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Sport, Sovereignty, and Spectacle: Mughal Sports Culture in Historical and English Literary Perspectives

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Abstract

During the medieval period in India, the Muslims rulers saw sports and huntings as a part of royal life. Traditional games like chaugan (Polo) were encouraged by Mughal emperors, Akbar built chaugan grounds at Fatehpur Sikri and organized them in the Mughal empire. They controlled hunting (particularly the big ring-hunt of the qamargah) and organized large royal hunting parties. The royal patronage was extended to folk sports like wrestling too; wrestlers were called in to the festive occasions to play mall-yuddha (combat). Those activities were linked to military training, social order and also martial skill and royal splendor. The purpose of this study is to look at the main sports (chaugan, hunting, wrestling, archery and chess) and the policies that helped to form them (royal patronage, regulation, taxation and festival organization), and their social impact. The key sources consulted are Abul Fazl's Ain-i-Akbari, Mughal farmans, and the accounts of the travellers of the period, as well as modern scholarship.

Keywords: *Chaugan (polo), qamargah, shreni, Mughal sports policy, dangal, akhara, medieval India, social impact.*

Introduction

The medieval era (c. 1200–1707 CE) in India was a time of the Delhi Sultanate and the Mughal Empire. During this period, the role of hunting, sport, and physical training were among the special statuses that they held in royal courts. The traditional games of Persia-Turkey were adopted by the emperors and were used in socio-political ways. This paper examines the nature of sports policies and their social outcomes within six major perspectives: nature of sports being practiced, the nature of policies, religion and social attitudes, gender and class issues, economic aspects and legacy of the Mughals in terms of cultural impact.

Sports has never been just a pastime, as the cultural historian Norbert Elias maintained in *The Civilizing Process* (1939), a place where the power structure, emotional codes and social

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hierarchy of a civilization is not only acted out, but is also reproduced (Elias 164). In this regard, the Mughal court's investments in sport were an investment in performance and continuation of imperial authority. In his *Defence of Poesy* (1595), Philip Sidney similarly notes that the arts of the body – horsemanship, tilting, military exercise – are bound together with the arts of governance and the idealization of the courtier, a sentiment that not only connects the two cultures, but also two nations: Renaissance England and Mughal India, in their conception of the political role of physical culture (Sidney 42).

Objective

The objective of this paper is to systematically analyze the sports policies of Mughal rulers in light of available evidence and multidimensional impacts of these policies on the society. The paper proposes that the Mughal deployment of sport as a means of governance, social cohesion, and cultural diplomacy is a valuable and under-explored facet of the global history of physical culture when compared against the English literary and cultural tradition.

Principal Sports of the Mughal Era

Chaugan (*Polo*): Royal sport played upon horses, in which a ball was hit with a wooden mallet. Chaugan was hugely popular in Mughal courts and had strong Persian–Central Asian connotations of martial style.

Hunting (*Shikar*): Hunting large animals such as deer, elephants, lions. Hunting festivals were organized as a lavish state function in Mughals.

Wrestling (*Kushti*): Fighting without the use of arms between two pahalwans (wrestlers). Wrestlers were invited to festivals to hold public contests.

Archery (*Teerandazi*): The art of bow and arrow which was considered the standard of excellence in martial arts in Islam. Princely training in archery was ensured by the Mughal kings.

Shatranj or Chess: Mental game considered as a means of mental exercise and training in military strategy.

Research Method

Primary Sources

Policy decisions have been identified from Mughal administrative and literary texts, most importantly Abul Fazl's Ain-i-Akbari, Baburnama and Jahangirnama, and from the writings of

other travellers of the period, such as Ibn Battuta. There are also some indications of official regulation in the form of royal farmans and ambassadorial accounts.

Secondary Sources

The economic and social aspects of these sports have been examined using academic articles, books and dissertations, namely *Nation at Play: A History of Sport in India* (2015) by Ronojoy Sen and research on archery in Mughal India by Syed Shahid Ashraf.

