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What is This?
Author of one’s fate: Fatalism and agency in Indo-Persian histories

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A shift of worldviews can be observed in the historical writings of three Indo-Persian authors ‘Abd al-Malik ‘Isami, Rizq Allah Mushtaqi and Nizam al-Din Ahmad. Whereas ‘Isami viewed history as the unfolding of events predetermined by divine fate; Nizam al-Din considered human agency to be the main mover of events. Mushtaqi displayed ambivalence between the two. His text can thus be read as the expression of a worldview under disintegration and re-composition in the transition from the Sultanate to the Mughal period. This change of attitude bears similarities to other ‘Early Modern Features’ of the late sixteenth century.

Keywords: ‘Isami, Mushtaqi, Nizam al-Din, Indo-Persian historiography, Mughals, fatalism, human agency, modernity

I

A profound transformation in worldviews occurred in north India between the fourteenth and the sixteenth centuries: divine fatalism gave way to belief in human agency. This massive cultural shift is traceable in the genre of the Indo-Persian historiography (tarikh), and is most clearly articulated by ‘Abd al-Malik ‘Isami (fl. 1350) and Nizam al-Din Ahmad (d. 1594), who represent two extreme poles in this divergence; as well as Rizq Allah Mushtaqi (d. 1581/2), whose long life spans the protracted transitional decades between the sultanate and Mughal

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periods, and who vacillates between the two poles. Such a claim inevitably recalls the paradigmatic shift from the ‘Medieval’ to the ‘Early Modern’ generalised from European history, and recently applied to South Asian historiography although with some important qualifications.

Sanjay Subrahmanym, for example, insists that the notion of ‘Modernity’ should be separated from its European teleology and be rather seen as a global shift which need not have uniform causes or even uniform significance in various locations.1 The characteristic features of the shift include a new sense of the limits of the world realised by increased travel, accelerated expansion of the settled frontier into the nomadic and hunter-gatherer space and the resultant conflict, changes in ‘political theology’ that are today obscured in the search for the teleology of nationalism, the development of ‘historical anthropology’ which often falls under the rubrics of universalism and humanism in Europe, the emergence of ‘the notion of the individual’, and the spread of millenarianism not as fatalistic attitudes about the end of time but as a resource to be exploited by centralising monarchies.2

Subsequent scholarship has since expanded on and modified some of these themes. So for example, John Richards’ Unending Frontiers contends that Mughal expansion into the Bengal in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries was comparable to Dutch, English, Russian, Chinese and other similar experiments around the world.3 Likewise, in their book Indo-Persian Travel, Subrahmanym and Muzaffar Alam have selected and summarised a set of travel accounts from this period to and from the Indian subcontinent in order to argue for the existence of a parallel development with European ‘voyages of discovery’ of the same time. More relevant to the present article are a number of works that suggest new forms of historiography developed all over South Asia and these exhibited a new ‘secularism’. So, for instance, new south Indian Telugu statecraft treatises were composed in the sixteenth century that abandoned the more religious outlook of their Sanskrit prototypes.4 Similarly in the Mughal north, the new imperial ‘ideology’ formulated in the late sixteenth century also broke away from the normative religious discourse of the shari‘a (Islamic law) that had dominated the statecraft tradition during the sultanate period.5

Subrahmanym maintains that this was not a set of random coincidences. Initially, he believed that new ideas were diffused all over the subcontinent and beyond not through print capitalism, as in the European case, but through an

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1 Subrahmanym, ‘Connected Histories’, p. 737.
2 Ibid., pp. 737–40, 754.

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intense rate of elite circulation that transported the new ideational tools of state-legitimation from one kingdom to another. Moreover, ideas were debated by urban literati and circulated in the forms of manuscripts. More recently, specific agents have been added to this general picture: that is, armies of scribes known as *munshis* in the north and *karanams* in the south. The importance of the northern *munshi* was directly related to Mughal imperial policy and its adoption of Persian as its official language of administration and elite culture. Muzaaffar Alam had independently argued that the choice of Persian had particular values associated with it in the Mughal realm. Whereas Turkish was too obscure to serve as the imperial lingo in Hindustan, and since both Arabic and Sanskrit were too exclusively associated with one religion or another (while ‘Hindavi’ existed in various dialects), Persian on the other hand had just the right amount of contradictory cultural associations to be acceptable for all: enough Islam for Muslims and sufficient neutrality (unlike Arabic) for non-Muslims. Through the writings of Abu al-Fazl, Persian grew to represent the ideals of religious pluralism and numerous Hindus were trained in the art of Persian composition, a ‘distinctly this-worldly’ education ‘devoid of religious and theological connotation’. By the seventeenth century, as their skill set took these scribes to every corner of the empire, their secular worldview was also diffused throughout the areas under Mughal control.

At roughly the same time, the polyglot southern *karanams* who participated in the secularising trend of the statecraft discourse gained a new social importance; thanks to the spread of Persian as administrative language, the existence of several languages in small kingdoms with whom political correspondence was necessary, the widespread distribution of paper, and new accounting practices. In other words, this new generation of scribes no longer comprised just copyist or note-takers but rather men who were in a powerful position to disseminate their worldviews all over the southern half of the subcontinent. These developments directly bear on the rise of historiography as the new scribes authored many of the historical texts that have come down from this period. So a diverse historiographical tradition arises in south India at the hand of the *karanams*, a phenomenon indirectly related to the spread of Persian. Likewise, the scribes working in the bureaucracy of the Maratha state (the *chitnavis*, *waknavis*, or *vakil*) authored

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11 Rao and Subrahmanyan, ‘History and Politics’, p. 54.

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new forms of historical bakhars. In Bengal too, as Kumkum Chatterjee has shown, local vernacular historical narratives (such as mangalkavyas and kulagranthas) selectively incorporated techniques and vocabulary from the Persian chronicle tradition which were introduced most extensively by Mughal rule.

Thus, works on early modernity, especially as reflected in studies of early South Asian historiography, are on the rise, and yet, ironically, much of this scholarship has focused on trends in vernacular literatures and not on the most significant common denominator: the Persian material that indirectly ushered in the relevant transformations. Moreover, the results of this scholarship do not shed light on the beginnings of the immense innovation that took place in the realm of Indo-Persian cultural production itself. The present article will attempt to address this gap. It will argue that in a process that found its most vocal expression in a Mughal court chronicle, the ideas of human agency were placed at the centre of the understanding of history. This rupture occurred in the genre of the tarikh not only as represented by the tradition of sultanate-period Hindustani chronicles, but apparently even that of the Iranian and Central Asian prototypes. The article will conclude by showing how Mughal administration actually ‘rationalised’ the society it ruled by applying the same standards manifested in historical texts to evaluating the records of religious groups in its domains.

In order to make this argument, three texts will be analysed. The first is the fourteenth-century Futuh al-Salatin by ‘Isami (fl. 1350) in which the author freely employs and manipulates historical anecdotes in order to make particular moral points. Anecdotes in which human actions trump divine fate are not suppressed by the author but are controlled by him as the sign of a deeper Godly intervention. The second, Vaqi‘at-i Mushtaqi by Mushtaqi (d. 1581/2) occupies a very interesting halfway point as the author includes both stories that propound fatalism as well as those that champion human agency without subjugating one to the other. It is as if Mushtaqi no longer quite believes in divine destiny but he is not willing to completely abandon it either. A third author, the Mughal administrator and court historian Nizam al-Din Ahmad (d. 1594), lives in an intellectual universe in which fate and its agents (usually dervishes) are viewed almost contemptuously, and it is humans who possess power over and responsibility for their actions.

The selection of these texts must be justified. The relationship between Mushtaqi and Nizam al-Din Ahmad is indeed a linear one. Nizam al-Din used Mushtaqi’s text as one of the main sources for the history of north India in the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. He altered the narrative of his source in a way that reflected a very different worldview, and he at times explicitly stated his reasoning for the changes that he made. Most modern scholars do believe that Nizam al-Din’s

13 Deshpande, Creative Past.
14 Chatterjee, The Culture of History.
15 Hardy, Historians, 94–110.
16 Digby, ‘Indo-Persian historiography’.

