Early Modern Circulation and the Question of ‘Patriotism’ between India and Central Asia

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Hūrān-i bihishti rā dozakh būd a ‘rāf,
Az dozakhvān purs ki a’rāf bihisht ast.

To the huris of paradise, purgatory (a’rāf) seems hell.
Ask the denizens of hell; to them purgatory is paradise.

- Sa’di, Gulistān, bāb 1, hikāyat 7.

I.

Some years ago, an Uzbek soccer coach who had recently been employed by a team in India was asked by a Delhi newspaper to comment on the degree of cultural difficulty he expected to face in his new position. The Central Asian sportsman simply shrugged off the question. People tended to forget, he stated confidently, that North India and Central Asia were all pretty much a part of the same continuum. Circulation between the two spheres had gone on for centuries if not millennia, and the mountain ranges that had allegedly been ‘Indian-killers’ (thus: hindū-kush) had in reality barely posed a barrier to the process. Invoking such figures as the Mughal (or Timurid) dynast Babur in the early sixteenth century, he suggested that there was scarcely any need to speak of difference – except perhaps in minor matters such as language -- between his own homeland and Hindustan. While the response was no doubt reassuring to our soccer coach’s employers and wards, it was actually not based on a close reading of the Bābur Nāma, Babur’s autobiographical text in Chaghatai Turkish, which is at times quite insistent precisely on the differences between the hot and dusty plains further south, and the cool climes of the Ferghana valley or even Kabul where Babur had spent a certain time in exile. The question then naturally arises of the categories that Babur, as well as other writers from the Perso-Turkic world, deployed in the sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries to speak of spatial difference as well as spatial belonging. And how is one to discern how such changes were experienced in a context of movement? This
chapter focuses on the corpus of Indo-Persian travel-narratives and other related texts between about 1400 and 1800.³ It argues that in an era that clearly preceded that of modern nationalism, other forms of local belonging – to town (shahr) and patria (watan) for example – played a crucial role in how movement was experienced. At the centre of the chapter’s reflections are comparisons made by early modern travelers and wanderers themselves between the nature and quality of life in different regions of Central Asia and India.⁴ While framing their thoughts in a variety of ways, I shall nevertheless attempt here to give their own original attempts to grapple with displacement, pride of place in this account.

Much historical literature on the early modern world – and no doubt on earlier periods as well – has posed the question of circulation I address here in terms of a familiar triangle: India-Iran-Central Asia, or if one prefers Hind-Iran-Turan. But the three legs of this triangle have for a variety of reasons not received equal attention.⁵ The relationship between India and Iran, though once perhaps neglected, has been the object of a number of consequent studies in the past quarter-century, particularly as regards the early modern period of the Safavid and Mughal dynasties. These studies have highlighted a number of features, of which a few may be mentioned. The consolidation of a prosopography of the mansabdār class in Mughal India, and above all its upper (or umarā’) echelons by authors like M. Athar Ali, was able to demonstrate the extent to which Iranian emigration between the reigns of Humayun in the mid-sixteenth century and Aurangzeb-’Alamgir in the late seventeenth century continued to be a major factor in Mughal élite politics.⁶ These migrants may at times have been classified primarily as administrators, but they were equally poets, chroniclers, calligraphers, musicians, painters, as well as lexicographers. They carried with them the seeds of a distinct tension. For many of them intended to assert that, even if they were seeking employment from a new patron, their culture of origin was of course far superior to that to which they were migrating. Iranian poets were thus often less-than-gracious clients of Mughal patrons, happily biting the hands that fed them, and complaining of how they were underappreciated and underpaid. The case of the poet Ashraf Mazandarani, born in Isfahan in the early 1620s and who died in Bengal in 1704, is a telling example.⁷ Ashraf migrated to India in the 1650s, and had a number of powerful patrons and supporters
there, even amongst the Mughal royal family. Though he returned for a time to Iran, he therefore eventually was drawn back to the Mughal domains where he spent the last decades of his life. Despite that, his verses are at times disdainful enough.

How can you compare the soil of Hind,
With the lands of Iran?
Can black soil ever equal a rose garden?\(^8\)

It scarcely needs to be recalled that the process of migration between India and Iran during the reigns of the Safavids and Mughals was both complex and asymmetrical. If the more significant and visible movement was from Iran to India, Indians too migrated to Iran, but they rarely if ever came to occupy positions of significance in the Safavid administrative hierarchy. (The partial exception to this were some Mughal princes who exiled themselves and took refuge in Iran in the seventeenth century). Rather, they were more often and than not traders, and could be found in appreciable numbers both in interior cities like Isfahan or Qazwin, and in ports such as Bandar ‘Abbas, Bandar Kung, Jarun (or Hurmuz), or even Basra. Their numbers seem to have expanded considerably over the course of the seventeenth century, though already in 1618, the English East India Company’s factors in Iran noted the formidable presence of ‘the bannians, the Cheife Marchantes whoe vende Linene of India, of all sorts and prices, which this countrrey cannot bee without’.\(^9\) It has been claimed that by the 1670s, Isfahan alone hosted some 10,000 \textit{baniyās}, that is to say traders from a variety of Hindu and Jain merchant castes from western and northern India. Some of these possibly settled there, but others are more likely to have circulated between the Mughal and Safavid domains, using either the classic overland route via Lahore, Kabul and Qandahar, or the maritime routes that joined the Gujarat ports and those of the Indus delta with the Persian Gulf. To all of this movement, we must of course add another variant, namely the connections between the Deccan and Iran that had flourished since the time of the Bahmani dynasty in the later fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries. Traders and political entrepreneurs, as well as religious specialists from Iranian centres like Kerman, Gilan, Astarabad, and Mazandaran, had regularly set up in the great courtly and regional nodes of the Deccan, and there had been moments such as the late fifteenth century when Iranian dominance over elite Deccani politics was very substantial indeed.
If these Indo-Iranian links of the early modern era have been studied over the last decades, beginning with the works of scholars such as Ghulam Yazdani and H.K. Sherwani, and continuing with the detailed research of the French savant Jean Aubin, the connections with Central Asia, or ‘Turan’, have been somewhat harder to discern or delineate in a systematic fashion. If we go back as far as the eleventh and twelfth centuries, when first the Ghaznavids and then a series of Mamluk rulers established themselves initially in the Punjab and then in the Ganges-Jamuna do-āb, the familiar pattern emerges of a Turko-Persian condominium in which the Turks dominated over warrior functions and the Persians over secretarial and related duties. The Turks in question were of course predominantly Central Asian in origin, though some had spent a generation or two in centres farther south such as Ghazna and Ghur. The tension and mutual incomprehension that could at times exist between the two groups is a staple element in the writings of the chroniclers of the Delhi Sultanate, as well as in the reflections of the Sultanate’s most famous literary figure, Yamin al-Din Amir Khusrau (1253-1325), himself a Turk of Central Asian origin whose family had resided for a time in Balkh. The invasion of Delhi and its environs in 1398-99 by the Central Asian ruler Timur then led, paradoxically, for a time to a diminution in the power of the Turkish clans and a corresponding rise in that of Afghans, both in Delhi and further east. It is also likely that as a consequence the fifteenth century saw a shrinking in direct contacts between the plains of northern India and Central Asia. The emergence in the middle decades of the same century of the Kashmir Sultanate as a substantial polity also changed the nature of relations somewhat. Rulers like Sultan Zain al-‘Abidin of Kashmir maintained diplomatic and other contacts with several lines of Timurid princes in Central Asia, including Mirza Shahrukh and Mirza Abu Sa‘id. Relations between Kashmir and regions to the east and north-east, such as Tibet, but also centres like Yarkand and Kashgar (today in Xinjiang) seem similarly to have been strengthened in the period.

