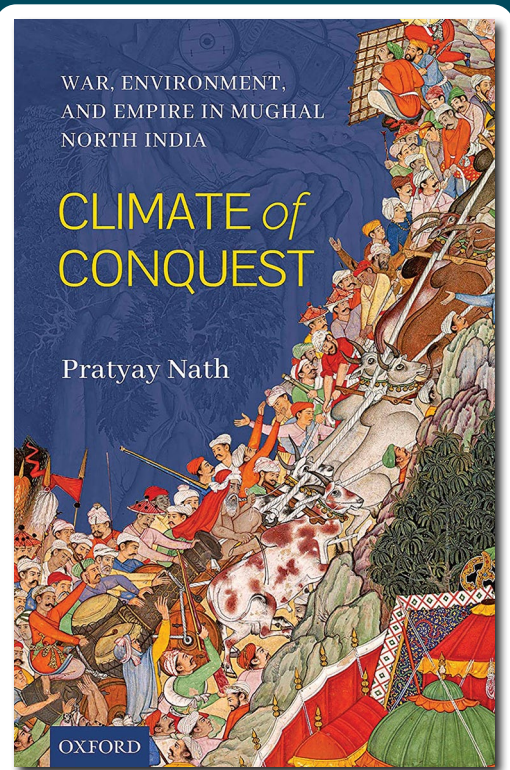


REVIEW ESSAY

Climate of Conquest War, Environment, and Empire in Mughal North India



Pratyay Nath, Oxford University Press, Oxford, United Kingdom, 2019, 368 pages

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Residing on a continent bordered by the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans, most Americans with an interest in military history outside the United States gravitate to historical information from either Europe or east Asia. Pratyay Nath, a professor of history at Ashoka University in Sonapat, in India's National Capital Region, offers a unique alternative to east Asian or European histories. In his book *Climate of Conquest: War, Environment, and Empire in Mughal North India*, Nath examines how the Turkic Muslims invaded and built an empire in North India in late sixteenth through the mid-seventeenth centuries.

Family dynamics generated the first Mughal invasion of Northern India. The young Muslim Turkic Prince Zahir ud-din Muhammad Babur fell victim to fraternal rivalry. He lost his inherited title and his

possession of family lands in the Oxus River (now called the Amu Darya River) plains, which is located between Afghanistan and Tajikistan. In the year 1519, he marched southeast out of Kabul, seeking to assuage his ambition, and set his sights on the fabled riches of Hindustan. By 1526, the prince defeated the Muslim Lodi Sultanate in battles at Delhi and Agra. Assuming control over these two cities and their commerce permitted him to expand his power. Upon his death in 1530, his eldest son, Nasir ud-din Muhammad Humayun, inherited the throne and initiated military advances both east and west. Initial successes turned into successive defeats, resulting in the loss of Agra and Delhi by 1540. During a fifteen-year interlude, Humayun defeated his half-brother, established his power base in Kabul, and seized Qandahar. Then, in 1555, Humayun rode out from Kabul, seized Lahore,

returned from exile, entered Northern India, retook Delhi, and died soon afterward.

Nath focuses his book on how Humayun's son, Jalal ud-din Muhammad Akbar, along with his subordinates, expanded the Mughal empire from its initial base in the Indus Valley and Punjab Basin, which was a bridgehead into North India. The author divides his book into two parts. The first part he labels "Fighting Wars: Campaigns, Environment, and Empire." Here, in two chapters, he addresses intentional and opportunistic military campaigns and the impact of the environment on operations. The second part is titled "Producing Wars: Logistics, Frontier, and Ideology." The three chapters in this part span the spectrum of acquiring and moving resources, delineating the extent of imperial power, and believing in the concept of a divine mandate to rule. The latter created an obligation to perform and extend justice, which legitimized expansion and the violence to achieve it. The reader with military experience or who is versed in military history can decipher the rationale behind the author's division of the book. Nath's first part describes theater-level operations. The second elaborates on the operations' logistical support, plus the political and cultural mindset of the ruling elite.

The phrase "campaign, conquer, consolidate, and repeat" summarizes Nath's pages devoted to Akbar's methodology in part 1, wherein Akbar expands his base and achieves his strategic end state of a Mughal empire across North India. Those first three verbs outline Akbar's primary approach. In addition, those verbs permit categorizing lessons.

