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‘Intirely the Kings Vassalls’: East India Company Gifting Practices and Anglo-Mughal Political Exchange (c. 1670-1720)

Exchanges of objects and cash lay at the heart of the political relationship between the English East India Company (EIC, 1600-1858) and the Mughal Empire (1526-1857), the paramount power in South Asia between the late sixteenth and early eighteenth centuries. From precious items offered to emperors or disbursed by them, to money and goods presented to lower-ranking officials, gifting practices expressed and structured the hierarchical relations between the Indian state and the resident foreign traders. Following established Mughal patterns, such transactions operated as one of several symbolic practices which inserted the Company into the Mughal imperial realm. Take the case of the English merchants in Surat, the main Mughal port in western India, who described the goods they presented to the provincial governor of Gujarat in November 1670 as ‘a Ciuill kinde of Plunder demanded by these great Umbrates [umara, high nobles] as a Tribute due to them’.¹ Juxtaposing the recent plunder of Surat by Shivaji’s Maratha army with the belated reassertion of Mughal authority by Bahadur Khan – ‘whose arrival [...] cost us [...] deare for our Protection in Presents to him’ – Gerald Aungier and his colleagues blurred conventional distinctions between presents, tribute, exaction, and protection payment.² These shifting and overlapping rubrics offer a point of entry into the hierarchical relationship between the EIC and the Mughal imperial administration, one that cast the English in the role of tribute-paying vassals.

¹ IOR/E/3/31, f. 149v: Gerald Aungier and Council to Company, Surat, 20 November 1670. All archival references are to: British Library, London, India Office Records (IOR).

² Each has featured prominently in discussions of diplomatic “gifts”: Algazi, G., V. Groebner, and B. Jussen, eds. *Negotiating the Gift: Pre-Modern Figurations of Exchange* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2003); Behrens-Abouseif, D. *Practicing Diplomacy in the Mamluk Sultanate: Gifts and Material Culture in the Medieval Islamic World* (London: I.B. Taurus, 2014); Biedermann, Z., A. Gerritsen, and G. Riello, eds. *Global Gifts: The Material Culture of Diplomacy in Early Modern Eurasia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017). On protection, see Benton, L. and A. Clulow, eds. *Protection and Empire: A Global History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017). Shivaji’s sack of Surat of October 1670 followed his earlier looting of the town in January 1664.

Focusing on the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, this article discusses the types of gifts the English selected for presentation, the occasions at which they changed hands, and the range of relationships that were facilitated or confirmed through them. Anglo-Mughal contacts are best understood in the context of the Mughal court's management of relations with a diverse range of political actors over whom it extended claims of overlordship, from nobles and tributary princes to landholders and neighbouring polities. As has been observed for other early modern societies, 'the boundaries between power relations within states and foreign relations' were not clear-cut in Mughal India, with diplomatic protocol an extension of the courtly ritual through which emperors performed their authority over domestic vassals.³ The case at hand, therefore, invites us to rethink the category of diplomacy as it pertained to the relations between the English merchant community and Indian state authorities. It builds on recent work that shows how transcultural diplomacy often involved the incorporation of European political actors into non-European political orders. Material exchanges have proven to be particularly fruitful for tracing these processes.⁴

Scholarship on the East India Company and gifts has remained limited to a handful of discussions of the objects exchanged during Sir Thomas Roe's embassy to the Mughal court of Jahangir (r. 1605-1627) and the circulation of portraits and other precious goods between British and Indian dignitaries in the later part of the eighteenth century.⁵ Such studies are

³ For the general point: Amsler, N., H. Harrison, and C. Windler. "Introduction: Eurasian Diplomacies Around 1800: Transformation and Persistence." *International History Review* 41 (5) (2019), 943-946, at 943. On relations within the Mughal polity: Athar Ali, M. *The Mughal Nobility Under Aurangzeb* (rev. ed. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997); Faruqi, M.D. *The Princes of the Mughal Empire, 1504-1719* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012). About Mughal diplomacy: Farooqi, N.R. "Diplomacy and Diplomatic Procedure under the Mughals." *Medieval History Journal* 7 (1) (2004), 59-86.

⁴ See for two recent examples: Talbot, M. *British-Ottoman Relations, 1661-1807: Commerce and Diplomatic Practice in Eighteenth-Century Istanbul* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2017); Laver, M. *The Dutch East India Company in Early Modern Japan: Gift Giving and Diplomacy* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020).

⁵ Cohn, B.S. *Colonialism and Its Forms of Knowledge: The British in India* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996); Das, N. "'Apes of Imitation': Imitation and Identity in Sir Thomas Roe's Embassy to India." in *A Companion to the Global Renaissance: English Literature and Culture in the Era of Expansion*, ed. J. Singh (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 114-128; Eaton, N. "Between Mimesis and Alterity: Art, Gift, and Diplomacy in Colonial India, 1770-1800." *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 46 (4) (2004), 816-844; Eaton, N. "Coercion and the Gift: Art, Jewels and the Body in British Diplomacy in Colonial India." in Biedermann et al. *Global Gifts*, 266-290.

significantly fewer in number than those regarding the Dutch East India Company (VOC) or the Portuguese *Estado da Índia*,⁶ and far less numerous than those concerning gift-giving in areas such as the Ottoman Empire and North Africa.⁷ As a consequence, we remain comparatively ill-informed about the role of gift-giving in the activities of the EIC prior to its acquisition of large-scale territorial power in the 1750s – a period of a hundred and fifty years during which the EIC became embedded in and learned to adjust to Asian political structures.⁸

In a brief but influential contribution, Bernard S. Cohn suggested that the English in India regarded objects strictly as commodities with a ‘market-determined price’. As such, he argued, Company representatives failed to recognise how objects in Mughal society operated ‘in a culturally constructed system by which authority and social relations were literally constituted and transmitted’.⁹ This view of an unbridgeable cultural gap is no longer tenable.¹⁰ Instead, this article argues that the transfer of valuables in cash and kind between English and Indian actors operated as one of several connected registers through which relations of sovereignty, submission, service, and protection were articulated and acknowledged on both sides.¹¹

⁶ See for instance: Viallé, C. ““To Capture Their Favor”: On Gift-Giving by the VOC.” In *Mediating Netherlandish Art and Material Culture in Asia*, eds. T. DaCosta Kauffmann and M. North (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2014), 291-319; Clulow, A. “Gifts for the Shogun: The Dutch East India Company, Global Networks and Tokugawa Japan.” in Biedermann et al. (eds.), *Global Gifts*, 198-216; Laver, M. *The Dutch East India Company*; Melo, J. “Seeking Prestige and Survival: Gift-Exchange Practices between the Portuguese Estado da Índia and Asian Rulers.” *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 56 (4-5) (2013), 672-695; Biedermann, Z. “Diplomatic Ivories: Sri Lankan Caskets and the Portuguese-Asian Exchange in the Sixteenth-Century.” in Biedermann et al., *Global Gifts*, 88-118.