The irruption of the Timurid (or Mughal) dynasty into power in northern India in the 1520s eventually transformed this structure of dealings. This southward move on the part of Zahir al-Din Muhammad Babur to conquer Delhi and Agra from the Afghan Lodi dynasty was itself the consequence of complex circumstances, notably the growing power of a rival Chinggisid clan, led by Shaibani Khan, which emerged into prominence around
1500. These latter rulers, sometimes designated with the epithet ‘Uzbek’, seized first Bukhara and Samarqand, and then the great centre of Herat after the death of its celebrated Timurid ruler Sultan Husain Baiqara in 1506.\textsuperscript{13} The defeat and killing by the Safavids of Shaibani Khan in 1510 gave some temporary respite to Babur, but he was eventually and comprehensively expelled southwards by ‘Ubaidullah Khan, Shaibani Khan’s successor. He then spent the next decade in and around Kabul, and as he later wrote in the 1520s, ‘From the year 910 H. [1504-05], when Kabul was conquered, until this date I had craved Hindustan. Sometimes because my \textit{begs} [commanders] had poor opinions, and sometimes because my brothers lacked cooperation, the Hindustan campaign had not been possible and the realm had not been conquered’.\textsuperscript{14} He also noted that in the late 1510s and early 1520s he had made four unsuccessful campaigns into northern India until he eventually succeeded in 1525-26. Nevertheless, it seems that in reality Babur was not enthused by Hindustan, which is to say the northern Indian plains. As he wrote rather bluntly a few pages after the passage quoted above: ‘The cities and provinces of Hindustan are all unpleasant. All cities, all locales are alike. The gardens have no walls, and most places are flat as boards’. India in short was ‘unpleasant and unharmonious’ wrote Babur, adding ‘there is no beauty in its people, no graceful social intercourse, no poetic talent or understanding, no etiquette, nobility or manners’. Its chief attraction then, especially to a prince who was coming to the end of his tether, was that ‘it is a large country with lots of gold and money’. But there is little doubt that he felt that his wanderings had brought him too far south for comfort. Thus, he wrote:

\begin{quote}
‘Hindustan lies in the first, second, and third climes, with none of it in the fourth clime. It is a strange country. Compared to ours, it is another world. Its mountains, rivers, forests, and wildernesses, its villages and provinces, animals and plants, peoples and languages, even its rain and winds are altogether different. Even if the Kabul dependencies that have warm climates bear a resemblance to Hindustan in some aspects, in others they do not. Once you cross the Indus, the land, water, trees, stones, peoples, tribes, manners, and customs are all of the Hindustani fashion’.\textsuperscript{15}
\end{quote}

This view, and an abiding nostalgia for the Central Asia that had been left behind, was not Babur’s alone. He notes the case of one of his companions, a certain Khwaja Kalan,
who on the eve of his return from Delhi to Ghazna, is reported to have scribbled a rude verse as graffiti on the wall of his quarters: ‘If I cross the Indus in safety, may my face turn black if I ever see Hindustan again’. We cannot know how humbler foot-soldiers or cavalrymen from Central Asia felt, though Babur indicates that as the hot season came upon them in 1526, ‘many began to sicken and die as though under the influence of a pestilent wind’, and murmurings were heard that the chiefs in the army wished to contemplate an early departure. But Babur’s argument at the time in council was implacable: ‘Shall we go back to Kabul and remain poverty stricken?’ After all, he notes, many of the men had sent back ‘gifts for relatives and kinfolk’, as well as offerings to the shrines of holy men in areas around Samarkand and Khorasan from which they came. His memoir is equally helpful in providing us an understanding of what such men looked back to. Here, for example, is his idealized view of Samarkand, which in his view lay ‘at the edge of the civilized world’. Not only was it termed the ‘well-protected town (balda-i mahfuza)’ since it had never been stormed and seized, it was in his opinion one of the most pleasant cities in the entire world. Its virtues were many but could broadly be classified as follows. First, the area had been dominated by Muslims from the time of the early Caliphs and was thus a great centre for theologians and the writing of important Islamic texts. Second, despite the harsh winters, the air was generally good and the water sufficient to irrigate orchards so that grapes, apples, melons and other excellent fruit could be found there. The city itself was a marvel, and its architecture had been greatly improved by the intervention of both Timur and his descendant Mirza Ulugh Beg in the matter of buildings and gardens. These included a famous observatory from which great texts on astronomy were produced, far superior to those in India, according to Babur. Finally, there was the question of the artisanal and commercial activity in Samarkand, with ‘each trade [having] a separate market’. In respect of every one of the trades in question, from baking, to velvet-production, to paper-making, Babur apparently saw Samarkand as a city with practically no equal in the world.16

But his enthusiasm did not extend equally to every part of Central Asia. Ferghana, with which his memoir begins, is described (like Samarkand) as being ‘on the edge of the civilized world’, and marked by the plentiful availability of grain and fruit. Its seven major towns are depicted by him as pleasant, somewhat bucolic places, with fat pheasants
and game, beautiful tulips and violets, and excellent agricultural products – in particular melons, which are actually something of an obsession with Babur. At the same time, Babur does not hesitate to call the town of Khojand a ‘miserable place’, on account of its lack of resources and capacity to provide for a man of his own stature.\textsuperscript{17} In this sense, Samarqand does represent an unusual combination: not only is it located in an excellent and sufficiently northerly clime – the fifth, it is also notably urbane and sophisticated, a worthy residence therefore for a man from a courtly lineage. As we shall see below, it would remain something of a yardstick against which other cities and centres – particularly those of Hindustan – were compared.

It is probable, at any rate, that Khwaja Kalan was not the only one amongst Babur’s companions to return for a time to Kabul or even Central Asia. But by the time of the ruler’s death, and the succession of his oldest son Humayun in 1530, the regular flow of Central Asians – or Turanis – into northern India was an established fact. These included warriors to be sure, but also a number of divines and mystics, given the proximity of the Mughals to a particular branch of Naqshbandi Sufi Khwajas – the Ahraris – from Central Asia. Babur himself had been closely linked while a child in Central Asia to Khwaja ‘Ubaidullah Ahrar, a powerful entrepreneurial figure who controlled enormous resources in terms of land and other revenues, and several direct descendants and disciples of the great Naqshbandi Sufi accompanied him into Hindustan.\textsuperscript{18} While we do not have clear information concerning the composition of the upper echelons of the \textit{begs} and \textit{amīrs} who surrounded Humayun in the first decade or so of his reign, there is little doubt that these included a substantial number of Turanis. One of these to whom we shall turn below was Mirza Muhammad Haidar Dughlat from Kashgar. Even after Humayun’s exile into Iran, and eventual return to Hindustan in the 1550s – when his entourage clearly contained a conspicuous Iranian element – there is little doubt regarding the significance of the Turani presence in the Mughal court. Through the second half of the sixteenth century, and despite the fact of several rebellions by Turani groupings against the rule of Humayun’s older son, Akbar, this remained the case. To be sure, the numerical significance of the Central Asians declined, but still roughly a third, sometimes a little more and sometimes a little less, of the higher echelons of the great \textit{mansabdārs} -- as the \textit{amīrs} came to be called in reference to the
numerical ranking system (of mansabs) that was consolidated in this period -- remained Central Asian, usually bearing the characteristic place-name nisbat denominations such as Bukhari, Samarqandi, or Andijani, that indicated this. These denominations were themselves indicative of a form of patriotism on the part of those who carried them.  