Campaign. Kabul is located on the primary route between Central and South Asia. While trade flowed through Kabul, most of those riches originated in Hindustan—the Persian term for North India. The conquest and control of the Punjab created a safe base and a defense in depth, if necessary, for expansion. Delhi was taken by Babur and was then seized again by Humayun. It sat on trade routes out of India to Lahore, Kabul, and Central Asia. Additionally, it sat at the nexus of trade routes west to Ajmer and to the ports on the Arabian Sea, south to Agra and the interior, east along the Ganges River valley to the river port Calcutta, and to the seaport Chittagong in the Bay of Bengal, which was then a Portuguese settlement.

Akbar refrained from a main effort focused on immediate expansion outwards from Delhi until he

secured his base and could reap the rewards of the fertile Punjab plains. However, he permitted subordinate commanders to be opportunistic. As a reward, he assigned each commander a *jagir*, a subordinate fiefdom of unconquered or unsubjected land. This incentivized his lieutenants to conduct ways and employ means to bring those areas under control.

Babur and Humayun's military forces, plus Akbar's early offensives, consisted primarily of cavalry supported by infantry and artillery. The Mughal ancestors came from the central Eurasian steppes and valued horses and horsemanship. Babur benefited from a military advisor from the Ottoman Empire who recommended the fusion of direct- and indirect-fire weapons—in the form of mounted archers, matchlock infantry, and field artillery—with traditional cavalry tactics. A wagon laager protected the direct-fire weapons; foot and mounted archers fell behind them. The Ottomans picked up this tactic in their conflicts in eastern Europe; the Hussite forces in Bohemia had used it against the armies of the Holy Roman Empire and the Kingdom of Hungary.

While the Europeans typically employed the laager in their rear formations, the Ottomans and Mughals emplaced it at the front to engage the enemy's center. Chains secured the wagons to each other and impeded enemy cavalry charges. This laager provided cover for the slow-loading matchlocks. Heavy cavalry behind the direct-fire infantry protected against enemy advances or exploited routes. Light cavalry of mounted archers comprised the flanks and "skirmish line." This light cavalry harassed the opposing flanks and rear to entice the enemy to break formation—either to advance or withdraw. Once the line broke, the heavy cavalry would then deliver the decisive blow.

In Hindustan, the Mughals encountered war elephants carrying archers and matchlock men. At the First Battle of Panipat in 1526, Babur's wagon laager with its firearms and artillery repulsed the elephant charge to his center, a key factor in his victory, which resulted in control over Delhi and Agra. In contrast, thirty years later at the Second Battle of Panipat, the Hindu army with at least three times the horse cavalry dispatched their elephants against the Mughal flanks. Pushed out of position, the Mughal light cavalry initiated an enveloping maneuver. Its mounted archers targeted the elephant's legs and the soldiers atop, while the heavy cavalry circled and attacked the enemy's

rear. A ravine in front of the wagon laager prohibited an enemy horse and elephant charge against the Mughal center. Victory arose when the Hindu forces retreated after seeing their general fall when an arrow hit him in the eye. The enemy's employment of elephants so impressed Babur's thirteen-year-old grandson Akbar, that when Akbar eventually expanded into the Ganges River valley in 1567, he used elephants in conjunction with horse cavalry; he even initiated the battle on the back of an elephant.

Conquer. The Mughals infrequently fought large-pitched battles in Akbar's conquest of North India. Forts permitted control of communication lines. Commanders preferred to acquire forts quickly and intact without expending time and effort to breach walls, clear and secure, and then rebuild. Accordingly, Akbar employed a variety of ways to conquer a fort. These approaches included the following:

Negotiate. Mughal commanders leveraged the diplomatic and economic instruments of power. They attempted to co-opt the local area and garrison commander with rewards for surrender. These rewards involved positions of rank, title, and payment to enter into the empire's service. Concurrently, the offer's recipient also received a covert warning of the adverse consequences of nonacceptance. A significant delay in response often resulted in separate negotiations to advise subordinate leaders, merchants, and elders of the benefits of capitulation. These benefits attracted many people, who pressed the commander to consider surrender. Alternatively, if someone was still reluctant to surrender, the promise of benefits incentivized people to assassinate the commander. Early diplomatic and military successes influenced other powers to voluntarily enter negotiations designed to shift alliances and recognize Mughal sovereignty.

Defeat forces in the field. Mughal siege operations commenced with a circumvallation of the fort. This involved building two walls—one to surround the citadel and protect its forces from direct fire from the walls, and another to protect its rear from enemy reinforcements that might attack. Units sallied out of the defensive walls to repulse encountered matchlock infantry in defensive positions and Mughal cavalry.

Blockade. The circumvallation interdicted food supplies. Food shortages combined with diplomatic pressure and the offer of imperial service sufficed in the early years of expansion to cause the surrender of three forts.