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writing indeed marks a watershed in Persian histories of South Asia, particularly with regards to his conceptualisation of the subcontinent as a unified cultural and political unit and his shift of attention away from monarchs and towards a larger subset of people.\(^7\) Nizam al-Din’s view of history as human-centric and not fatalistic and predetermined, I would argue, is yet another sign of the changing times in which he wrote. Thus, the selection of Nizam al-Din is guided by the author’s role as a strong representative of one of the two extremes between which Mushtaqi struggles. The choice of ‘\(\ddot{I}\)sami was directed by same consideration, that is, for his forceful and systematic advocacy of divine fatalism. Whether or not ‘\(\ddot{I}\)sami was necessarily more fatalistic than his sultanate-period compeers is of less relevance here. Finally, Mushtaqi, to whom the lion’s share of the analysis will be devoted, has generally been derided for his ‘credulity’ towards various ‘tales of wonder’ which he incorporated into his text along ‘realistic’ anecdotes.\(^8\) Needless to say, the categories of ‘realism’, ‘miracle’, ‘tales of wonder’, ‘fact’, ‘fiction’, etc., are problematic. While they serve a critical positivist method of evaluating Mushtaqi’s text in terms of source material for political events, they do not help disentangle the worldviews that had gone into giving this composition its particular arrangement and selection of material. Of course, the contradictions observed by modern commentators in the \textit{Vaqi‘at} are not simply a presentist retrojection. They represent Mushtaqi’s position in the middle of changing currents of thought that reached their logical conclusions in Nizam al-Din’s \textit{Tabaqat}. I will begin to chart this transformation by analysing the background against which it developed—that of the sultanate historiography.

\section*{II}

‘\(\ddot{A}\)bd al-Malik ‘\(\ddot{I}\)sami completed in 1350 his epic history of Muslim kings of South Asia and dedicated to the Bahmanid monarchs in the Deccan. The course of the history that is depicted in this text is visibly predetermined by God. Such predetermination (\textit{taqdir}) however, is beyond the understanding of human beings who are caught up in the unfolding of events.\(^9\) Human reason (\textit{khirad}) is presented by our author as useless for affecting an individual’s destiny.\(^{10}\) ‘\(\ddot{I}\)sami exemplifies this condition right from the beginning of his narrative through a parable in his preface about a man, a snake, a worm, and a few ants. He writes:

\begin{quote}
I have heard that one day, long ago, according to the \textit{taqdir} of God the Great, a man was running fast after a snake, trampling to death many ants under his
\end{quote}

\(^7\) Ali, ‘Perception of India’; Kumar, \textit{Emergence}, p. 356; and Anoooshahr ‘Mughal Historians’.
\(^8\) Digby, ‘Indo-Persian historiography’, and I.H. Siddiqui and W.H. Siddiqi’s introductory remarks to their edition of Mushtaqi’s \textit{Vaqi‘at}.
\(^9\) ‘\(\ddot{I}\)sami, \textit{Futuh}, p. 205.
\(^{10}\) \textit{Ibid.}, p. 2.
feet. When he caught up with the snake he struck it over the head three or four times with a wooden stick. The stick broke and a worm that lived in it was also torn in half. Meanwhile the wounded snake bit the man, and within a short while they both died. Wisdom (khirad) decrees that because the snake was highly poisonous, it was right for the man to attack him. Moreover, it was fair that the snake bit the man, given how it had been struck by him. However, can someone say what had the ants done wrong who had been marching where a snake hunter ran? And as for the worm that was lying in peace in the wooden stick, what had it done that merited death when the blow was struck?21

The senselessness of random deaths completely baffles the author. His mind cannot justify in any way what has taken place. And yet, ‘Isami does not want to conclude from these absurdities that history and the world are governed by a random chaos. Rather, he ascribes it all to a higher divine order that is simply beyond people’s ken. He writes, ‘we are all helpless when He [God] decrees something’, and ‘He does what he wills and no one can know. Human wisdom is barred from this path.’22 One can observe the same logic operating in main text of the Futuh as well.

The history of the kings of India evinces a clear divine plan at work. Things happen and particular individuals rise and fall according to a predetermined plan devised in eternity. However, unlike the snake parable above, when it comes to royal history ‘Isami believes that there may exist certain individuals who possess the power to glimpse into this divine plan and make sense of otherwise unintelligible clues. The anecdotes about Sultan Mahmud of Ghazna, whom ‘Isami considered the founder of Muslim kingship in India, provide some of the best examples of this.

For instance, we are told that the birth of Mahmud is foretold to his father Sebüktegin in a mysterious dream in which a tree grows out of the king’s castle and casts its shadow on the earth. The next day, Sebüktegin seeks the help of his advisors to unravel the dream. Initially no one can assist him but then ‘a wise man from that auspicious group, more knowledgeable than the dream interpreters (ahl-i ta’bir)’, explains to Sebüktegin that he will soon sire a son who will become a great monarch.23 Simultaneously, Indian astrologers across the frontier notice the signs of the sultan’s birth and his forthcoming invasions of South Asia.24 Mahmud’s future had thus always been determined, even before his birth. Mysterious signs, such as dreams or the position of stars, reveal this plan to particular individuals, but only a select few with unexplained powers can correctly interpret these signs. History is thus the mere unfolding of such preordained events.

21 Isami, Futuh, p. 2.
22 Ibid., p. 4, 2.
23 Ibid., pp. 33–34.
24 Ibid., p. 36.

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And yet, this type of fatalism does not lead to a complete elimination of human agency. There are a number of ways by which a historical actor can exercise power over his destiny. The most important of these is moral action. ‘Isami narrates an anecdote about the same Sultan Mahmud in which the monarch alights at a garden belonging to an old woman to rest on a journey. He is thirsty and his hostess brings him a pomegranate to refresh him. The fruit is so juicy that Mahmud secretly desires to possess that garden. The next fruit is immediately brought and is found to be dry. When Mahmud wonders what happened to the pomegranates the old woman tells him that the king of this land must be coveting her property. The contrite sultan begs God’s forgiveness and the next fruit is succulent once again.  

Such pious deeds would be particularly helpful if the recipients happened to be holy men. As stated above particular individuals were believed to possess extraordinary powers and see the meaning of signs by which the true course of human events might be identified. The source of these powers is never explained but dervishes of various sorts tend to dominate the rank of such oracles. A good example of this is provided in the life of Balaban, who, according to ‘Isami, is one day walking in a bazaar when suddenly he hears a hunchbacked old man who is ‘a man of vision/perception’ (ahl-i nazar) yell ‘who would like to buy the kingdom of India for a silver coin here on this road?’ Balaban who has no money in his pockets rushes home, finds the right amount, returns, and pays the old man. When the money falls into the hunchback’s hand he declares, ‘take this key of the kingdom. I have committed into your hand all the realms of India, o man of auspicious conjunction’.  

The old man belongs to a class of people who literally see into the future. Moreover, he even has the power, it seems, to determine this future in exchange for a good deed done to him since the possibility does exist that someone other than Balaban might pay him the required silver in exchange for his blessings. The source of the hunchback’s power is not explained and its mysteriousness is further emphasised through the contrast with his unimposing looks. In other words, while the destiny of humans is predetermined and incomprehensible, good deeds to people, particularly those who have the power to tap the divine world for knowledge, can still provide an individual with some agency over his destiny.  

Yet, in spite of this general view, there are characters in ‘Isami’s Futuh who defy fate by using their reason to affect the course of history. ‘Isami is aware of the contradiction and tries very hard to explain it according to his overarching ‘system’ of predetermination. The term used for this strategy of the mind is tadbir or ra’y, here roughly meaning ‘ruse’ or ‘judgement’. A good instance of this is

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25 Ibid., p. 55.
26 Ibid., p. 124.
27 Ibid., p. 139.

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provided by the history of the Ghurid Sultan Mu‘izz al-Din Sam, who after leading two unsuccessful attacks into the Indian subcontinent, finally formulates a new plan to ensure victory. The king realises that the reason for his initial setbacks had to do with the fact that his horses were not used to elephants and would run away at the sight of the unusual beasts. He therefore orders his commander to build large elephant statues out of mud and straw, dress them in armour, and have the horses train around them in order to get accustomed to them. The strategy works and the Ghurids decisively win the next battle.28 Here, it is not fate that determines events but Mu‘izz al-Din Sam himself. He learns from his previous mistakes and devises a new strategy that changes the course of history.

