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The Cultural Investments of Empire: Raja Man Singh in Bengal

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This paper examines the role of cultural factors in the consolidation of Mughal rule by exploring the image, tradition and legends that developed around the figure of Raja Man Singh, one of the most eminent vassal princes and mansabdars during the reigns of the Emperors Akbar and Jahangir. Since Raja Man Singh’s career is so well-known, I will briefly touch upon his career and services to the Mughal polity. Man Singh belonged to the Kachhwaha family of Amber which had played a very important role in terms of taking the first step towards an alliance with the Mughals – a step that was emulated later by the rulers of several other Rajput principalities. The Kacchwahas were also trail blazers among the Hindu royalty of Northern India by entering into matrimonial alliances with the Mughals. This again, was a practice which was repeated by several other Rajput lineages. The Kachhwaha-Mughal relationship had originated in the time of Man Singh’s grandfather , Bhar Mal, who together with his son Bhagwan Das, served the expanding Mughal empire as mansabdars under the emperor Akbar. As a boy, Raja Man Singh had been raised at the Mughal imperial court; as one of the most high profile mansabdars and courtiers of Akbar’s reign, he earned the title of “farzand” or son from the emperor. After Raja Man Singh, his nephew, the Mirza Raja Jai Singh, became one of the most high-ranking mansabdars of the Mughal empire during the 17th century. Thus, multiple ties of kinship and service bound the Kachhwaha lineage as a whole and Raja Man Singh particularly, to the Mughal polity as well as to the Mughal royal family. The Kachhwaha lineage and the career of Raja Man Singh is concrete proof of several key policy measures of the Mughal empire and particularly, Akbar’s reign i.e. alliances with Rajputs, the practice of opening the highest offices of the empire to talented personnel irrespective of their affiliations and ethnic backgrounds . Association with the Mughals elevated the Kachhwahas from their relatively ordinary position ( in terms of the size of their realm, wealth etc.) vis- a vis other Rajput clans into the most celebrated among them. Man Singh can almost be regarded as one of the “real” founders of the territorial spread of the Mughal polity. His long career in Mughal service is testament to his association with almost all key military campaigns of Akbar’s reign. These ranged from the wars against Maharana Pratap of Mewar, a series of military expeditions in Gujarat, in the Punjab and the North –West frontier provinces and finally, a long stint in Eastern India during which he fought doggedly and tenaciously against various anti-Mughal forces in an effort to clear away obstacles to the secure establishment of Mughal rule over the region. Raja Man Singh also held responsible offices such as that of subahdar in different parts of the empire. He attained the rank of a hafthazari mansabdar, - a rank which had hitherto only been given to princes of the royal family.

Raja Man Singh’s association with Eastern India i.e. Bihar, Orissa and Bengal was much longer than the typical tenure of Mughal mansabdars with a particular region. Man Singh was appointed subahdar of Bihar in 1587 and held that office until 1593/94. He was appointed subahdar of Bengal in 1594 and held that office till 1606/07.

Cathy Asher’s well-known work on the sub-imperial architectural patronage of Raja Man Singh illustrates how the raja “simultaneously served his own interest s and those of the [ Mughal] emperor and as he did so, was pivotally important in establishing a Mughal aesthetic across the realm” [[1]](#footnote-1) Through an exploration of Man Singh’s architectural patronage in terms of style, size and several other vectors, Asher demonstrates how several motivations can be detected in the fortresses, palaces, temples, mosques that Man Singh built, repaired and modified in Eastern India – particularly in Bihar - during the period of his long association with this region. Asher quite rightly concludes that, “ He [Man Singh] thus played out his dual role as the [Mughal] emperor’s agent and raja in his own right, a duality characteristic of the relationship between Akbar and those lesser authorities beneath him” [[2]](#footnote-2) . The present paper builds upon the very significant work done by Asher and explores a related issue i.e. the image and traditions about Raja Man Singh that developed in Bengal during the late 16th and the 17th centuries and were remembered and recorded in most cases in the late 19th and the early 20th centuries.