⁷ Examples include: Windler, C. “Tributes and Presents in Franco-Tunisian Diplomacy.” *Journal of Early Modern History* 4 (2) (2000), 168-199; Burschel, P. “A Clock for the Sultan: Diplomatic Gift-Giving from an Intercultural Perspective.” *Medieval History Journal* 16 (2) (2013), 547-56; Talbot, *British-Ottoman Relations*, 105-140; Heinsen-Roach, E. *Consuls and Captives: Dutch-North African Diplomacy in the Early Modern Mediterranean* (Boydell & Brewer: 2019). For gift-giving by trading companies in West Africa, see: Brauner, C. “Connecting Things: Trading Companies and Diplomatic Gift-Giving on the Gold and Slave Coasts in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries.” *Journal of Early Modern History* 20 (4) (2016), 408-428.

⁸ Veevers, D. *The Origins of the British Empire in Asia, 1600-1750* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

⁹ Cohn, *Colonialism and Its Forms of Knowledge*, 18.

¹⁰ Subrahmanyam, S. *Three Ways to be Alien: Travails & Encounters in the Early Modern World* (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2011), 174-175.

¹¹ On Mughal imperial ideology, see Richards, J.F. “The Formulation of Imperial Authority under Akbar and Jahangir.” in: *Kingship and Authority in South Asia*, ed. J. Richards (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998), 285-326; Koch, E. “How the Mughal *pādshāhs* referenced Iran in their Visual Construction of Universal Rule.” in *Universal Empire: A Comparative Approach to Imperial Culture and Representation in Eurasian History*, eds. P.B. Bang and D. Kolodziejczyk (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 194-209.

Secondly, it maintains that elaborate presents for the emperor conveyed by men carrying the official title of ambassador and the regular flow of money and objects between agents of the Company and officials of the imperial administration proceeded from the same logic. By recognising the continuum running from formal courtly engagements to everyday political interactions at provincial sites of power, a notion of Company diplomacy comes into view that straddled the boundaries between inter-polity relations and intra-imperial solicitation.¹²

The decades covered by this article illuminate these dynamics particularly clearly. Founded as a merchant corporation in 1600, by the 1670s the EIC had been present on the Indian Subcontinent for close to seventy years. During this time the Company had gradually become integrated into a variety of commercial and political networks on terms granted by the reigning authorities. Such arrangements were not enshrined in reciprocal treaties but assumed the form of written commands issued by the emperor or high officials. In return for enjoying the privilege to trade freely on favourable terms and benefit from legal protection in Mughal domains, European merchant groups acknowledged their obedience to the emperor and, occasionally, rendered services upon request. In doing so, they were accorded a place within the empire's richly plural socio-political fabric, made up of a great diversity of territories and communities brought into the imperial fold as 'co-sharers of the realm' during nearly two centuries of brokered expansion.¹³

The empire's legal plurality was reflected in the conditions on which the English were permitted to trade and settle in its various parts. In the western emporium of Surat, where the Company established a trading post as early as 1613, it paid between 2% and 3.5% in import and export duties on its commodities, as set down in successive *farmans* (imperial edicts)

¹² About the EIC's modes of diplomacy in the Mughal Empire more widely, see Van Meersbergen, G. "The Diplomatic Repertoires of the East India Companies in Mughal South Asia, 1608-1717." *The Historical Journal* 62 (4) (2019), 875-898.

¹³ Gommans, J. *Mughal Warfare: Indian Frontiers and the High Roads to Empire, 1500-1700* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), 106.

issued by the central authorities. In Bengal, on the other hand, where the English first settled in the 1640s, they were exempted from paying custom duties in return for an annual payment of 3,000 rupees into the imperial treasury at Hugli, some 40km north of modern-day Kolkata. Crucially, whilst this arrangement was authorised by a succession of Mughal princes and powerful nobles acting as provincial governors, it was not formally sanctioned by the court until 1717. This resulted in a substantial amount of ambiguity which equipped officials at the lower levels of the imperial administration with significant leverage.¹⁴ Because officials in Bengal recognised that the Company had a clear interest in maintaining a situation in which it only paid a nominal annual sum, they were in a position to demand a regular stream of gifts and payments to confirm the status quo. These circumstances fuelled the development of a vibrant sphere of local diplomacy.¹⁵

The Company was equally aware that remaining on amicable terms with different local powerholders in the empire's borderlands was essential for its business to flourish. Outside the immediate purview of the imperial court, provincial governors were able to conduct their administration with considerable degrees of autonomy. Moreover, nominal vassals and outside adversaries alike continued to contest imperial authority, with effective control over certain areas fluctuating as a result; a situation intensified by the waning of central authority from the 1700s. The succession struggles unfolding in the wake of the death of Aurangzeb (r. 1658-

¹⁴ The rate of customs duties fluctuated over the course of the seventeenth century. See: Das Gupta, A. *Indian Merchants and the Decline of Surat, c. 1700-1750* (Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1979); Prakash, O. *European Commercial Enterprise in Pre-Colonial India: The New Cambridge History of India II.5* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998). About the brokering of power relations between the central and local authorities, see Hasan, F. *State and Locality in Mughal India: Power Relations in Western India, c. 1572-1730* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

¹⁵ About these dynamics, see also Van Meersbergen, G. "Diplomacy in a Provincial Setting: The East India Companies in Seventeenth-Century Bengal and Orissa." in *The Dutch and English East India Companies: Diplomacy, Trade and Violence in Early Modern Asia*, eds. Adam Clulow and Tristan Mostert (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2018), 55-78.

1707) dealt a severe blow to imperial control, resulting in the emergence of de facto independent successor states in Bengal and elsewhere by the 1720s.¹⁶

The gift-giving practices discussed in this article took shape against the backdrop of these larger geopolitical shifts. Starting with a survey of the material exchanges that structured relations between the EIC and Mughal representatives in the province of Bengal, the focus then shifts to the Company's drawn-out preparations for sending a costly present to the Mughal court, beginning in 1708. Covering a variety of contexts and purposes, from confirming ties of overlordship and vassalage to greasing the wheels of politics and, ultimately, securing the flow of trade, these two sections together highlight the different categories of Anglo-Mughal gift-exchange that acted as the material means for expressing acknowledgement of imperial authority and protection. When examined alongside other forms of interaction, it becomes clear that the offering and receipt of objects and cash formed part of a wider ceremonial discourse through which the English professed to be 'Intirely the Kings Vassalls'.¹⁷

Local Gifts and Everyday Diplomacy in Bengal

Exchanges of objects and cash at the local level served a variety of needs and relationships, best approached through a division according to types of transaction. Right from the start, the presence of the English in Bengal was premised on an annual payment of Rs. 3,000 into the Mughal treasury at Hugli, known as the 'yeerly Piscash'.¹⁸ A term used widely across the Persianate world of West, Central and South Asia, *pishkash* referred to 'a present from someone of an inferior status' to a social superior, including but not limited to 'a due or tribute

¹⁶ Eaton, R.M. *The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier, 1204-1760* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1993); Alam, M. *The Crisis of Empire in Mughal North India: Awadh and Punjab, 1707-1748* (2nd ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

¹⁷ John Russell to Zulfiqar Khan, Calcutta, 7 July 1712: Wilson, C.R., ed. *The Early Annals of the English in Bengal, being The Bengal Public Consultations for the First Half of the Eighteenth Century* (3 vols. London: W. Thacker & Co., 1895-1917), II.1: 65. The king referred to is the Mughal emperor, Jahandar Shah (r. 1712-13).

