Approaching Diplomatic and Courtly Gift-giving in Europe and Mughal India: Shared Practices and Cultural Diversity

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This article deals with courtly gift-giving practices in Europe and Mughal India from a comparative and interwoven perspective. Given the historiographical lacunae on Mughal gift-giving, the article presents preliminary observations for further research. Unlike most contributions to this volume, this article understands the notion of diversity in terms of an intercultural diversity that came to the fore in courtly contexts and in diplomatic encounters. My arguments are bifold. On the one hand, European and Mughal rulers and their envoys shared a common ground of diplomatic gift-giving practices that were shaped by an understanding of what was worthy of giving and of the symbolic power of the given objects. On the other hand, courtly gift-giving practices were embedded in different social and cultural environments in Europe and India. By looking at the notion of the ‘gift’ and the social organisation of the Mughal elite, it becomes clear that pishkash was an idiosyncratic concept in South and Central Asian contexts and that offerings of mansabdārs to the Mughal emperor had a different character than those of European courtiers to their rulers.

When in May 1498 Vasco da Gama landed near Calicut and sought out the local ruler, he and his men were received in a friendly manner. The palace gates opened quickly, and, according to the eyewitness-account of Álvaro Velho, the Portuguese delegation was admitted to the Zamorin without any obstacles. Vasco da Gama presented himself as an envoy of the king

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of Portugal and was accorded a private audience in one of the Zamorin’s chambers where friendly words were exchanged and Vasco announced the presentation of a letter of Manuel I (r. 1495–1521). When the second encounter occurred and the gifts intended for offering were inspected, the Zamorin’s officials laughed at the selection:

saying that it was not a thing to offer to a king, that the poorest merchant from Mecca, or any other part of India, gave more, and that if he wanted to make a present it should be in gold, as the king would not accept such things.1

Locals of Calicut talked about the worthless goods that the captain desired to be sent to the king: ‘twelve pieces of lambel [striped cloth], four scarlet hoods, six hats, four strings of coral, a case containing six wash-hand basins, a case of sugar, two casks of oil, and two of honey’.2 Indignantly, de Gama ordered the gifts to be restored on board and presented himself with empty hands. This time, however, he waited in front of closed palace gates for hours, scrutinized by officials, before finally meeting the Zamorin. The absence of gifts did not go unnoticed by the Zamorin, and when the royal letter was delivered and Vasco departed, no further courtesy was shown to him.3

The Portuguese were not only disgraced by their presents, but also jeopardised their reputation as royal delegates and explorers. Thus, Vasco da Gama was treated as a merchant, not as an ambassador.4 To be more precise, his status as an envoy of a powerful and rich monarch was challenged because he lacked suitable gifts. While the Zamorin measured his appreciation of the foreigner according to his presents, Vasco da Gama was obviously ill-prepared for the cultural encounter with the rulers of India. Not unlike in Europe, his status was represented and negotiated by the gifts he offered. But despite their transcultural nature as media of social relationships, intercultural gift-exchanges were a frequent source of conflict in early modern European–Indian encounters. Poorly selected gift baskets and the rejection of gifts point to culturally diverse habits and

1 Velho, Journal: 60; On the historical background of the Portuguese landing see Diffie and Winius, Foundations of the Portuguese Empire or Disney and Booth (eds), Vasco da Gama and the Linking of Europe and Asia.
3 Ibid.: 61–63.
4 Ibid.: 60.

expectations that had to be bridged in intercultural encounters. What is commonly labelled as ‘cultural misunderstanding’ was often based upon fundamental differences of perceptions, practices and semantics between those who met. In what follows, then, the notion of diversity is understood in terms of an intercultural diversity that came to the forefront in cultural encounters between early modern Europeans and Japanese, Ottomans and Indians. Most of the sections of this volume address diversity within Europe and India, and investigate complex systems such as lordship, religion and economy. Here, fields of comparison have yet to be carved out. In this section, by contrast, we have chosen a narrower subject matter from a field one could denote as ‘modes of exchange’. The focus on gift-giving as one such mode of exchange—others could be trade or booty-taking—allows approaching our topics from a comparative and interwoven perspective at the same time. In analysing the Habsburg mission to the Ottoman court in 1628, Peter Burschel illuminates diverging ideas concerning gift obligations between the two parties. Wim de Winter focuses on seventeenth-century encounters between Europeans and Japanese and shows how shared gift-giving practices were developed on a day-to-day basis. The present contribution examines European gift-giving experiences at the Mughal court and argues that while on the one hand European envoys and Mughal courtiers shared practices of gift-giving in terms of diplomacy, the meaning of courtly gift-giving differed remarkably on the other hand.