Table: Composition of upper Mughal mansabdārs, 1555-1707

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Period</th>
<th>Turani</th>
<th>Irani</th>
<th>Rajput</th>
<th>Indian Muslims</th>
<th>Other</th>
<th>Total</th>
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<tr>
<td>1555</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>16</td>
<td></td>
<td>8</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1565-75</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1575-95</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>184</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1605</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>95</td>
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<td>1606-11</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1637-38</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>194</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1655-57</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>248</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1658-78</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>136</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>147</td>
<td>486</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1679-1707</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>126</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>235</td>
<td>575</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

What this meant in turn was that one of the chief motors of factional politics in the Mughal court throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (when the proportion of Turanis eventually declined to under 15 % under Aurangzeb, even if their absolute numbers increased) was identification with ethnicity and patria of origin, a logic which modern historians have sometimes naively called ‘the racial composition of the nobility’. Two further factors further exacerbated it. The migrants from Central Asia were more often than not Sunnis, while those from Iran usually – though not always – were either Shi’i or somewhat heterodox in their religious orientation. From a legal point of view, once again it was the Central Asian migrants who tended – together with other groups in close contact with the Hijaz and the Ottoman domains – to strengthen the Hanafite legal orientation of the Mughal courts. Further, even if some of the migrants from Iran who bore names such as Qazwini or Gilani were ethnically Turks, a linguistic
cleavage regarding the relative place of Persian and Turkish in the Mughal court did exist.

Beyond faction, there were thus real questions of ideology regarding the nature of rulership, of succession, and so on. Within a half-century of Babur’s conquest of Hindustan and over the course of just two generational successions, the Mughals acculturated considerably in the face of Indian realities, sometimes leaving their Turani amīrs aghast at the compromises they were willing to countenance. It is clear now that two rebellions, in the 1560s and then again in the early 1580s, in which many of the Turanis rose up in support of Akbar’s half-brother Mirza Muhammad Hakim, who ruled over Kabul, were in fact a reflection of this unease. Mirza Hakim’s court was far more closely tied to Central Asia than that of Akbar, and he also maintained very close ties with a number of Naqshbandi Khwajas, one of whom Khwaja Hasan was not only his brother-in-law but the real grey eminence in his court.20 Such figures obviously preferred the relatively orthodox Sunnism of the Kabul court to the eclectic Islam that had emerged around Akbar, who was attempting at this very time to manage a complex court in which Central Asians and Iranians stood side-by-side with Afghans, Indian Muslims and prominent Rajput princes. Even those Turanis who remained faithful to the central Mughal lineage of Humayun and Akbar (rather than, say, to Mirza Kamran and Mirza Hakim) seem to have been rendered anxious, as we see from the career of a certain Qilij Khan Andijani, who was a prominent administrator in Gujarat and elsewhere. Qilij Khan is described in various Mughal texts, as well as the great Mughal biographical dictionary, the Ma’asir al-Umarā’, as an orthodox Sunni Muslim, whose ancestors had already been in the service of Babur.21 Though made uneasy by a number of changes and reforms in the reign of Akbar, he seems broadly to have stood firm in his loyalty, and was hence rewarded with a series of significant provincial governorships. But the great amīr apparently knew rather well who he was and what he and his ilk stood for. The account of Asad Beg Qazwini of the end of Akbar’s reign notes for example that when the ruler was on his deathbed, two prominent amīrs, Mirza ‘Aziz Koka and Raja Man Singh, attempted to mount a conspiracy to set aside his son Salim and replace him instead with prince Khusrau (Salim’s own son, and the nephew of Man Singh). It is claimed however that those who vehemently opposed the proposal, and who eventually triumphed, were
precisely the Turanis. These included a certain Saʿid Khan, a great Turkish noble from Central Asia and related to the Mughals by clan, who was strongly supported by none other than Qilij Khan Andijani. What is also of significance is that their principal argument lay in how this proceeding of the Timurids, who belonged after all to the Ulus Chaghatay, would be wholly contrary to the normal Chinggisid customs (*šīʿar-o-tūra-i chaghatāy)*. In other words, they wished to keep the Mughals true to their Central Asian roots, rather than let them be contaminated by the new-fangled ways of the Rajputs and others, with whom they had increasingly begun to inter-marry.

But still more complex attitudes can be found amongst the Central Asians of these first generations. A particularly intriguing example is that of Mirza Haidar Dughlat, an adventurer and the author of a somewhat neglected text in Persian entitled the *Tārīḵ-i Rashīdī*, who had been born in Tashkent around 1500 in a clan closely related to that of Babur’s lineage but which saw itself as quite distinct in its ambitions in many ways. Mirza Haidar spent the first years of his life in close personal proximity to Babur, but then chose from his mid-teens to place himself in the service of another important clan, that of Sultan Saʿid Khan to the east. Over the next two decades, he then fought more or less ceaselessly for this patron in the area between Kashgar and Khorasan, but often extending his operations southwards into the Tibetan plateau as well. This altogether brutal high-altitude campaigning with small forces and high casualty-rates took the Mirza across the Pamirs on more than one occasion. In 1531, he invaded Ladakh, Tibet and western Kashmir on behalf of his patron in what he termed in his text as a form of *jihād* against prosperous and powerful infidels. Again, in 1533, he mounted an attack on Lhasa which he had understood possessed considerable riches on account of its density of Buddhist monasteries, but was eventually forced back by a lack of material resources. However, when his chief patron Sultan Saʿid died in 1533, in the course of these strenuous mountain campaigns, Mirza Haidar began to fear with some justification that a powerful warlord like himself would not be treated well by his successors. Rather than test the murky waters of loyalty, he therefore chose exit as an option. After a complex set of dealings and negotiations, he managed in 1536-37 to attain Badakhshan, and then Kabul, from where he sought to revive his far older dealings with the lineage of Babur. His initial contacts were in Lahore, where in 1538 he entered briefly into the service of
Mirza Kamran, Babur’s younger son and the rival of Humayun. Then in 1539, he entered the service of Humayun himself and fought briefly at the latter’s side in his disastrous campaign in the Gangetic valley against the Afghan-led armies of Sher Shah Sur. After Humayun’s defeat at Kannauj, Mirza Haidar proposed a retreat to the north in the direction of Kashmir with which he had some earlier familiarity. When the Mughal ruler chose otherwise, Haidar Dughlat himself marched north, and in November 1540 entered Kashmir and took it over with very little initial resistance.

Over the next decade, and until his death in 1551, his activities in Kashmir remain quite enigmatic. Initially, he seems to have chosen to act as a mere ‘regent’ to one of the claimants to the throne in Kashmir, Nadir Shah. Thereafter, from the mid-1540s, he issued coins in the name of Humayun and seems largely to have acted in his name, even though the Mughal ruler was absent in these years in distant Iran and then in the Kabul region. In this same period, as discontent with his rule grew, Mirza Haidar was obliged to defeat various rebellions mounted either by members of the displaced Kashmir dynasty or by other powerful local warlords. A common modern narrative presents him as a ruler whose intolerance grew apace with time and power, and who increasingly revealed himself as an orthodox Sunni Muslim of a Hanafite persuasion, and therefore quite unable to stomach the heterodox Sufi-inflected Islam of the region, as incarnated in particular by the Nurbakhshiya order of mystics. As an important recent historian of Kashmir portrays matters, ‘the Nurbakhshiyas suffered a great setback in the time of Mirza Haidar Dughlat, who persecuted them thinking that if there was uniformity of religion in Kashmir there would be peace in the country’.