‘Isami would not have his readers make such errors though. He adds another anecdote to the account of the battle in which Indian prisoners tell the Ghurid army they were beaten and captured by mysterious green horsemen riding wild horses. When Mu‘izz al-Din hears this he discovers that God had helped him.29 The moral of the story is unmistakable. Contrary to initial appearances, it was not the Ghurid sultan and his clever ruse but God and his mysterious agents who had won the battle for the invaders. Divine intersession, being unexpected of course, removes any sense of agency that Mu‘izz al-Din and the readers might have felt following the end of the battle. ‘Isami, without suppressing anecdotes contradictory to his overall worldview, is fully in charge of his narrative and makes sure to homogenise his material into a coherent whole.

He even goes further to show that such strategies of the human mind are not only insufficient but even dangerous if crafty individuals put too much stock in them. He recounts the tale of a certain minister who is known as a man of tadbir. When taunted by Mongols for being old and useless, the minister compares himself to an old wolf that will bring his enemies in the lasso using his tadbir, which he does.30 But the old man’s overactive brain ultimately causes his own downfall. When the ruling monarch grows suspicious of him, the minister tries to poison his royal master. But then the unsuspecting king asks his minister in a gesture of generosity to share the drink with him, and the perpetrator has no choice but to drink his own poison and die.31 Thus in the contest between tadbir and taqdir (the machinations of human reason vs divine fate) victory belongs to God. Hard work and moral action are important, but only in so far as they set in motion a plan devised already in eternity. A few gifted individuals, the source of whose powers is unfathomable, can serve as intermediaries between the mundane and the mysterious. But the rest of humanity should not think that they control their destiny. All this will begin to change by the sixteenth century when Rizq Allah Mushtaqi wavers between human agency and fatalism.

28 ‘Isami, Futuh, p. 75.
29 Ibid., p. 79.
30 Ibid., p. 187.
31 Ibid., pp. 198–89.

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Shaykh Rizq Allah Mushtaqi was born to an old Delhi Sufi family in 1491–1492. He was initiated into the Shattari order as a young man and wrote poems in Persian and Hindavi. He earned his living by serving as prayer leader to powerful Lodi amirs, and spent the rest of his time studying historical narratives and telling stories. Mushtaqi wrote our main source for the history of the Afghan Lodi dynasty of north India, using primarily oral accounts. Not much has been written about our author, and the short few paragraphs one encounters in one place or another often harp in a rather derogatory manner on the contradictory nature of his mind which was apparently unable to separate fact and fiction. The circumstances of the composition of the Vagi’at has also received some attention, particularly from Simon Digby, though I think most of the resultant conclusions in this regard are not tenable.

Digby believed that Mushtaqi’s account of the Delhi Sultans resembled the compositions of Jawhar, Bayazid, and Gulbadan—old men and woman who were asked by the Mughal court in the late sixteenth century to jot down their remembrances regarding the ill-documented events of recent past. Digby wanted to connect Mushtaqi’s text to this courtly project based on two reasons. He wrote, ‘The opening sentence [of the text] has perhaps a pointed reference to the kingship [padishahat] of God, a term with a distinctly Mughal flavour; and the work has been rewritten in what appears to be a more fashionable and courtly idiom to replace the uncouth phrases of an Indian sultanate style of Persian. As we have noted above, Jawhar the ever-bearer’s reminiscences were treated in a similar way’. Digby in fact made much of the difference in phraseology between the two manuscripts in which the Vagi’at survives: ‘Almost every sentence is re-written, often using a different vocabulary. The older manuscript clearly represents an original draft by the author, and the other a re-writing with or without his participation’.

Digby’s observations do not sustain criticism however. As for the imperial commission, only Gulbadan and Bayazid explicitly state in their books that they were indeed asked by the court to write (or have someone else write) their memoirs. Mushtaqi, as we will see below, says nothing of the kind and actually provides a very clear account of how his Vagi’at came to be—a fact incredibly overlooked by Digby. Moreover, Mushtaqi’s text is at times openly critical of Mughal rule and highly nostalgic about the Lodi and Sur dynasties. One would not expect a revision undertaken by the court to only improve the style and overlook the criticism. Third, the assumption that the prose of the Sultanate period

33 Ibid., ‘Indo-Persian Historiography’, pp. 244–45.
34 Ibid., p. 245.
was inherently inferior or uncouth is problematic. Though simpler and smaller, the corpus of Persian from the fifteenth and late sixteenth centuries, including Jamali Dihlavi’s Siyar al-‘Arifin or the Gujarati Tarikh-i Mahmudshahi, can easily hold its own against works of the same nature written elsewhere. This is to say nothing of the mature Deccani compositions of master-stylists such as Mahmud Gawan. Regarding Jawhar and the rewriting of his memoirs by a certain Ilahdad Fayzi Sirhindi, about which Muzaffar Alam has written more extensively to make similar points regarding the difference between Sultanate and Mughal Persian,\textsuperscript{36} some very important evidence is left out of the picture. Jawhar initiated the writing process on his own in 1587 (four years before Bayazid), hoping for favour and advancement. Afterwards, he himself, not the emperor or Abu al-Fazl, asked Ilahdad to recast the narrative in a more ornate prose. Jawhar presented the work before the emperor and was rewarded for it. However, Akbar suspected that Jawhar probably could not have produced such a graceful composition on his own, and discovered the ‘ghost-writer’ in 1591. He then recommended the talented Ilahdad to the Khan-i Khanan.\textsuperscript{37} It seems, therefore, that too much has been made of what turns out to be Jawhar’s lack of literary self-confidence. In short, the connection of Mushtaqi to the Mughal court is dubious and the responsibility for the revision of his text cannot be placed at the doorstep of the imperial chancery. Rather, Mushtaqi’s work reflects the world of the north Indian literati ‘outside’ the court, a world that was changing however, but was not isolated from ideas forming in the imperial centre. Now, if not by royal commission, why did Mushtaqi put together his Vaqi’at in the first place? His introduction makes it quite clear. He writes:

When I raised my head from the lowliness of childhood and climbed the base of maturity, I spent my days among outstanding and perfect men of the age and profited from their discourse. I heard some very strange tales and unusual anecdotes and even witnessed a few with my own eyes. But when I was no longer sheltered by the shadow of those great men, I spent my days yearning for their conversation and company so that I might find another of the same heart and join in his fellowship. But as every age has its hardship, my heart did not find peace with any companion and took no pleasure from any friend. Thus unfulfilled, as decreed by time, I indiscriminately allowed myself the company of all, and whenever the occasion demanded, I would cite some exemplary tale and narrate a story. Every comrade would refer to me and say, ‘Discuss a subject so that we may profit from it,’ and I would reply, ‘Praise God, it is right and true.’ It reached the point where my comrades started to bring paper and

\textsuperscript{36} Alam, Languages, pp. 125–26.


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ink and write down the accounts of our sessions and take them to other assemblies. One day a friend insisted that I should write down whatever I had heard and seen of historical events and their lessons so that students may benefit from it and the worthy grow wiser by it. So I wrote down a few words regarding what I had heard from experienced friends or witnessed myself and called it Vaqi’at-i Mushtaqi.\textsuperscript{38}

Mushtaqi’s introduction begins with a gesture common to Persianate Sufi texts of the Middle Period (1000 to 1500): the author, despairing of worthy company is asked by young friends to write down his remembrances. We find the same trope in the poet Sa’di’s Gulistan or the Ottoman soldier Aşıkpaşazade’s history. As mentioned above, there is no mention at all of a courtly commission as there is in the writings of Gulbadan or Bayazid Bayat. The existence of two different recensions, similar in content but different in wording, can also be explained by this passage. An unauthorised version had already existed, copied down by certain members of the audience and was being circulated. Mushtaqi himself then penned down his own version of the anecdotes—another common practice in Sufi settings as well as in older Islamic history-writing of the Middle Period.

