Cherian on Nath, 'Climate of Conquest: War, Environment, and Empire in Mughal North India'

Review published on Saturday, October 29, 2022


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Printable Version: https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showpdf.php?id=56414

Cherian on Nath, Climate of Conquest

What are the limits of the category “war” in the study of early modern imperial formations? What happens if the historian becomes attentive to the ways in which military mobilization spilled beyond battlefields, sieges, generals, and soldiers? These are the questions that guide Pratyay Nath’s Climate of Conquest. In it, he seeks to bridge the gaps that separate environmental and military histories of early modern South Asia from the study of the Mughal state and imperial culture. Focusing on the period from the 1550s to the 1680s, Nath compares Mughal military strategies on the western, northern, and eastern edges of the empire as it expanded and ran up against its limits.

The book’s foremost intervention is to bring processual approaches to the study of states in general and of the Mughal state in particular, a turn spearheaded by Sanjay Subrahmanyam in a landmark essay in 1992, to bear upon the history of Mughal warfare.[1] As Subrahmanyam suggested for the state more broadly, Nath demonstrates the benefits of studying Mughal warfare as itself being in flux. Generalizations from one theater of war or phase of Mughal expansion, he shows, cannot explain Mughal strategy and its outcomes in other phases or theaters. In fact, it was precisely the dynamism of Mughal warfare and its adaptability to local ecological and technological conditions, in combination with the effective building of local alliances, that explains the military successes and enduring nature of the empire (p. 111). Other central interventions are: imperial frontiers need not coincide with ecological margins and equally, heartlands need not be in agrarian plains. War and conquest were ubiquitous in the Mughal era, both across time and in scope. Seemingly nonmilitary acts, such as buying a camel, had military valences and purposes. Noncombatant labor, including that of nonhumans, was essential to the military enterprise. Daily life in the Mughal Empire was deeply shaped by war.

Proceeding chronologically, Nath begins with Akbar’s expansion of the Mughal domain and the consolidation of a Mughal “heartland” in Punjab and the Gangetic Plains. Moving beyond the wagon laager explanation for Babur’s initial success against north Indian armies and discussions that give primacy to technological superiority (including deployment of gunpowder), Nath points to the significance of the adaptability of Mughal armies to the variable ecological and topographical conditions across north and central India. While Mughal heavy cavalry remained effective in open battlefields, the ubiquity of forts, sometimes in thickly forested hill regions, called for sophisticated
siege tactics. In telling this history, Nath is careful to point to the role of diplomacy and alliances in winning over antagonists and thus allowing the Mughals to avoid battles. He also points to the role of commanders and military revenue assignees in frontier areas in incorporating or defeating challengers, such that the main Mughal army did not need to confront them at all. By the end of the sixteenth century, Nath argues, the Mughals did not enjoy any visible technological or tactical advantage over many of their rivals. Instead, Nath concludes, it was the Mughals’ superior command over funds, food, fuel, and labor that gave them the winning edge.

Nath begins his exploration of the ecological aspects of Mughal warfare in the second chapter, when he looks at Mughal imperial expansion into what ultimately became the northern, eastern, and western limits of their domain. He shows how the Mughals learned from initial setbacks in the rainy, densely forested, and riverine regions of the Bengal delta and Brahmaputra basin to switch to the “amphibious warfare” (p. 60)—involving both land armies and naval forces—that their local rivals in the region deployed. Against local Afghan rulers, the Arakanese kingdom, Portuguese pirates, or the kings of Tripura, Kuch, Kamrup, and Assam, the Mughals used boats loaded with projectile weapons, learned quickly to make mud forts in the manner of local warriors, and relied on war elephants that could navigate the riverine jungles and demolish enemies’ mud forts. It was in Assam that the Mughals ran up against insurmountable challenges. Their unfamiliarity with the terrain, ecology, and climate meant that the even denser vegetation in this mountainous terrain, combined with regular flooding in the region, made it impossible for the Mughals to sustain the supply lines and channels of communication and movement that were essential to sustain their presence in the area. Amphibious warfare and mud forts were also a feature of Mughal military techniques in the lower Indus River basin on the western peripheries of the empire.

In the higher reaches of the Himalayas and the Hindu Kush, Mughal forces faced dangerous routes on steep mountainsides, paths from which elephants and soldiers alike could and did fall to their deaths. In Kashmir and Qandahar, a long and cold winter season, snow, sleet, and icy rain, and a thin food base in these mountainous regions made Mughal soldiers and generals disinclined to stay or fight. The terrain lent itself to fortifications and the Mughals found themselves contending with rivals holed up in strong forts armed with heavy artillery. While the Mughals managed to build a base of allies in Kashmir, they could never hold on to Qandahar, perhaps due the added logistical challenges generated by its distance from the heartland and the greater fluency of the Safavids in operating in cold-weather conditions. In trying to expand northward, past Kabul, the Mughals ran up against slow and difficult transport conditions due to the absence of rivers, a thin food base due to the aridity of the region, and once more, bitterly cold winters that were unmanageable for their large army of men and animals. In discussing the hasty Mughal retreat in October 1647, Nath makes palpable, in a way that cuts through the centuries and touches the reader, the suffering that was borne by detachments of Mughal troops as they rushed southwards to beat the oncoming winter but got caught in snowstorms (pp. 107-108).