¹⁸ BL, IOR/G/20/1, f. 102. Hugli Diary, 25 September 1678 (in Dhaka).

paid to the ruler or his officials.’¹⁹ As Ann Lambton has shown in the context of Safavid Persia, both regular payments by provincial governors to the Shah and ad-hoc gifts on occasions such as their appointment to office were styled *pishkash*, the common thread being their function of ‘emphasizing both the loyalty and subordination of the giver’.²⁰ A similar range of meanings applied in the Mughal context. Thus, in official chronicles we encounter the term *pishkash* in relation to the tribute paid to Aurangzeb by the last sultan of Bijapur, Sikandar Adil Shah, in 1678, but also to describe the princely sum (thirty *lakhs* of rupees and four *lakhs* in jewels) delivered that same year by the Mughal viceroy of Bengal, Shaista Khan.²¹ Finally, it is also the term used to describe the offerings which princes and great nobles made to Aurangzeb on occasions such as the *Eid al-Fitr*, or breaking of the fast following the month of Ramadan.²² The dual nature of the *pishkash*, framed as a gift yet one that was demanded by the recipient, is evident too in East India Company sources that refer to ‘ye p[re]sent of Rup[ee]s 3000: yearly exacted at Hugly’.²³ By discursively aligning the arrangement that formalised the Company’s presence in Bengal with standard Mughal practice in dealings with vassals and landholders, the community of English traders was thus rendered as one among a wide spectrum of beneficiaries of the emperor’s favour falling under the capacious umbrella of imperial authority.

Of symbolic more than monetary importance, the annual *pishkash* of Rs. 3,000 was just the tip of the iceberg in terms of gifts distributed by the Company in Bengal. A second type of gifts was of a customary nature, not formalised as such but dictated by precedent. It consisted

¹⁹ Lambton, A. “*Pīshkash*: Present or Tribute?” *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 57 (1) (1994), 145-158, at 145. About the Persianate world, see Eaton, R.M. *India in the Persianate Age 1000-1765* (London: Allen Lane, 2019), 11-18.

²⁰ Lambton, “*Pīshkash*: Present or Tribute?” 150.

²¹ Must’ad Khan, S., Jadunath Sarkar (ed.), *Maāsir-i-‘Alamgiri: A History of the Emperor Aurangzib-‘Alamgir (reign 1668-1707 A.D.) of Sāqi Must’ad Khan* (Calcutta: Royal Asiatic Society of Bengal, 1947), 103-104. A *lakh* refers to 100,000. The tribute paid by Sikandar Adil Shah amounted to 11 *lakhs*, or Rs. 1,100,000. About the role of *pishkash* in Mughal political culture, see Athar Ali. *The Mughal Nobility*, 143-144.

²² Must’ad Khan, *Maāsir-i-‘Alamgiri*, 76. On this occasion, in 1673, the Mughal princes and nobles presented *pishkash* worth 50 *lakhs*, while the sultans of Bijapur and Golconda, as acknowledgement of Mughal suzerainty, sent jewels, embroidery, gems, Chinaware and other goods worth four and three *lakhs* respectively.

²³ IOR/G/20/1, f. 71. Hugli Diary, 3 August 1678 (in Dhaka).

of presents made to a wide range of local officials – from the town governor, judge (*qazi*), paymaster (*bakhshi*), and imperial news writer (*waqianavis* or *akhbarnavis*), down to the scribes and translators in the employment of these notables, each according to rank. Meant to grease the relations with the various members of local governments in towns such as Hugli, these regular episodes of gift-giving inform us about the tastes and demands of Mughal elites as well as the leverage these local actors had in brokering the larger Anglo-Mughal relationship. EIC records make clear that gift-giving in regional centres of trade and administration followed a steady, often annual, rhythm. It featured a familiar assortment of gifts (textiles, firearms, glasswork, mirrors, knives and sword blades, and European and Asian consumables such as liquors and spices) and was embedded in wider negotiations. In particular, decisions to let the Company's goods pass freely, or the issuing of commands to that effect to subordinate officials, were often conditional on the presentation of suitable gifts. Thus, 'for the better carrying on of our future Affairs', the Englishmen in Sutanuti (later: Calcutta) in October 1690 prepared presents to the *faujdar* (military governor) and *bakhshi* of Hugli, comprising varieties of green and scarlet cloth, velvet, glass and amber knives, a standing globe, two guns, and '1 Glass picture Woman'.²⁴ The reasoning behind the practice was clearly summarised six years later: 'the Bengall Trade Centring there [in Hugli] they can Stop or Clear goods at pleasure therefore best to keep friends with them'.²⁵ And again, in 1697, when the Sutanuti Council tried to court the support of the governor of Bengal's son, Zabardast Khan, they made the point that 'persons who haue business are not acceptable & welcome to these great Persons empty handed'. They accordingly decided to send an 'Arruzdaast' (*arzdast*: petition) along with a present of broadcloth, flintware, green and red velvet, and six sword blades.²⁶

²⁴ IOR/G/7/1, ff. 36-37: Consultations Sutanuti, 20 October 1690.

²⁵ IOR/E/4/1, f. 95: Abstract Fort William to Company, 31 December 1706.

²⁶ IOR/G/7/2, ff. 106-107: Consultations Sutanuti, 24 June 1697.

In addition to these items, which represented the Company's commercial assortment and specimens of European technology in equal parts, the English also gifted a range of goods that reflected established patterns of Mughal elite consumption. Hence, one *aftaba* and *chilamchi* (water ewer and washbasin) appeared on the list of gifts presented to the governor of Bengal in October 1690, while officers in Murshidabad received seven rosewater bottles, a betel box, two *pikdani* (spitting pots), as well as three 'Hubbubbles' or water pipes (*hooqah*) in January 1704.²⁷ It is likely that objects were selected based on information regarding the recipient's expectations, possibly even directly communicated by the latter. For instance, shortly after the English presented the governor of Bengal, Ibrahim Khan, a collection of gift goods including a couple of brass guns, he conveyed his interest in receiving more brass guns of the same type.²⁸ Lower-ranking officials, too, were not shy to convey their demands. After the Company disbursed nearly Rs. 2,800 in gifts to sixteen officials within the Hugli administration, in October 1704, the *bakhshi* and *akhbarnavis* returned word that they would not accept their presents unless augmented. Keen to avoid troubling the waters, the President and Council in Calcutta instructed their *vakil* (agent or attorney) to come to a private understanding with the two men, offering them another three to four hundred rupees to remain on good terms.²⁹

Concerns with trade passing untaxed through Mughal domains without hinder or delay form a recurring refrain in English factory records throughout our period. Reflective of the bargaining power of local officials, patterns of gift giving illuminate the constant brokering required to ensure that arrangements agreed to by central or provincial authorities would operate on a day-to-day level. In a typical passage, the Council at Fort William (Calcutta)

²⁷ IOR/G/7/1, f. 34: Consultations Sutanuti, 14 October 1690; IOR/P/1/1, f. 121: Consultations Fort William, 10 January 1704.