What we are dealing with here is therefore a dynamic concept of authorship that certainly became archaic by the end of the sixteenth century when the likes of Badauni, Nizam al-Din, Firishtah, and others appeared on the scene. This older style of authorship resembles on the one hand the genre of the Sufi malfuzat which date back to the early fourteenth century, when one of the disciples of the Chishti Shaykh Nizam al-Din Awliya (d. 1325) began recording the master’s conversations and finally showed them to him for his correction and approval.\textsuperscript{39} In the field of history there are similar examples from about the same time when the Mamluk historian Quth al-Din Musa al-Yunini (d. 1326) created a divergent manuscript tradition of his history by dictating an early version of the text to his friend and colleague ‘Alam al-Din Birzali (d. 1339) and later ‘publishing’ another version which he himself wrote down and revised.\textsuperscript{40} In sum Mushtaqi’s authorship should be understood at the intersection of orality and writing, not simply in terms of source material or the absence of literacy, but in the very act of composition. The difference between the manuscripts of his work can likewise be understood against this background.

The Vaqi’at is marked by a similar liminality at other levels. Politically it stands between Afghan and Mughal dynasties, but most relevant to the present study, it straddles two very different worldviews. Indeed, Mushtaqi’s history reflects ambivalence between a position that stressed the machinations of human reason

\textsuperscript{38} Mushtaqi, Vaqi’at, pp. 1–2.
\textsuperscript{39} Ernst, Eternal Garden, pp. 65–66.
\textsuperscript{40} Guo, Early Mamluk Historiography, I: pp. 22, 44, 45–46, 76–80.
for interpreting and acting in the world and another that relied on the miraculous powers of a few chosen men (often Sufis). It is worth emphasising that Mushtaqi does not question God or his taqdir directly. Rather it is the mystic intermediaries who bear the brunt of the new scepticism. The portrayal of Sultan Bahlul Lodi (d. 1489) provides a good example of this. On the one hand, there occur anecdotes in which the good fortune of the king seems preordained and can only be recognised by few individuals whose source of knowledge remains unexplained. For instance, when as a child the sultan-to-be disturbs his uncle Islam Khan during his prayers and is therefore scolded by a servant, the uncle intervenes on his nephew’s behalf, because, he predicts, the young boy will grow up to bring glory to his family.41 In other words, the story suggests that both Bahlul and his uncle are endowed with mysterious ability: one of good fortune and the other of prescience.

Later, writes Mushtaqi, Bahlul began working as a merchant, and here the author tells a story with which we are already familiar, as we have seen one almost exactly like it in 'Isami about another historical figure. We are told that once, on his way back home from a business trip, Bahlul and two companions visit a holy man named Sayyid Ibin who is possessed by divine grace (literally ‘attracted’ majzub), and is an ecstatic (literally ‘possessor of unveiling’ sahib-i kashf). ‘When they sat down, so runs the narrative, ‘Shaykh Ibin said, “I will sell the throne of Delhi for two thousand tankas. Is there any one who is willing to make this deal?”’ Bahlul pays the dervish the sum of sixteen hundred coins, which is all that he has in his possession, and is told, ‘Go. The throne of Delhi is logged (muqarrar) in your name and these two will be your servants’. When reprimanded by his friends, the young Bahlul justifies his action as either being a good transaction or a pious and charitable deed and is therefore congratulated by his erstwhile critics.42 This tale in its two manifestations presupposes that the destiny of people, especially great men, is predetermined by a higher power more-or-less at random. In other words, the young Balaban in 'Isami’s Futuh al-Salatin and Bahlul here do not need to earn the good fortune with which they are blessed. The same source of power (fate or God) also randomly chooses particular individuals who, unlike most common folk, can actually observe and bestow this unique destiny. They have been zapped as if by a magnet and thereafter possess the ability to unveil the secret aspect of phenomena. Bahlul and Balaban play some role in shaping their destiny by acting upon the seemingly outlandish pronouncements of Shaykh Ibin or the hunchback, but as other stories about their lives suggest, their ‘selection’ by God had already taken place in eternity. But there also exist a number of crucial divergences in these two versions of royal investiture. In Mushtaqi’s account the two friends of Bahlul serve as the mouthpiece of a rational scepticism that mocks the protagonist for his credulity. Bahlul feels the need

41 Mushtaqi, Vagi’at, p. 3.
42 Ibid., p. 3.

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to justify his position and he does this by appealing to two mutually exclusive possibilities: either the dervish is right or he is not. The very possibility of the dervish lying is new here. It never occurred to ‘Isami to suggest the hunchback in the tale of Balaban could not really possess the power that he claimed to have. Nor is Balaban forced to justify his actions on any rational grounds.

However, Mushtaqi’s narrative includes other anecdotes in which Bahlul’s rise to power relies at least as much, if not entirely, on his personal acumen and the ability to manipulate events in his own favour. For instance, after Bahlul joins hands with Hamid Khan Sultani the vizier to the young Sultan ‘Alauddin Tughluq, and takes over the throne of Delhi in a coup (clearly attributed to Bahlul’s swiftness of action), the Lodi, we are told, spends a long time deceiving Hamid Khan into believing that he, the future sultan, is a simple and unthreatening military man and supporter of the vizier. Once Hamid Khan lets his guard down, Bahlul and his party seize power.

In one instance, we are told, Bahlul asks his followers to act like ignorant yokels overawed and confused by court ceremony.

When they got there they took off their shoes. Some of them tied their shoes to their heads, others to their waist. When Hamid Khan witnessed this abominable behaviour he asked, ‘What are you doing?’ They answered, ‘We are protecting it from thieves.’ He said, ‘No one will steal them. Don’t worry.’ Then they took off their shoes from their heads and waists and stepped on colourful delicate spreads and said to Hamid Khan, ‘Give us some of these spreads so we can send them to our inferiors and make them understand how much we’ve been honoured here.’ Hamid Khan said, ‘You will receive better gifts than these.’ Then they sat down and ate. When food was done perfumes were brought out. Some rubbed the herbs, others ate the flowers, and others still ate the betel leaf and when their mouths burned they spat it out. Hamid Khan asked [Bahlul], ‘What kind of people are these?’ He answered, ‘They are savages. All they know is to eat and die.’

Through such deceptive shows Bahlul and his subordinates quickly overthrow the vizier and establish the Lodi monarchy. In these episodes too, like the ones in the previous category, a distinction between the superficial appearance and the deeper meanings of phenomena is assumed. However, the deception or covering-up of the deeper reality is man-made and not divine, and the key to unlocking the true nature of events also lies in the power of the human mind and perception and not in occult powers of gifted individuals. These worldviews provide fundamentally opposing interpretations of the world.

43 Ibid., pp. 5–6.
44 Ibid., pp. 4–7.
Now, by simply reading the pages of Mushtaqi that deal with the reign of Bahlul, one cannot determine why the author included these conflicting histories of the early Lodis within a single chapter (for they must have originated in divergent literary or oral traditions). To the end, neither side seems to dominate, although it is certainly worth noting that the chapter is concluded by stories in which the sultan generally seems subservient to the authority of a holy man, as, for instance, when he is portrayed on the eve of a battle against Sultan Husayn Sharqi (d. 1479) praying over the tomb of a Khvajah Qutbuddin, the ultimate spiritual pole (qutb al-aqtab) of his age, with his head uncovered (sign of humility) whereupon a mysterious man appears to Bahlul at dawn and hands him a staff as a sign of victory. This is obviously not the same soldier who overthrows his foes by his craftiness and swiftness. Why not combine the two?

It is indeed in the section detailing the events of the reign of Sultan Sikandar Lodi (d. 1517) that the coexistence of this dichotomy of worldviews begins to be explained. For here too, Mushtaqi initially incorporated a set of narratives in which the sultan and his advisors manipulate or interpret events using their rational mind, as well as another in which the sultan or other characters employ powers and knowledge that seem to defy human reason. Examples of the first type include a story in which the young prince, when in Panipat, grants villages to his commanders from the parganas (administrative districts) belonging to other notables. These lords of neighbouring districts in turn take their complaint to the reigning sultan Bahlul. The royal father admonishes his son and orders him to leave his subjects alone and go fight Tatar Khan Yusuf Khail who had been acting rebelliously in the Punjab. To the surprise of the young prince however, Shaykh Sa’id Farmuli, the young Sikandar’s advisor, interprets the letter to actually mean that Bahlul intends for Sikandar to succeed him to the throne because he has allowed his son to take military action on his behalf and during his lifetime. The moral of this tale is presumably that using his reason, a man can pry deeper beyond the superficial meaning of things, but also, and this is quite striking, it seems to suggest that a clever interpretation actually determines reality since it is difficult to imagine that even Sultan Bahlul could anticipate the hermeneutic acrobatics that would be performed on his letter by Shaykh Sa’id. Shaykh Said’s position is of course not in complete defiance of fortune. As he says to Sikandar, the prince must take action and test fortune (bakhtazma’i). Nevertheless it provides a bold example of the historical agency of individuals using their mind.

