

Prologue: Setting the Stage, 1504–1707

At the heart of the story of the Mughal Prince was the imperative to succeed to the Mughal throne. It is a story that necessarily begins with Babur (d. 1530), the founder of the Mughal Empire, and moves through changing succession approaches adopted in the subsequent reigns of Humayun (d. 1556), Akbar (d. 1605), Jahangir (d. 1627), Shah Jahan (d. 1666), and Aurangzeb (d. 1707). Over the course of these reigns, a period lasting 181 years, the imperial commitment to an open-ended system of succession never faltered. Broader norms characterizing Mughal succession practices were not static, however, and this prologue provides a broad overview of the shifts in the system and explains how they delineate in turn three main periods in the history of the princely institution.

THE OPEN-ENDED AND EVOLVING SYSTEM OF MUGHAL SUCCESSION

Zahir-ud-Din Muhammad Babur succeeded his father to the throne of the small Central Asian principality of Ferghana at the age of eleven. The Central Asian steppe tradition of the time allowed all male members of the broader Chaghatai and Timurid families (from whom the Mughals claimed descent) to assert individual claims to political sovereignty. The custom was practiced by an imperial clan, each of whose members competed fiercely with one another in a world of aggressive and shifting loyalties. According to Mughal historian Stephen Dale, by the late fifteenth

century, two or three generations of Chaghatais and Timurids (all of whom claimed nominal descent from the great Mongol leader Chingiz Khan) struggled for power in a broad arc of territory covering much of contemporary Central Asia.¹ Eventually despairing of his prospects after a series of betrayals and reverses, Babur decamped to Kabul, a small outpost on the fringes of the former Timurid Empire. He took the city in 1504 from his uncle, no less. In 1507–8, following the Uzbek capture of Herat, Babur assumed for himself the symbolically powerful title of *padshah* (emperor) in place of the more commonly used *mirza* (a ruler's son). In Babur's mind, his action was fully justified because he was the sole surviving Timurid to still rule a kingdom. Equal measures of melancholy and amazement tinge Babur's comment around that time: "Only I was left in Kabul."²

Jack Goody provides us with crucial terminology for explaining different succession systems. Thus a "royal descent group" refers to a ruling lineage that is but one of a number of similar groups, whereas a "stem dynasty," by contrast, maintains agnatic succession over time.³ As Babur's personal authority grew, so did his efforts to mold the succession politics of his nascent realm closer toward a "stem dynasty." He did so in two ways. First, he made sure that his sons were the primary focus of his growing realm's political attention. Following Chaghatai and Timurid political traditions, Babur granted his sons semi-independent and semipermanent territorial holdings (*uluses*) once they were old enough.⁴ Thus Humayun got Badakhshan in 1519 and Mirza Kamran received Qandahar in the early 1520s. After Babur invaded India in 1525–6, he augmented Mirza Kamran's holdings by also giving him temporary charge of Kabul. Babur's third son, Mirza 'Askari, held Multan until the fall of 1528, and Mirza Hindal was briefly awarded Badakhshan in 1529. Although Babur continued to depend heavily on his extended family, especially men such as

¹ Stephen Dale, *The Garden of Eight Paradises: Babur and the Culture of Empire in Central Asia, Afghanistan and India (1483–1530)* (Leiden, 2004), 68–70, 200–7. For a deeper historical context, see Beatrice Manz, *The Rise and Rule of Tamerlane* (Cambridge, 1989), 41–3.

² Zahir-ud-Din Muhammad Babur, *The Baburnama: Memoirs of Babur, Prince and Emperor*, trans. W. M. Thackston (New York, 2002), 257.

³ Jack Goody, *Succession to High Office* (Cambridge, 1966), 26.

⁴ According to Stephen Dale, the term *ulus* has multiple meanings. As well as pointing to a territorial unit, it can also refer to a tribe, confederation of tribes, community, or "nation." *The Garden of Eight Paradises*, 101, 158.

Muhammad Zaman Mirza and Esan Temur Sultan, to command armies and represent him at the regional level, his focus on his sons is noteworthy and seems to point to an effort to limit the number of individuals within the Timurid extended family who might succeed him.

Also in line with Chaghatai and Timurid tradition, Babur expressed a preference for one son to succeed to the supreme title of emperor. However, in a milieu where nomadic warriors constantly shifted loyalties and territories, and in a world still populated with princely appanages, this meant that the heir apparent was nothing more than a “first-among-equals.”

For almost a decade, between 1519 and 1528, Humayun appears to have been Babur’s preferred candidate to follow him as *padshah*. Thus it was Humayun who received the lion’s share of spoils after the city of Agra was conquered in 1526. Also in 1528, Babur wrote asking his son to honor a distribution of land and spoils that gave him six parts to five for the emperor’s second son Mirza Kamran. In the last years of his life, however, Babur seems to have been plagued by growing doubts about Humayun’s ability to keep the empire and his brothers united. Evidence of this discontent can be seen in his decision to ignore Humayun and instead recall Mirza ‘Askari from Multan to help him in the 1528–9 campaign against Bihar and Bengal. Such favor for Mirza ‘Askari may well have prompted Humayun’s precipitous abandonment of Badakhshan in 1529 and unauthorized return to the imperial court. On his deathbed, Babur is said to have asked for his youngest son Hindal, not Humayun, hinting at the depth of the older prince’s imperial disfavor.⁵ Mughal sources are largely silent about the embarrassing episode wherein, just before Humayun’s ascent to the throne, Babur’s closest advisors sought to position the emperor’s brother-in-law and Babur loyalist Mahdi Khwaja as a possible replacement.