²⁸ IOR/G/7/5, f. 20: Job Charnock et al. to Charles Eyre, Sutanuti, 27 August 1690; IOR/G/7/1 (Vol. II), f. 34: Consultations Sutanuti, 17 December 1690. Compare Laver's concept of 'quasi-gifts' referring to those items the Dutch East India Company presented to Japanese officials at the explicit request of the latter: Laver, *The Dutch East India Company*, 16.

²⁹ IOR/P/1/1, f. 93: Consultations Fort William, 30 October 1704. For a detailed break-down of the gifts presented to each of the sixteen individuals, see: IOR/P/1/1, ff. 85-86: Consultations Fort William, 2 October 1704.

remarked that ‘It being a Custom of many years Standing to give Presents once a year to the Persons in the Governm:t of Hugly [...therefore] we judge it necessary in order to preserve their Friendship that we delay no Longer to give them the usuall Presents’.³⁰ As India’s trading pattern was governed by the rhythm of the monsoons, all parties were well aware that delaying the boats that carried merchandise down the Ganges and Hugli rivers from inland centres such as Patna could prevent them from reaching Calcutta in time for trans-shipment. Negotiations over gifts, therefore, were particularly vibrant during the shipping season, when the leverage of government officials was greatest. Yet in this finely calibrated system of checks and balances the Company also had a card up its sleeve. When the English deemed demands for gifts and payments to be excessive, they could threaten to move their business to a different district or obstruct the trade of Indian merchants, as indeed happened on multiple occasions. Such measures meant the loss of income for Mughal tax collectors and economic damage to Mughal subjects, not to mention reduced access to gift goods for local officials. For all of these reasons the latter also retained a clear interest in maintaining workable relations with the Europeans.

The third category of gifts shaping Anglo-Mughal interactions in Bengal consisted of the sizeable periodic presentations of valuables to provincial governors. In much the same way that reciprocal interests helped uphold the status quo, however tenuous, between Company agents and Mughal officers in port towns such as Hugli, mutual benefit also underpinned the ‘nebulous alliance’ which Farhat Hasan has argued existed between the English and the ruling elite at the *subah* (province) level.³¹ Precisely because the EIC’s exemption from custom duties was not formalised in a *farman* issued by the emperor, the *subahdars* (provincial governors) and

³⁰ IOR/P/1/2, f. 401: Consultations Fort William, 1 February 1714.

³¹ Hasan, F. “Conflict and Cooperation in Anglo-Mughal Trade Relations During the Reign of Aurangzeb.” *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 3 (4) (1991), 351-360, at 356. About the ‘perceived mutual advantage’ between Indian authorities and European traders that helped maintain a ‘fragile equilibrium’ between either side, see Prakash, *European Commercial Enterprise*, 124; Subrahmanyam, S. “Forcing the Doors of Heathendom: Ethnography, Violence, and the Dutch East India Company.” in *Between the Middle Ages and Modernity: Individual and Community in the Early Modern World*, eds. C.H. Parker and J.H. Bentley (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2007), 131-153, at 137.

provincial *diwans* (chief revenue officials) who administered Bengal possessed a key advantage in their relations with the English.³² Besides smaller gifts received on their appointment, these governors also expected more substantial presents upon issuing their written commands (*parwanas* or *sanads*) to subordinate officials with orders to let English trade pass without demanding customs.³³

It is worth observing that interactions with the provincial government comprised many of the familiar trappings of early modern diplomacy. Thus, recounting his first audience with Shaista Khan, in Dhaka in 1682, William Hedges recalled that the *subahdar* ‘sent officers to bring me into his presence, being sat under a large canopy of State’.³⁴ Having been assigned a place in the assembly hall by the official in charge of ceremonies, Hedges looked on as Shaista Khan appointed subordinates to military-administrative offices and invested them with robes of honour, a routine replicating that of the imperial court.³⁵ Over the following six weeks Hedges conducted multiple negotiations with Shaista Khan, the latter’s *diwan* (Rai Nandalal), the provincial *diwan* (Haji Sufi Khan), as well as the latter’s son (the *faujdar* of Hugli), eventually succeeding in soliciting a series of *parwanas*. What is more, Shaista Khan agreed to write to the emperor recommending that the English should be exempted from paying customs.³⁶ Naturally, such valuable backing carried a price tag, often as intensely negotiated as the commercial agreement itself. From his appointment as provincial *diwan* of Bengal in 1700 until his death in 1727, most of these transactions involved the powerful Murshid Quli

³² A dated but still useful discussion of Mughal provincial administration is Sarkar, J. *The Mughal Administration: Six Lectures* (Patna: Government Printing, 1920), 40-51.

³³ See for instance: Abstract of Fort St. George to Company, Madras, 12 September 1706: *Records of Fort St. George: Despatches to England 1701-02 to 1710-11* (Madras: Government Press, 1925), 49.

³⁴ Hedges, W., H. Yule and R. Barlow (eds.), *The Diary of William Hedges, Esq. (afterwards Sir William Hedges), During his Agency in Bengal; as well as on His Voyage Out and Return Overland (1681-1687)* (3 vols. London: Hakluyt Society, 1887-1889), I: 43.

³⁵ Ibid. Nobles were only allowed to use such marks of dignity as accorded to them by the emperor: Athar Ali, *The Mughal Nobility*, 137-142. Compare: Nathan, M., M.I. Borah (trans.), *Baharistan-i-Ghaybī: A History of the Mughal Wars in Assam, Cooch Behar, Bengal, Bihar and Orissa during the reigns of Jahāngir and Shāhjahān, by Mīrzā Nathan* (2 Vols. Gauhati: Government of Assam, 1936), I: 213-214.

³⁶ Hedges, *Diary of William Hedges* I: 53-56, 61-62, 99-101.

Khan, who went on to become *subahdar* of Bengal and eventually its virtually independent ruler.³⁷ As relayed to the Company's Indian *vakils* attending his *darbar* (court), the payments Murshid Quli Khan demanded for his *sanads* lay in the region of Rs. 20,000-30,000.³⁸ In other words, the Company's periodic distribution of presents to the local and provincial governments far outstripped the *pishkash* of 3,000 rupees it was formally held to pay.