That this interpretive framework was understood to stand in contrast to the one championed by dervishes (like the story of Sayyid Ibin and Bahlul) can be gathered from yet another episode in which a dervish approaches the sultan before the battle of Qannauj with his brother Barbak Shah, takes his hand, and

43 Mushtaqi, Vaqi’at, p. 12.
46 Ibid., p. 21.

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predicts victory. The sultan however withdraws his hand. Questioned for this breach of etiquette Sikandar tells the dervish that the proper prayer should have been for the result that best serves Islam, thereby undermining the supposed divine power of the holy-man by exposing his disrespect for religion.47

And yet, predictably, these anecdotes suddenly disappear halfway through the ‘Sikandar’ chapter and instead Mushtaqi narrates histories that portray a radically divergent viewpoint regarding the world and the locus of authority in it. Here we have dervishes that astonishingly defy the barriers of space such as Shaykh Hasan who simply appears out of thin air in the sultan’s private chamber to gaze at his beauty, who survives unscathed Sikandar’s angry reaction (the sultan shoves the shaykh’s face into a fire), and again escapes the prison into which he is confined for his defiance.48 Another Shaykh, Haji ‘Abd al-Wahhab, puts a curse on sultan Sikandar for comparing him to his slaves (asserting a social hierarchy in which the dervish is no more than a mere subject), and the curse causes the sultan to die.49 Where Sikandar does appear in a dazzling light in this section, he is shown to be a medium of divine power, as when he reattaches the head of a decapitated man and brings him back to life.50 These are two very different Sikandars. One uses the power of reason to better interpret or even to determine reality, and the other possesses supernatural power or is confounded by dervishes who use mind-defying abilities to subvert perceived reality. What explains this pendulum swing in Mushtaqi’s narrative?

Actually Mushtaqi marks this key transition quite openly. At the juncture where the shift occurs, he writes, ‘The purpose of this composition is to pen down some of the vaqi’at that took place during the reign of Sultan Sikandar, and now I shall mention something of the manaqib of shaykhs and commanders who were contemporaries of the sultan’.51 The word vaqi’at can be translated as occurrences or histories (also of the same Arabic root as the word for ‘reality’), whereas manaqib was generally reserved for Sufi hagiographies. So for instance, the memoirs of Babur (d. 1530), the founder of the Mughal Empire, was commonly referred to as the Vaqi’at-i Baburi. On the other hand, the Anatolian Sufi Aflaki’s (d. 1360) popular biography of the famous mystic Jalal al-Din Rumi (d. 1273) was entitled Manaqib al-‘Arifin. In other words, Mushtaqi was drawing on two different types of sources for his history. Each genre reflects dissimilar interpretive attitudes vis-à-vis the world, and of course, the source of authority in each text is also different. ‘Isami was very likely dealing with the same material. However, Mushtaqi’s explicit division of his sources into manaqib literature and vaqi’at further hints at his inability to smoothly weld them together.

47 Ibid., p. 25.
48 Ibid., p. 30.
49 Ibid., pp. 65–67.
50 Ibid., p. 46.
51 Ibid., p. 29.
What exactly was the reason for this rift? Did it date back to the Lodi period when the anecdotes purportedly take place? Apparently not. One only needs to compare Mushtaqi with an earlier contemporary of his, the Afghan soldier Dattu Sarvani, to confirm that the rift observable in the Vaqi‘at must have occurred later. Recording his memoirs for the biography of his spiritual master ‘Abd al-Quddus Gangohi in the early 1540’s, Dattu appears at first to share much in terms of his outlook with Mushtaqi. There exists as in Mushtaqi’s history an intense relationship with the supernatural as mediated through dreams. However, some subtle but significant differences separate the two.

For instance, Dattu remembered that after the battle of Panipat, a chaotic scene unfolded on the banks of a river among frightened Afghan soldiers who could not find a way to cross over to safety. That night, Dattu’s spiritual advisor (pir) came to him in a dream and promised him deliverance in exchange for the sacrifice of a sheep that was to be fed to the poor. The main events run as follows:

The writer [Dattu] awoke, and after he had performed the dawn prayers, he told [it to] ‘Isa Khan. Shaykh ‘Abdul was there and said, ‘We must do as Hazrat ‘Abdul-Quddus has commanded’. Masnad-i ‘Ali ‘Isa Khan told the writer, ‘Get up and bring that gelded sheep.’ I got up and went forward a few paces, and saw that the gelded sheep was coming of its own accord towards us. I stood there and the gelded sheep stood beside me, and everyone saw this happen. Shaykh Abdal [sic] said, ‘Praise be to God, O the mightiness of Pir’s’. The writer then slaughtered the sheep with his own hand and had it cooked and distributed it in the name of the spirit of the Prophet (upon whom be Peace). Then we began to plan how to cross the river: while we were doing so Masnad-i ‘Ali Sa’id Khan came up and said: ‘You can cross in the boats which we have.’ By the Grace of God all our difficulties were made easy, and people were amazed. ‘The saints are beneath a cloak, and no man else knows them’.52

In this account, the relationship between the dream and the action is unproblematic and straightforward. The soldier’s saintly mentor comes to him in a dream, promises help in return for some particular action, and in the end delivers on his promise. The soldiers simply carry out the order. They are of course amazed and acknowledge the event as supernatural and miraculous, but they do not seem to have any difficulty recognising the bargain. Not so in Mushtaqi. In line with his overall ambivalence, Mushtaqi adds characters in similar stories who voice their doubt about the reasonableness of such actions. The anecdote about the Lodi grandee A’zam Humayun Sarvani proves the point.

One day he was taking his afternoon nap. Suddenly, he got up, asked for Sayf Khan, and said, ‘Beat the drums and get the soldiers ready. We’ll ride out

52 Digby, ‘Dreams and Reminiscences’, 63–64.

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immediately.’ He put on his own armour, got himself in perfect order, climbed his horse, and rode out. They had travelled twenty *kurohs* [about 40 miles] when Sayf Khan demanded, ‘My khan, won’t you let me in on where you are headed?’ He answered, ‘The Prophet of God said to me in a dream, “Mount your horse. There are many *kafirs* at a particular place and victory is yours. Get up!” I’m headed to the place he told me about.’ Sayf Khan said, ‘Who would distress so many soldiers over a dream like this?’ [A’zam Humayun] raised his finger to his mouth in amazement and exclaimed, ‘Ask forgiveness! You doubt the dream of the prophet?’ Sayf Khan persisted, ‘We have been marching for twenty *kurohs*. Do you even know where this place is?’ He replied, ‘He has pointed it out to me. That’s where we are going, wherever it may be.’ Sayf Khan asked, ‘And how would you know where it is?’ He answered, ‘I have it in my mind’s eye.’

Naturally, A’zam Humayun soon arrives at the appointed place and wins his war. However, he has to deal with a lot more scepticism than Dattu Sarvani. By the time Mushtaqi writes his history, dreams are no longer accepted at face value. Even a dream of the prophet is challenged by Sayf Khan who persists in his doubt in spite of his master’s reprimand. Thus, if the contrast between Dattu and Mushtaqi is sufficient indication, it is clear that as late as the 1540s the worldview of the sultanate period had not yet come under question. The rift then must have occurred sometime between the 1540s and the 1570s when Mushtaqi penned his composition. This would put us squarely in the decades of the Sur reign.

Internal evidence in Mushtaqi supports this hypothesis. For the moment when the incongruity presented above is actually and self-consciously voiced by characters within the *Vaqi’at* is precisely in the episodes of the reign of Sher Shah Sur (d. 1545). Sher Shah and some of his great *amirs* are the first characters in the text to openly contrast *taubit* with *karamat* (‘miracle’, that is, the power of seeing God’s *taqdir*). The new worldviews that found their fullest expression in the Mughal imperial idiom of the late sixteenth century seem to be a legacy of the last Afghan dynasty.