In the past, historians have used theories of the gift from sociology and anthropology in order to explain historical gift-giving practices, favouring the impression as Gadi Algazi puts it, ‘that some complete theory of the gift lies ready for historians to apply’. Instead of essentialising ‘the gift’ by sociological and anthropological concepts, Algazi argued for an analysis of contexts that brings out the specific historical and cultural practices, and the semantics of gifts. Rather than lumping Mughal and European courtly gifts under the umbrella of a single ‘medium of representing and shaping social hierarchies’, then, I bring to the surface the underlying logic of how Mughal courtly gifts differed from that of courtly gifts in medieval and early modern Europe.

Gift-giving practices at Mughal courts have yet to be investigated in a detailed manner. While European gift-giving practices have been

studied intensively, similar works on Mughal India are still missing. Important observations have been made by Harbans Mukhia and others, and, in the wider contexts of Islamic courts, in the exhibition volume *Gifts of the Sultan*. In a transcultural perspective on late Antique, Byzantine and early Islamic societies, Anthony Cutler has analysed the economic dimensions of gift-giving and the significance of diplomatic gifts as redistributed and circulating objects. For the European–Ottoman and North African contexts the problem of gift-giving and tribute, relevant for the Mughal context, has been addressed by Christian Windler and others. By and large, however, the history of gift-giving in Mughal India has yet to gather momentum.

The present contribution cannot and does not intend to cover these historiographical lacunae. On the basis of various European travel accounts and Jahangir’s autobiographical chronicle, as one example of Mughal chronicles that report extensively on courtly gifts, it presents preliminary observations for a project that has yet to be launched. In this sense, it mirrors the original purpose of the conference to sound the ground for comparative perspectives.

**Cultural Encounters and Diplomatic Gift-giving**

Unlike Vasco da Gama who apparently failed naïvely to meet the gift expectations of the Zamorin, many travellers of the sixteenth and seventeenth century were well-prepared for the encounter with the Grands of India. François Bernier (1625–1688) began his famous letter to Jean-Baptiste Colbert with the words: ‘In Asia, the great are never approached empty-handed.’ After having spent most of his nine-year stay in India at the court of Aurangzeb (c. 1659–1667), Bernier knew the customs of the court well. Likewise, his contemporary Jean-Baptiste

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7 Mukhia, *The Mughals of India*: 100–104; Jaffer, ‘Diplomatic Encounters’; Komaroff (ed.), *Gifts of the Sultan*.


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Tavernier (1605–1689) was familiar with the necessities of gift-gifting. As a merchant of jewels he had managed to be admitted to the pādišāh and to acquire his uncle Shāista Khān (d. 1694) as a customer.\footnote{On Mirzā Abu Ṭalib entitelt Shāista Khān, brother of Shah Jahan’s wife Mumtāz Mahal and one of the grand amirs of the empire, see Ali, \textit{Apparatus of the Empire}: 98–322.} Reporting on the negotiations at court, he informed his readers:

> For it should be stated that if any one desires to have audience of the Emperor, they ask, before everything else, where the present is that he has to offer to him, and they examine it to see if it is worthy of being offered to His Majesty. No one ever ventures to show himself with empty hands, and it is an honour obtained at no little cost. \footnote{Tavernier, \textit{Travels}, vol. 1: 113–14.}