That Humayun eventually ascended to the throne signaled Babur’s success in focusing imperial attention on his sons as well as dominating the political ambitions of all other clan members – in other words, a shift for the Timurids from “royal descent group” to “stem dynasty.” This succession practice was sustained through Humayun’s reign and reached its full realization in Akbar’s when it was made clear to all that the only legitimate contenders for the imperial throne were males in the emperor’s direct line.

⁵ Gulbadan Begum, *Ahwal-i Humayun Badshah*, British Library, Ms. Or. 166, f. 17b.



Mughal Empire in 1530 (Babur)

Between 1530 and 1555, however, the shift had not been so clearly established that it could not be challenged. Humayun was forced to face down multiple kinsmen who sought imperial authority. In the first decade of his rule, for instance, he fought long and hard against Muhammad

Zaman Mirza, grandson of the last great ruler of Herat (Sultan Husain Bayqara) and Babur's son-in-law. That struggle ranged across Malwa and the Punjab and even drew the Mughals into conflict with the ruler of Gujarat after he offered Muhammad Zaman Mirza his protection. Ultimately, Muhammad Zaman Mirza surrendered to Humayun's greater authority and was later killed fighting against the emperor's nemesis Sher Khan Suri in 1539. In 1546, Humayun ordered the execution of Yadgar Nasir Mirza, a first cousin, for repeated acts of treason. And after losing his empire in India (a topic to be discussed more fully in the next chapter), Humayun also fought his half brothers Mirza Kamran and Mirza 'Askari for many years. By the end of Humayun's reign, however, the surviving *mirzas* had been successfully reduced to the ranks of imperial nobility and were no longer considered viable candidates for the throne. By clearing away the competition around him, Humayun had paved the way for a relatively smooth succession by his oldest son and heir, Akbar.

When Humayun died unexpectedly in 1556, the broad consensus among the Mughal nobility was that Akbar was the rightful heir despite his being only thirteen years old. Dangers nonetheless lurked. This can be seen in the decision to keep Humayun's death a secret long enough to allow the young Akbar to return to the imperial court from his provincial posting in the Punjab. Once Akbar had assumed his father's place, however, there was a general willingness on the part of the Mughal nobility to accept his legitimacy. This is attested to in the action of Humayun's senior noblemen Tardi Beg, who surrendered an important prisoner (and potential political competitor), Mirza Abu'l Qasim, the son of Mirza Kamran, to Akbar.⁶ Humayun had another son, Mirza Hakim, but he was an infant living in distant Kabul under the protection of his mother. Even after Mirza Hakim reached adulthood, his power and influence were confined to Kabul and its environs.

Seen from the perspective of succession politics in Mughal India, Akbar's reign can be divided into two broad periods. The first, from the early 1560s until the mid-1580s, featured efforts from various quarters to replace Akbar with his half brother Mirza Hakim. These efforts included the joint rebellion of Mirza Sharaf-ud-Din Husain Ahrari (married to Akbar's half sister) and Shah Abu'l Ma'ali between 1562 and 1564, a rebellion by the Mirzas in 1566, and the massive North India-based rebellion of 1580–1. In all these, Mirza Hakim played a key role as a symbol of opposition to Akbar. This testified, on the one hand,

⁶ Shaikh Abu'l Fazl, *Akbarnamah*, ed. Abdul Rahim, vol. 1 (Calcutta, 1878), 365.

to the success of their father Humayun's efforts to contain claims to the Mughal throne to the emperor's direct heirs, but on the other hand, it indicated how imperial authority continued to be destabilized by the existence of princely appanages.

Against this backdrop, it must be noted that Akbar did not entirely abandon his vigilance against threats to his power offered by more distant kinsmen. Over the years, potential or real opponents were politically co-opted (such as Mirza Sulaiman of Badakhshan in 1575), imprisoned (such as Muzaffar Husain Mirza in 1577), or killed (such as Mirza Abu'l Qasim in the mid-1560s and Ibrahim Husain Mirza and Muhammad Husain Mirza in 1573). In addition, despite their fierce rivalry, Akbar worked to protect his half brother's hold over Kabul against other kinsmen. In 1564–65, for instance, he sent forces to help Mirza Hakim drive Mirza Sulaiman of Badakhshan out of the city he had successfully occupied. In the decades that followed, Mirza Hakim's hold on Kabul ironically relied on the threat of intervention by Akbar from India.

The rise of Akbar's sons, Salim, Murad, and Danyal, to political prominence, as well as the demise of Mirza Hakim and the Kabul appanage, mark the second phase of Akbar's reign. A key moment came in 1582 when Akbar attacked Kabul to punish Mirza Hakim for invading India the previous year. Rather than commanding the imperial forces himself, Akbar deputized his second son, the twelve-year-old Murad, to be their nominal commander. As the Mughal forces approached Kabul, Mirza Hakim was forced to engage them in battle. Murad's subsequent victory over his uncle not only signaled the emergence of a new imperial hierarchy, but also opened the way for Akbar to incorporate Kabul into the empire. This he finally did in 1585, after Mirza Hakim's death. With Kabul's seizure and the imprisonment of Mirza Hakim's young sons Kaikobad and Afrasiyab in India, Akbar signaled his determination to abandon the custom of granting princes individual appanages. Henceforward, succession politics would be focused exclusively on Akbar's direct heirs and played out on an imperial stage that spanned the entire Mughal Empire.

From the birth of his oldest son Salim in 1569, Akbar strove to make sure his sons became the most powerful centers of power in Mughal India (see Chapter 4). In 1585, these efforts intensified – along with granting his sons imperial ranks below only himself, Akbar also recused himself as a candidate for additional marriages. The significance of this move cannot be underestimated. As Ruby Lal has shown, not only were royal marriages crucial for producing heirs and building political partnerships, but they also helped highlight the dynasty's accommodation to and symbolic

protection of the world around it.⁷ By allowing his sons to contract dozens of marriages among themselves over the next twenty years, Akbar was demonstrably setting up each of them to take on the mantle of emperor in an empire that was now indivisible.