It is thus convenient, no doubt, to contrast Babur and Mirza Haidar and their texts from a number of viewpoints, starting with the linguistic: Babur’s text is written in eastern Turkish and that of his cousin in Persian. Further, if the former author appears flexible, pragmatic and human (and even ‘humanistic’, as one of his recent apologists has it), to which one can add his metro-sexual self-presentation as a further virtue, the latter can easily be presented as the bigoted Sunni from eastern Mughalistan, the failed country-cousin of the cosmopolitan dynast. In this process, we may however sell Mirza Haidar somewhat short. In fact, even if the Tārīkh-i Rashīdī borrows extensively from other texts – as its author himself freely admits – the attitudes and perspectives it captures
cannot be quite so easily dismissed. These attitudes are, moreover, not simply those of a nostalgia for a Central Asia from which the author found himself in exile. The text of the Tārīkh-i Rashīdī, we may recall, was written while Mirza Haidar was in Kashmir in the 1540s, even though historians of Kashmir have often complained that he says all too little about that region itself.

Babur’s own self-perception is clear enough. He saw himself as a Timurid, and also as a Chinggisid; his direct descendants continued until much later to use terms for themselves such as the ‘Chaghatay princes (salātīn-i-Chaghata)’ or the ‘lineage of Timur (khāndān-i Timuriyya)’, and in fact broadly destested the term ‘Mughal’ or ‘Mogor’ which others – notably the Europeans from the sixteenth century – used for them. On the other hand, Mirza Haidar saw himself precisely as a Mughal, and a native of a region he termed Mughalistan, though he also sometimes identified with the Qara-Khitai – an older usage. He noted that when he was born in around 905 H. (or 1499), the towns in his native region were in a state of ‘ruin’, and that most of his fellow-Mughals ‘had never possessed or even lived in a village – nay, had never even seen cultivation. They were as wild as the beasts of the mountains’. This referred then to the easterly groups, in contrast to the more fortunate, prosperous, urbanised and settled westerly lineages to which Babur belonged. But Mirza Haidar’s own reflections on Kashgar and Yarkand can only be termed ambiguous in the extreme. An extended passage from the Tārīkh-i Rashīdī makes this clear enough.

‘[Kashgar] also has many defects. For example, although the climate is very healthy, there are continual storms of dust and sand, and violent winds charged with black dust. Although Hindustan is notorious for this phenomenon, yet in Kashgar it is still more prevalent. The cultivation of the ground is very laborious and yields but little profit. In Kashgar it is impossible to support an army upon the produce of the country. Compared with the Dasht-i Kipchaq, the Kalmaq country, and Mughalistan, it has the semblance of a town, but with regard to productiveness and its capacity to support an army, it cannot be compared to those steppes. The inhabitants of towns who go there regard Kashgar as a wild country, while the people of the steppes consider it a refined city. It is a sort of Purgatory between the Paradise of Towns and the Hell of Deserts’.
This can hardly be termed a ringing endorsement. In Mirza Haidar’s imagination, the area around Kashgar and Yarkand was once prosperous; he writes that ‘in ancient times there were large towns in these [wastes, but] … all are buried under the sand’. He even adds the claim that ‘hunters, who go there after wild camels, relate that sometimes the foundations of cities are visible, and that they have recognised noble buildings such as castles, minarets, mosques and colleges, but that when they returned a short time afterwards, no trace of these was the be found; for the sand had again overwhelmed them’. Indeed, only Yarkand seems to retain some vestiges of its former glory in its eyes, and he tells us briefly of its impregnable high citadel, with ‘magnificent buildings’ and ‘lofty edifices, containing about a hundred rooms each’. Yet despite its excellent water – ‘the best in the world’, and superb fruit and roses that were ‘almost as good as those of Herat’, it would seem that even Yarkand is a place that by the early sixteenth century was a pale shadow of what it once was.27 One can fruitfully compare Mirza Haidar’s tone while describing it with his broadly enthusiastic view of the physical environment of Kashmir, which he notes ‘is among the most famous countries of the world, and is celebrated for its attractions and its wonders’. Writing in the mid-1540s, he congratulates himself for having conquered it, especially since ‘I have neither seen nor heard of any country equal to Kashmir, for charm of climate during all the four seasons’. Like Babur then, Mirza Haidar was obliged to move south from Central Asia; but unlike the grumbling Babur, he seems quite contented with his lot in Kashmir, looking back at his land of origins as a place in more or less terminal decline that, in the final analysis, had little to offer for a man of large ambitions.

II.

Writing in the late 1990s, the Cambridge historian C.A. Bayly proposed that it was necessary to ‘reconsider the origins and periodization of Indian nationalism from the perspective of late pre-colonial history’ and that the most appropriate way of doing so would be to consider the question of ‘old patriotisms’, that is ‘how successive generations of Indian commentators understood and contested sentiments of attachment to land and local custom in the political realm’.28 In relation to terminology, he proposed not only a closer look at the powerful term desh, but also other terms such as watan and qaum,
referring broadly to a sense of belonging to a place and to a community respectively. Although he then went on briefly to examine Indo-Islamic treatises on governance, and pointed to the circulation of such ideas in a wider sphere including Iran and Central Asia, Bayly’s attempt foundered largely on two issues: the constant spectre of a teleological relationship between ‘patriotism’ and ‘nationalism’, and a too-close adherence to the Maratha case, which he defined as ‘the paradigmatic example of pre-colonial Indian patriotism’. To be sure, he argued a more elaborate typology of patriotisms could be laid out, and he provided several other examples: (1) a patriotism deriving principally from personal ties of loyalty to an overlord, as was often the case of the Rajputs and similar warrior groups; (2) a concrete attachment to land (or bhūmi) itself as a sentiment; (3) patriotism that was primarily defined through the emergence of a more acute sense of ‘ethnicity’ and language community, and finally (4) a patriotism that rested above all on alterity or ‘a fear of the outside other’. But even if one were to take the Marathas as ‘paradigmatic’, how would one deal with those lineages that consolidated their rule not in the heartland of the svadesh or svarājya, but in places such as Gwaliyar ruled over by the migrant Shinde clan? In other words, what would be the relationship between patriotism and circulation, given that so many of the elites groups whose activities were centrally in question with regard to state-building, whether Rajputs, Marathas, Iranis, Turanis, or Afghans, were precisely given to ceaseless to-and-fro movement?

At roughly the same moment when Bayly was refining these reflections on ‘old patriotism’ in a South Asian context, the Austrian historian of Iran and Central Asia, Bert Fragner, independently put forward his own reflections on the question of ‘Iranian patriotism in the seventeenth century’. Here, Fragner argued that under Safavid rule, and particularly after the kingdom had been consolidated and stabilised by Shah ‘Abbas I, conditions emerged for a discourse on the part of the literati regarding terms such as Irān-shahr and Irān-zamīn. He proposed moreover that this seventeenth-century conception was distinct both from the classical and medieval vocabulary regarding place and belonging deriving for example from authors such as Firdausi in the Shāhnāma, and from nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Iran nationalism. Fragner’s view, like that of Bayly, was not entirely devoid of teleological overtones since he moved easily between ‘patriotism’ and ‘protonationalism’ as terms. But what is of particular interest is the
central figure he chose in order to exemplify the new tendencies of the seventeenth century, namely Muhammad Mufid Mustaufi Yazdi. This member of the secretarial class from the town of Yazd, has left behind at least two important works: the Jāmi'-i Mufidī, and the Mukhtasar-i Mufid. Yet, his reflections on his own identity and loyalties were clearly not those of a stay-at-home; instead, they emerged precisely in the context of his move to first Mughal India and then the Deccan in the 1670s.