In reviewing the role of environmental constraints in military expansion, Nath concludes that even as adaptability to new terrains and climates was essential for military success, lasting conquest could only be achieved through the building of local alliances (p. 111). By tracing the long arc of Mughal campaigns, Nath counters the military and environmental historian of South Asia Jos Gommans to argue that by the mid-seventeenth century, the Mughal army was no longer a nomadic army. Instead, it had become “sedentarized” (p. 110) and favored matchlocks, elephants, and light artillery instead
of the evasive tactics of mounted archers that were more characteristic of nomadic armies of the sort the Mughals had originally been in the early sixteenth century.

In the third chapter of the book, Nath draws attention to the irreplaceable role of non-elite laborers—skilled craftsmen, boatmen, manual laborers, animal caretakers, camp workers—in the Mughal military undertaking. This was particularly due to the sheer size of the Mughal army on the move during expeditions. Nath argues for the inclusion of this varied body of workers in the category “military labor” (p. 120), pushing beyond the focus so far only on armed combatants. Here Nath also describes the different kinds of animals drafted into the war effort: horses, elephants, camels, and pack animals such as cattle and mules.[2]

The study then moves in the fourth chapter to a reflection of what constituted a frontier in the Mughal conception. Nath concludes that rather than signifying the outer boundaries of the empire, frontiers in Mughal times consisted of forts that commanded key routes. Imperial authority faded away with distance from these routes and fort nodes and it was in such fade-out spaces that local commanders asserted their own agency and political power. Nath builds on Gommans and J. C. Heesterman to argue that these routes-as-frontiers were open portals in times of peace, conceptualized not as means of preventing access to Mughal territories but as doorways through which travelers, pilgrims, and traders were welcome to transit. In the fifth chapter, Nath discusses Mughal ideological justifications of war, as expressed in textual sources. Here he builds on Muzaffar Alam’s argument about the Mughal elevation of Nasirean ethics and their emphasis on the ideal of justice. Nath suggests that the rhetoric of justice, conceptualized as an equilibrium maintained by the sovereign, as an attribute of Mughal rule allowed imperial writers to paint military antagonists, particularly those who never accepted defeat or incorporation and those that deployed “dishonorable” guerilla tactics, as obstacles to justice that were deserving of the violence that came their way. War in Mughal writings, Nath argues, was a “moral compulsion” (p. 243).

The justification of political violence as being in pursuit of justice rather than on behalf of any particular religious or ethnic community helped weld together a multifaith and multiethnic military formation. At the same time, Mughal writers represented imperial actions in the context of military tensions as guided by Nasirean ethics such as striving to avoid war through diplomacy and peaceful incorporation, treating an enemy who surrendered with generosity, and ensuring the lives and belongings of nonpartisan ordinary subjects were unharmed. In addition, argues Nath, the embrace of the Nasirean ethic and the role it bestowed upon the king allowed Mughal rulers the flexibility needed to form alliances with anyone, irrespective of faith or origin. Still, Nath points to importance of warfare in Mughal imperial formation, pushing against Gommans’s claim that military violence had largely symbolic value.

The ecological sensibility in Nath’s analysis is a welcome addition to a new direction in Mughal and early modern South Asian studies. At the same time, his reflections on military labor leave room for further examination. Nath argues that his demonstration of the large numbers of non-elite workers involved in the Mughal military enterprise “allows us to see the Mughal Empire as something that the ruling elite co-created with a very large section of the non-elite population of the Indian subcontinent.” (165) Mughal warfare, he argues, emerges as a “broad-based enterprise that involved a large part of the non-elite, non-combatant population of the empire” (xli). Approaching war in this way, Nath says, helps “problematicize the conceptualization of the empire as largely an elite project.”
(282) This recasting of the imperial enterprise as a co-creation with subaltern workers invites further nuance: while acknowledging the hitherto under-appreciated role of non-elite labor in the Mughal camp and military logistics is laudable, it seems to be a side-stepping of the power asymmetries and relations of exploitation within the state-labor relationship to deem the Mughal empire a “co-creation” by the elite and non-elite. The discussion of the work of humans and animals would have benefitted from greater attention to conflict, tensions, and variations in agentive abilities and affective investment in the imperial enterprise between employers and workers.

A signal contribution of this work is its pointing us to the inner frontiers within the cartographic boundaries of the Mughal empire. The study itself however remains largely focused on developments on those cartographic boundaries—edges both geographically and ecologically of the Mughal empire. It would have been rewarding to see the inner frontier in operation—to see the Mughals struggling in zones more proximate to the Gangetic Plains and Punjab. Still, Nath does a commendable job in bringing alive the weaknesses, the rebellions, the resistance, and the ever-present possibility of a loss of control—along with the personal ambitions and acceptances of defeat—that made up the everyday life of the Mughal empire on its frontiers through its heyday. All in all, this is a welcome contribution to the field of early modern South Asian history.

Due to a clerical error, this review had erroneously omitted the final two paragraphs when published. We apologize for this oversight.

Notes


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