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Tracing the Symbiosis: Human and Nature Relationships in Mughal Chronicles

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ABSTRACT

This article offers a nuanced examination of the complex relationship between humans and the natural world during the Mughal Empire(1526-1857). It challenges the simplistic binaries of exploitation versus conservation approach in analysing Mughal relationship with nature. It argues that the Mughal attitude constituted a multifaceted symbiosis, simultaneously shaped by pragmatic statecraft, economic ecologies, and cultural symbolic and aesthetic appreciation for nature. Through a critical analysis of primary and secondary sources—including the memoirs of Babur and Jahangir, the administrative documents of Abul Fazl, and European travelogues—this study investigates the textual and artistic representation of wildlife, landscapes, flora, and fauna. It argues that the Mughal mentality sought to both dominate and collaborate with nature, a duality evident in their water management, forestry, horticulture, and wildlife interactions. By situating these practices within their cultural and technological context, this research seeks to shed light on understanding of pre-colonial environmental mindsets and challenges anachronistic ecological narratives.

Introduction

The Anthropocene crisis and growing research on environmental history have compelled medieval historians to integrate the use of faunal and floral evidence in reconstructing past ecologies. In the backdrop of this, they started re-examination of past through an ecological lens, analysing human-environment interactions in the light of contemporary sources. In this context, the Mughal Empire provides unique case study as it ruled over a vast and ecologically diverse subcontinent for over three centuries and the Mughals left behind an extensive corpus of chronicles that offer a unique window into medieval environmental mentalities. These texts—ranging from deeply personal imperial memoirs like Babur's Baburnama to encyclopedic administrative records like Abul Fazl's Ain-i-Akbari—are far more than mere records of political

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conquest and courtly intrigue. They are repositories of detailed observations on wildlife, geography, climate, flora, and fauna, reflecting a complex and often contradictory elite worldview towards the natural world. The paintings of this period could be analysed to understand the sensibilities of the Mughals towards nature.

This article contends that the Mughal approach to nature cannot be reductively categorized as either completely exploitative or harmonious. Instead, it was a dynamic and context-dependent symbiosis. This relationship was shaped by several factors: the relentless pragmatic needs of a centralized, revenue-maximizing state; the technological limitations and possibilities of a pre-industrial society; the intense aesthetic and scientific curiosity of the elite, particularly under Emperor Jahangir; and the rich cultural inheritances from Islamic, Persian, and Turko-Mongol traditions that influenced perceptions of kingship, paradise, and humanity's place in the cosmos. The Mughal state engaged in large-scale manipulation of the environment—digging canals, clearing forests, and organizing massive hunts—yet its documents also reveal protectionist policies towards certain resources and a profound, almost reverential, interest in the systematic cataloguing and understanding of natural phenomena. By exploring this duality thematically, this article aims to illuminate the complex and often paradoxical environmental mindset of one of the medieval most powerful empires.

The Mughal Mentality: A Dialectic of Dominion and Reverence

The Persian chronicles of the Mughal Empire consistently speak of desire to alter the landscape and revere of flora and fauna and it revealed dialectical tension between a desire to dominate the landscape and a genuine, observant reverence for its intricacies. This was shaped by the personal proclivities of emperors and the administrative demands of statecraft. It was hardly influenced by any environmental philosophy.

The voice of the empire's founder, Babur, establishes this pattern vividly. In his Baburnama, he initially expresses disdain for the Indian landscape, comparing it unfavorably to the ordered gardens and familiar fruits of his Central Asian homeland. He famously declared, "Hindustan is a country of few charms… its people have no beauty; its horses no excellence" (Babur 483). However, this cultural chauvinism quickly gives way to the meticulous eye of a naturalist. He compiles an astonishingly detailed inventory of the subcontinent's ecology, describing over forty species of plants and trees, including precise observations on the mango, the jackfruit, and the banyan tree. His account of the fauna is equally comprehensive, covering mammals, birds, and fish with a level of detail that, as one scholar notes, "would make no contemptible figure in a modern work of natural history" (Babur 487). This act of cataloguing was not passive; it was the first step in a process of intellectual and physical appropriation. By naming, describing, and classifying, Babur was asserting a form of cognitive control, making the unfamiliar environment

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knowable and thus manageable for his nascent empire. His immediate impulse to create Persian-style charbagh gardens in Kabul and later in India was the physical manifestation of this—imposing a familiar, ordered geometry upon the alien wilderness.