Of these works, Fragner draws above all on the Mukhtasar-i Mufid, a text which begins with Mufid congratulating himself on his own hard-won knowledge in comparison to the ‘fools who remained at the surface’ (bikhuradān-i zāhir-bīn), and those ‘illiterates regulated by stupidity’ (nādānān-i himāqat ā’īn) whom he frequently encountered in the salons of India.31 Irritated by the claims of these others, who usually held forth on the greatness of the rulers of Cathay and China, the armies of the Turk, and the vastness of Rum and Magna China (Māchīn), Mufid wished to insist even in exile on the great achievements of the Safavids, and in particular those of the founder-figure Shah Isma‘il Safavi, who had provided stability over a vast area including Iran and its neighbourhood. His exasperation seems particularly marked when he meets other exiles from Iran, including his fellow-townsmen (ham-shahr), who unlike him seem quite well-settled in India and do not spend the greater part of their time in a state of discontent. Mufid further notes that his intention was to write a work highlighting the topography, urban centres, and certain political facts, with reference in particular to the Safavids. It would seem to have been completed while in ‘a state of exile (diyār-i ghurbat) in Lahore in Hind’ in the late 1670s or early 1680s. Its closing passages are marked with the twin sentiments of exilic bitterness and loyalty to a homeland, that are characteristics of much of this author’s writing while in India.

‘Since the year 1089 H. until the completion of these stories, the sadness of exile and the desire to meet my brothers has become so overwhelming, that I am unable to continue writing and describing. From the first light of dawn to the last light of dusk, I am preoccupied with the idea that this exile, who is wandering in the valley of perdition, may be able to return to his own country’.32

For the most part, we are unable to capture much of the expression of the sentiments of those Indians who found themselves in Central Asia in the same period. A single
important exception comes to us from the 1740s, when the Delhi-based intellectual Khwaja ‘Abdul Karim Shahristani found himself in Transoxiana, and left us some of his impressions of the region in his text entitled Bayān-i Wāqi’. Of course, this does not mean that there were no Indians to be found in Central Asia, quite on the contrary. Both the Mughals and other northern Indian courts maintained diplomatic relations with the courts of Central Asia. Despite the occasionally rancorous tone of the correspondence, and potential border problems at the time of the Shaibanid ruler ‘Abdullah Khan in the last decades of the sixteenth century, a reasonable level of relations were maintained from at least the early 1570s forward. In the mid-1580s, for example, ‘Abdullah Khan sent Akbar a gift of special pigeons and a trainer for them along with his envoy to the Mughal court, Nizam-ud-Din Amir Quraish. A few years later, Akbar sent a return embassy, headed by the important courtier Hakim Humam Gilani. While several of the letters to this envoy while he was away on his mission have come down to us, and we know that he was given quite a lavish ‘expense-account’ so as to make influential contacts in the Shaibanid court, we do not possess either his letters or the report he must certainly have prepared on his return. It would seem that besides managing the difficult frontier issues that were emerging at this time as a consequence of Shaibanid expansion into Khorasan, one of Hakim Humam’s tasks was the purchase of valuable books in Turan, on such diverse subjects as bird-rearing and mysticism. Some years later, while he was in Kashmir, Akbar also opened correspondence and diplomatic relations with Muhammad Khan, the ruler of Kashgar, and sent him an envoy who was himself of Central Asian origin, by the name of Mirza Ibrahim Andijani. In the letter carried by this envoy, the Mughal ruler declared his eventual intention to send an embassy to the Ming court, and asked the Kashgar ruler to mediate in the matter by providing him information on a variety of subjects: the religion followed in China, the nature of Ming administration and justice, the arts and crafts there, the strength of Chinese armies, and the principal arts and crafts. Once again, the answers to these requests have not come down to us, nor do we have details of a great merchant called ‘Fataha’ who was apparently sent out by the Mughals on an exploratory mission to China via Kashgar. But it must have been merchants such as these in whose company the Portuguese Jesuit Bento de Góis set out in
1603 from Lahore, to make his way via Kashgar into western China, where he eventually died in Gansu province in 1607.\textsuperscript{38}

The relatively fragmentary evidence we have suggests that the Indians who travelled or settled in Central Asia between the sixteenth and eighteenth century were a complex lot. If some of them were Muslims, such as the unfortunate ‘Ala-ud-Din Khan, who went to trade in Balkh in the 1640s but was eventually enslaved and sold on the Bukhara market, a substantial number were Hindus from the Punjab and Sind. These included a large number of Aroras and Khattris (sometimes with sub-caste names like Kapur and Chaddha), often generically identified in the records as ‘Multanis’, even though their geographical origins are likely to have been more diverse than that. A listing from Astrakhan, at the mouth of the Volga, in 1747, allows us a reasonable sense of many of their names: Brajnath Bhavanidas, Jagatrai Fatehchand, Ramdas Jassu, Kasiram Madhodas, Tekchand Lal, Sukhnath Dharamdas, Amardas Multani, Lajjaram Brindaban, and Kesardas Kripam are some examples.\textsuperscript{39} Many of these names suggest that they were Vaishnava in their orientation, though undoubtedly there would have been some variation as regards this matter. Evidence regarding their activities indicates that they maintained close solidarities, and tended to live in distinct streets and quarters of their own in towns such as Samarqand or Bukhara where they found themselves.

Our real difficulty in penetrating their world, to discern the nature of their sentiments concerning both their patria, and where they eventually found themselves, is the absence of first-person accounts written by them. Muzaffar Alam, whose analysis of the question remains the most complex to date, suggests an interesting pattern based on his examination of Persian administrative records like those in the Majmūʿ a-i Wasāʿiq, a collection of court papers maintained by the chief qāzī of Samarqand. Alam argues that in the fifteenth century, Indian merchants and craftsmen in towns such as Bukhara and Samarqand often lived in ‘mixed’ quarters; he suggests moreover that ‘many abandoned their ancestral religion, took Muslim names, married Uzbek women, and were identified with their in-laws’.\textsuperscript{40} However, as their numbers grew, and with the passage of time, one can actually discern a decline in such assimilation. Hindu merchants and craftsmen now cohered under the leadership of a designated head, a kalāntar or āqsaqāl. They sometimes had their own places of worship, and attempted to settle their disputes
internally, including on matters of commercial interest. Their model thus came to approximate that using which the Armenians regulated their commerce across the Eurasian world in the sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, even if Multan never quite acquired the status held by New Julfa.\footnote{41}

Studies of modern nationalism have often proceeded from the premise that ‘absence makes the heart grow fonder’, and that exile is therefore often the cradle for nationalist sentiment. But equally, it may be the case that rather than wandering being the handmaiden of patriotism, it promotes assimilation into a new culture. This is one possible opposition; but another, equally fruitful, would oppose the ‘patriot’ to the ‘cosmopolitan’, those who – according to celebrated famous – felt they were in fact strangers nowhere in the world. But this was scarcely more than illusion when it refers to most of the inhabitants of the early modern world, who were heavily circumscribed in their sense of belonging by such factors as language, religion, and access to cultural traditions other than those in which they had been brought up. However attractive a ‘trickster’ figure like the Hungarian traveller to Central Asia, Ármin Vámbéry (1832-1913) may be, he cannot be seen as characteristic of the period on which this essay has focused.\footnote{42}