Raja Man Singh and Bengal zamindars

In this presentation, I particularly emphasize a body of traditions concerning Raja Man Singh that were preserved by a number of families of landed aristocrats in Bengal for several centuries. The Mughal conquest of Eastern India and Bengal commenced in the late 16th century and although Daud Khan, the Afghan ruler of Bengal was defeated in 1575 A.D., it would take several decades before the incoming Mughal regime could properly consoldate its position in Bengal as well as in the adjoining areas of Bihar and Orissa. The principal opponents of the Mughals were a segment of landed barons ( known commonly as the *bara bhuiyans*), particularly in Eastern Bengal and secondly, Afghan nobles whose position of dominance in Eastern India had been disturbed by the Mughal incursion. Not surprisingly, the Mughals needed local help and collaboration in their task of rooting out anti-Mughal forces here. A common way of rewarding local collaborators was by bestowing zamindari rights on them and creating thereby a bastion of sorts on the ground for the emergent Mughal administration in this region. Interestingly though, of the long list of Mughal subahdars and other high officials who had served in Bengal and had presumably been involved in the bestowal of zamindari grants, the name and image of Raja Man Singh stands out particularly in the family traditions of local rajas in different areas of Bengal. These memory traditions which had originated probably in the late 16th and the early 17th centuries – the time period when Man Singh was actually present in Eastern India and in Bengal – continued into the late 19th and the early 20th centuries when they were referenced in the scores of local and lineage histories which were edited and published on the basis of family chronicles and genealogies which had hitherto existed in manuscript form.

Raja Man Singh’s activities regarding the creation of zamindaris in Bengal seem to have been principally of two types: first, he bestowed zamindari sanads on a number of people who were from Rajasthan and other parts of northern India and had followed him into Bengal as part of his entourage. The Aadhurya family, founders of the village of Maliara in Bankura district, traced their descent from a Rajasthani Brahmin who had settled there following the receipt of a zamindari grant from the raja. The rajas of Pakur ( Santhal Parganas) identified a man called Sulakshan Tewari, a Brahmin from Kanyakubja as their ancestor who too had followed Man Singh into Bengal and had subsequently settled down there as a zamindar. The second category of zamindari sanads granted by Man Singh seem to have been awarded to persons who were either completely or relatively obscure in terms of material wealth and power but were enterprising military entrepreneurs who combined their martial capabilities with skills in the fields of revenue collection and management. Examples of this type include the families of the rajas of Nadia/Krishnanagar and the Sabarna Chowdhury family of the area around what later became the East India Company’s settlement at Calcutta. Bhavananda Majumdar, the architect of the Nadia zamindari and Lakshmikanta Majumdar the ancestors of the Sabarna Chowdhurys are said to have offered military assistance to the Mughal forces commanded by Raja Man Singh and in return won revenue collecting rights over large tracts of land in western Bengal. These are just two out of many such examples.