Analytical Method

A qualitative analysis of existing texts and articles has been carried out to look at several aspects of sports policy (royal patronage, military training, regulation, and festivals) and its social impacts (religious attitudes, gender and class division and economic aspects).

Historical Overview: The Mughal Empire and the Spread of Sport

Chaugan was revived in the Mughal dynasty in 1526 CE when Babur established the Mughal dynasty. During Akbar's reign (1556-1605), royal sport was given its biggest boost. It was around 1570 CE that Akbar made a large chaugan ground at Fatehpur Sikri and organised regular tournaments there. Akbar's love for the game even extended to night-time, as described by Abul Fazl: he had a wooden ball stuffed with burning matter, which would illuminate the game (Abul Fazl 1:295). Hunting and wrestling continued to be common recreational activities during Jahangir's (1605–1627) and Shah Jahan's (1628–1658) reigns. Military policy was altered after 1658, but hunting and archery were not. These sports were spread in a particular manner in northern and central India but also in the Deccan Sultanates in which they were also practised, albeit in lesser numbers, such as chaugan and hunting.

The Mughal promotion of sport culture mirrors the trends that can be observed in early modern Europe. In Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queene* (1590–1596), the knightly practice of jousting, hunting, swordplay, is the prerequisite training ground of moral virtue and political leadership (Spenser, II.i). The Mughal court's emphasis on the importance of learning archery, horsemanship and chaugan was based on just this.

Policy Analysis

I. Royal Patronage

In the point of view of the Muslim rulers, sports were strategically and culturally significant. The organization and system of the games and institution were encouraged by the Mughal emperors and the Chaugan was accorded special status. The arenas for wrestling (akharas) and archery matches were a regular part of the court life during the reigns of Akbar and Jahangir. These sports were rewarded with prizes, such as the king's horses, the robes of honour, and land, and were demonstrated in royal processions as symbols of a constructed imperial culture. This is a motif of royal patronage that is reflected in the writings of Sir Thomas Elyot, in his book *The Book Named the Governor* (1531), which is one of the earliest English treatises on princely education. The ruler's prowess in exercising his body--hunting, archery, wrestling, dancing--was not simply an amusement, but evidence of his readiness to rule, for that was what he was seen to be doing (Elyot 65–68). The Mughal chaugan tournament was at the same time a military exercise as well as a theatre of sovereignty, just as the royal tournament in England.

II. Military Training

Archery and horsemanship were considered martial arts in Islam's tradition. The Mughals ruled the country and made sure that princes learned these arts. The army trained in horse racing, archery and sword fighting. Chaugan was especially significant in cultivating the agility and stamina of mounted troops, as Sen has noted, “the game 'was used not only for recreation, but also as a simulation of cavalry warfare'” (34).

Roger Ascham, in *Toxophilus* (1545)—the first book that focussed entirely on archery in England—argued passionately that shooting and the protection of England were co-joined: “Shooting is a gift of God” given to England for its protection (Ascham 8). Ashraf's research supports the notion that the same ideology guided Mughal policy toward archery, and a number of the Ashraf's farmans emphasize the importance of systematic physical education (Ashraf 3992–94).

III. Regulation and Taxation

Wildlife hunting was tightly regulated under the Mughals. A hundred of shikargahs (hunting grounds) were drawn in the empire, and no one had permission except the emperor. Specialists like the Mir-i-Shikar (Master of the Hunt) and the Qarwal were designated to arrange the hunting trips. Even emperors rode out in an elephant or on a horse. The ceremonial hunt (qamargah) in which thousands of men closed the game in an ever-narrowing ring to be slaughtered by the emperor was a privilege of the emperor alone (Abul Fazl 1:285-88).

There are parallels of this with the Norman and Plantagenet forest law of medieval England. *The Forest Charter of William the Conqueror and the Charters of the Forest* (1217) established a system of royal game reserves with a structure that is very similar to the Mughal shikargah: land for the king to hunt on, but which was heavily protected against unauthorized use. The English forest law system was "an assertion of royal power over the land and its creatures" (Clanchy 95), just as could be said for the Mughal hunting reserve system.