A final and somewhat extended example should help demonstrate the complexities of the problem of belonging and ‘patriotism’ between early modern India and Central Asia. This is the intriguing text written by the Central Asian poet, Mutribi al-Asamm al-Samarqandi in the latter half of the 1620s regarding his conversations with the Mughal emperor Jahangir.\footnote{43} Mutribi’s \textit{Khātīrāt} is certainly not a classic example of travel-literature, since it contains no clear itinerary, no sense of movement in space and time together, and the text is in fact essentially a memoir of amusing conversations and discussions. Nevertheless, it touches on a central problem that we are concerned with here, namely the comparison between two adjacent but somewhat separated cultures (Central Asia and Mughal Hindustan). The text is situated in a period in Mughal history in which source-materials are by no means in short supply. The monarch Nur-ud-Din Muhammad Jahangir (r. 1605-1627) is after all himself the author of a highly accomplished autobiographical work in Persian, the \textit{Tūzak-i Jahāngīrī} or \textit{Jahāngīr Nāma}.\footnote{44} In this work, Jahangir shows off his vast culture and curiosity, concerning both
nature and artefacts; nothing, from melons, to elephants, to the themes favoured by local poet-composers, seems to escape his probing pen. The court-chronicles of the reign, such as that of Mu‘tamad Khan, the *Iqbalnama-i Jahangiri*, supplement this ‘internal’ perspective, of kingship seen from the inside out, and we may add a number of other personal memoirs (and travel accounts) that date from this reign, and which shed light on a variety of political and cultural institutions at work in this epoch of the Mughal meridian. Amongst these, one finds ‘Abdul Latif Gujarati’s elusive travel-text from 1607-10, Mirza Nathan Isfahani’s well-known memoir, and Asad Beg’s account of his vicissitudes both in the Deccan, and in early years at Jahangir’s court. Finally, the important text of ‘Abdus Sattar Lahori regarding the nightly conversations in Jahangir’s court during the early period of his reign has begun to attract increasing attention amongst scholars. In each of these works, comparisons both implicit and explicit are made between different cultures and lived experiences. A variety of voices speaks to these questions, sometimes in the form even of an explicit debate with contradictory opinions.

Mutribi Samarkandi was a quite well-known figure of the early seventeenth century, and the author of several texts including a *tazkira* (or biographical dictionary) of poets composed in around 1604. He was the grandson of Zain-ud-Din Mahmud Wasifi, a poet from Sultan Husain Baiqara’s court at Herat, who then migrated to Transoxiana and moved between Samarqand, Bukhara and Tashkent. Mutribi himself had studied in Bukhara with a certain Khwaja Hasan Nisari, and also travelled extensively in the course of his life initially in regions such as Khorasan and Badakhshan, but eventually to Hindustan as well. Being the writer of a biographical dictionary, he was aware that other poets from Central Asia had attempted to seek Mughal patronage before him, albeit with somewhat mixed success. As Maria Szuppe notes: ‘the attraction of the imperial courts of the Great Mughals made India the preferred destination for Central Asian poets and literati, despite the rather significant distance and the difficulties, even the dangers of crossing the Afghan mountains. Not everyone succeeded in obtaining a position at the Mughal court; one finds some of them later having returned to their own country, or in attendance on less prestigious patrons’. This included a certain Mushfiqi Bukhari who had tried his luck in Akbar’s court only to return disappointed; fortunately, he was then
given a place of great importance in ‘Abdullah Khan’s court in Bukhara. More successful acquaintances of Mutribi included a certain Mulla Hisari Samarqandi and Salihi Nada’i Shaikhi Bukhari, both of whom had left for India in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries.  

Mutribi himself had quite carefully prepared the ground before entering the Mughal court, and begins his work with a brief introduction reflecting on the twin ideas of thanksgiving and patience. His patience with respect to one of the greatest rulers of the age, namely Jahangir, has proven fruitful and thus his text is naturally one of thanksgiving to Allah. It recounts a set of meetings with Jahangir which appear to have taken place in Lahore, through the mediation of a certain Khwaja Fakhr-ud-Din Husain, who was son of Maulana Khwaja Khan Diwan. They began on Wednesday, 19th Rabi I 1036 AH. in the afternoon, thus rather late in Jahangir’s reign; the text itself was written down from Thursday, 9th Jumada II of the same year, when the recollections were still fresh in Mutribi’s mind.

Mutribi describes the meetings are described using the term wāqi‘a (happenings), but there is a clear sense of orchestration present rather than mere chance. It all begins rather coyly. In the first meeting when the poet appears in court, Jahangir asks Mutribi why, after spending a whole month in Lahore, he had only now come to his presence. The poet answers that he was finishing a text in honour of Jahangir (entitled the Nuskhayi Zība-yi Jahāngīr), and had only now found a chronogram to close it. On duly being presented the text, Jahangir is pleased, and asks Mutribi whether he would rather stay in the Mughal court, go back to his homeland of Turan, or whether he wanted to make the hajj to Mecca and Medina. Mutribi, ever the courtier, says that he is at the ruler’s disposal. Jahangir then tells him he has four gifts for him, but that he would give them one after the other. They were respectively, money for his expenses, a khil’at (ceremonial and honorific robe) to wear, a horse and saddle, and a slave to serve him. Which of these did he want first? Mutribi replies in poetry on the importance of money (zar), and is at once given a platter full of money, amounting to 1,000 rupees and another 500 rupees on the part of the ruler’s wife Nur Jahan. Mutribi immodestly compares himself to Hafiz Shirazi before Jahangir’s ancestor Timur, on the occasion of the conquest of Shiraz by the latter, and recounts an elaborate anecdote regarding the meeting between the two.
Timur too had given Hafiz money and a *khil’at*, though not a horse and a saddle. Clearly, the poet’s opening gambit has succeeded and he now has a foothold in the court.

The stage has now been set for the subsequent meetings and conversations, which will have a more explicitly comparative and reflective nature for the most part. In the second meeting, the ruler’s brother-in-law Khwaja Abu’l Hasan Asaf Khan the *dīwān*, Khawass Khan, and a certain Bahadur Khan from Mawarannahr (Central Asia), as well as several other *amīrs* are present. Jahangir comes quickly to the point with regard to his own interest in Central Asia: this is the burial-site of his illustrious ancestor, Timur, in Samarqand. Mutribi replies that details regarding the spot were to be found in his text, the *Nuskhā-yi Zība*. But the emperor wishes to have answers to a set of precise questions regarding the colour of the gravestone; asking for a square black stone to be brought, he asks Mutribi to compare it in his mind’s eye with the gravestone. Mutribi replies that there some differences, since the stone before him was duller than the other. He now gives the reader details of the construction of Timur’s burial-place, by way of an aside. He further reports that Jahangir was content with the tenor of his response and once again gave him a *khil’at*, as well as a Kashmiri shawl, a turban and other gifts. Besides, his son Muhammad ‘Ali who has accompanied him is given a suit of expensive brocade clothes.