The move to favor only his sons had important repercussions for Akbar. This became evident in 1591 when Akbar fell seriously ill. Salim, Murad, and Danyal (who were twenty-two, twenty-one, and eighteen years old, respectively) began mobilizing their supporters in anticipation of a war of succession, and the imperial court teetered on the brink of civil war. Luckily, Akbar's health improved in time to prevent an outbreak of hostilities. But Akbar was now forced to concede the necessity of geographically separating his sons.⁸ Over the next decade, each was in turn moved out of the imperial court and sent to either govern a province or lead a military expedition.

As relations among his sons worsened throughout the 1590s, Akbar himself felt increasingly threatened by the eldest, Salim. Let us consider the situation of Salim in the new post-appanage era of the Mughal Empire. Although being the oldest son did tend to come with certain favors and advantages, it did not in fact guarantee assumption of the Mughal throne. What was Salim to do about his brothers now that princely appanages had been done away with? A fight was inevitable. Instead of an advantage, then, the position of heir apparent was a burden. It came with added expectations of loyalty and service to the emperor that conflicted with maintaining an independent and powerful household and cultivating networks of support to ward off future rivals. Salim found this balance increasingly difficult to strike; starting in the early 1590s, he began to defy Akbar. In subsequent generations, favored sons – among them Khurram (who rebelled in 1622), Muhammad Sultan (who rebelled in 1659), and Mu'azzam (who was imprisoned between 1687 and 1695) – would face similar opposing incentives.

In 1594, Akbar made a fateful decision. It was fully intended to undercut Salim. He decided to grant Salim's oldest son, Khusrau, a high imperial rank (*mansab*), even though Khusrau was only seven years old at the time. Along with the *mansab*, Akbar allowed the young prince to draw on the financial resources of the newly conquered province of Orissa. The emperor also appointed the prince's maternal uncle, Salim's brother-in-law Raja Man Singh, as his guardian/protector (*ataliq*). The

⁷ Ruby Lal, *Domesticity and Power in the Early Mughal World* (Cambridge, 2005), 166–73.

⁸ 'Abd al-Qadir Badauni, *Muntakhab al-Tawarikh*, ed. W. N. Lees and Ahmad Ali, vol. 2 (Calcutta, 1865), 378.

Raja was simultaneously made the governor of the neighboring province of Bengal. To add political and military muscle to the minor prince's military establishment, Akbar also assigned seasoned Rajput and Afghan troops to his command.

Through his elevation of Khusrau, Akbar appears to have sought to impress on all concerned parties, but especially on Salim, that he was willing to supersede their claims to the throne if they questioned his authority. In an effort to deepen the wedge between Salim and Khusrau, Akbar insisted that the young prince remain under his exclusive charge. The emperor went so far as to openly declare that he “loved grandchildren more than sons.”⁹ Remarkably, Khusrau began to be treated, or thought of, as Salim's younger brother. Khusrau even took to referring to his father as Shah Bhai (Imperial Brother).¹⁰ Inevitably, relations between princely father and son began to mirror the deterioration in the ties between Akbar and Salim.

Adding to these pressures, Akbar decided sometime in 1597 to remove Salim from the imperial court. The emperor faced stiff resistance, however. The prince argued that he should remain at court in light of the emperor's advancing age (Akbar was in his late fifties), and this drew support from Salim's own influential circle. Still, in mid-1599, Akbar forced Salim to accept command of an expedition against the recalcitrant Rajput state of Mewar. In addition to being unceremoniously removed from his central perch at the Mughal court, Salim learned that Akbar had permitted his younger brother Danyal to use red tents at his camp – an imperial prerogative that until then was exclusively reserved for the emperor himself. There can be no doubt that Akbar was working to make the next succession a more competitive one. Sometime in 1599, Salim reached the end of his tether and in the fall of that year began his rebellion against Akbar.

As I argue in Chapter 5, Salim's five-year rebellion was part of a long-term effort to force the emperor to make political concessions. In the end, it failed. For Akbar, however, who was determinedly reshaping how succession worked in the Mughal Empire, Salim's rebellion uncovered important fault lines in this emerging dispensation. To what extent was a favored prince to be elevated over his competitors? What happened when a chosen or favored prince turned hostile or was deemed no longer a favorite, for whatever reason? What degree of consent and control might an emperor exert over the succession process? What would be the fate of the remaining royal brothers?

⁹ Shaikh Abu'l Fazl, *Akbarnamah*, ed. Abdul Rahim, vol. 3 (Calcutta, 1886), 735.

¹⁰ Kamgar Husaini, *Ma'asir-i-Jahangiri*, ed. Azra Alavi (Bombay, 1978), 53.



Mughal Empire in 1605 (Akbar)

Almost to the end of his reign in October 1605, Akbar seems to have held out hope that Salim's imperial claims might somehow be thwarted. In the end, it was the premature deaths of both Murad and Danyal (in 1599 and 1605, both from alcohol poisoning) that spared the Mughal Empire its first war of succession in the post-appanage period. Only Akbar's grandson Khusrau remained as an alternative to Salim, and Mughal dynastic history contains the remarkable episode wherein, just days before Akbar's death, a gathering of powerful imperial nobles met to override Khusrau's candidacy. In the end, they ruled (out of political expedience rather than conviction) that the customs and laws of the Chaghatai did not permit a son to trump the imperial claims of a still-living father.¹¹ Akbar, in one of his final acts as emperor, acquiesced to the wishes of his nobles.

