



*The King and the People:
Sovereignty and Popular Politics in
Mughal Delhi*

Abhishek Kaicker

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The King and the People: Sovereignty and Popular Politics in Mughal Delhi. By Abhishek Kaicker. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020. ISBN 9780190070670. xxii + 351 pp. £64.00

Royal authority is always a relational and dynamic negotiation. Abhishek Kaicker's new study provides a powerful demonstration of this as he explores the changing nature of Mughal sovereignty over the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Kaicker operates from the premise that while Mughal sovereigns might have proposed a vision of the relationship of ruler with ruled, the populace too had views about it, which were expressed in a wide range of forms to which they had access. These represent political engagements, Kaicker argues, although they cannot be interpreted as a smoothly developing trajectory towards a clearly defined conceptualisation of political agency but as rather more episodic expressions. Spanning from the creation of Shahjahanabad in 1648 under Shah Jahan to Nadir Shah's violent departure from the city in 1739, rulers' particular engagement with Delhi is the key focus of this work, which contends that urbanisation was a critical factor in the ways that the populace was able to express a political voice. Kaicker's focus thus is less directly focused on these rulers than with their not-so-quiescent subjects who offered opinions, both support and protest, in their writings and actions. However, the actions of the Mughal rulers were vital to the ways in which city-dwellers developed political capacity as subjects. Their respective interests in commercialisation or in a community of Muslims or their claims to deliver justice, for example, became mechanisms and discourses through which people were able to respond dynamically to them.

Kaicker's point of departure is the end of the period. In Chapter 1, he examines how the support of Iranian and Mughal elites for the invasion of Delhi under Nadir Shah in 1739 was contested by the common people, a resistance to a new claim to sovereignty over them for which they were to pay a heavy price. Chapter 2 takes us back to this moment's foundations in the building of the new city of Shahjahanabad and the movement of Mughal power away from Agra in 1648, as Shah Jahan's political and economic vision of rule was expressed in the new cityscape. This shaped new ideas about subjects' proximity to the king and engagement with the processes of government, creating the long-term commercial communities who sought political power to match their improved economic standing as well as an underclass who received few benefits. This chapter's particular use of images as well as written sources to support the argument is well warranted although they merit a similar contextual consideration of their apparatus as the textual materials receive and presentation of their strategies, audience and reception.

Having fought to succeed his father, Aurangzeb turned to a different way of consolidating his authority, through support for Sunni Islam and a vision of a "Community of Muslims." Kaicker demonstrates that just as Aurangzeb's politics operated through religion, so too could that of his subjects, providing a rich and capacious discourse for political action and expression, not least satire, as well as new places such as the Grand Mosque in which politics was made. In Chapter 3, Kaicker examines in detail the work and reception of divergent poetic commentators, one a member of the courtly elite, Ni'mat

Khan-i 'Ali and the more vernacular and robust critic, Mir Ja'far Zatalli. Chapter 4 explores the political participation of ordinary people as read through riot and protest. The accretion of elements, from new officials to taxes, as part of the imperial administrative apparatus developing under Aurangzeb, Kaicker proposes, each opened up new opportunities for negotiation of the relationship of ruler and ruled, particularly in relation to ideas and expectations of justice and a shared commitment to Islam.

In Chapter 5, Kaicker focuses on the response of the common people to the regicide of Farrukh Siyar in 1719. This event provoked popular protest against elite assumptions about their right to depose a king, to dishonour his body and, more conceptually, to shift where *daulat* (the divine authority to deliver justice) resided. Kaicker argues powerfully that these riots insisting upon the king's funeral rites represent an attempt by the common people to re-articulate a concept of Mughal sovereignty, one that was to be pressed further into action in popular uprisings against the invasion soon after of Nadir Shah. Chapters 6 and 7 present further re-interpretations of popular expressions that have conventionally been seen as little more than overheated passions and irrational acts, as political practices that carry their engagement through economic and religious discourses, actions and languages that Kaicker suggests are renewed for their own political motivations. Thus, the interruption of the Friday sermon (*khutba*) by those that the king would see as its audiences could be a direct challenge to his rule, and can be re-read to demonstrate the "adeptness of the city's diverse populace in using the practices, symbols, and gestures of Islam to invoke a form of community and assert its rights ... [that] betrays a sophisticated understanding of the claims of imperial sovereignty and an agile engagement with its practices of authority" (290). Kaicker is careful, however, to qualify the power and impact of these acts and to identify also their limitations. They did not, he observes, lead to the identification of a popular leader or spawn wider movements.

This is a thought-provoking and robust re-consideration of how different groups of Mughal subjects sought in ever-expanding ways to voice not only their own ideas about their place and participation in the life of the realm but also about the power of their sovereign.

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