There is for instance an episode from the life of Masnad-i Ali Khavass Khan, a Sur grandee, who was known for his generosity. We are told that on an occasion Khavass Khan was marching his camp from Rahtas to Kakkar. The main commanders and their party went ahead and camped in the desert with a day’s worth of provision and waited for the remainder of the army to arrive. Soon a messenger turned up saying that the rest of the soldiers and all the provisions had been plundered by the local inhabitants. All the men fell into despair, but Khavass Khan then surprised his *amirs* by inviting them to a feast celebrating the prophet’s birthday. When the incredulous *amirs* arrived there was so much food and sweets that

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astonished them. Masnad-i Ali Khan Niyazi gives voice to this amazement when he says to Khavass Khan, ‘You have manifested your karamat (miracle).’ But Khavass Khan responds, ‘This is not karamat, but my tadbir.’

In this interesting passage, tadbir as foresight or strategy of the human mind, particularly of an intelligent commander, is contrasted with the miraculous power of karamat which the officers in their amazement assume to have brought about the unexpected excess of food. In the same vein, Mushtaqi mentions several episodes in which he credits Sher Shah with possessing the power of prediction through, not divinely inspired prophecy but tadbir. And again Sher Shah’s acute perspicacity is specifically contrasted with karamat.

One day [Sher Shah] was branding horses. A man riding an Arab horse came forward. He logged him for four badra [unit of money]. Shaykh Khalil [the king’s spiritual advisor] was present. He said, ‘Such a young man and such a horse, and such great horsemanship—assigning him four badras is unfortunate.’ [Sher Shah] said, ‘Shaykh, you are right. But that is all he deserves.’ The shaykh replied, ‘Kings possess karamat. The rest of us only see what’s on the surface [zahir].’ [Sher Shah] retorted, ‘In fairness, observe and see who is right.’ He ordered the young man to draw a bow. He was given a bow and he could not draw it. The shaykh protested, ‘It is customary for soldiers to come to branding with other people’s weapons. Perhaps this is not his bow.’ The king tossed his own bow to the shaykh and said, ‘See whether this bow is soft or hard.’ His grace the shaykh drew the bow and found it to be exceedingly soft. Then the king ordered the young man to draw that bow and he could not. The shaykh persisted, saying, ‘Perhaps the armour he is wearing is preventing him.’ He was told to remove his armour but still could not draw. The shaykh conceded, ‘We see the superficial [surat-i zahir], but the king’s gaze is upon the interior [batin].’ The king replied, ‘All this man knows how to do is wear fancy clothes and take his horse prancing around. And he does this to screw harlots. He rides in alleyways and shows off.’ His grace the shaykh grew silent. When they made some inquiries it was found to be true.

Sher Shah here is presented as one endowed with particular insight into his soldier’s character. His spiritual advisor, the Sufi shaykh, can only understand this perception as miraculous. He divides the phenomenon according to classic Sufi doctrine, into the superficial and the interior (zahir and batin) and supposes that the king must possess the power to see deeper than all others due to what the Sufis believed would give such power: the miraculous karamat. Of course the whole discourse is a challenge to the king. Naturally the shaykh believes that it

54 Ibid., pp. 146–47.
55 Ibid., p. 124.

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is he and not Sher Shah who is a master of perceiving the bātin. Sher Shah’s insistence on proving his point only makes sense in this context. He too knows that the shaykh does not really believe that kings possess karamat and can see deeper than Sufis through clairvoyance. Rather, Sher Shah’s insightfulness is due to his ability to read the body language of the soldier as he approaches him (the way he has dressed, the way he rides his horse, etc.) and is related to his sound judgement.

So on the one hand, some of the internal evidence in Mushtaqi’s Vaqi’at suggests that the strongest challenge to the older worldview of divine fatalism was first voiced in the middle of the sixteenth century by the Sur military elite. At the same time, Mushtaqi presents other anecdotes that imply the change in attitude was experienced by a broader public, across generations. The following episode, if read allegorically, bears out this assertion. What we have here is not a contest between Sufis and soldiers but one between a father and son. It runs as follows:

There lived a carpenter during the reign of Khizr Khan, King of Delhi to whom people would come from every district for final arbitration. He was very famous. One day his son said to him, ‘You make your rulings based on the occult (ghayb). How do you know what’s behind the curtain of the occult (pardah-i ghayb)? If you stop this I will stay in this house, otherwise I am leaving.’ The father replied, ‘God most high has provided me with enough to know who lies and who tells the truth. My judgements are based on that power.’ The son said again, ‘Only God knows the occult.’ But the father insisted, ‘I too receive it from God. I don’t invent it on my own.’ ‘You persist in your ignorance,’ answered the son, ‘I will not remain in your house,’ and he stormed out.

The son travels for two days and decides to spend the night at a village. There he witnesses a crime by a woman who, out of jealousy for her husband’s second and more beloved wife, murders her own infant child and frames the co-wife by hiding the bloody knife in her possession. Unable to establish the truth of the matter, the husband and other villagers bring the two women to the carpenter in Delhi who agrees to arbitrate. His son meanwhile stands back and watches the proceedings.

The man called forth the two women and asked their stories. Then he lowered his head [in reflection]. He raised his head after some time and said, ‘There are no witnesses for this story. But there is one thing: whoever strips naked in front of this assembly, she is telling the truth.’ The mother of the child [that is, the murderer] quickly stripped and stood naked. The other froze, thinking how could she embarrass herself in front of that crowd? Then the carpenter spoke, ‘You have killed your own son out of your hatred for the other wife. You stripped in front of a couple of thousand people and did not hesitate. Therefore you killed your son out of your enmity to this woman.’ The son of the carpenter

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was sitting in a corner and he thought, ‘I have witnessed this event, and were my father to conduct an investigation, he would be told the same result.’ Thus having seen this, he got up and threw himself at his father’s feet.57

This is a curious story indeed. A contrast is set up between a father who claims to have access to secret knowledge through God, and a son who refuses to accept his claims and considers his father to be ignorant. But when the father tests the two women, he employs not divination but Solomonic wisdom. His way of adjudication is contrasted by the son with an investigation, and is understood to be reconcilable to it as both lead to truth. Mushtaqi is thus aware of the new criticism to claims of divine intervention through gifted individuals, and while he wishes to prove the older generation right, he actually settles for a compromise, both here in this anecdote as well as in other parts of his Vaqi’at. All this begins to change within a couple of decades however. Soon Mushtaqi’s ambivalence would be decisively settled in favour of human agency by Nizam al-Din Ahmad who wrote at the court of the Mughal Emperor Akbar.

IV

It is certainly instructive to compare Mushtaqi’s narrative of the early Lodis with that of the soldier and courtier Nizam al-Din Ahmad Haravi (d. 1594), a prominent historian and grandee in the imperial service. Earlier scholarship did not look very positively on our author and even chastised him for his ‘slavish’ attitude towards his source which was for him something ‘merely to copy’.58 As stated above however, more recent studies have vindicated his historical significance to a great extent. Nizam al-Din’s narrative manifestly reflects the kind of worldview in which the machinations of the human mind play a determinative role in history explicitly at the expense of dervishes. For instance, in the section on Bahlul, Nizam al-Din, who clearly relied on Mushtaqi’s Vaqi’at, excluded the tale about young Bahlul’s uncle predicting his nephew’s greatness.59 He did maintain the story about the young Lodi buying off the throne of Delhi from a holy man, but felt the need to rationalise it, ‘[Bahlul] combined total power and ability, and based on the words of that dervish which he always remembered from his youth, but also based on the instigation of Jasarth Khokhar which was described above, the bird of monarchy laid an egg in his brain and so he began to seek kingship.’60 It was apparently difficult for Nizam al-Din to believe that a dervish had the authority to decide or predict who should be king. So he justified Bahlul’s

57 Mushtaqi, Vaqi’at, pp. 220–22.
58 Mukhia, Historians and Historiography, p. 145.
59 Nizam al-Din, Tabaqat, I: p. 294.
60 Ibid., p. 295.

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rise based on the latter’s personal merits and the consequences of his actions (his peace treaty with Khokhar).