After having won the throne through a show of obedience to Chaghatai ideals, Salim (now Emperor Jahangir) proceeded to immediately break faith with those same ideals by not honoring his earlier pledge to grant Khusrau the governorship of Bengal. The presumption, at least on Khusrau's part, was that Bengal would become his appanage. When Jahangir reneged on the promise by not allowing Khusrau to depart from the imperial court, the inevitable result, in April 1606, was a princely rebellion. This Jahangir quickly crushed, confirming his commitment to the indivisibility of the empire. There was another crucial way in which Jahangir reaffirmed Akbar's determination to move away from Central Asian, Timurid-based succession practices. Like his father, he vigorously quashed the political pretensions of collateral branches of the imperial family. An example was his extraordinary treatment of his deceased brother Danyal's three minor sons: he ordered their conversion to Christianity. Francisco Pelsaert, a Dutch traveler in Mughal India, writes:

He did so not because he thought well of or was attached to that religion, but in order to turn away the affections of everyone from them. He did not wish that they should enjoy the support of the great nobles for their father's sake, who was much loved by everyone.¹²

¹¹ Asad Beg Qazwini, *Waqā'i' Asad Beg*, Center for Advanced Study Library (Aligarh Muslim University), Rotograph 94, f. 29b. Amir Timur's decision in 1405 to designate his grandson Pir Muhammad bin Jahangir as his heir offers proof that the dynastic claims of living sons were sometimes ignored. Beatrice Manz, *The Rise and Rule of Tamerlane* (Cambridge, 1989), 128.

¹² Francisco Pelsaert, *A Dutch Chronicle of Mughal India*, ed. and trans. B. Narain and S. R. Sharma (Lahore, repr. 1978), 74.

In addition, Jahangir repeatedly imprisoned, banished, and publicly degraded his uncle Mirza Hakim's sons and grandsons.¹³ Outraged by his own son Khusrau's rebellion and disloyalty, he wrote: "If such treatment is received from a son of my loins, what can be expected of nephews and cousins?"¹⁴

In 1607, Jahangir decided to blind the imprisoned Khusrau. This action followed the discovery of another plot to overthrow him by Khusrau's supporters. By blinding his son, Jahangir effectively disqualified Khusrau from ever ascending to the Mughal throne. But the emperor still had two adult sons – Parvez and Khurram, eighteen and fifteen years old, respectively – who could potentially succeed him. Jahangir elected to groom his third son, Khurram. Although Parvez continued to receive military and administrative assignments over the next decade, he was effectively sidelined.

We can view the rise of Khurram as a mark of Jahangir's efforts to shift the Mughals toward a system of quasi-designated succession. Between 1607 and 1621, Khurram received every conceivable honor. None perhaps was more important than the open acknowledgment that he was the emperor's preferred choice to succeed to the throne. Enabling Khurram's rise were his high-profile military appointments and military successes throughout the 1610s. Jahangir himself never led military campaigns as emperor, preferring that Khurram and others do so in his stead. Khurram also enjoyed a close alliance with his influential stepmother Nur Jahan, who had married Jahangir in 1611. Khurram took Nur Jahan's niece Arjomand Banu Begum (better known as Mumtaz Mahal) in marriage in 1612, and from that point on (with one notable exception in 1619), she was the only woman to have children with Khurram. Indeed, history tends to remember their relationship, monumentalized as it eventually was in the building of the Taj Mahal, while forgetting Khurram's far less appealing handling of his older brother Khusrau (as will be shown next). Through

¹³ It is recounted that Mirza Afrasiyab was once ordered to serve as an attendant behind Jahangir's throne during a public audience with a visiting envoy from Shah 'Abbas of Iran. The humiliation was too much for the proud prince, however, and he refused to do as told. Jahangir ordered his imprisonment thereafter. Shaikh Farid Bhakkari, *Dhakhirat al-Khawarin*, ed. S. Moinul Haq, vol. 2 (Karachi, 1970), 204–5. Sir Thomas Roe, the visiting English ambassador to Jahangir's court, recounted how one of the princes begged to be gifted a feather, three or four pictures, and an old pair of spurs, highlighting the relative penury of the Mirza's sons. Sir Thomas Roe, *The Embassy of Sir Thomas Roe to India, 1615–1619* (Delhi, repr. 1990), 143.

¹⁴ Nur-ud-Din Muhammad Jahangir, *Jahangirnama*, ed. Muhammad Hashim (Tehran, 1980), 34.

most of the 1610s, Jahangir appears to have left the empire's workings to the combined charge of Nur Jahan and Khurram.

Meanwhile, after being blinded in 1607, Khusrau was placed under the control of Ja'far Beg/Asaf Khan (a Parvez loyalist). Three years later, responsibility for overseeing Khusrau was shifted to Ani Singh Ra'i Dalan, a loyal servitor to the emperor. Another six years on, in 1616, in an ominous move for Khusrau, he was transferred to a sworn enemy, Abu'l Hasan/Asaf Khan – Khurram's father-in-law and Nur Jahan's brother. Even Jahangir's own mother, Maryam-uz-Zamani, strongly opposed this move out of concern that allowing physical harm to befall a prince of the royal blood would set a terrible precedent.¹⁵ Unfortunately for Khusrau, Nur Jahan managed to calm her mother-in-law's fears. Despite repeated petitions by other high-ranking imperial supporters to give Khusrau more freedom within the confines of the court, the emperor remained steadfast in his commitment to punish his son, a commitment that Nur Jahan and Khurram undoubtedly encouraged. Finally, in what amounted to Khusrau's death warrant, he was handed over to Khurram as part of an imperial quid pro quo designed to get Khurram to lead the Mughal forces in the Deccan in 1620. Within two years, Khusrau was dead, murdered on Khurram's orders. Then, within a matter of months, Khurram himself was in rebellion against both Jahangir and Nur Jahan.