What also stands out in many of these cases is the recurring association of these ambitious military entrepreneurs with traditions of religiosity and spirituality. Lets us take the case of Lakshmikanta Majumdar’s family, for example. The lineage histories of the Sabarna Chowdhury family associated their ancestors with high-status Brahamnical antecedents ( kulin Brahmins) and with a tradition of high-level Brahmanical scholarship and spiritual powers as well. For the Sabarna Chowdhury family , their ancestor, Shiv or Jia Ganguly ( 1535/48 – 1620 A.D.) was reputed to have attained great celebrity and fame as a scholar of Nyayashastra ( logic) and held the title of “Vidyavachaspati” . This was paralleled by his great spritual powers and his deep devotion to the worship of the goddess Kali. Shiv or Jia Ganguly is associated with the shrine of the goddess , known as Kalighat ( in Calcutta) and his son, Lakshmikanta was born due to the blessings of the goddess at the same sacred spot. When Lakshmikanta was a mere infant, Jia Ganguly, renounced the material world, became a sanyasi , assumed the name of Kamadeva Brahmachari and moved to Benaras. According to the family traditions preserved even now among the descendants of Lakshmikanta Majumdar , Raja Man Singh met Kamadeva Brahmachari- who by then had become famous all over India as a great tantrik ascetic – at Benaras and became his disciple. Kamadeva Brahmacahari blessed Raja Man Singh and asked the latter to contact his son, Lakshmikanta in Bengal . In addition, he gave Man Singh much needed practical and medical advice about how to safeguard his own health and that of his troops while they were in Bengal and the raja recruited baidyas or, medical practitioners from Bengal to accompany his troops. As noted above, Lakshmikanta rendered useful military assistance to Raja Man Singh but, the persistence of the tradition linking the famous Mughal mansabdar to a Tantric ascetic indicates an implicit need on the part of the Sabarna Chowdhury family to be sure – and perhaps even, Man Singh himself – to suggest that his military –political project in Bengal was undergirded by a spritual-religious ethos. The main outlines of the family story of Lakshmikanta Majumdar was repeated in the cases of several other lineage chiefs, all of whom provided military assistance to Man Singh and reaped handsome material rewards in return. The rajas of Tahirpur ( North Bengal, currently in Bangladesh) identified a certain Kamadeva Bhatta ( interestingly, the same name as the father of Lakshmikanta Majumdar) as one of their ancestors in the 16th century. Kamadeva Bhatta is said to have deviated from the family’s tradition of Brahmanical-Sanskritic scholarship and instead acquired proficiency in the martial skills. He also formed a militia comprised of young men whom he trained in the arts of warfare. It seems likely that Kamadeva Bhatta and his militia helped Raja Man Singh to oust an Afghan chieftain called Tahir Khan from the area controlled by the latter and this estate, called Tahirpur, was bestowed upon Kamadeva Bhatta. In the nearby pargana of Laskarpur ( also in N.Bengal, now Bangladesh) Man Singh ousted an Afghan chieftain called Lashkar Khan, ostensibly due to the good advice and counsel he had received from a Brahmin of “noble association”, named Vatsacharya, who maintained an ashrama in that area. As a mark of his gratitude, Man Singh offfered the pargana of Laskarpur to Vatsacharya who refused it on account of the fact that he was an ascetic. Thereupon, the pargana was granted to Vatsacharya’s son, Pitambar, who became the founder of what later came to be known as the Puthia zamindari. There are also instances of other zamindar lineages – such as the Rajas of Naldanga for example – which commemorate their acquisition of a zamindari title via the extermination of an Afghan baron – and at the same time, identify as an ancestor, a certain Bishnudas Hazra , whose great sprititual powers extended to the performance of miracles. In this case, Bishnudas Hazra’s encounter was with a certain “nawab” rather than with Man Singh , but the rest of the story is similar to the ones mentioned above. Bishnudas Hazra was able to provide much –needed assistance to this nawab and in return, received the grant of five villages. Bishnudas’s son, Srimanta Khan, became a celebrity for his success in exterminating Afghan chieftains from surrounding areas and earned the title of Ranabir Khan. From Northern Bengal, comes the example of Shankar Mukhopadhyaya who became Raja Man Singh’s personal priest while the latter was in Bengal. The former was given the pargana of Kundi , probably in North Bengal. After Shankar Mukhopadhyaya’s death in 1606 A.D., his son, Keshavchandra, was confirmed zaminadr of the pargana and given the title of “Roychowdhury” by the Mughal emperor.,

Temples, Deities and Raja Man Singh

The recurring association of Man Singh in these accounts with holy figures is paralleled by Man Singh’s actual cultural activities and patronage in Eastern India as well as in Bengal. Cathy Asher’s paper discusses at length Man Singh’s association with temple construction in various places in Bihar: within the great fortress-palace complex that Man Singh built at Rohtas, and in several other places. In Bengal too, local histories of various sub-regions in Bengal contain references to Man Singh establishing temples , repairing and renovating temples in various parts of Bengal as well. Among such temples are a Shiva temple at Ishwaripur, in the very area where the capital of the infamous Raja Pratapaditya had once been located. Man Singh is believed to have built this temple following his defeat of Raja Pratapaditya. This is a point to which I will return below. The unusual two storied temple of the goddess named Karunamoyee Kali at Amdanga in the 24 parganas is also associated with Raja Man Singh according to local traditions. J.C. Beglar attributes the repair and alterations to several temples in the villages of Para and Telkupi ( South bank of the Damodar river) to Raja Man Singh , but it is difficult to be completely sure. I venture to suggest that Man Singh’s temple-building activities in Bengal and adjoining regions of Bihar and Orissa may have also served as a signal to local gentry and aristocracy to start building public shrines and temples after a hiatus of a few centuries ( very few public temples were built in Bengal during the sultanate period; from about the late 16th century, a new trend in temple construction became evident in Bengal). It may have also encouraged other officials associated with Mughal administration in Eastern India to patronize temple construction. The temple to the goddess Sarvamangala at Keshiarai in the borderlands between Bengal and Orissa was built by Shri Sundardasa, an employee of Raja Kalyan Mal (son of Raja Todar Mal) who served as subahdar of Orissa in the reign of the emperor Jahangir. The most famous association between Raja Man Singh and the goddess - Bengal’s most revered and beloved deity- centers round Sila Mata, the presiding deity of the principality of Raja Kedar Roy of Sripur in Eastern Bengal. As Richard Eaton’s seminal paper has shown, victorious rajas seized and took away deities from the temples of their vanquished foes. Bengals’ history in the 16th-18th centuries is rife with instances of local rajas seizing deities from each others’ temples and sometimes from the possession of their ordinary subjects as well. In keeping with this tradition, Raja Man Singh, removed Shila Devi from the possession of Raja Kedar Roy ( one of the bara bhuiyans of East Bengal who so plagued the Mughals for decades) and transported her to his own kingdom at Amber where he built a shrine for her. Sila Mata is still worshipped in this temple at Amber by the descendants of the family of priests who are supposed to have been taken by the Raja from Bengal to Amber.