IV. Festivals and Public Events

The Mughals had a strong interest in sports as part of their public ceremonies. Special festivals and victory celebration were used to organise chaugan tournaments and wrestlers' fights (dangal) and horse race. Royal sports events would be organized at court during occasions like Nauroz (Persian New Year) and Holi. These meetings were open to everyone, and surrounding them the tent-markets sprang into existence. Ordinary folk were also invited to do so in open spaces to watch or participate in wrestling and other games (Sen 41-44).

The opening scene of William Shakespeare's *As You Like It* (c.1599) is just such a spectacle, a public wrestling bout at the Duke's court where the wrestler Charles is acting politically to eliminate Orlando, an unwanted rival. Shakespeare's dramatisation of the wrestling match as a locus of power, display and social struggle is uncannily accurate of the social dynamics of the Mughal dangal, which is simultaneously an entertainment, a social display and a mechanism of political management (Shakespeare 1.2).

Social Impact

I. Religious and Social Attitudes

In Islamic culture, great value and prestige were given to the physical abilities and martial arts. The ability of the soldier was regarded highly by the Mughals; their love for hunting and war games, both real and ceremonial, was indicative of this. Islam forbids gambling and some kinds of animal cruelty, but skills, like archery, horsemanship, and wrestling, were encouraged as acts of piety and preparation for Jihad. Sport was therefore legitimized and involvement in sport was deemed as being meritorious.

This religious justification for martial sport is consistent with the English notion of muscular Christianity, which was explained in the nineteenth century but was inspired by other ideals. In Tom Brown's *School Days* (1857), Thomas Hughes described the sport of cricket and

football as morally shaping, disciplinarian pursuits that developed character, courage and fair play (Hughes 89-92). The theological basis was quite distinct, but the social conclusion was similar: Physical culture is ethically good and socially essential.

II. Gender and Class Divisions

Men mostly engaged in sporting activities. Chaugan, horse racing and hunting were suitable sport activities for the upper class (nobles and senior military officers) while wrestling, Kabaddi and gilli-danda were suitable sport activities for rural and urban lower classes. In the feudal era, kings and landowners used sport for amusement fitting of their status. There was limited involvement by women, although royal women were sometimes included in the hunting party and empresses and princesses occasionally practiced shooting or swift horsemanship in private.

In *A Room of One's Own* (1929), feminist essayist Virginia Woolf noticed that the exclusion of women from institutions of learning, culture and public life is not natural but constructed; there is no natural gate or lock or bolt to set upon the freedom of my mind. (Woolf 76) As with women's status in the Mughal court, the pardah system and the geography of the court kept most women out of the sporting world, although some women, such as royal women who practised archery, were able to participate. As for the women of the Mughal zenana, the argument Mary Wollstonecraft made in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) – that physical weakness was caused by enforced inactivity and not natural incapacity – would have been equally applicable.

III. Economic Dimensions

Sports were an economic activity, too. The chieftains, with the backing of their followers, betted and wagered at the game of chaugan, wrestling and horse racing. The royal officials gathered animals (horses, elephants) for hunting with large expenses. The demand for horses, weapons and costume arose from commercial interests created by the wrestling arenas and royal sporting events. Wages and allowances were paid to spectators and to the serious trainers. As a whole, the gambling, trade in sporting goods and the provision of services linked to sports were important to the local economy, as was it as a medium of social prestige (Sen 52–57).

The Complete English Tradesman (1726) by Daniel Defoe described the economy of his time as being driven by ‘these kind of auxiliary business chains’: the need for the gentry to ride horses, wear liveries and enjoy sports led to entire trades and crafts (Defoe 134). The economics

of Mughal sport was the same: spending on sport spread through the economy, including that of the saddlers, weapon makers, animal trainers, cloth merchants, and food sellers.