The roots of Khurram's rebellion ran deep. Nur Jahan's status as both imperial wife and his stepmother was complicated; her loyalties were often divided between serving her husband while he still lived, positioning herself for a post-Jahangir political dispensation, and working with Khurram's political ambition. For Khurram, questions must have arisen regarding her continued influence once he had replaced Jahangir as emperor. By 1619–20, Nur Jahan had reached the conclusion that Khurram would undermine her power in a post-Jahangir dispensation, and, in a provocative move, she arranged for the marriage of her only biological child, her daughter Ladli Begum, to Jahangir's youngest son and Khurram's half brother, Shahryar (he was fifteen at the time). Over the next few years, she actively helped Shahryar build his princely household and raise his political profile at the Mughal court. Nur Jahan also encouraged a reconciliation of sorts between Jahangir and his other son, the estranged Parvez. Having favored Khurram for more than a decade and groomed him as his heir, Jahangir's actions offered a clear reversal. As with Akbar and Salim, so also with Jahangir and Khurram: as Jahangir had a change of heart regarding the once-favored

¹⁵ Roe, *The Embassy of Sir Thomas Roe to India*, 256, 262.

older son, he allowed the always present pressures of princely competition to rise to the surface of dynastic politics.

By the mid-1620s, Jahangir was simultaneously working with three major princely contenders: Parvez; Shahryar; and, most surprisingly, Dawar Bakhsh, son of the murdered Khusrau, whose prominence grew out of sympathy and support for his deceased father. Jahangir had special plans for Dawar Bakhsh, stating in a 1626 imperial communication that the prince had been ordered “to take vengeance for his father’s murder by putting that wretched one [i.e., Khurram] to the sword.”¹⁶

So many princely contenders created turmoil. Nur Jahan favored Shahryar, whereas the nobility was split in its support for Parvez, Dawar Bakhsh, and – secretly – Khurram. These fractures came to the surface in a 1626 rebellion by one of Jahangir’s powerful nobles, Mahabat Khan, a Parvez loyalist. Over the course of six months, the Khan managed to place Jahangir and much of the imperial court under arrest. Although Mahabat Khan’s final political goals are unclear, he likely intended to keep Jahangir under his control until the emperor (who was in bad health) died, allowing him to place Parvez on the throne. During the course of Mahabat Khan’s rebellion, Parvez quietly supported the nobleman from his princely base in the Deccan. The collapse of Mahabat Khan’s revolt and Parvez’s sudden death in October 1626 (like his uncles Murad and Danyal from alcohol poisoning) reconfirmed Nur Jahan’s power, however.

Parvez’s demise meant that officially only Shahryar and Dawar Bakhsh remained as potential heirs. Although Shahryar was the stronger of the two, thanks to the ongoing support of Nur Jahan, neither prince had wide-reaching and independent webs of political support, nor did either have large enough contingents of troops or deep enough financial resources to pose a real threat to Khurram. All eyes were now trained on Khurram, who, after considering flight to Iran in early 1626, returned to the Deccan upon hearing of Parvez’s death. In October 1627, Jahangir finally died and fighting broke out at the imperial court. The first round of conflict pitted the resident princes and their supporters against each other. Khurram watched from the sidelines.

On one side were Nur Jahan and Shahryar; on the other were Dawar Bakhsh and Asaf Khan – Nur Jahan’s brother and Jahangir’s chief advisor (*vakil*). It was clear to most contemporary onlookers that although on Dawar Bakhsh’s side, Asaf Khan was acting as a proxy for his son-in-law

¹⁶ *A Descriptive List of Farmans, Manshurs and Nishans: Addressed by the Imperial Mughals to the princes of Rajasthan*, ed. N. R. Khadgawat (Bikaner, 1962), 62.

Khurram. In the battle that followed, Shahryar was defeated and, shortly thereafter, blinded on Dawar Bakhsh's orders. When news of Shahryar's defeat reached Khurram, he began marching northward out of the Deccan. As Khurram approached Agra, he sent a message to Asaf Khan to imprison Dawar Bakhsh (who had been acting emperor for the past two months); Dawar Bakhsh's younger brother Gurshasp; the blind Shahryar; and his uncle Danyal's surviving sons, Tahmurs and Hoshang. A few days later, in the third week of January 1628, Khurram conveyed a fresh set of orders through a trusted household retainer that all five princes be put to death.

With this gruesome order, Khurram asserted his exclusive right to the throne. His execution of five princes also set a bloody precedent for future princely rivalry. No longer would princes escape with their lives in lieu of their eyes. Henceforth, and until the end of competitive successions in 1719, Mughal princely wars of succession were expected to be bloody and brutal affairs that would result in the death of all claimants to the imperial throne, barring the one who rose to the top.¹⁷

Khurram attained the throne and reigned for thirty years, from 1628 to 1658, as Emperor Shah Jahan. The central feature of his long reign was his attempt to frame, in the words of historian John F. Richards, "a more formal, more forbidding, and grand monarchy and empire."¹⁸ Shah Jahan's ambition unfolded on multiple fronts, including massive building projects (two noteworthy examples being a new capital called Shahjahanabad and the Taj Mahal as a mausoleum for his wife Mumtaz Mahal); extensive patronage of the arts and literature; administrative consolidation; and, most significant, a renewed push to expand the Mughal Empire's frontiers. Of course, shaping the future succession practices of the dynasty figured importantly in his overall schemes.