Finally, it will be instructive to consider gifts of a congratulatory nature presented to Indian dignitaries in accordance with Mughal social practice. Consisting of varying numbers of *mohurs* (gold coins) and silver rupees, the ceremonial offering to social superiors known as *nazr* carried the connotation of a vow (from the Arabic: *nadhr*) or 'oath of allegiance'.³⁹ As M. Athar Ali notes, amounts were usually small, citing a minimum of one *mohur* and five rupees, although Mughal chronicles show that the number of coins offered to the emperor could vary widely and run to a thousand *mohurs* or more.⁴⁰ Company sources make clear that the importance of complying with Mughal custom was keenly felt and constantly invoked. Upon news of the impending arrival of prince Azim-ush-Shan, grandson of Aurangzeb, who came to Bengal in 1697 to take up the post of *subahdar*, the English deemed it 'absolutely necessary [...] to visitt the Prince (as most persons have already done) w:th a Nuzzerana [*nazr*] of 25: Mohurs & 100: Rupees'.⁴¹ Once again, in 1712, when receiving notice that the prince had proclaimed himself emperor, the governor of Fort William visited Murshid Quli Khan and 'Carried five Mohurs and Nine Rupees for a Congratulatory Present for the Welcome News the Duan [*diwan*] had heard'. If their exact content varied depending on occasion, these public

³⁷ Karim, A. *Murshid Qulī Khān and his Times* (Dhaka: The Asiatic Society of Pakistan, 1963).

³⁸ IOR/P/1/1, ff. 92, 177-178, 250-251: Consultations Fort William, 27 October 1704, 22 January, and 18 October 1705; IOR/E/4/1, ff. 4, 28, 52, 95, 139: Abstracts Fort William to Company, 20 January 1704, 10 January 1705, 30 November 1705, 31 December 1706, 13 October 1707.

³⁹ Minault, G. "The Emperor's Old Clothes: Robing and Sovereignty in Late Mughal and Early British India." in *Robes of Honour: Khil'at in Pre-Colonial and Colonial India*, ed. S. Gordon (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2003), 125-139, at 127; Mitchell, C.P. *Sir Thomas Roe and the Mughal Empire* (Karachi: Area Study Centre for Europe, 2000), 165.

⁴⁰ Athar Ali, *The Mughal Nobility*, 144. Compare: Must'ad Khan, *Maāsir-i- 'Alamgiri*, 147, 150, 217, 227.

⁴¹ IOR/G/7/2, f. 107: Consultations Sutanuti, 24 June 1697.

offerings were all similar in form.⁴² This pattern extended to the social sphere, as cultivating political ties with influential members of the imperial government meant no less to obey the laws of Mughal elite sociability. During his stay in Dhaka in 1682, Hedges recorded that a son was born to Shaista Khan and that, accordingly, ‘‘twas expected I should make him a visit, and give him a present’, upon which he made his way to the *darbar* with a *nazr* of 13 gold *mohurs* and 21 silver rupees.⁴³ The birth of a son to another Mughal nobleman and official in Bengal, Ziyauddin Khan, in 1711, inspired the same response. ‘[I]t being ye Custom to pay a Complim[en]t & send a present on such occasions’, the President and Council noted, they agreed to send their *vakil* with a gift of silk and 5 gold *mohurs*.⁴⁴

In each of the cited cases, the English conformed closely to the expectations of Mughal gift culture. As the next section will illustrate, their compliance with the traditions of *pishkash* and *nazr* was by no means limited to provincial politics but extended to the highest level of courtly diplomacy, with gifts functioning as the material manifestation of an empire-wide ceremonial discourse that functioned to define and reassert relations of authority and service.

‘Proper for a Present’: Gifts to the Mughal Court

The death of Aurangzeb in March 1707 set off a series of succession struggles that pitched the members of the imperial family and their respective support networks against one another in bloody conflicts that destabilised the empire and irreparably weakened central authority.⁴⁵ In the space of twelve years, no less than six emperors came to the throne while multiple others crowned themselves emperor in expression of their claims and ambition.⁴⁶ If in the longer term

⁴² Consultations Fort William, 7 April 1712: Wilson, *Early Annals* II.1: 48. English gifts of *nazr* tended to consist of odd numbers. I have not found information regarding the significance of specific amounts of coins in this context.

⁴³ Hedges, *Diary of William Hedges* I: 48.

⁴⁴ IOR/P/1/2, f. 76: Consultations Fort William, 5 February 1711.

⁴⁵ About the role of princely support networks, see Faruqi, *The Princes of the Mughal Empire*.

⁴⁶ For a schematic overview, see Fisher, M.H. *A Short History of the Mughal Empire* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016), 215.

the erosion of Mughal central authority increasingly steered the EIC towards political relations with regional powers, throughout the 1710s its focus remained firmly on securing new *farmans* from the reigning emperor. True to the tradition that grants and edicts lost their force upon a change in command, the Company's need to have its privileges confirmed by Bahadur Shah (r. 1707-1712) and Farrukhsiyar (r. 1713-1719) illustrates the enduring importance of Mughal sovereignty as a source of legitimacy even when actual power to enforce commands was in decline. Initial contacts between the English and Bahadur Shah's court centred on Madras (Chennai) at a time when the emperor was campaigning in the Deccan against his brother and rival throne contender, Kam Bakhsh (d. January 1709). This rapprochement set in motion an intense process of diplomatic exchanges centred on the dispatch of a set of precious gift goods to the imperial court, which ultimately culminated in 1715 when John Surman and Khwaja Israel Sarhad arrived at Farrukhsiyar's court in Delhi at the head of a grand embassy.⁴⁷

We first learn about the negotiations regarding a gift to Bahadur Shah through the intermediation of Ziyauddin Khan, who acted as the 'Lord High Steward' or *Khan-i Saman* of the emperor's household prior to his appointment as governor of Hugli. Having invited the governor of Fort St. George (Madras) to submit a petition to the new sovereign in early 1708, Ziyauddin Khan subsequently arranged for the delivery of the emperor's *husb-ul-hukm* (literally: according to command) by means of his wife who resided near Madras.⁴⁸ This royal order, President Thomas Pitt's petitions written in reply, and particularly the *husb-ul-hukm* and letters from various imperial officials received in Madras in December 1708, exemplify the rhetorical framing of the political relationship between the Mughal ruler and the English

⁴⁷ For accounts of the Surman embassy, see Wilson, C.R., ed., *The Early Annals of the English in Bengal, being The Bengal Public Consultations for the First Half of the Eighteenth Century, Vol. II-Part II: The Surman Embassy* (Calcutta: The Bengal Secretariat Book Depot, 1911).