We quickly comprehend that Mutribi represents a window into Central Asia for Jahangir, as a sort of authentic eyewitness (*bayān*) to affairs in Transoxania. Despite the emperor’s alleged fascination with Iran and its ruler, it is clear that his curiosity ranges further afield as well. Mutribi and Jahangir spend the next conversation comparing objects of wonder. The emperor shows the poet a small booklet (*kitābcha*), four fingers long, that has been presented to him by European merchants. He writes on the book with a pencil, and then shows him how to rub the writing off. On receiving it as a gift, Mutribi reports his intention to carry the book back to Turan, and give it to the ruler there, Imam Quli Khan, as a valuable gift from Hindustan. He also recounts an anecdote from the time of ‘Abdullah Khan Uzbek in Bukhara, when a certain physician (*hakīm*) called Maulana Jalali possessed a strange box (*sandūq*) the height of a man in his house, with the heads of animals (a monkey, a lion, and a horse) sculpted on it. These heads, and especially that of the monkey, would move about, the apparatus would make a noise, and the passage of time could be measured thereby. Mutribi is obviously referring to a rather complicated
clockwork mechanism of some sort. Now, Maulana Jalali had an ingenious use for this contraption. He would ask his guests to make a wish, and then ask them to take a seal made of a mix of seven metals that he gave them, and place it in the mouth of the horse. The seal would fall into the box with a bang, but would then rise up again with a rattling sound, emerge from the lion’s mouth and fall into a jar. At this time, a window concealed at one side of the box would open, and a man would be revealed sitting on a throne with a rolled up paper in his hands. Taking the paper, the Hakim would read out from it, and recount details of his visitor’s future, and impending fortune or misfortune. At the end of this, the window would close up, and the entire structure would once more resemble a box. So, if Jahangir had his fancy magic tricks brought to him by the European traders (tujjār-i firang), the denizens of Central Asia had their own magic too it seemed.

In the fourth meeting, matters took a literary turn, as Jahangir had by now read Mutribi’s book, and commented on a verse in it. A discussion took place on its authorship, as Mutribi had taken it from another writer (a fact that Jahangir apparently recognised). Mention is made of the presence in court of a certain seventy-year old courtier called Maktub Khan, himself a poet from Shiraz, and in charge of the imperial library and picture-gallery. Maktub Khan had on an earlier occasion cited the same verse, and the issue arose of who in fact had the earliest claim over the verse. Did Shiraz have precedence over Samarqand and Bukhara? Happily, Mutribi reports, the matter was eventually settled with tact.

In the next meeting, Jahangir brought up the issue of hearsay and eyewitness. He asked Mutribi if he knew a certain Mirza Baqi Anjumani, and the latter replied that he was ‘Abdullah Khan’s son, who had taken refuge in Akbar’s court, and gave details of his stay in the Mughal court. Jahangir was surprised at his knowledge of these details, and asked him how he came by them. Mutribi replied that he had received news of him in Samarqand, and then in Lahore from a traveller called ‘Brahman’, who claimed to have made the hajj with Mirza Baqi, and told of his death. Jahangir insisted that this hearsay was incorrect, and that Mirza Baqi had never left the Mughal court, but had in fact died there. This leads Mutribi to reflect on the nature of truth and falsehood, and he notes that Jahangir was rigorous in investigating the veracity of statements. Jahangir now wished to test Mutribi. He hence asked him if he knew a certain Abu’l Bey, and Mutribi replied that
he did. Jahangir hence had two men produced before him, and asked Mutribi which one was Abu’l Bey. Mutribi hesitated and said he did not think either was Abu’l Bey; at this, Jahangir smiled, and said that Mutribi was right, for in fact one was Afzal Khan and the other Musawi Khan. The emperor was simply toying with the poet, it seemed. Indeed, on a later occasion, Mutribi espied Abu’l Bey in the court, and Jahangir was satisfied at his powers of observation and devotion to the truth.

A certain level of intimacy is being established over these meetings, and even by their rather ludic nature. In the sixth meeting, Jahangir is being weighed on the occasion of a celebration. Mutribi too receives two platters of coins, worth 2,000 rupees, and other valuables. Pleased, the poet recites verses in the court in praise of the emperor, and pleased, in turn, at the verses, Jahangir for his part gives him still more gifts. He also asks Mutribi which sort of horse and saddle he wanted. Mutribi somewhat greedily asks for the most expensive sort of horse and saddle, and a discussion ensued on the relative quality of different sorts. Finally, he receives an ‘Iraqi horse (rather than a less valuable Turkish one) and a saddle of velvet (rather than a more expensive but less durable one in scarlet).

At the next meeting, the question of ‘patriotism’ takes on a somewhat different flavour as we turn to the question of the wonders of Hindustan. A massive sugar-candy (weighing half a Bukhara maund) has been placed on a silver seat in the court in anticipation of Mutribi’s arrival. Jahangir then proudly asks Mutribi whether such a thing could be found in Transoxania. When Mutribi said he had never seen such an object, Jahangir notes that it was rare in India as well; a certain Muhammad Husain had brought it from the region of Lucknow, and now he offered it to Mutribi as a gift. The latter for his part decides to take it back to his home, and to give it either to Imam Quli Khan or to the man he terms the ‘Axis of the Age’, Hazrat Ishan. Intrigued, Jahangir asked who this latter person might be, and Mutribi replies that it was a great Sufi master called Khwaja Hashim Muhammad Dehbedi. It turns out that Jahangir knows this Sufi and is even devoted to him, a measure perhaps of the continuing Mughal connection with the Central Asian Naqshbandi order.

In the following encounter, Jahangir who has just returned from a hunt, gives Mutribi a special bird (surkhāb) that he himself had shot. He then jokingly asks him for
something in return, and Mutribi recites a verse on the occasion. Pleased, the emperor gives him some money in gift. In the next meeting, he is again given two birds (murghābī), from which he has a kind of pilaf dish (mutanjana) made. Such birds, it is noted, were simply not to be found in Transoxania, and were a peculiarity of Hindustan; what we have then is an implicit reversal of Babur’s view where so much of the best flora and fauna of Central Asia cannot be found in India.

At a subsequent meeting, the conversation takes a more explicitly ‘anthropological’ turn. Jahangir asks Mutribi rather bluntly whether he thought white skin was better than black, obviously wishing to test our Central Asian’s colour prejudices in respect of Indians. Mutribi replies evasively, saying that it was all a matter of opinion; but Jahangir insisted that he wanted to know his opinion. Mutribi for his part says that he could only judge by seeing (bīnam wa gūyam), and so Jahangir advised him to look right and left and decide. On the right, Mutribi found a dark young Indian princeling (rājābacha), who was so handsome that Mutribi claims he lost control of his heart. But equally, on the left, a fair and handsome boy was standing, who dazzled Mutribi’s eyes. How could he now decide? Having looked twice at each, he said to Jahangir, that it was not a matter of dark and fair but of the pleasantness of the countenance. Jahangir is pleased, and recites a verse in the same sense, to which Mutribi replied with a supporting hadīs, in which the Prophet boastfully states that his brother Yusuf was fair, but it was he whose countenance had a more agreeable (literally ‘salty’) quality (or malāhat).

The remaining meetings also contain anecdotes intended to pursue this comparison between Mutribi’s native land and the country to which he has come. During one of them, the emperor has organised a tournament with camels, and fighting bucks. Mutribi marvels, for he has never seen such a fight in Transoxania, and Jahangir too rubs it in, by asking whether he had ever witnessed such in his homeland. Mutribi has to confess he had not, and admits that Hindustan held wonders unheard of in his own country. In another episode, the eighteenth meeting, the nature of empirical verification is again at issue. A freshly made set of portraits from the Mughal ateliers is brought before Mutribi, who sees that they depict the former ruler of Turan, ‘Abdullah Khan Uzbek and his son ‘Abdul Momin Khan. However, he tells Jahangir that there are defects in the representation of ‘Abdullah Khan’s chin, and of his son’s headgear. At this, the painter is
at once summoned, and asked to correct the paintings, which he does by the next day. Another Turani courtier expresses a contrary opinion on the matter of ‘Abdul Momin Khan’s headgear, but finally Mutribi’s view is upheld. He is once more impressed by the empiricist spirit on display in Jahangir’s court: seeing is believing, and Jahangir does appear to be seriously invested in Central Asian matters.

