

Review of Ebba Koch (ed.) in collaboration with Ali Anooshahr. *The Mughal Empire from Jahangir to Shah Jahan*. Mumbai: The Marg Foundation, 2019. ISBN 978-93-83243-26-6, Illustrations and Maps, Index and Glossary, 4200.00 INR, 90\$.

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Ebba Koch (Vienna), Ali Anooshahr (University of California, Davis) and – as the preface makes plain – Robert McChesney have created an informative, innovative and inspiring volume on the reigns of the two Mughal Emperors Jahangir and Shah Jahan of the first half of the seventeenth century. In the company of twelve contributors, experts in their respective fields, they put together a multidisciplinary volume on two historical protagonists that shaped the Mughal Empire after Akbar (r. 1556-1605) and before Aurangzeb (r. 1658-1707). As Ebba Koch states herself in the introduction to the volume, previous scholarship has mostly concentrated on those two figures. One feels compelled to add that they have often been popularised as the “tolerant” and “inclusive” Akbar and the “orthodox” and “narrow-minded” Aurangzeb, the hero and the villain, of the familiar Mughal cast. The volume is a welcome contribution that weakens this dichotomous construction, which is also bound up with historiographical tropes of imperial rise and decline, respectively.

The volume fills a dynastic gap. One of the editors’ aims is to explain and reflect on the manifold historical processes that led to Shah Jahan’s court being “regarded as the paradigm of civility, progress and development” (p. 16) by the outside world, and for many the emblematic period of the Mughal Empire in South Asia. The book abounds in visual materials, including maps, reproduced manuscript folios, images of paintings, old and new photographs of buildings and sites. The format and size of a coffee-table book it does more than satisfy the eyes alone. It is carefully edited and scintillatingly diverse, and refreshingly innovative in the topics it treats.

The individual contributions are divided up into four thematic sections dealing with political practices, courtly culture, literature, arts and architecture, rounded up with an epilogue. As the introduction by Koch states, this volume proposes to conceive of the first half of the seventeenth century as an exceptional period in its own right and “an entity where structural continuity prevailed in the face of the polemically professed divisions between the reign of Jahangir and Shah Jahan” (p. 16). This line of argumentation is particularly strong in the first section, which paints a vivid picture of this “regnal unit”. Corinne Lefèvre stresses continuities from Jahangir’s

to Shah Jahan's reign over disconnections through the notion of a "hidden indebtedness" (p. 22). She centres her argument on how Shah Jahan elaborated on his father's visual representations of universal rule, especially in the field of "dynastic iconography", which increasingly made claims to a world domination. Mercantilist impulses from the emperor, his family and courtly entourage and a stronger participation in the maritime trade of the Indian Ocean underscore another continued policy. Anna Kollatz offers a fascinating view on "Mughal strategies of legitimation and integration" through her thorough narratological analysis of the *Majālis-i Jahāngīrī*, a close-up representation of Jahangir's debates and discussions with representatives of mostly Christian, but also Muslim religious figures at the court. 'Abd al-Sattar Lahauri, a subaltern member of the Mughal court, as she defines it, composed the text to present a wide range of topics and discussions as exemplifications for an imperial rationality and an ongoing validity of Akbar's *Sulh-i kull* approach. The ultimate aim was to integrate various communities of the empire and factions at the court under the mantle of the omnipotent Mughal ruler. Ali Anooshahr and Munis Faruqi offer separate case studies of politics of dissent among the Mughal elite. They study instances of rebellion and coup, respectively, to look at the delicate business of negotiating political allegiance for members of the imperial elite and the historiographical strategies involved in mediating political transition from Jahangir to Shah Jahan. Mehreen Chida-Razvi's study of Jahangir's mausoleum offers an important corrective to narrative sources of the period by highlighting the role that Nur Jahan played in patronising and designing her husband's resting place, an achievement later appropriated by Shah Jahan.

Understanding the functioning of court society and its culture is crucial to an investigation of this period, and here the contributors offer new empirical depths. Harit Joshi delineates intricacies of royal ritual and ceremony under Shah Jahan to underscore their constitutive function for the running of the empire from his court and the projection of its power and prestige to the outside world. Stephan Popp compares practices of gift-giving and receiving to identify elements of an emerging imperial bureaucracy from Jahangir's and Shah Jahan's reign. Roman Siebertz takes us into a maze of legal procedures to recount the frustrating experiences of the Dutch merchant Joan Tack in trying to secure an imperial decree for the Dutch East India Company from Shah Jahan. Siebertz's case study provides an exceptional perspective on the actual running of the Mughal state, its "patrimonial" bonds between emperor and officials as well as the "bureaucratic" system that complemented it.

Literary sources of the seventeenth century remain largely unstudied. Sunil Sharma takes up the task with his study of "the last Mughal poet laureate" Abu Talib Kalim Kashani and his death that ushered in a shift from an Iranian community of poets to a more "Indian" group of

literary composers, whose writings can also be illuminating as historical sources. Chander Shekhar offers a first typology of the literary genre of *dibachas* (“prefaces”), which, as paratextual elements, have a lot of information to offer about literary production under Mughal patronage.

The fourth section takes us on a trip to see specimens of architecture and fine art and what they can tell us about aesthetic sensibilities, but also normative understandings and practices of power in this period. Ebba Koch experiments with a novel approach that looks at architecture to investigate the poorly understood issue of “property rights” and related intergenerational legal practices of this period, often in the absence of documentary sources. Susan Stronge looks at the tangible matter of “tile revetments” to probe architectural patterns of Shah Jahan’s reign. J.P. Losty explores the codicological and visual depths of the floral universe of one of Dara Shukuh’s albums to offer a refined date for its creation. McChesney’s epilogue transports the reader to 19th and 20th century Afghanistan to look at how Shah Jahan’s imperial culture lived on among political elites who “mimicked” several of his courtly rituals and construction practices.

It would have been interesting to hear more about areas of courtly learning and scholarship in this period. While royal patronage constituted a significant element of courtly culture, zooming in on scholars and other learned groups and their activities at the court could have offered another line of investigation to link the court with other powerful communities of the empire. Nevertheless, harvesting the rich empirical field of the seventeenth century and offering historical insights through the close reading of sources is a welcome step that can further our understanding of the period. Ultimately this will also provide the groundwork for less dynastic and court-centred histories of the period which might be able to anchor the Mughals into a broader social and cultural history of the seventeenth century.

The volume will be of interest to students of South Asian history, arts and material cultures and in particular to those who aspire to provide more nuance and depth to the study of the Mughal Empire by exploring the many hidden treasures of its heritage.