Lay siege. If diplomatic pressure and the blockade failed, the Mughals initiated building siege batteries. These well-defended positions, often built higher than the surrounding terrain, held artillery pieces and contained siege equipment. While the Mughals exercised a doctrine that combined arms, their enemies were not technologically inferior. In addition to archers, most forts the Mughals encountered had matchlock firearms and artillery. Consequently, rather than a medieval rush across terrain and scale of ramparts, the Mughals used mines and *sabats*. Mining consisted of tunneling underground from the siege camp to the ramparts. From that location, the attackers created a large chamber, filled it with combustibles and gunpowder, and set it alight. When successful, the explosion would collapse walls, create breaches, and permit the attackers to storm the fort. The *sabat* was a covered and concealed approach trench for soldiers and artillery. It resulted from "sapping," which involves digging trenches, reinforcing trench walls, and covering the top with planks.

The Chittorgarh citadel, one of the hill forts of Rajasthan, commanded the trade routes to Gujarat with its west coast seaports and also the wealthy interior kingdom of Malwa. When its defenders successfully repaired a breach in the walls as a consequence of mining in 1568, the Mughals commenced sapping. Nath quotes contemporaneous records that indicate the width of the trench was as wide as ten men abreast, and it permitted artillery to engage and break the walls; this resulted in the Mughal victory.

Consolidate. Barbur seized Delhi and Agra, assigned a governor general, and then returned to Kabul. The defeated Lodi sultanate and local Hindus interpreted Barbur's return to Kabul as a sign he lacked dedication to stay. Humayun's later reconquest of those cities, and early demise afterward,

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set the stage for his son. After succeeding his father, Akbar realized that while he controlled those cities, his writ of power over the new domain extended only as far as his cavalry could patrol. Furthermore, recently defeated enemy forces had fled north. The reality of these realizations jeopardized his tenuous hold on forts and cities in the Punjab and created a risk to his rear guard. Consequently, rather than marching east to reconquer lost realms, Akbar determined his first line of effort was to embark on a military campaign with the objective of consolidating his base. Only after securing his base did he commence further expansion across North India. The Mughal concept of assigning commanders a jagir delegated authority, responsibility, and rewards. It created fiefdoms where the lord had a personal interest in consolidating power, ensuring security, removing opponents, inspiring loyalty, and creating conditions for the economy to flourish prior to expansion. Additionally, through co-opting former enemy commanders, local leaders, and the merchant class, the victorious Mughals leveraged the personal, familial, and economic interests of new allies to hasten the pace of consolidation.

Repeat. Nath divides Mughal expansion into six separate areas and reveals how the Mughals modified tactics to react to their environment.¹ As Akbar's forces moved eastward along the Ganges River valley, the terrain changed substantially. Northward they encountered the forests and mountains of Assam, and southward into the Bengal delta they discovered numerous rivers, rivulets, and other bodies of water. The infrequent but large force-on-force operations resulted in a reduction in the size of cavalry and an increase in the size of infantry. The changes in terrain caused the adoption of riverine and amphibious operations, the purchase or construction of war boats, plus the creation of forts situated where water lines of communication intersected. Campaigns to the north out of Kabul, the Mughal's northernmost base, into Balkh and Badakhshan required infantry to perform the duties of engineers, which included making, clearing, and improving roads and passes.

In part 2's chapters, Nath examines the material and immaterial aspects of making war. The longest portion of part 2 is chapter 3, which emphasizes the operational and logistical support required to conduct campaigns. Nath's first example is Akbar's campaign against his younger half-brother Mirza. The sibling had attacked

Mughal domains and politically threatened the emperor's authority in North India. The author elaborates that the route taken to retaliate required fording rivers, erecting bridges, and buying and building boats. These details set the stage to differentiate the types of non-combatant labor required to engage in warfare.

Combat forces at minimum needed food, fodder, equipment, and water. This all required procurement, production, and transport. Siege warfare required experienced engineers to plan and supervise, and also the labor of thousands with diverse skills to dig, brace walls, set charges, cover trenches, and build siege equipment. Nath cites primary sources that the siege at Chittorgarh involved over five thousand carpenters, miners, sappers, and stonemasons. There were one hundred to two hundred laborers lost each day building the sabats. Emperor Akbar directed the siege and dispersed cash to incentivize this work force. A siege of a Rajput citadel in 1569 involved five hundred porters to drag fifteen cannons to the top of a hill to employ against the fortress. In addition to providing pomp and luxury, the emperor's army headquarters psychologically projected power. Akbar's vizier wrote in a history that the process to set up, take down, and transport all the equipment, furniture, rugs, tents, and other material to the next location involved over 1800 laborers. While these laborers erected the imperial camp, another full camp set with its laborers marched forward to the next day's site to prepare. The expansion into Bengal and Assam involved riverine operations, which created a need for boat builders, boatmen, and crew. The empire centralized the acquisition and training of horses and elephants, plus the procurement of raw materials and the production of arms and armor.