⁴⁸ Consultations Fort St. George, 24 January, 12 March, and 7 August 1708: *Records of Fort St. George: Diary and Consultation Book of 1708* (Madras: Government Press, 1929), 9, 14, 42 [Henceforth: *RFSG: DCB*]. To thank Ziyauddin Khan's wife, the Madras agents sent her a gift of Persian fruits, rosewater, filigree work from Manila, and a piece of Persian gold cloth.

community settled in his domains. As Abhishek Kaicker observed, '[i]n a state that represented itself as organized around the figure of an emperor who was an absolute source of power, all communication must necessarily take the form of either 'petition' or 'command'.⁴⁹ Communications between the Mughal government and the EIC proved no exception. Indeed, they fit a broader pattern described by Rohit De and Robert Travers, who noted that in South Asia petitioning was a practice through which 'subjects have been both incorporated' into networks of power and 'acculturated into sanctioned modes of rhetorical address and bodily comportment'.⁵⁰ Steeped in stylised Persianate formulae, the tone and intent of Bahadur Shah's *husb-ul-hukms* to Pitt and the latter's replies remain clearly palpable in their contemporary English translations. In particular, expectations of loyal service and assurances of royal favour and gracious reward form the organising principles in a discourse designed to glorify the emperor as the pinnacle of authority and justice.⁵¹

In July 1708, the emperor's *wazir* (first minister) informed Pitt that 'The good and faithfull services you have done his Majesties Subjects has been represented to him' and that as 'a mark of his favour to you he has ordered this Husbulhookum [*husb-ul-hukm*] to be sent you'. Having been reminded that 'further marks of his Maj[es]tys Grace' might be expected if he continued to observe the royal commands, the Englishman dutifully responded that the latter were 'kept as Sacred by us as they were in the time of your Majestys Royall Predecess[o]rs', pledging himself 'as in Duty bound' to pray for the emperor's victorious reign.⁵² The *husb-ul-hukm* issued in October 1708 reiterated that Pitt's petition 'ma[de] known the constancy of his faithfull service'. Affirmations that the requested *farman* would be granted were then followed

⁴⁹ Kaicker, A. "Petitions and Local Politics in the Late Mughal Empire: The View from Kol, 1741." *Modern Asian Studies* 53 (1) (2019), 21-51, at 27.

⁵⁰ De, R., and R. Travers. "Petitioning and Political Cultures in South Asia: Introduction." *Modern Asian Studies* 53 (1) (2019), 1-20, at 9-10.

⁵¹ Consultations Fort St. George, 7 August and 13 December 1708: *RFSG DCB 1708*, 42-43, 63. The first *husb-ul-hukm* was dated 1 July 1708; the second 9 Shaban in the second year of Bahadur Shah's reign (24 October 1708). President Pitt's petition was entered in Fort St. George's Consultation book on 13 August 1708.

⁵² Consultations Fort St. George, 7 and 13 August 1708: *RFSG DCB 1708*, 43-44. This *husb-ul-hukm* was signed by Bahadur Shah's *wazir* Munim Khan, who carried the titles *khan-i-khanan* Bahadur Zafar Jung.

by a series of concrete directives to the English, the most consequential being the order to intercept Kam Bakhsh if he were to attempt to escape by sea, making ‘Endeavours to deliver him killed, or a Prisoner in the hands of Power’. After ordering Pitt to ensure that merchants could trade safely in the areas under his jurisdiction, the document closed with the injunction that ‘he shall shew all the Duty and service he is able and according to his good service he may expect a Retribution’.⁵³ It is worth noting that, while pushing back gently against some of the more ambitious dictates, Pitt did not challenge the issuing of orders itself: ‘His Majestys Commands in his Husbullhookum shall be strictly obey’d as far as it lyes in our power’.⁵⁴ Describing the act of petitioning as ‘to lay at your Royall Feet, the Humble offering of our gratefull hearts’, Pitt’s heavily scripted appeal for ‘the continuance of your Majestys blessings’ underlines the reciprocal nature of this rhetoric of service, honour, and protection.⁵⁵

In line with Mughal practice, Bahadur Shah’s written orders also came accompanied by a further mark of favour in the form of a robe of honour (*khil’at* or *sarapa*), a royal gift which functioned as an act of investiture that gave material expression to the bonds of patronage and fealty articulated in his decrees.⁵⁶ Mughal emperors, members of the imperial family, and high nobles distributed robes of honour in large numbers and on a wide variety of occasions, yet what united these transactions was their common association with notions of reward, distinction, and ties of loyalty.⁵⁷ Being accorded the usual treatment of Mughal vassals, Pitt was expected to also perform their part. In a note to the Madras-based merchant Aga Makeem, Ziyauddin Khan stipulated that the English President should receive the imperial favours ‘with all manner of respect as accustomary’ and publicly dress himself in the robe of honour, which

⁵³ Consultations Fort St. George, 13 December 1708: *RFSG DCB 1708*, 63.

⁵⁴ Thomas Pitt to Ziyauddin Khan, Madras, 4 January 1708: *RFSG DCB 1709*, 2.

⁵⁵ Petition Thomas Pitt to Bahadur Shah, Madras, 17 February 1709: *RFSG DCB 1709*, 52.

⁵⁶ On the widespread nature of the tradition, see: Gordon (ed.), *Robes of Honour*.

⁵⁷ Must’ad Khan, *Maāsir-i-‘Alamgiri*, passim. Mirza Nathan mentions an autonomous *raja* brought into the imperial fold, conferred robes of honour, and thus ‘converted into a loyal officer’, as well as existing officers sent robes of honour ‘as an incentive to other loyal officers in the discharge of their duties with zeal’: Nathan, *Baharistan-i-Ghaybī* I: 27, 297.

elsewhere he described as ‘a Glory and Credit to the Shoulder that wears it’. Makeem relayed the message to Pitt, stating that ‘you doubtless know the Custom to be observed when you Receive the Kings Tashereef [*tashrif*, here the robe of honour]’, a clear indication that the Englishman was meant to conform to Mughal custom.⁵⁸ Sure enough, when the *husb-ul-hukm* and *khil’at* reached the vicinity of Madras, Pitt and his Council rode out from the fort accompanied by all notable European and Indian inhabitants to receive the imperial favours ‘with the usuall Ceremonys practiced in these Kingdoms on the like occasion’. Furthermore, again in conscious conformance with Mughal practice, the courier who delivered the royal items was presented with 300 rupees and three yards of scarlet cloth.⁵⁹

Together with the *husb-ul-hukms* arrived a set of additional communications conveying in unmistakable terms that the expected sequence when requesting new *farmans* following throne successions was to send an appropriate gift first.⁶⁰ Ziyauddin Khan instructed Pitt that it was ‘necessary that according to the way good subjects walk in, yourself walk in the same’, and that he ought to style his solicitation ‘after the way and Custom of the Derbarre [*darbar*]’.⁶¹ Helpfully, the letter included ‘A List of what [is] Proper for a Present’, including a detailed break-down of suitable gifts for the emperor, princes, and chief officials, distinguishing explicitly between the general *pishkash* and the *nazr* to Bahadur Shah. The first category consisted of ‘Rarities of all Countrys’, which comprised a wide range of luxury items from East and Southeast Asia, Iran, and Europe. Among items from Eastern Asia, we find Chinese silks, lacquered Japanese writing desks with inlaid mother-of-pearl, rare and fine Chinese porcelain ‘the older the better’, painted Chinese screens, Filipino filigree metalwork, and orange trees in

⁵⁸ Consultations Fort St. George, 13 December 1708: *RFSG: DCB 1708*, 61-64. Ziyauddin Khan’s note was dated 29 October 1708 and Agha Makeem’s 11 December 1708.