The way Nizam al-Din explains the working of the prophecy is quite interesting because it suggests that the holy man’s words actually served not as a cause but as a motive for Bahlul’s rise. In other words it was not the case that the dervish could foresee the future or be able to determine it. Rather his speech merely served as encouragement for Bahlul, and in any event, his words had as much effect as the instigations of a non-Muslim figure. Comparing the reaction of Bahlul’s friends in Mushtaqi and Nizam al-Din is also instructive. Whereas Mushtaqi describes it as a mild scepticism by saying that they objected ‘smiling’ (tabassum-kunan), Nizam al-Din has them openly ridicule the gullible Bahlul (tamashkur nimuda[nd]). The repetition of this anecdote in all three authors analysed in the present article (even if applied to different kings) neatly demonstrates the kind of change that took place in the genre. Mushtaqi introduces doubt into the narrative and Nizam al-Din intensifies the scepticism while completely removing the mystical element from it. Where Nizam al-Din’s account follows Mushtaqi closely is in those episodes detailing the craftiness of Bahlul in fooling his superior Hamid Khan and overthrowing him.

Nizam al-Din’s Sultan Sikandar embodies these virtues and is often (except in one instance)\(^{61}\) portrayed as derisive of the prophetic claims of dervishes. In a similar anecdote to the one reported by Mushtaqi, when a dervish prophesies victory for Sikandar, the sultan withdraws his hand in disapproval because the former should have prayed for an outcome that would serve Islam best. While both historians report this story, Nizam al-Din intensifies it, saying that Sikandar withdrew his hand ‘with disgust’ (ba kirahiyat).\(^{62}\) Needless to say, the author of the Tabaqat took out the dervish curse that killed Sikandar, but, interestingly, maintained the symptoms of the curse as an unfortunate disease.\(^{63}\) As for the Lodi sultan’s supernatural powers, once again Nizam al-Din felt obliged to rationalise them, stating that, ‘[Sikandar] was able to gather so much intelligence about people and soldiers so that he knew even about private matters in their homes. Sometimes he could report on the status of those who lived alone. Based on this people began to imagine he was in communion with the jinn and received information from the occult’.\(^{64}\) Again such a statement stands in contrast to a worldview in which individuals can serve as media for God, Nizam al-Din had to find a reasonable explanation for it. Nor was our author’s position unconscious. He declares unequivocally, ‘The manaqib and the mafakhir (gestes) of Sultan Sikandar are mentioned in some histories to such an extent that is mostly exaggeration and

\(^{61}\) Ibid., p. 337.
\(^{62}\) Ibid., p. 325.
\(^{63}\) Ibid., p. 334.
\(^{64}\) Ibid., p. 337.
hyperbole. I however have presented what is closest to truth (sihat).\(^{65}\) It is clear that, among other things, Nizam al-Din had found manaqib literature less credible and felt the need to apply the criteria of reason to sift through the anecdotes he had inherited in his main source.\(^{66}\) Moving down the list of dynasties, unlike Mushtaqi, Nizam al-Din does not implicitly credit Sher Shah and his amirs for introducing the values that he himself cherished: challenging karamat with tadbir. However, his obituary on the greatest adversary of the early Mughals is remarkable for its positive evaluation and seems to acknowledge Sher Shah’s role in foregrounding tadbir. He wrote, ‘Sher Shah was privileged by reason, perspicacity, and sound judgement [tadbir-i sa’ib] and left behind many good works. He persisted in the ways of justice’.\(^{67}\) In sum, Nizam al-Din completed a movement that began in the middle of the sixteenth century whereby history as a divinely predetermined and fatalistic affair gave way to an unfolding of events through the agency of a rational individual. This change was fully self-conscious and all the authors studied above posited the two modes as contradictory. But was this change limited to courtly or literary circles or did it have a broader manifestation? As stated earlier, Mushtaqi at least seems to suggest that there was something much more significant at work.

V

When he wrote his Vaqi’at, Mushtaqi knew that the days of Afghan rule were irreversibly over. But even beyond this he sensed that what had transpired by the late sixteenth century was not simply a dynastic change but the passing of an era. He seems to have understood that the issues of reasoned scepticism and human agency, later dominating Nizam al-Din’s work, actually had greater moral and political ramifications. This was because once the presence of God was removed from history, one was left at the mercy of powerful individuals, the subjects of history, who took their fate and those of others into their own hands. One might recall that in ‘Isami, kings had to show benevolence to the weak in order to activate their good destiny. The contractual check placed on monarchy in association with divine fatalism was disappearing under Mughal rule.

In this new world upright monarchs and men of state like Khan Jahan Lodi, a grandee of Sultan Sikandar, were an extinct species. Mushtaqi recalls him with admiration and nostalgia when he says, “I will write something of his character (akhlaq) so that people may understand what sorts of men were in charge in those

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65 Mushtaqi, Vaqi’at, p. 335.
66 A point already made by Athar Ali in his ‘The Use of Sources in Mughal Historiography’, pp. 362–64. However Ali remains very clearly within a positivist source evaluation when he concludes by chiding Mughal historians for failing to achieve the standards of European historiography and corroborating their facts.

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days. One cannot find such character even among the shaykhs of today”. Khan Jahan Lodi was pious, lived by Islamic rules and regulations, was exceedingly generous, and fed many people each night. His son and others like him, including the author’s father Shaykh Sa’d Allah, also behaved in the same manner. ‘Alas the goodness of those days and the purity of that age,’ writes our author wistfully, ‘What a king, what men of state, and what sipahis [military men]!’ In this new age, all that was good in the great men had disappeared.

This change of eras was reflected in the kinds of histories that were being produced. The one represented by Mushtaqi prioritised the moral lessons of historical anecdotes over factual accuracy. The new style, as represented by Nizam al-Din used the criteria of truth and reasonableness over morality. Thus Mushtaqi too excluded some material from his narrative in conformity with his view of the past. Comparing Nizam al-Din’s portrayal of Sultan Sikandar to Mushtaqi is a good case in point. Whereas Nizam al-Din’s Sikandar is a violent champion of Islam, the sultan in Mushtaqi primarily fights other Muslims who have challenged him or who have somehow wrought injustice in the world. In the Tabaqat-i Akbari, Sikandar wages no fewer than nine battles against non-Muslims or apostates and most of these results in a terrible slaughter or the destruction of temples, all graphically described in rather matter-of-fact prose. Mushtaqi knew about these events. He cryptically referred to them in a single sentence at the beginning of his narrative and moved on to other issues. Where the author gave more room to the violent side of Sikandar’s zealotry was in clear condemnation, as in the story of the most senior ‘alim at court, one Miyan ‘Abd Allah, who when asked by the sultan to rubberstamp his decision to raze a Hindu religious structure to the ground advised, at a risk to his life, to leave alone whatever temple had been left untouched by former Muslim kings. Mushtaqi obviously sympathised with Miyan ‘Abd Allah’s position and his exclusion of the accounts of Sikandar’s temple destructions are very much related to this stance. The guiding principle was to maintain and not disturb the order of things (which obviously favoured the Muslim elite). Mushtaqi’s famous line describing the greatness of Sikandar Lodi’s age, ‘Muslims had the upper hand, Hindus were subdued, and no one knew the name Mughal’, also speaks to this point. There exists a pattern then, in Mushtaqi and other Indian Muslim men of letters such as Badauni, by which what was considered to be an immoral excess in the treatment of non-Muslims was suppressed. This was not simply a gesture of selfless charity since the social harmony and the

68 Mushtaqi, Vaqi’at, p. 70.
69 Ibid., p. 73.
70 Ibid., p. 75.
71 Nizam al-Din, Tabaqat, 1: 321–32.
72 Mushtaqi, Vaqi’at, p. 18.
73 Ibid., p. 20.
74 Ibid., p. 100.

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status quo it tried to protect was very much in the interest of the Muslim religious elite.

Likewise, the infamous ‘legendary tales’ that Mushtaqi incorporated in his *Vaqi’at* can also be understood in this context. Such tales usually carry a pointed ethical lesson with further political implications. For instance, several love-stories are narrated by the author in which two lovers, usually one Hindu and the other Muslim, are buried apart due to demands of their respective families, but are then miraculously found in each other’s arms in one of the graves. At the end of a series of such tales Mushtaqi complains,

Yes, such wondrous things exist in love. But that era was also endowed with influence (*ta’sir*). Today, neither love has any influence nor the age and those people have all died away. It is the good fortune of the people of an age to have a good ruler. [Verse] *If God likes a people, he will give them a good ruler. If he wants to ruin the world, he puts the kingdom in the hands of a tyrant*’.75

The tyrant is of course none other than the ruling monarch Akbar. Mushtaqi clearly perceived the transition from the Sultanate to Mughal rule as the ushering of a new era in which the human mind, and not God’s hand, controlled the course of history, and, in his opinion, this age was marked by tyranny, greed, impiety and lack of love.