Chapter 4 addresses the imperial frontiers, and chapter 5 focuses on Mughal ideology. Rather than establishing a physical boundary to delineate an area of sovereign control, the Mughal empire projected power from its Punjab heartland, which was reinforced by a series of forts along trade routes. These forts represented zones of power that controlled agricultural surpluses, grazing lands, and lines of communication; additionally, they benefited from loyal local elites. The writ of imperial control dissipated the farther away from those nodes and the closer it got to rival power projected from other entities that served the interests of subordinate fiefdoms, conquered lands, or competing kingdoms. The Mughal dynasty adhered to the idea of "universal sovereignty."

They adopted this concept from their Mongol and Turkic ancestors who interacted with Chinese dynasties whose emperors perceived they held a “mandate from heaven.” Universal sovereignty also reflected similar perceptions held by neighboring powers. The Mughal concept of kingship required he strive for “justice.” The Mughals interpreted this mandate to include using diplomatic and military power to “guide people to pledge allegiance to a single person”; namely, the emperor. Therefore, the Mughals perceived that a “justice-loving prince” would have the responsibility to avoid becoming content with a hold over only his current dominions. Rather, a leader incurred a moral imperative to expand the empire to fulfill the mandate.

Climate of Conquest presumes that the reader is familiar with the Mughal empire and its major characters. Accordingly, the book omits background and biographical information necessary to set the stage, provide context, and enable perspective. Unfamiliar names of persons, places, and events compelled me to research to acquire background. Nath sacrifices “the story” to submit evidence to support his thesis. A less-informed reader would appreciate the book if provided with the following information: On his paternal side, Babur is a fifth-generation descendant of Tamerlane, or Timur, the Turco-Mongol conqueror who founded the Timurid empire. On his maternal side, he is a royal descendant of Genghis Khan.² Babur’s son Humayun’s name translates to “lucky” or “conqueror.” Information from other sources about Humayun’s defeat by foreign armies, plots by his brothers, his refuge in Persia, and his death after his

general secured victory reveal he was inaptly named. The mausoleum erected by his wife inspired the building of the Taj Mahal.³

The book appears disjointed. The reader receives only partial components of a campaign or battle relevant to a specific topic and encounters the other components in later pages when they relate to other topics. Readers new to the Mughal empire might benefit from a chronological organization subdivided by themes. The book lacks one large overview map that shows the extent of the Mughal empire with its origins in Kabul, its base in Delhi, its trade routes, and its frontier to Dacca and Mumbai. The only map that provides a grand perspective is the first map, which only displays the arid zones of Afro-Eurasia. The remaining maps predominantly depict an area 250 miles east to west, and 500 miles north to south. For comparison, a map that depicts Kabul to Dacca would extend approximately 1,200 miles east to west and 850 miles north to south.

The reader familiar with the founding and expansion of the Mughal empire, and who is interested in its specific military history, will find *Climate of Conquest* a useful read. It will expand a reader’s current base of knowledge. For those new to this topic, my recommendation is to first read chapter 5 of Douglas Streusand’s book *Islamic Gunpowder Empires: Ottomans, Safavids, and Mughals*.⁴ It provides an excellent background for *Climate of Conquest*, and it chronicles each of the emperors, devoting more pages to Akbar. Armed with this background, the reader who desires to learn about the impact of the North Indian environment on Mughal military campaigns will enjoy Pratyay Nath’s *Climate of Conquest*. ■

Notes

1. Nath specifically analyzes (1) the Bengal Delta between the Ganga and Delta Rivers; (2) the Brahmaputra Basin, the river that divides modern-day Bangladesh—rivers, rivulets, water bodies, plus forests in the south, and forests and mountains of Assam in the north; (3) the Lower Indus Valley, south of the Punjab, a valley with mountains to the west and the Sind Desert to the east; (4) the Himalayan foothills; (5) Qandahar, the frontier between the Mughal and the Safavid empires; and (6) Balkh and Badakhshan—north of Kabul, the Mughal’s northernmost base.

2. Robert L. Canfield, *Turko-Persia in Historical Perspective* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

3. Stanley Lane-Poole, *Medieval India under Mohammedan Rule (712–1764)* (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1903), 230–37.

4. Douglas E. Streusand, *Islamic Gunpowder Empires: Ottomans, Safavids, and Mughals* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2011), 184–258.