Following the bloodletting of 1628, the historical record for Shah Jahan's reign is almost completely silent regarding the activities of princes from collateral lines of the Mughal royal family. What happened to the grandsons

¹⁷ Shah Jahan's responsibility in rendering fratricide an integral part of future imperial succession struggles did not escape contemporary comment. As François Bernier, a mid-seventeenth-century French traveler to Mughal India noted: "not only was the crown to be gained by victory alone, but in case of defeat life was certain to be forfeited. There was now no choice between a kingdom and death; as Chah-Jehan [i.e., Shah Jahan] had ascended the throne by imbruing his hands in the blood of his own brothers, so the unsuccessful candidates on the present occasion [i.e., the 1657–9 war of succession between Shah Jahan's sons] were sure to be sacrificed to the jealousy of the conqueror." François Bernier, *Travels in the Mogul Empire, AD 1656–1668*, trans. A. Constable (Delhi, repr. 1997), 25–6.

¹⁸ John F. Richards, *The Mughal Empire* (Cambridge, 1993), 119.

of Khusrau, the sons of Parvez, or the heirs of Danyal, Murad, and Mirza Hakim? We know that they were alive during Shah Jahan's reign, but there is barely any mention of them and their activities in the imperial sources, which seem deliberately silent on the affairs of non-lineally related royals. Nor do other sources provide any commentary. The concerted focus on the direct sons of the emperor is striking. Such a movement may be understood as a strategy for tackling what Jack Goody has described as the "dangerous proliferation of the royal personality"¹⁹ or growth in the number of mutually hostile heirs. Shah Jahan's determination to restrict the number of princely competitors even extended to withholding daughters from marriage and sexual contact to control their bearing of royal children. Although unusual in the South Asian context, this strategy occasionally occurred in other imperial contexts.²⁰ Thus Shah Jahan denied his three adult daughters – Jahan Ara, Roshan Ara, and Gauhar Ara – the right to marry, though he happily encouraged their political participation in concert with one of their four brothers. In this way, Jahan Ara emerged as a firm supporter of Dara Shukoh, whereas Roshan Ara and Gauhar Ara became partisans of Aurangzeb and Murad, respectively.

The surviving sons of Shah Jahan – Dara Shukoh, Shuja', Aurangzeb, and Murad – were full brothers, all sons of Mumtaz Mahal, which was unusual for Mughal princely competitors. Although we know little of Shah Jahan's relations with them prior to his accession in 1628, we do know that from the early 1630s onward, he favored the oldest, Dara Shukoh. And in contrast to both Akbar and Jahangir, who eventually revisited their original choice, Shah Jahan never shifted in his support of Dara Shukoh.

Evidence of Dara Shukoh's favored status is manifold. An example is his imperial rank. By 1657, the last full year of Shah Jahan's reign, Dara Shukoh had been elevated to the extraordinary standing of 50000/40000. The first figure represented his rank in the imperial hierarchy (*zat*); the second indicated the number of horsemen (*sawar*) he was expected to maintain from his income.²¹ Compare this to the combined rank of 55000/42000 for Shuja', Aurangzeb, and Murad. Unlike his three younger brothers who were either frequently rotated through assignments or kept far removed from the imperial court, Dara Shukoh was more-or-less permanently based at the court,

¹⁹ Goody, *Succession to High Office*, 27.

²⁰ Nancy Kollmann, *Kinship and Politics: The Making of the Muscovite Political System, 1345–1547* (Palo Alto, 1987); Jane Bestor, "Bastardy and Legitimacy in the Formation of a Regional State in Italy: The Estense Succession," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 38 (1996): 549–85.

²¹ For further discussion about the *mansabdari* system, see Chapter 3.

giving him a powerful voice in the day-to-day administration of the empire. Unlike his brothers, he was also given the right to share in certain imperial prerogatives such as the use of red-colored tents. Perhaps the strongest proof of Dara Shukoh's higher status, however, was his 1633 marriage to Nadira Begum, the daughter of Shah Jahan's deceased brother Parvez and a granddaughter of Akbar's younger son Murad. Theirs was the most expensive wedding ever staged in Mughal history, and the bride's trousseau of Rs. 800,000 (more than \$12 million in 2009 dollars) was the largest ever. Since Babur's reign, the Mughals had avoided contracting marriages between male heirs of an emperor and first cousins from collateral branches. By this marriage, therefore, Shah Jahan sought to consolidate already forged imperial networks within which his oldest son would become the main pivot. The marriage might also have signified that Dara Shukoh was too exalted to marry outside the royal family (unlike his brothers who did). The consequent progeny, purportedly, would be doubly favored on account of their unusual dual Mughal lineage. Indeed, Shah Jahan extended extraordinary privileges to Dara Shukoh's two sons – Sulaiman Shukoh and Siphir Shukoh – as well. Sulaiman Shukoh was granted the right to use red imperial tents in 1653 and four years later was granted a status rank (*zat*) in the imperial hierarchy that placed him just under his uncles Shuja' and Aurangzeb, and on par with Murad.

Such favoritism bred enormous resentment among Shah Jahan's other sons. Especially as Shah Jahan aged through the 1650s, Dara Shukoh's influence grew ever stronger, to the great alarm of his brothers. In a 1657 letter to his older sister Jahan Ara, Aurangzeb angrily demanded why “despite twenty years of service and loyalty, he is not considered worthy of the same level of confidence as his brother's son [i.e., Sulaiman Shukoh].”²² Far from forestalling a destructive war of succession, Shah Jahan's actions, in fact, intensified the conflict between Dara Shukoh and the rest of his sons. Despite Shah Jahan's efforts, his other sons were not content to accept either their father's plans for his succession or their older brother's presumption to be next in line.

In the early 1650s, Shuja', Aurangzeb, and Murad agreed to a secret alliance against Dara Shukoh. Its details are explicitly captured in Aurangzeb's surviving princely correspondence.²³ No amount of

²² Aurangzeb, *Adab-i 'Alamgiri*, ed. Abdul Ghafur Chaudhuri, vol. 2 (Lahore, 1971), 829.

