

**The Mughals were an integral part of India –  
so why are they being labelled foreigners?**



It's not their place of origin but their Muslim identity that makes them 'foreign', writes the author of a new biography of Jahangir.

There was a recurring sketch on the old BBC comedy, *Goodness Gracious Me*, which featured a father who would counter his children's enthusiasm – whether for Jesus or Santa Claus – with "Indian!". It was a clever satire that's grown sharper in today's increasingly chauvinist atmosphere, but there's one question now that would stump the father. What of the Mughals? It's part and parcel of the politics he parodies, after all, that as much as India was the womb for all that is great and good in the world, the Mughals are always and utterly foreign.

It's true enough that Babur was born far away in the Fergana valley, now spread between Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. In portraits commissioned by his descendants, he has slanted eyes, a wisp of a beard, and no sign at all of the north Indian plains he would conquer – and often deplore. Babur didn't want to live in Hindustan, nor did his nobility. It's well known that he broke his goblets and gave up drink to induce in his reluctant Central Asian amirs a righteous urge to rule these infidel

– and dusty – plains. Equally, the story of how Babur wept when a cargo of his beloved melons reached him – the lack of fruit was as traumatic as the sacrifice of wine. “While others repent and make vow to abstain,” he wrote, “I have vowed to abstain and repentant am I.”

But Babur had not come to India to eat and drink; he had come to stay. *How* he stayed would be up to his descendants. Babur died within five years of his conquest; his dynasty survived three centuries and more. Something of the secret of their success may be found in their very faces. Put the first six Mughal emperors in a line, from Babur to Aurangzeb, and you see a distinct, historical change: the eyes change to almond-shaped until they lose the epicanthic fold altogether; the noses lengthen and change shape; the facial hair thickens. It’s not surprising: only the first two Mughals, Babur and Humayun, had Central Asian mothers. Akbar and Aurangzeb’s mothers were Persian; Jahangir and Shahjahan were both born to Rajput queens.

It wasn’t just their features that changed; with every generation, so did their tastes and tongues. Babur wrote his memoirs, for example, in Chagatai, a now-extinct form of Turkish – and often he wrote of melons. His great-grandson, Jahangir, would fill his own book, the *Jahangirnama*, with equally prolific descriptions, comparisons and exaltations of mangoes. Jahangir wrote in Persian – with smatterings of Hindustani – but on a visit to Kabul, leafing through the *Baburnama*, he was proud to be able to read it: “Although I grew up in Hindustan, I am not ignorant of how to speak or write Turkish.” Jahangir’s son and successor, however, had no interest in this ancestral tongue – and the last of the Mughals, Bahadur Shah Zafar was a noted patron of a language that was as much a product of the subcontinent as the emperor himself: Urdu.

The festivals of India, too, found their way into the Mughal calendar.

The *Akbarnama* records how, in Kashmir, Akbar ordered the “boats, the river banks and the roofs...adorned with lamps” for Diwali. In a famous painting from Jahangir’s reign, the emperor is destroying “poverty”, represented by an old man but described in the inscription as “dalidar”, derived from the goddess Daridra, harbinger of misfortune, who is shunned during Diwali while her sister, Lakshmi, is invited home. Another painting takes the conflation between the Mughal emperor and Hindu custom even further: it shows Jahangir seated in the lotus-position, wearing nothing but a loin-cloth. Jahangir in the pose of a Hindu ascetic. It is, as the historian Ebba Koch exclaims, “the most Indian (and eccentric!) depiction of a Muslim king one could possibly imagine”.

And yet, in Koch’s very words lies a hint of why Jahangir’s dynasty is considered eternally alien. She does not juxtapose “Indian” with “foreign” after all, but with “Muslim”. The Mughals may have loved mangoes; they may have celebrated Diwali and

Dussehra, Shivratri and Rakhi; they may have had more Rajput blood than Central Asian, but there is one thing they were not: Hindu.

“Think about it yaar,” as the father from *Goodness Gracious Me* likes to say: the politics that wants to demolish the Taj Mahal has no equally visceral antipathy towards Fergana, does it? Few Indians will even know it exists. Clearly, it isn't the Mughals' origins but their religion that makes them suspect. They may have left behind much of the art and architecture, culture and cuisine by which India is still renowned – but their “Indianness” is subject to shrill debate; their “Muslimness” is why cities must be renamed and monuments demolished as if to teach them a lesson.

It is one of the tragedies of modern India that our past is so often held hostage to our politics, but can such pettiness really be what it now means, to be Indian?