Given, the well-known connections of the Kachhwaha royal family with Vaishnavas of the Chaitanya sect in the Braj area, one would have expected to find evidence of Man Singh’s relationships with them in Bengal as well. The only indirect evidence I have found so far, is about a brick temple to Radharaman built by a Vaishnava named Purushottamdas in the village of Para during Raja Man Singh’s presence in Bengal. Purushottamdas had come to Bengal from the Braj region with the Viashnava community of which, Man Singh had close links and he may have provided support, land and money for this establsihment.

Raja Man Singh’s Image in Bengal

Thus Raja Man Singh’s activities in Eastern India generally and in Bengal in particular, resembled the practices of Hindu rajas in their roles as religious-cultural exemplars . The recurring associations with Brahmanical Hindu holy men and ascetics, the building and repair of temples, and certainly, the truimphant but respectful seizure of the deity of a defeated foe – all these point in that direction. In addition, Raja Man Singh and his family members entered into marriages with the daughters of local chieftains and rajas in different parts of Bengal, Bihar and Orissa. The raja himself married the sister of Raja Lakshminarayan of Coch Bihar. This princess, referred to as “Prabhavati Bangalini” bore Man Singh a son and committed Sati with several other co-wives on the death of the raja. The strongest pointer to the traditions that crystallized around Raja Man Singh are perhaps best typified by the persistent myth that Raja Man Singh had personally vanquished Raja Pratapaditya of Jessore and had imprisoned him in an iron cage in order to carry him to Delhi . As contemporary sources such as the *Baharistan* for example indicates, at the time of the decisive battle between the raja of Jessore and the Mughals, Raja Man Singh was no longer in Bengal and instead, it was Islam Khan Chishti, the subahdar of Bengal who was the vanquisher of Raja Pratapaditya. Similarly, several chronicles of zamindar lineages in Bengal commemorate that Raja Man Singh had personally escorted them to Delhi to be feted and honoured by the Mughal emperor, even though Mughal /Persian sources do not mention such visits. Even the family of Isa Khan, the most valiant perhaps of the Mughals’ bhuiyan foes in Eastern Bengal, preserved a tradition according to which Isa Khan had impressed Man Singh by his physical strength and prowess.

I would like to suggest that Man Singh’s activities certainly helped to establish a Mughal imperial presence in Bengal. However, his activities in terms of (the real or constructed) traditions regarding his closeness to ascetics and holy men, marriages with lineages of local notables and the traditions linking him to temples and deities made him appear to a segment of Bengal’s gentry and aristocracy as a prototype of a Hindu raja. Man Singh’s high-profile within the Mughal empire combined with his continuing involvement with Hindu Brahmanical practices served to make him a role model for the provincial gentry and aristocracy. He embodied the possibility of aligning with the Mughal empire and yet preserving a sphere within which it would be possible to enact their regional, cultural and religious practices.

It is true that Raja Man Singh’s status within the cadre of high Mughal officials was certainly a special one. Secondly, his tenure in Bengal and in adjoining regions occurred at a very troubled time when the Mughal authority here was far from well-consolidated. However, we do not know of the Mughal emperor actually disapproving or forbidding most of such activities. There were cases though, where Man Singh was reined in by the emperor himself. Thus, overall, these activities may have represented the cultural investments of the Mughal polity in distant parts of the exapnding empire and I suggest that such practices went a long way in making it easier for Bengals’ gentry and aristocracy to accept and live under Mughal rule.

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2. Ibid., p. 380. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)