⁵⁹ Consultations Fort St. George, 13 and 21 December 1708: *RFSG: DCB 1708*, 61-62, 72. For the ceremonies practiced upon the receipt of imperial orders and robes of honours, see Nathan, *Baharistan-i-Ghaybī* I: 297: ‘The Khāns came out to receive them with the greatest humility and after making their obeisance they offered their prostrations of gratitude to the Eternal. They put on the robes of honour and placing the *sanads* or grants of their increase in rank, on their head and eyes, they again performed necessary formalities of obeisance.’

⁶⁰ Consultations Fort St. George, 13 December 1708: *RFSG: DCB 1708*, 64-65, 68.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 65.

pots, such as were imported from Pegu, Aceh, or China. Other products from the Indian Ocean world appearing on this list were Persian carpets, ambergris, artificial flowers made of silk, and ‘Sea Coco Nutts the best of the best’. European goods in demand comprised broadcloth of the finest sort, silks and velvets, and varieties of English and Venetian glassware (among which lanterns, mirrors, and a good quantity of *hooqahs*), fine children’s toys, tapestries and curtains, and black and red pencils. Other European items consisted of guns and cannon, swords and lances, and chiming clocks and watches. Finally, the list called for live birds (particularly those ‘that can speak’), a good elephant, and horses from Aceh.⁶²

As for the gift to Bahadur Shah upon his accession to the throne, Ziyauddin Khan recommended that high-quality rubies, topazes, sapphires, or emerald rings would be most suitable, especially in the form of the costly jewelled turban ornaments known as *sarpech* and *jigha*. Additionally, he advised that spice oils and rose waters would be appropriate, as well as rarities from Europe, China, Persia and other countries except for India itself.⁶³ A combination of exotic luxury goods from across maritime Asia, European craftwork and technology, and items typically included in gift assortments presented and received by Mughal elites (rich jewels, horses, elephants, and rose waters), it is evident that Ziyauddin Khan’s list reflected Mughal tastes and patterns of elite consumption.⁶⁴ That said, the inclusion of typical Company gift goods such as broadcloth, European manufacture such as firearms and clocks, but also lacquer, porcelain, and spices suggests that the selection must have been influenced by previous patterns of dealings with European traders and knowledge of the kind of markets they had access to. For instance, the parallels between the items on Ziyauddin Khan’s list and the gifts presented to Aurangzeb during the embassy of Sir William Norris (1699-1702) are striking.

⁶² Ibid., 66.

⁶³ Ibid, 66-67.

⁶⁴ Mughal chronicles contain countless examples of gifts of jewels, jewelled weapons, horses, elephants, and ornaments such as *sarpech* exchanged between the emperor and princes and courtiers, and as diplomatic gifts: Must’ad Khan, *Maāsir-i-‘Alamgiri*, 21-22, 97, 144, 202, 287, and *passim*.

The selection presented on behalf of King William III included multiple varieties of cloth, clocks, mirrors, glasswork including *huqqahs* and rosewater bottles, sword blades and guns, as well as telescopes and twelve custom-made brass cannon. Tellingly, Norris' personal gift to the emperor consisted of a gold casket containing 201 gold *mohurs*, clearly recognisable as a sumptuous *nazr*.⁶⁵ As such, lists of gift goods in Anglo-Mughal political exchange are valuable in at least three ways. They inform us about Mughal elite tastes and English attempts to cater to them, highlight the Company's role as a supplier of foreign exotica, and underline that the Company's political relations with the imperial court and occasional diplomatic missions sponsored by the English Crown followed very similar patterns of interaction.

A further aspect that the preparation of Bahadur Shah's gift had in common with Norris' earlier embassy is the tangible way in which both illuminate the at times excruciatingly complex logistics of Anglo-Mughal diplomacy.⁶⁶ In the early months of 1709, the agents at Fort St. George acquired the gift goods and prepared them for transportation, deciding to ship them first to the port of Masulipatnam from where to arrange for their overland carriage to the emperor's camp at Hyderabad.⁶⁷ However, before any goods were transferred, and whilst Ziyauddin Khan had already arranged for an imperial *gurzbardar* (mace-bearer, charged with carrying orders) to escort the gifts from Masulipatnam with *dastaks* (passes) for their safe conveyance, Bahadur Shah settled his affairs in Hyderabad and moved his court all the way north to Delhi.⁶⁸ Part of the present did make it to Masulipatnam in September 1709, only to remain there for eighteen months. The Council at Fort St. George was put off by the high costs involved in transporting the gift goods onwards through unstable territory, and decided to wait

⁶⁵ IOR/E/3/61, no. 7559.

⁶⁶ For an account of Norris' embassy and its logistical woes, see Das, H., S.C. Sarkar, ed., *The Norris Embassy to Aurangzib (1699-1702)* (Calcutta: Firma K.L. Mukhopadhyay, 1959). Commissioned by King William III, Norris' embassy acted on behalf of the "New" East India Company founded in 1698.

⁶⁷ Consultations Fort St. George, 15 January and 11, 17, and 19 February 1709: *RFSG: DCB 1709*, 13-14, 22, 24-29.

⁶⁸ Consultations Fort St. George, 21 May, 24 June, 23 August, and 9 September 1709: *RFSG: DCB 1709*, 45-46, 54, 67, 71.

and see.⁶⁹ An opening appeared in 1710 when Ziyauddin Khan announced his appointment as *faujdar* of Hugli and requested the presents to be sent there. Nonetheless, a break-through did not occur until the following year, as the *gurzbardar* and *faujdar* charged with overseeing their transport from Masulipatnam were reluctant to release the gifts. The present eventually arrived in Bengal in mid-1711, although without the six elephants purchased in 1709 which had since been sold off as their long-term maintenance had become too costly.⁷⁰

When inspected by the Company's agents in Calcutta, the latter found many of the gift goods far from suitable for presentation at the Mughal court. To replace items deemed wanting they requested Fort St. George to forward more European commodities, particularly broadcloth, velvets and brocades, silks, as well as pistols and brass guns.⁷¹ Meanwhile, they again opened communications with the court to request imperial protection in the form of a convoy and letters of safe passage.⁷² Bahadur Shah's death in February 1712 meant that the present destined for him was to be redirected to his successor. President John Russell informed the new emperor, Jahandar Shah (r. 1712-1713), that the English were 'Your Majesties most Obedient Slaves, always Intent upon Your Commands', and that the present lay ready for transport in Calcutta.⁷³ This time, the volatile situation at the imperial centre caused further delays. Soon after Jahandar Shah's overthrow and execution in February 1713, Russell sent another highly stylised petition to Delhi, now addressed to Farrukhsiyar. Reminding the new emperor that the English 'have been continually dutifull servants', how in the past they 'supply'd the Imperiall Troops largely with ammunition and provision', and that they 'received

⁶⁹ Consultations Fort St. George, 14 September and 1 December 1709: *RFSG: DCB 1709*, 72, 107; Abstract Fort St. George to Company, Madras, 6 January 1710: *RFSG: Despatches to England 1701-1711*, 121.