This tradition of detailed observation evolved and became more systematized under Emperor Jahangir, in whose reign the duality of dominion and reverence reached its zenith. His memoir, Tuzuk-i-Jahangiri, interweaves records of brutal hunting expeditions with passages of delicate scientific inquiry. The hunt (shikar) was a central pillar of Mughal kingship, a ritual performance of power and martial virtue. Jahangir records with pride the scale of these slaughters, noting on one occasion the killing of 66,000 animals, a figure that served to quantify his imperial reach and potency (Jahangir 218). Yet, in almost the same breath, the chronicle can shift to a minute description of a specific bird, such as the sarus crane, whose mating habits and loyalty to its partner he describes with empathy and fascination. He recounts, "They never separate from each other... If one dies, the other sorrows so much that it also passes away" (Jahangir 152). His curiosity extended to experimentation; he once ordered a sheep to be fed to a lion and a goat to a tiger to document which would be consumed first, blending a crude scientific method with a demonstration of his absolute power over life and death (Jahangir 215). In Jahangir, the animal was simultaneously a symbol to be subjugated in the field and a subject of wonder to be preserved in text and art.

The administrative vision of the state, most comprehensively articulated in Abul Fazl's Ain-i-Akbari, codified this dualism into policy. The Ain-i-Akbari is, above all, a manual for the efficient exploitation of the empire's human and natural resources for fiscal strength. It contains exhaustive quantitative data on land, crops, yields, and prices, reflecting a mentality that viewed nature as a calculable storehouse. The detailed regulations for the imperial stables and the elephant corps, specifying the diet and maintenance for thousands of animals, reduce these magnificent creatures to line items in a military and logistical ledger (Abul Fazl 125-130). However, Abul Fazl's prose often frames this extractive relationship in the language of benevolent stewardship. He portrays Akbar not as a plunderer but as a just ruler whose irrigation projects and agricultural policies were acts of providence for his people. This was the ideological gloss on a system driven by "economic need and technological limitation." The empire's capacity for environmental transformation, while significant, was bounded by pre-industrial technology. Its exploitation was intensive within these means—through agrarian expansion and managed resource extraction—but lacked the transformative, systemic scale of later colonial industrial capitalism, resulting in a more personalized and directly managed relationship with the natural world.

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Water: The Arteries of Empire

The Mughal Empire's control over water resource was crucial in survival and expansion of empire. It was the lifeblood of the Mughal Empire, and its management exemplifies the sophisticated interplay between utilitarian engineering, economic strategy, and symbolic representation. The Mughal approach to hydrology was holistic, encompassing grand state projects, support for traditional systems, and the aesthetic use of water in landscape architecture.

The most visible manifestations of Mughal hydraulic power were the large-scale canals. While earlier rulers had initiated such projects, the Mughals expanded and systematized them. The restoration of the Firoz Shah canal in the Punjab during Shah Jahan's reign, for instance, transformed a vast tract of semi-arid land into a productive agricultural zone, directly boosting crop yields and, consequently, land revenue. These projects were monumental feats of engineering that served clear economic purposes, but they were also potent symbols of sovereignty. As historian James Wescoat argues, such canals were "central to the projection of imperial authority," physical testaments to the emperor's ability to harness fundamental natural forces for the prosperity and order of the realm (Wescoat 45). The ruler who commanded water commanded life itself, and these public works were widely promulgated as evidence of Mughal benevolence and power.

Alongside these macro-projects, the Mughal state demonstrated a pragmatic reliance on micro-level water management. The Ain-i-Akbari reveals a keen administrative awareness of local irrigation technologies. It details various water-lifting devices, most notably the persian wheel (rahat), and differentiates revenue rates for lands irrigated by wells, canals, and rainfall (Abul Fazl 285). This was not merely descriptive; it was prescriptive. The state, understanding that its revenue depended on agricultural success at the local level, often provided tax incentives (taqavi) loans for the digging and maintenance of wells and tanks. This policy effectively integrated countless decentralized, community-managed water systems into the imperial fiscal framework. It was a collaborative model, where the state's interest in sustainable revenue aligned with local knowledge and practice, ensuring a degree of ecological stability and resource renewal, even if the primary motive was fiscal rather than consciously environmental.