Tavernier himself invested considerable amounts of money in presents. By offering valuable things like emeralds from the West Indies, watches, crystal vessels and precious textiles from Europe, he proved to be well aware of the demand for ‘exotic’ rarities among Mughal emperors and nobles.\footnote{Ibid., vol. 1: 106, 113–15. On the interest in luxury goods see also Jaffer, ‘Diplomatic Encounters’: 80–81.} Almost 200 years separated Vasco da Gama and Jean-Baptiste Tavernier, and although European knowledge of India became increasingly accurate during this period, the time span between the first explorers and the experienced merchant travellers of the late seventeenth century should not be interpreted prematurely as a learning process. To be sure, recommendations for suitable presents for Indian rulers and nobles had circulated since the beginning of the seventeenth century in Europe. Both, Francisco Pelsaert (c. 1595–1630), an agent of the Dutch factory in Agra, and Sir Thomas Roe, a British diplomat at Jahangir’s court, compiled lists of appropriate gifts that were available through various travel reports and travelogue collections.\footnote{Pelsaert, \textit{Jahangir’s India}: 27. Pelsaert’s Chronik on the Mughal Empire was translated by Joannes De Laet into Latin and encroached on his \textit{De imperio Magni Mogolis} (Leiden, 1631). This text was used again by Fra Sebastian Manrique who quoted some passages literally. For Roe’s gift recommendations see Roe, \textit{The Embassy}. Roe’s Journal was partially reprinted in Samuel Purchas’ (1577–1626) travelogue collection \textit{Hakluytus Posthumus or Purchas His Pilgrims} that widely circulated in Europe.} Given the proliferation of travel literature and the coexistence of old customary
images on the one hand, and up-to-date knowledge on the other, the reception of new information was not self-evident. Just a few years before Bernier’s warning, for example, the *Compagnie des Indes Orientales* despatched a mission to Aurangzeb without furnishing the envoys with any presents. In the second half of the seventeenth century, European missions to the Mughal court still failed due to lack of suitable gifts. In contrast to this, the Jesuits had been successful in making contact with the *pādishāh* by the late sixteenth century. When they first approached Akbar’s court in 1580, they offered a multilingual bible richly furnished with copper engravings and many European paintings, among them some from Albrecht Dürer, that were appreciated as European rarities and high quality works of art at the Mughal court.

The success or failure of intercultural diplomatic gift-exchange, then, did not primarily depend on the chronology of European–Indian encounters and the growing repertoire of experiences. Rather, it was a question of intercultural competences, financial resources, and attitudes of the European diplomats and their employers whether an encounter succeeded or not. The diary of Sir Thomas Roe is a telling example.

Roe was an appointed ambassador of the English crown and merchant agent of the East India Company in 1614. Although he was able to partially realise the aims of his mission—obtaining a trade contract and granting protection against arbitrary customs duties—his four-year stay at Jahangir’s court was a significant diplomatic disaster in which his permanent lack of costly gifts played a major role. From the very

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15 According to the English agents the envoys could not even procure an audience. Foster, *The English Factories*, cited in Jaffer, ‘Diplomatic Encounters’: 76.
beginning, Roe was confronted with a demand for presents that he could not meet because neither King James nor the East India Company had fitted him with suitable gifts for the Great Mughal and his entourage.\textsuperscript{18}

Roe was well aware of the dilemma he found himself in. William Edwards, Roe’s precursor at the Mughal court, had enlightened him that no business could be conducted without presents and Roe’s journal is full of reflections on his lack of presents and his poor equipment.\textsuperscript{19} But Roe’s journal was not only an intimate diary; it was also an official report for his employers. While he kept asking for more and for more suitable gifts, Roe did not—or could not—openly blame King James or the company for the daily failures he endured. Instead, he transformed his frustrations into a stereotypical narrative. To convey his experiences to European readers, he reduced Jahangir’s request for jewels, rarities and other luxuries to the European stereotype of the cupidity of oriental rulers.\textsuperscript{20} This narrative strategy, however, was not consistent with his acquaintance of international diplomatic practices and the expectations of the Mughal court. Roe’s journal has often been read as a document of his incomprehension and ignorance towards Mughal court society. But Roe, as I shall argue, did not misunderstand the importance of diplomatic gift-giving.

He was an ingenious, subtle person with a courtly socialisation and profound diplomatic experience. Before his stay at the Mughal court he had accompanied various diplomatic missions in Europe. In 1604, he had travelled to Spain in order to bear witness to King Philip’s signature to a peace treaty between Spain and England. In order to impress the Spanish, King James spared neither expenses nor troubles. A delegation of more than 600 men was sent to Valladolid, consisting of trumpeters, porters of banners, servants and gentlemen, all dressed in costly textiles. The size of this delegation overwhelmed the Spanish capacities so much that part of the delegation had to be sent home.\textsuperscript{21} Among the presents exchanged during this stay were horses with costly trappings, jewels, golden chains and a diamond ring worth 3000 pounds. In other words, the kinds of presents the Great Mughal would later ask for. Roe took part in the negotiations and gift exchanges, and he was familiar with the protocol of diplomatic gift-giving.