²³ Aurangzeb, *Adab-i 'Alamgiri*, 790–7. In one of his letters to Murad, Aurangzeb urges his younger brother to send all communications in a secret script called *khat-i mukhtara*. See page 791.

engineering by Shah Jahan, short of the execution or permanent incarceration of his younger sons, could have prevented the conflagration that followed his temporary illness and inability to rule in 1657. In their capacity as imperial generals and provincial governors, Shuja', Aurangzeb, and Murad represented Shah Jahan's authority in regions where the emperor did not or could not go. And in this sense as well as in their position as direct lineal competitors, the princes played a crucial role in the political life of the empire.

The incapacitation of Shah Jahan in the last months of 1657 led to a full-blown war of succession among his four adult sons. The emperor, of course, threw his support behind Dara Shukoh; nonetheless, Aurangzeb methodically bested the heir apparent as well as his other brothers. Shah Jahan's efforts to promote Dara Shukoh and initiate a new model of Mughal dynastic succession – in which the emperor's favored son would either ascend the Mughal throne unopposed or easily vanquish challenges from his brothers – simply did not come to pass.

Among the most interesting features of the 1657–9 war of succession are recurring conversations about partitioning the empire among the contestants. In the fall of 1657, for example, Aurangzeb and Murad signed a contract (*qaulnama*).²⁴ The two brothers agreed that following Dara Shukoh's defeat, Murad would get the north and northwest areas including Punjab, Kabul, Kashmir, Multan, and Thatta, whereas Aurangzeb would get the rest of the empire. When Aurangzeb and Murad together prevailed over the imperial forces in the battles of Dharmat (April 1658) and Samugarh (May 1658), their sister Jahan Ara offered another proposal. Working on behalf of Shah Jahan, she broached the possibility of dividing the empire five ways among Dara Shukoh (the Punjab and neighboring regions), Shuja' (Bengal), Murad (Gujarat), Aurangzeb (much of northern and central India), and Aurangzeb's oldest son Muhammad Sultan (the Deccan). Around the same time, Shah Jahan engaged in secret negotiations with Muhammad Sultan to try to persuade him to abandon his father and accept the Deccan as his patrimony. Meanwhile another agreement to partition the empire was signed in early May 1658 by Dara Shukoh and Shuja'. Under its terms, Shuja' would get Bengal, Orissa, and parts of Bihar, leaving the rest of the empire to Dara Shukoh. In July 1658, Aurangzeb improved on that offer. He extended the same terms with the additional carrot of all of Bihar.

²⁴ 'Inayat Khan, *'Inayatnama*, British Library, Ethe 411, ff. 38b-40b.

Ultimately, Aurangzeb's victory over his brothers (Dara Shukoh and Murad were executed in 1659 and 1661 respectively; Shuja' disappeared in Burma in the early 1660s) meant that the empire was never divided. Whereas the schemes to partition the empire might be offered as evidence of the continued echo of Chaghatai-Timurid ideals into the seventeenth century, in fact, the notion of an indivisible empire prevailed.

During Aurangzeb's long reign, from 1658 to 1707, he actively reaffirmed Mughal succession practices as they had evolved since Akbar's reign. For instance, he rotated most of his sons (and later grandsons) between provincial and military assignments. The one exception was his youngest son, Kam Bakhsh, in whose leadership skills Aurangzeb had little confidence. Unlike the favor shown Dara Shukoh, however, Kam Bakhsh's permanent presence at the imperial court appears to have generated little anxiety on the part of his brothers because this prince did not receive all the honors and privileges that had been bestowed upon his uncle. Like previous emperors, Aurangzeb tried to keep his sons geographically separated, mostly to prevent conflicts. Especially toward the end of his life, Aurangzeb even went so far as to carve out areas of influence for each of his sons. After his son Mu'azzam's release from prison in 1695 (following a treasonous attempt to undermine Mughal war goals in the Deccan), he and his sons largely dominated the empire's northwestern provinces and Bengal: A'zam and his sons were dominant in Gujarat, Malwa, Rajasthan, and northern parts of the Deccan. Kam Bakhsh was given nominal authority over parts of Bijapur and Golkonda.

Aurangzeb gave his own stamp to the unfolding succession practices of the Mughals. Like Babur, Humayun, Akbar, and Shah Jahan before him, he accorded his oldest available son the honor of being considered the most important among the empire's princes.²⁵ Unlike earlier generations of rulers, however, he moved toward making it a more clearly honorific position. Thus, after renaming Mu'azzam his nominal heir following his release from prison in 1695, Aurangzeb permanently removed him from the imperial court. Between 1695 and Aurangzeb's death in 1707,

²⁵ At the beginning of Aurangzeb's reign, his oldest son Muhammad Sultan was his acknowledged heir. He was disqualified, however, when he switched sides to support his uncle Shuja' during the last phase of the war of succession. Subsequently, Aurangzeb anointed his second son Mu'azzam. Mu'azzam would hold this position until his own removal in 1687, after it was revealed that he had plotted to undermine the Mughal conquest of Golkonda. During the years of Mu'azzam's imprisonment between 1687 and 1695, Aurangzeb's third son A'zam was his father's nominal heir apparent. But the position reverted back to Mu'azzam upon his release.