The most aesthetically refined expression of Mughal hydrology was in the construction of gardens. Gardens like the Shalimar Bagh in Lahore and Kashmir were not just pleasure resorts; they were complex hydraulic ecosystems. They employed sophisticated engineering—terracing, stone-lined canals (nahars), fountains, and waterfalls—to create a perfectly controlled environment. Water was the central element, its flow meticulously choreographed to represent the Quranic rivers of paradise. Ebba Koch notes that in the Mughal charbagh, "water was the most important element... its channeling reflected the emperor's role as a bringer of order and

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fertility" (Koch 62). The garden was thus a microcosm of the ideal empire: a space where nature was perfected, organized, and made to yield both aesthetic pleasure and symbolic meaning. The same water that powered the persian wheel in a village field danced in the fountains of the Shalimar, illustrating the seamless Mughal integration of the utilitarian and the sublime in their relationship with the natural world.

Flora: The Forest and the Garden

The Mughal interaction with the plant kingdom was characterized by a stark and revealing dichotomy, a clear division between the utilitarian realm of the forest and the aesthetic-symbolic realm of the garden. This dichotomy reflects the two primary, and often opposing, modes of the Mughal environmental relationship: resource extraction and symbolic appropriation.

Forests were perceived primarily as economic and political spaces. They were reservoirs of timber for construction and shipbuilding, sources of fuel, and provided pasture for animals. Crucially, they were the designated grounds for the royal hunt, a space for military training and the ritual display of sovereign power. However, in the Mughal textual imagination, forests were also landscapes of fear and disorder. They were frequently described as the abode of "bandits" and "rebellious persons", territories that lay outside the direct control of the state's revenue machinery and represented a challenge to its authority. Consequently, state policy towards forests was largely transformative and extractive. The clearing of forest land to bring it under the plough was a primary objective, as it expanded the area under the zabt system, the measured land from which the state derived its core revenue. The Ain-i-Akbari's detailed provincial surveys, which meticulously record the expansion of arable land, are implicit records of this process of deforestation and ecological change (Abul Fazl 295). As Sumit Guha's work on the Marathas suggests, similar processes were underway in other contemporary Indian polities, indicating that agrarian expansion and the reshaping of forest ecologies were a hallmark of the period, though on a scale constrained by pre-modern technology.

In the most dramatic contrast to the exploitative view of wild forests stood the Mughal passion for gardens (bagh) and horticulture. If the forest was the "other," the garden was the self—a perfected, humanized nature. The Mughals were avid botanists and horticulturalists on a grand scale. They established extensive fruit orchards and pleasure gardens, importing, acclimatizing, and cultivating a vast variety of species from across the known world. Babur initiated the introduction of Central Asian and Persian plants, a tradition enthusiastically continued by his successors. Jahangir's memoirs are filled with notes on the introduction of the Chinar tree to Kashmir and his admiration for flowers like the nastaran (Persian rose) and the oleander (Jahangir 175). The Ain-i-Akbari includes detailed lists of fruits, their seasons, and their prices, reflecting the economic and cultural value placed on cultivated flora.

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The garden was, however, far more than a source of produce or pleasure. It was a profound political and cosmological symbol. The formal, geometric charbagh, divided by water channels, represented the Quranic paradise and, by extension, the empire itself—a bounded, orderly, and fertile realm under the emperor's benevolent control. Ebba Koch argues that the Mughal palace-garden was a "representation of the empire and the universe" (Koch 55). It was a microcosm of the Mughal ideal, where nature was subdued, organized, and made to reflect the glory of its creator and owner, the emperor. This symbolic opposition—the chaotic, dangerous forest versus the ordered, safe garden—encapsulates the core of the Mughal environmental mindset, where the value of nature was intrinsically linked to its degree of subjugation and integration into the imperial project.

Fauna: Utility, Antagonism, and Curiosity

The Mughal relationship with animals was based on its utility, symbolic meaning, and alignment with human interest. It depends on purely ecological polity, economic imperative, and cultural ecology. This hierarchy reveals the full spectrum of the Mughal ecological mentality, from the purely pragmatic to the scientifically inquisitive.