IV. Urban–Rural Divide

Polo, horse racing and hunting were preferred in the big cities and at court, while in the villages local sports such as kabaddi and wrestling were more popular. In these territories, some powerful landlords staged sporting events à la Mughal, providing some level of social cohesion, and thus integrating the local culture with the imperial one.

V. Long-Term Legacy

The sporting tradition of Mughal times had left a lasting impact. In the British era, chaugan became popular among the Mughals and was formalised into modern polo by the English officers and disseminated throughout the British empire, ("Polo", Encyclopaedia Britannica). The tradition of sporting festivals and some lexical heritage (such as farman, qamargah) perseveres in the social culture and continues till today. Institutions of dangal and akhara established with Mughal culture have kept wrestling in the prestige of independent India where the sport is playing a pivotal role in the construction of a national sporting identity (Sen 189–92).

Case Studies

I. Akbar and the Chaugan Ground at Fatehpur Sikri

The importance of chaugan was given the highest place in Akbar's reign. He was so fond of the game that he had a burning wooden ball made for playing the game at night as it could light itself up (Abul Fazl 1:296). The emperor and his ministers played in this chaugan, which was several kilometres wide, at Fatehpur Sikri. Modern authors mention that Akbar had his chaugan competitions with huge crowds. For instance, Akbar's chauhan policy is an example of how a game can be recreated by a ruler as an instrument of courtly display, inter-noble competition, military preparedness at the same time.

II. The Royal Hunt (Qamargah): Evidence from the Jahangirnama

Jahangir (1605-1627) was a great hunter of tigers and deer. According to the *Jahangirnama,* he once shot eighteen deer with a single arrow (Jahangir 142). More than a hundred members of the royal family attended such grand qamargah events at Shah Jahan's court. The hunts were

a demonstration of royal courage. Shah Jahan shot fourty deer in one hunt which is documented in *Daulatabad Ramazan Nama* (1628 CE). The qamargah was not simply a game, but an exercise of royal authority: the naturalist/travel writer Thomas Pennant remarked in *British Zoology* (1776) that "the royal hunt, so much a theatre of sovereignty, in which the kings domain over nature, is his dominion over men" (12).

III. Sport in the Deccan Sultanates

In the Saturdhan and Ahmednagar, in the south of India, the chaugan and hunting were also practised. According to contemporary records, the Adil Shah of Bijapur used to hunt lions. While such a presence is not as well attested in the available sources, the presence of these dynasties is clearly seen in the Mughal tradition to keep sport an aspect of royal culture.

Conclusion

The Muslim rulers of medieval India's sports policy was very strong with the socio-political fabric of the era. Sports were employed, both as a means of royal show and as an educational aid for military develops. The patronage and regulation of chaugan, hunting and wrestling by the Mughal rulers suggest that they viewed these pursuits as tools to secure the rule of rulers and ensure organized entertainment for them. A link between nobles and landholders and the court was maintained through sporting activities. Socially these sports at the same time registered gender and class barriers, and, in the context of common events and popular culture, a certain cultural integration.

The royal sport was rooted in the economy of the wagering, swearing of oaths, and exchange of goods. The Mughal sports policy had a significant influence on Indian society as a whole, and its impact can be seen in the sporting culture of both the British colonial era and contemporary India. As Ronojoy Sen says in Nation at Play, "The Mughal in Indian sport is not just historical, it is also structural, belonging to the institutions, the vocabulary, and the social meaning of physical culture in the subcontinent" (Sen 198).

In his famous essay, "The Sporting Spirit" (1945), George Orwell, controversially, claimed that organized sport was not play at all, but war minus the shooting—a means of nationalism, class feeling, and the implementation of political rivalries (Orwell 40). Despite its simplicity, Orwell's diagnosis reveals a truth about the use of sport by the Mughals: after all, chaugan, and the qamargah were politics by other means, performances of domination, discipline, and social hierarchy. But, as this paper has also revealed, they were times of real joy, cultural invention

and social contact, at the same time as they were times of class and creed transcending – albeit in part.

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