that other sources hint at. The Babri Masjid in Ayodhya is a prime example of subtext and silence: Babur never mentions ordering a mosque at the site of Rama's birth temple – an event of enormous later controversy. Yet an inscription (since lost, but recorded by scholars) claimed the mosque was built in Babur's name in 1528. The fact that Babur's memoir and even his daughter's histories are silent on it could suggest it was not seen as noteworthy (one of many mosques built) or that Babur himself never went to Ayodhya and delegated it. Modern historians caution against reading history solely through Babur's eyes – they cross-reference archaeology, local folklore, and later chronicles to fill gaps. For instance, Babur does not describe the impact of war on Delhi's population in detail, but later sources talk of how his unpaid soldiery initially caused mayhem in Delhi until Babur curbed them. Babur is similarly silent about any negotiations with his defeated foes' families – we know from other records he married off some Lodi princesses into his family to conciliate the Afghans, but the Baburnama chooses not to mention these diplomatic marriages (perhaps to maintain the tone of outright conquest rather

Contemporaneously, Hindu and Jain perspectives on Babur are elusive. No Rajput chronicler left a first-hand written account of the battles of Khanwa or Chanderi. Knowledge about Rana Sanga and Medini Rai comes mostly through the filter of Mughal sources and much later regional histories (like the 18th-century Khyat chronicles in Rajasthan, which remember Sanga as a legendary warrior but whose details are tinged with folklore). It seems that in the immediate aftermath, the Rajputs transmitted the story of their defeat orally and in bardic songs. These songs (e.g. about Sanga's valor, his losing an eye, arm, etc., and fighting on) kept the memory of resistance alive among the Rajput community, though they do not constitute formal history.

One notable exception in indigenous record, as previously discussed, is Sikh literature. Guru Nanak's verses give a slice of popular reaction in the Punjab. They show the anguish and confusion of ordinary people witnessing Babur's atrocities – a perspective entirely absent in Babur's writing. There is also a later Sikh tradition called "Babur Bani" (Nanak's hymns are part of it) that frames Babur's invasion as a turning point of Kalyug (the dark epoch).<sup>18</sup> However, beyond Nanak, no other South Asian vernacular chronicler of that exact time wrote about Babur in detail. Some Jain authors in Rajasthan and Gujarat, who often wrote poetic semi-historical works, might have alluded to upheavals caused by Babur. For example, Jain writings

sometimes mention the refugee movements and chaos when a new conqueror arrived. A late 16th-century Jain text, Muhammad Shahid Bilas, for instance, written in Hindi, nostalgically recalls the time of Rana Sanga and the turmoils of Babur's invasion. But these are reflections a few generations removed.

The absence of robust contemporary Indian narratives of Babur's conquest is itself a telling sign – part of what one might call “imperial erasure.” When a new dynasty establishes itself, it often suppresses or overshadows the records of those it defeated. In Babur's case, the physical destruction of cities like Chanderi and the elimination of rival courts meant that any archival records or chronicles kept by those courts were lost. Had the Lodis maintained a court chronicle up to 1526, it likely perished in the sack of Delhi or was discontinued when patronage ended. Similarly, any documentation by Rana Sanga's scribes might have been lost in the chaos after his defeat and death. The Mughal court that followed had little interest in preserving their predecessors' chronicles; instead, they propagated their own version. Babur's memoir (and later his daughter Gulbadan's Humayun-nama) became the foundational texts for early Mughal history. During Akbar's reign, when the imperial historiography project was in full swing, the Akbarnama and Ain-i-Akbari looked back on Babur with reverence, but they relied mainly on Babur's memoirs and some hearsay. They did not, for example, incorporate Rajput or commoner accounts of Babur's conquests.

This one-sidedness means we have to read sources like the Baburnama “against the grain”. We ask, what is Babur not telling us? For instance, Babur is silent about how the local Hindu population reacted beyond those he fought. Did villages resist or submit? What happened to the family of Ibrahim Lodi? (We know from other sources that Babur treated Ibrahim's mother and wives with respect and gave them stipends – a detail Babur modestly omits, possibly because chivalry to a foe's family was expected and not worth boasting about). Babur also doesn't mention the administrative challenges of ruling a non-Muslim majority. However, from the Ain-i-Akbari we learn that Babur continued the practice of jizya (poll-tax on non-Muslims) initially – something Akbar abolished later. Babur probably did not find it noteworthy to record that he imposed jizya, as it was standard practice for an Islamic ruler. But for historians, whether he did or not is significant to understanding his approach to governance. Later scholars like M. Athar Ali piece together such information from Firmans (royal orders) and land grants; some farmans of Babur survive in archives, showing he granted lands to various Muslim nobles and perhaps a few Hindus of note. Such documents show that Babur tried to win some local cooperation – for example, he confirmed the Raja of Gwalior (Vikramaditya, who submitted to him) in his lands. But Babur did not elaborate this in his memoir, perhaps to keep the focus on martial achievements rather than administrative consolidation.

Another aspect of imperial narrative bias is how events are justified. Babur justifies his actions through divine sanction or necessity. A vernacular source might have painted those same actions as tyrannical. For example, Babur calls the mass killing at Chanderi a righteous conversion of a fortress to Islam; a ballad from Malwa (had one been written) might have mourned Chanderi as an act of barbarity by the Mughal foreigner. Indeed, centuries later, Hindu nationalists remember such acts bitterly – but at the time, in the absence of printed records, these views survived only in community memory.

## **VI. CONCLUSION**

Babur's India is both trophy and torment. The Baburnama shows a seasoned nomad who can seize Hindustan by cannon-fire yet never quite love it. Conquest becomes cultural collision: swords win territory, but the damp Indo-Gangetic air keeps him yearning for Kabul. His memoir proves that victors legislate memory; massacres appear as “necessary chastisements,” plunder reads as providence, and the author crowns himself a divinely favoured Timurid. Power, then, is narrative—write boldly and the world recalls your version.

The text also exposes a frigid imperial arithmetic. Babur tallies men, horses, treasure, genealogy, and fear with a merchant's precision. Rivals vanish, allies are bought, legitimacy is draped in Qur'anic piety and Timurid silk. At the same time, he plants Persian gardens beside the Yamunā, hinting at a wish to domesticate foreign soil even as he orders that his bones be carried back to Kabul. Early Mughal rule thus oscillates between exploitation and tentative assimilation: India enriches Babur but never embraces him. Five centuries on, that tension endures. Reading Babur is reading conquest itself—grandeur, prejudice, and self-deception—through the eyes of the stranger who won and then penned the final word.

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- [2] Babur. Baburnama, fol. 270a.
- [3] Ibid., fol. 291b.
- [4] Ibid., fol. 291.
- [5] Ibid., fol. 272b.
- [6] Ibid., fol. 298b.
- [7] Ibid., fol. 269.
- [8] Ibid., fol. 290b.
- [9] Erskine, William. *History of India under Baber* (London: Longman, 1854), 280–82. Erskine points out that Babur had earlier (in 1519 and 1520) raided into the Punjab without any invitation, driven by his own claims on the land (Babur believed the old Timurid claim via Timur's brief 1398 conquest gave him a right to Punjab and Hindustan). The overtures from Daulat Khan and Alam Khan merely accelerated Babur's plans.
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