There can be little doubt then that a persistent thread running through the conversations concerns Jahangir’s effort to demonstrate the hierarchical superiority of Hindustan over Central Asia. Thus, he asks Mutribi for the names of worthy persons from Central Asia whom he can invite to his court, never for a moment thinking that such an invitation would be refused; Mutribi suggests that a certain Maulana Sabri Tashkandi be invited, and the suggestion is accepted by Jahangir. In the same conversation (the twenty-second) Jahangir asks how much money should be sent to repair the Gür-i Amīr (Timur’s tomb). When Mutribi suggests 10,000 rupees, Jahangir says he will send it back with Mutribi to Central Asia, with the implication being that those in Central Asia are incapable of it.

By the time of the last meeting, Mutribi has begun to feel homesick, and also mentions his advanced years. However, he approaches the question obliquely, and on an occasion when Asaf Khan and others are present, presents a ghazal, and says he wishes to leave for Samarqand, promising however to spread the word of Jahangir’s greatness there. Jahangir asks him instead to come to Kashmir with him, and promises that he will send money to bring some more of Mutribi’s relatives over. After some discussion, he allows him at last to go, but insists that he should come back in a year. The poet then departs, leaving Jahangir – who has transformed himself through Mutribi into a sort of armchair traveller -- behind in Hindustan. Yet, in effect, in this text Mutribi has become the vehicle for the expression of Jahangir’s opinions and prejudices and willy-nilly a propagandist for ‘Hindustani patriotism’. To be sure, Jahangir still spoke Turkish as a mark of his Central Asian heritage, but we cannot forget that he combined this with Persian (his language of preference), and with some form of Hindawi (or northern Indian vernacular), speaking each of them as the occasion demanded. A century had elapsed since Babur had entered Delhi, and much had changed with the passage of time. Conceptually, this would not have been entirely strange to the Indo-Islamic theorists of
the time, who recognised that miscegenation, as well as the simple fact of ingesting the air and water (āb-o-hawā’) of a place over time, could work substantial changes in human beings.

Visiting the Central Asian steppe a century after Mutribi was in the Mughal court, in the 1740s, the Delhi intellectual Khwaja ‘Abdul Karim Shahristani was to note this very fact in regard to some prisoners from Khorasan who had been held for a long period by the people of Khwarizm, and then released. He notes:

‘The Turkomans, at the advice and with the connivance of their own ruler, had invaded Khorasan and had captured many women and children there. In each house, there were ten or twelve Khorasanis. The cultivation, irrigation, and the digging of deep ditches from the Jaihun river which went all through Khwarizm, had been entrusted to these prisoners from Iran. They were busy in these works day and night and because of the climate of that land, their faces had become like those of the Turanian Turkomans. Some of them were as old as fifty and sixty, and said that they had been brought there as children’.

Further, when they were released at last and some tried to persuade them to return to their ‘homeland’, they showed considerable reluctance, on account (it is claimed) of their affection for the people of Khwarizm, and since they had heard of the ruination of Iran with the fall of the Safavids. Many of them hence turned back to Khwarizm while half-way on the road to Khorasan, and others from the intensity of the winter and the lack of proper provisions, died on the way. And those who reached Khorasan regretted the fact that they had left Khwarizm. Human adaptation is thus stressed by Khwaja ‘Abdul Karim as much as innate qualities attributed to different ethnic groups. Not only is it not the same river twice over, it is not the same body that bathes in it.

III.

I began this essay by noting that the early modern relationship between India and Central Asia, like that between India and Iran, was undoubtedly an asymmetric one. But the asymmetries were by no means as simple as those that emerge from comparing the ‘vastly greater natural and human resources’ of Mughal India to those of Iran and Turan,
and concluding thereby that ‘its economy … overshadowed its neighbors in terms of its overall size, diversity and sophistication’. The invocation of the Wallerstinian and Braudelian ‘world-systems’ perspective has thus often led to an understanding where a South Asian ‘core’ dominated Iranian and Central Asian ‘peripheries’, with the presence of ‘thousands of merchants from the Mughul empire [who] resided semi-permanently in Iran and Turan … [and who] were, in essence, personifications of India’s stature as a regional world economy’.

Rather, the difficulty lies in coming to terms with a Mughal India which was itself a jigsaw of different ecological zones, from mountains and scrubland, to marsh and mangroves. It will simply not do to equate the Gangetic valley with the Mughal domains. Further, it is of crucial importance to note that movements of humans between Iran, India and Central Asia in the early modern period were never a form of one-way traffic. To be sure, Indian merchants and entrepreneurs found themselves in the towns of Central Asia (even if they wrote little about them), but so did Central Asians – whether poets, warriors or horse-traders – find themselves in the Mughal domains. Rather than the language of ‘core’ and ‘periphery’, the appropriate paradigm within which to comprehend these movements is thus one of circulation.

Equally important is the recognition that processes of circulation are for the most part also processes of transformation. This is perhaps inadequately taken into account in a part of the literature, which attributes an immutable ‘Central Asian’ character, for example, to the Mughals, and suggests that throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the conquest of Central Asia remained one of their significant preoccupations. The concrete evidence for this largely centres on Shahjahan’s campaign – which has incidentally long divided and puzzled historians – against Balkh in the 1640s, which ended after two years in a rather ignominious retreat in 1647. Yet, it has been concluded largely on this basis that ‘in the end it was their Central Asian roots that defined much of the psyche of the Mughal emperors’, and led their policies often to be driven by their ‘obsession with Central Asia’. If anything, the Balkh campaign shows the extent to which the Mughal princes who led it, such as Murad Bakhsh and Aurangzeb – now in the fifth generation after Babur, it should be recalled – were simply unable ‘to withstand the snow and cold of the country’ as well as the ‘rigour of the winter’ (as contemporaries noted). They had come a long way indeed from hardened winter campaigners such as
Babur and Mirza Haidar Dughlat. What had once been a snowy paradise had become instead a frozen hell, while the dusty roads of the Deccan were now precisely the places where the erstwhile Central Asians made their camps with the greatest alacrity.
Notes


2. This was ironical in view of persistent (and perhaps malicious) Indian press reports that the Uzbek coach Rustam Akramov was frequently in difficulty in India in the 1990s on account of his ‘lack of English knowledge’.

3. Some of the themes dealt with here have also been treated at some length in Muzaffar Alam and Sanjay Subrahmanyam, Indo-Persian Travels in the Age of Discoveries, 1400-1800 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).


1605 pertains to mansabdārs with a rank of 500 and above, and that for the period after 1605 to those with a rank of 1000 and above. The information for 1555 pertains to all amirs.


49. On Central Asian poets in Mughal India, see Syed Muhammad Fazlullah, ‘Some Persian poets of Transoxiana (beyond the Oxus) who migrated to India during in early Mughal period (10\textsuperscript{th} century H./ 16\textsuperscript{th} c. AD)’, in R.N. Dandekar, et al., *Sanskrit and

50. The meetings thus took place in December 1626 and January 1627, and Jahangir himself died in Rajauri (near Lahore) late in October 1627.


53. See the somewhat unsatisfactory discussion in Dale, *Indian merchants and Eurasian trade*, pp. 20-21, 45, passim.

54. This is amply demonstrated in Claude Markovits, Jacques Pouchepadass and Sanjay Subrahmanyam, eds., *Society and Circulation: Mobile People and Itinerant Cultures in South Asia, 1750-1950* (New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2003).