Mu‘azzam served in northern India and was never allowed to return to the imperial court, despite a number of requests to do so in the early 1700s. Aurangzeb thus undercut any advantage Mu‘azzam may have accrued vis-à-vis his princely rivals. In fact, when Aurangzeb died in 1707, Mu‘azzam’s status offered him no edge over his primary rival A‘zam. To the contrary, the smart money was on A‘zam to succeed to the Mughal throne. Although remaining true to the tradition of maintaining a nominal heir, Aurangzeb appears to have sought to avoid unduly favoring one son over another. Such caution likely had its roots in what Aurangzeb judged to be the mistakes of his father. Indeed, Aurangzeb often blamed his father’s overt favoritism of Dara Shukoh for Shah Jahan’s downfall.²⁶ Despite his precautions, Aurangzeb was not entirely successful in circumventing accusations of favoring one son over another as witnessed by his rebellious fourth son Akbar’s stinging rebuke (see Introduction).

Aurangzeb faced a unique challenge among Mughal emperors. His long life meant that besides having three politically competing sons in 1700 (Mu‘azzam, A‘zam, and Kam Bakhsh) and a fourth, Akbar, living in exile in Iran but always threatening to renew his claim to the throne in the event of Aurangzeb’s death, he also had nine adult grandsons to consider. By the time of his death in 1707, his adult great-grandsons would begin supplementing the princely ranks as well. Aurangzeb offered them all an active stake in the Mughal system. Whether inadvertently or by design, this stoked intergenerational tensions (see Chapter 7). It also ensured an exceptionally crowded political stage for the Mughal succession.

Returning to an earlier point about Aurangzeb’s willingness to work with, but also modulate, imperial succession practices, we see evidence of the same approach in his dealings with collateral branches of the royal family. Thus, although he did order the murder of Dara Shukoh’s oldest son, Sulaiman Shukoh, who had commanded armies in his own right during the 1657–9 war of succession, other nephews or more distant relations did not suffer so harsh a fate. Although he did keep the surviving sons of Dara Shukoh and Murad under close supervision for the duration of their lives, he also offered them annual stipends and, on special occasions, gifts. More significantly, Aurangzeb contracted marriages between those princes and his own daughters. For instance, Dara Shukoh’s sole surviving son, Siphir Shukoh, was married to Aurangzeb’s daughter

²⁶ Aurangzeb, *Anecdotes of Aurangzeb*, trans. Jadunath Sarkar (Calcutta, repr. 1988), 37, 44, 45, 48–9.



Mughal Empire in 1707 (Aurangzeb)

Zubdat-un-Nisa. Another daughter, Mehr-un-Nisa, was married to Murad’s son Izid Bakhsh. The latter had at least two sons – Dawar Bakhsh and Dadar Bakhsh – who occasionally appear in the historical record as having received imperial favors in the early 1700s.

Aurangzeb's generally benevolent treatment toward the extended Mughal family, his willingness to allow those daughters who had no political ambitions to marry, and his refusal to mutilate sons who rebelled against him highlight his attempt to step back from the worst excesses of the previous few generations of Mughal succession. Toward the end of his life, Aurangzeb even tried to broker an agreement among his sons to partition the empire. This appears to be a reversion to the appanage system and signaled Aurangzeb's resolve to end princely succession struggles for the empire. Significantly, these efforts occurred while he was still in full political charge. According to the contents of a final testament supposedly written in Aurangzeb's own hand and left under a pillow on his deathbed, the emperor implored "whichever of my sons has the good fortune of gaining the kingship" to "not trouble" Kam Bakhsh if he is content to rule over Bijapur and Hyderabad. It goes on to suggest a detailed blueprint for dividing the rest of the empire between Mu'azzam and A'zam.²⁷ However, as with previous attempts to divide the empire among imperial princes, it gained no traction.²⁸ Highlighting how deeply engrained the idea and fact of an indivisible empire had become, A'zam rejected any talk of a territorial partition, even writing a verse in which he offered to give Mu'azzam control over the heavens (presumably after he had been killed) in return for his right to be the next Mughal emperor:

Let the territory from the ground floor to the roof [of the palace] be mine
From the roof to the heavens be yours.²⁹

Later in the war of succession, in 1708–9, Kam Bakhsh also turned down an offer to divide the empire with Mu'azzam, perhaps realizing that the offer was insincere and not really meant to leave him in peace. In the end, like his brother A'zam, Kam Bakhsh died fighting for the right to rule as the sole Mughal emperor.

Thus we come full circle, with the Mughal succession story ending in the early 1700s not far from where it had been during the latter years of Emperor Akbar's reign when the successful move away from a system of princely appanages had taken place. The idea of a single emperor ruling

²⁷ Aurangzeb, *Dastur-ul-Amal-i Agahi*, National Library of India, Sarkar Collection 70, f. 49b. Also reproduced in Jadunath Sarkar, *History of Aurangzib*, vol. 5 (Calcutta, repr. 1952), 213.

²⁸ Ni'mat Khan, *Jangnama*, ed. Khwaja Muhammad Isa (Kanpur, 1884), 14.

²⁹ Kamwar Khan, *Tazkirat us-Salatin Chaghata*, ed. Muzaffar Alam (Aligarh, 1980), 11–12.

over a unified empire had become too deeply engrained to change. Indeed, even as the effective power of the emperor waned in the eighteenth century and he came under the direct protection or control of other political groups, there was broad acceptance that the political sovereignty of the Mughal emperor was indivisible and to be handed down to only one person from within the imperial family.

CONCLUSION

The rules and norms of the succession of Mughal princes may have been continuously modulated over the course of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, but the principle of an open-ended system was never called into serious question. It was the central dynamic that shaped the lives and activities of generations of Mughal princes. Succession politics formed the backdrop against which all manner of activities – including organizing princely households, building and leveraging networks of friends and allies, and resorting to disobedience and rebellion – occurred. The next chapter turns to the reigns of Babur and Humayun in order to explore in detail how Mughal princes fared before the transformations by which Akbar made the Mughal project truly imperial.