At one end of this spectrum some animals were deemed essential to the state's military and economic machinery. The horse was the absolute priority, the backbone of the Mughal cavalry, and immense resources were devoted to their acquisition, breeding, and care. The Ain-i-Akbari details the administration of the imperial stables (Ain-i-Supurdagi), specifying the rations and salaries for grooms and farriers, reflecting the animal's status as a vital, logistically managed asset (Abul Fazl 135-140). Elephants occupied a similarly crucial role, serving as instruments of war, symbols of royalty in processions, and beasts of burden. The meticulous records of the elephant corps (Ain-i-Fil-Khana), which document the specific diet of each elephant—from the quantity of ghee and sugar to the types of grains—demonstrates an intense investment in managing these powerful creatures (Abul Fazl 125-130). The taming and deployment of such animals were the ultimate demonstrations of human dominance over the natural world, a dominance directly harnessed for imperial power.

In contrary to domesticated animals, wild animals particularly predators like tigers, lions, and wolves represented the "anti-human side of nature"—a direct threat to livestock, villages, and the settled agrarian order that the state sought to protect and tax. The royal hunt was the ritualized theater for confronting this threat. These were not casual pastimes but massive, state-managed operations that served multiple purposes: they were military exercises, displays of personal bravery, a means of pest control, and a powerful metaphor for the emperor's role as the vanquisher of chaos. The killing of a tiger or a lion was a particularly potent political symbol. As Divyabhanusinh notes, the lion was seen as the "ultimate symbol of power in Mughal

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chronicles," and its slaughter was a direct enactment of kingship, aligning the Mughal emperor with a long tradition of regal hunters (Divyabhanusinh 102). The animal here was a symbolic adversary to be conquered.

Yet, coexisting with this culture of violent domination was a third, more nuanced perspective: the spirit of scientific and aesthetic inquiry. This is most vividly embodied by Jahangir, who approached fauna with the eye of a naturalist. His interest in cheetahs, for example, went far beyond their use in coursing blackbuck. He studied their breeding cycles, noted their temperament, and even conducted an experiment where he had a cheetah cub raised with goats to see if it could be tamed, carefully recording its eventual reversion to predatory instincts (Jahangir 190-192). He commissioned detailed paintings of animals and birds, demanding accuracy from his artists. This represents a form of collaboration with nature—an attempt to understand its intrinsic logic and workings. It is this profound contradiction that defines the Mughal relationship with fauna: the same emperor who could order a mass slaughter of thousands could also spend hours observing the behavior of a single bird, revealing a worldview where animals could be, simultaneously, logistical assets, symbolic adversaries, and fascinating objects of scientific study.

Conclusion:

The relationship between humans and nature in the Mughal Empire, as meticulously recorded in its chronicles, defies simplistic characterization. It was neither an idyllic harmony nor a relentless onslaught, but rather a complex and persistent symbiosis. This relationship was defined by a dynamic tension between domination and reverence, between the pragmatic imperative to extract resources and a deep-seated intellectual and aesthetic engagement with the natural world. The Mughals were consummate manipulators of their environment, engineering hydraulic landscapes, transforming forests into farmland, and staging grand hunts to demonstrate their sovereignty over the animal kingdom. Their administrative machinery was finely tuned to maximize revenue from these natural assets.

Yet, within this framework of utility and control, there existed a parallel strand of detailed observation, cataloguing, and appreciation. The empirical curiosity of Babur and the systematic inquiries of Jahangir reveal a mindset that sought not only to use nature but also to understand it. This duality was embedded in the very geography of the empire, from the exploitative frontier of the forest to the idealized paradise of the walled garden.

Understanding this nuanced, pre-colonial dynamic is crucial for several reasons. First, it demonstrates that significant human alteration of the South Asian environment long predates British colonialism, challenging narratives that locate ecological disruption solely in the modern

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era. Second, it highlights that the nature of this alteration was qualitatively different, bounded by technology and framed by a worldview that, while asserting human dominance, still saw humanity as fundamentally engaged with—and a part of—the natural order, rather than entirely separate from it. The Mughal case study ultimately provides a critical historical perspective, reminding us that the challenges of balancing human needs with ecological limits have deep and complex roots, and that the answers have never been simple.

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