In many ways Mushtaqi was not too far off the mark. Contemporary evidence shows that a similar worldview to that of Nizam al-Din was prevalent among the cadre of Mughal administrators all the way down the social ladder. As stated above, studies by Chatterjee and Deshpande see Mughal administration and historiography as the main engine behind the spread of new vernacular genres in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. However, the precise nature of this diffusion has not to my knowledge been adequately explained. Below, I will attempt to offer a solution to this problem by drawing on three documents, covering the middle thirty years of Akbar’s reign, that demonstrate how the same historiographical spirit of verification and scepticism was informing revenue collection and the inspection of property deeds held by religious groups under Mughal rule.

The documents in questions were published by M.A. Ansari in 1984 in a collection of 39 others ranging in date from 1563/4 to 1858. They tell a short but poignant story about the relationship between the Mughal state and the Hindu religious group the Jangam in Varanasi. The first document,76 dated to 1563/4 is an imperial decree issued in favour of the representative of the Jangam who had apparently come to court with documentation from previous rulers [*hukkam-i sabiq*] stating that the leader of the sect was in possession of 480 *bighas* of cultivated land. The imperial decree had confirmed this claim and ordered the Mughal

75 Mushtaqi, *Vaqi’at*, p. 52.

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officials in Varanasi (divan, amils, chawdharis and qanungos) to respect it and refrain from collecting taxes from them. This would have been quite normal following the fall of the Sur dynasty. By coming to court and therefore acknowledging the legitimacy of the new regime, the claimant was rewarded by a confirmation of his property rights and exemptions.

Ten years later, in 1573/4, the Jangam took another suit to court.77 This time they claimed to be in possession of two domed structures, but complained that some of the local residents were obstructing them from using their property. This time the court did not even demand paper documentation. The exalted farman was issued to the local officials to protect the Jangams from their persecutors. Here however, a demand was placed on the Jangam for the first time, namely, that they ‘engage themselves in praying for the perpetuation of the everlasting empire’. Such formulations do not appear in the few surviving documents of Babur and Humayun’s reign and suggest something new: the ‘state’ was inserting itself into the religious universe of its subjects in exchange for ready protection. Perhaps the Jangam could not yet grasp how much this progressively more intrusive relationship actually exposed them to the power of the Mughals. They would understand in just a short time.

About a decade later in 1584/5, a Mughal karori by the name of Rai Baruna showed up in Varanasi and began looking into the landholdings of the Muslim religious elite.78 While he was there, he decided to pay a visit to the Jangam as well. Matters grew worse when Rai Baruna began looking into the papers of the Jangam. Whereas before it was the Jangam who visited the Mughal court, now the imperial representatives were coming to them, and they wanted to see the books. Sure enough, the karori made a discovery he did not like. He was astonished (ta’ajjub namud) to see that ‘in all the documents of earlier kings and that of the officers of His Majesty [Akbar] the name of Malik Arjun Jangam is mentioned. Surely such a person cannot have remained alive up to the present time’. The Arjun had to scramble for an explanation. They stated that in their sect the elder [pir] who becomes the successor of Arjun is called by his name. This person, they continued, gathers all the alms given by the Padshah and other income and spends it on the poor [faqirs] of the sect [silsilah]. Apparently not convinced by the effect of their explanations, the Jangam then went out and brought in the qadi, the mufti, the important townspeople [ahali] and others who all verified their story [tasdiq namudand], and so an imperial decree was issued to reconfirm the Jangam’s holdings.

There are a number of important points here, the most remarkable of which, beside the obvious terror of the Jangam, is the way in which Mughal administration was ‘rationalising’ the society it ruled. The private sacred domain of the

77 Ibid., doc. 2.
78 Ibid., doc. 4.
Jangam sect is opened by a threat of force. They have to explain their religious doctrine, not only in Islamic religious terms (drawing on Sufi terminology such as faqir and silsilah in the process) but also in historical and rational terms in order to be able to survive their audit by an ever more intrusive state. Moreover, they have to expose themselves to further public scrutiny and even humiliation by calling on all the important people of the town to participate in their exonerations. The attitude of the karori is strikingly similar to the critical method of historiography we have observed above in Nizam al-Din. He is astonished by a story in the records that does not make sense, just as Nizam al-Din had been confounded by anecdotes about, say, Sultan Sikandar’s supernatural abilities that defied reason. Both Rai Baruna and Nizam al-Din then proceed to verify following a reasoned criteria of truth (sithat or sidq). In short, the same worldview was at work up and down the hierarchy of Mughal administration. The sacred and the supernatural were being relentlessly hunted out by officials relying on their reason for ordering society and its past, rationalising it, and controlling it all through the institution of a new revenue system. No wonder that Mushtaqi, belonging to the old religious elite, was bemoaning the dawn of a new era of tyranny in which there was no love, no God and no generosity. The new rulers were frightfully efficient and logical in the task of extracting revenue and not even the sanctity of the divine would stop them.

VI

While a growing body of recent scholarly literature has been addressing the issue of early modernity in South Asia in the sixteenth, seventeenth and the eighteenth centuries, the present piece has tried to investigate the ‘pre-history’ of this phenomenon. What has been charted above is the way in which a rupture appeared in Indo-Persian historiography by the 1550s leading to a total break in the 1590s in a Mughal text. This rupture appears to be particular to north India without parallels in sixteenth century Iran or Central Asia. At least a brief comparison with near-contemporary Persian histories shows that while the genre of tarikh was changing in important ways,79 no other historiographical tradition shows a special concern for tadbir, or if it does, it bluntly rejects it. The most glaring example of this occurs in Fazl Allah ibn Ruzbihan’s history of the Shaybanid campaigns in Central Asia, Mihmannamah-i Bukhara, completed in 1509 where the author, in a fit of illness, was reminded of ‘the difficult problem of predetermination (qadar) and the preference of the judgements of divine fate (taqdir-i ilahi) over the contrivances of mankind (tadbirat-i bandah).’80 He denounced those who believe that ‘mankind is the creator of his own actions’ (bandah khud khaliq-i

79 Subrahmanyam, ‘Intertwined Histories’ and Fleischer, Bureaucrat and Intellectual.
80 Fazl Allah Ruzbihan, Mihmannamah-i Bukhara, p. 266.

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af’al khud ast).\textsuperscript{81} Others, such as Mirza Haydar Dughlat in his Tarikh-i Rashidi, composed between 1541 and 1547, wrote about both tadbir and karamat without any sense of apparent conflict.\textsuperscript{82} In other words, while a thorough comparison is yet to be undertaken, the preference in Indo-Persian historiography given to human agency appears to be specific to a Mughal initiative (though perhaps not of their invention). This phenomenon parallels another secularisation: the distanciation achieved in Mughal political discourse away from Islamic religious norms. However, the causes for this change, as proposed by Muzaffar Alam, would not apply very well in explaining the rise to prominence of tadbir. Alam has argued that the general secularising trend in the Mughal statecraft writing evolved out of the convergence of Mongol and post-Mongol alternatives to Islamic hegemony, the prevalence of nomadism and its incompatibility with the norms of the shari’a, and the intervention of Sufis.\textsuperscript{83} Yet, the first two explanations should have equally applied to both Safavid Iran and Shaybanid Central Asia, and yet no similar trend toward human agency seems to have developed there. As for the Sufis, tadbir in the South Asian context was understood to be a direct challenge to their powers and not something created by them. In sum, while the present article has hopefully clarified to some extent the rise of a new historical thinking in Indo-Persian texts under Mughal rule, it has necessarily ended with a problem, one that has been in fact around for some time now. Why did indeed the concern for human agency find such receptive soil in the Mughal chancery? Why did other political powers with similar historical, cultural and literary traditions not share in this development? It seems that future scholarship will still have to seek the causes of the precociousness and peculiarity of the Mughals in this regard as compared to their counterparts in West Asia.

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\textsuperscript{81} Ibid., p. 266.
\textsuperscript{82} Haydar, Tarikh-i Rashidi.
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