⁷⁰ Consultations Fort St. George, 13 February, 4 April, 31 July, 20 September, and 9 November 1710: *RFSG: DCB 1710*, 16, 35, 78, 98, 115; Abstract Fort St. George to Company, Madras, 5 January and 8 February 1711: *RFSG: Despatches to England 1701-1711*, 142-143, 148.

⁷¹ IOR/E/4/1, f. 284: Fort William to Company, Calcutta, 28 August 1711; Fort William to Fort St. George, Calcutta, 31 August 1711: *RFSG: Letters to Fort St. George, 1711*, 99. Items deemed improper included punch bowls, carpets, and 'old silver beetle [betel or *paan*] boxes'.

⁷² Fort William to Fort St. George, Calcutta, 28 February 1712: *RFSG: Letters to Fort St. George, 1712*, 67.

⁷³ John Russell to Jahandar Shah, Calcutta, 15 September 1712: Wilson, *Early Annals* II.1: 65.

Sirpaws [*sarapas*, robes of honour] as a reward for our Service’, Russell communicated the Company’s desire to convey the present to court and be granted custom-free trade ‘as formerly’.⁷⁴ *Husb-ul-hukms* ordering all local officials to assist in the transport and protection of the presents arrived in October 1713, and by April 1714 the boats with gift goods started to make their way upriver towards Patna.⁷⁵

In the five years it had taken for the gift goods to be dispatched their composition had undergone multiple modifications. Whilst lying packed in Calcutta’s warehouses, the swords had become damaged by rust, the gilding of some of the mirrors had come off, and five of the large chiming clocks had the glass in front of their dial plates broken. Moreover, a substantial part of the gold and silver plate has been stolen from the warehouse.⁷⁶ New items were added to replace and complement what had been shipped from Masulipatnam, including more textiles, sword blades, clocks, and mirrors, but also fifty chests of Shiraz wine, ‘two Jappan’d Copper Fountains with Air Pums’, and a six-feet wide map of the world inscribed with Persian characters.⁷⁷ Of yet others we only learn during the embassy itself, such as the ‘Unicorns Horn’, large piece of ambergris, and gold writing desk presented by Surman together with no less than 1001 gold *mohurs* on his first audience with Farrukhshiyar, on 4 July 1715.⁷⁸ Hence, when the convoy finally made its way to Delhi, it was a grand affair indeed, with one hundred bullock carts required to carry presents together weighing perhaps some sixty tons.⁷⁹

During their two-year stay at court, Surman and Sarhad received multiple robes of honour, jewelled daggers, and turban ornaments, with similar items sent to President Robert Hedges, who also received an elephant.⁸⁰ Of most importance to the Company, when the

⁷⁴ John Russell to Farrukhsiyar, Calcutta, 27 March 1713: Wilson, *Early Annals* II.1: 111-112.

⁷⁵ Consultations Fort William, 19 and 22 October 1713, 19 April 1714: Wilson, *Early Annals* II.1: 143, 171.

⁷⁶ IOR/E/4/1, ff. 400, 450-451: Fort William to Company, Calcutta, 8 February and 3 December 1713.

⁷⁷ Consultations Fort William, 27 January, 1 February, 18 March, and 9 April 1714: Wilson, *Early Annals* II.1: 158-161, 169-170.

⁷⁸ John Surman and Edward Stephenson to Fort William, Delhi, 8 July 1715: Wilson, *Early Annals* II.2: 47. For gifts presented on later occasions, see: Ibid, 51-52, 66, 74.

⁷⁹ Wilson, *Early Annals* II.2: xx.

⁸⁰ Ibid, 47, 56, 196, 208-209, 251. Robert Hedges was the nephew of the William Hedges discussed above.

embassy returned to Bengal in November 1717, a *gurbardar* carried comprehensive *farmans* granting custom-free trade throughout the empire on the payment of a set annual *pishkash* in Bengal, Madras, and, crucially, Surat.⁸¹ Ultimately, these edicts proved of limited use, as Farrukhsiyar lacked effective power and was deposed and killed in 1719. Nonetheless, their solemn reception by Hedges offers a final reminder of just how fully Anglo-Mughal political exchanges responded to the patterns of Mughal imperial culture.⁸²

Conclusion

When addressing the imperial *wazir*, Zulfiqar Khan, in June 1709, President Thomas Pitt announced that ‘Pursuant to your Commands we have long since made the best collection we could of the rarietys of Europe, Persia, and China, to lay at the Feet of the great King’.⁸³ Highly deferential in tone, Pitt’s allusion to gifts expected from the English was far removed from Aungier’s cynical equation of an earlier demand with ‘plunder’. Yet both these episodes of gift giving and their respective understandings by English Company agents were situated on the same spectrum. Whether the stated objective was to honour an emperor upon his succession, solicit commands from provincial governors, or maintain productive relations with local officials, all such material exchanges followed a logic whereby the Company gratified the imperial government for the trading concessions and protection it received. This logic reflected the principles of Mughal political culture, with gifts functioning as the material expression of notions of submission, loyalty, and service, as well as patronage, honour, and reward. As we have seen, these principles structured relations with the central court but also percolated down to the provincial governments, where local powerholders likewise possessed considerable

⁸¹ Consultations Fort William, 23 November 1717: Wilson, *Early Annals* II.1: 287-288.

⁸² Consultations Fort William, 16 November 1717: Wilson, *Early Annals* II.1: 286. Once established as rulers in India, the British appropriated the marks of Mughal sovereignty in their relations with Indian subjects and princes, including Mughal-style gifts and petitions.

⁸³ Thomas Pitt to Zulfiqar Khan, Madras, 30 June 1709: *RFSG: DCB 1709*, 57.

leverage to press for gifts in cash and kinds. No matter how exasperating the demands for what were invariably described as “presents” could appear to the English, throughout the seventeenth and up till the mid-eighteenth century they continued to acknowledge the need for and benefits of performing the part imposed on them by the Mughal authorities.

Self-professed to be ‘Intirely the Kings Vassalls’ in petitions to the imperial court, the Company’s interactions with the Mughal authorities are best understood within the plural framework of intra-imperial political relations.⁸⁴ It is telling in this regard that the formally accredited ambassador for the English Crown, Sir William Norris, operated within the same structures of political solicitation as his merchant counterparts. Not only did his gift-giving practices resemble those discussed in this article, in their rhetorical forms of address Norris and the New East India Company he represented also conformed to the discourse of humble service to the Mughal emperor.⁸⁵ In other words, narrow definitions of diplomacy as inter-state dealings are unsuited to capturing the character of Anglo-Mughal political exchanges, which followed the patterns of the Mughal court’s conduct of relations with a diverse range of political actors from within and outside the imperial realm. Attending to the role of gift exchanges as a transcultural mechanism for structuring relations between political entities thus contributes to a fuller understanding of diplomacy as it operated in a variety of global settings.

⁸⁴ John Russell to Zulfiqar Khan, Calcutta, 7 July 1712: Wilson, *Early Annals* II.1: 65.

⁸⁵ A collection of translated documents exchanged between Norris and the Mughal administration is found in BL, Ms EUR D 1075.