\textsuperscript{18} Roe, \textit{Embassy}: 475–79, 127–29, 380,
\textsuperscript{19} \textit{Ibid.}: 76–77, 282–87.
\textsuperscript{20} \textit{Ibid.}: 458, 466.
\textsuperscript{21} Strachan, \textit{Thomas Roe}: 7–10, 285, note 22.
Throughout Europe lavish gift-giving was generally an accepted practice in diplomatic contexts. Many ceremonial and diplomatic manuals of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries testify to the importance of gift-giving. Presents were indispensable elements of every diplomatic mission and served to create, preserve and strengthen political bonds. They also gained the favour of the gift-receiver, expressed esteem for the diplomatic counterpart, and cleared the way for negotiations. Diplomatic gifts were carefully chosen from a wide range of objects, characterised by costly materials, skilful manufacture, aesthetic value, rarity and a high monetary value. Being part of the symbolic communication, they transported political messages. Thus, on the occasion of the 20 year jubilee of the emperor’s coronation in 1678, the Elector Frederik William of Brandenburg (1620–1688) offered Leopold I (r. 1658–1705) a pompous armchair made of amber with an iconographic programme fit to the jubilee. Worth 10,000 Polish florins, the chair was a unique item characterised by its precious material and exceptional artistic design. Gems and jewels, too, were common diplomatic gifts for high-ranking princes. In 1679, for example, the French King Louis XIV offered a set of diamond jewels to the Great Elector’s first wife Louise Henriette (1627–1667) worth some 60,000–70,000 talers.

The importance of lavish gift-giving was well-known in intercultural contexts, too. European diplomatic manuals underlined the benefit of presenting costly gifts at oriental courts, and diplomatic missions to the Ottoman or the Safavid court testify to the effort and expenses that went into the selection of gifts. The mission of Philip III (r. 1598–1621) to the Safavid court in 1618 indicates that the Spanish king and his advisers were well aware of the necessity to equip their envoy Don Garcia de Silvia y Figueroa with an opulent gift for Shah Abbas I (r. 1587–1629). Apart from smoothing out previous disgruntlements, Philip hoped to curtail Ottoman territorial expansion, to foster Spanish commercial interests in the Persian Gulf, and, last but not least, to work towards the Shah’s conversion to Christianity. The selection of gifts had been discussed over a period of two years and compiled with utmost care. It contained a variety of valuable objects from

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24 Ibid.: 65.
26 Ibid.: 126.

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Philip’s own property such as silver boxes, precious goblets and vessels, arms and trappings, luxurious textiles, pieces of jewellery, as well as Indian spices and ‘exotic’ pieces of art. All in all, the value of gifts was said to amount to 100,000 ducats. If this sum was noteworthy, the variety within the context of early modern, international gift-giving was not unusual.27

Sir Thomas Roe’s problem, then, was not that he was not familiar with the codes of international diplomatic gift-giving, but that his employer, the East India Company, was an economic enterprise that invested too little in symbolic communication with the Mughal court.

Similarities of diplomatic gift-giving practices between Europe and Mughal India are reflected in various missions from the Persian Shah to the Mughal court. In 1616, Muḥammad Riza Beg arrived at Jahangir’s court. The Iranian envoy was one of the most important foreign envoys at the Mughal court, representing a sovereign power that claimed to be as magnificent as the Mughals. Accordingly, Jahangir welcomed him with much pomp, sending out 100 elephants in order to accompany the ambassador and his huge baggage to Ajmer. The gifts that Muḥammad Riza Beg later presented at court consisted of 30 Arabian and Persian horses, watches, carpets, candied fruit, precious stones, and 50 camels loaded with velvet, hangings, wine, rosewater and perfumes.28 The matter-of-fact tone in which Jahangir noted in his autobiographic chronicle that the Persian ambassador had paid his respects, illustrates that the amplitude of the gift was anything but unusual.

Mughal chronicles document many more such instances. In 1611, an earlier Persian ambassador visited Jahangir’s court with a similarly lavish gift, accompanied by a letter from Shah Abbas that confirmed and strengthened the friendly relations between the Mughal and the Safavid Empire.29 Giving and re-giving was a mutual practice of princely self-fashioning, political representation, and affirming existing relationships. When the Persian ambassador, Budaq Beg, visited Aurangzeb in 1661 his gifts comprised a total value of more than 400,000 rupees as the chronicle meticulously records.30 When

27 Ibid.: 125. If the mission nevertheless failed, it was not because of the gifts but because Shah Abbas had lost interest in good relations with the Spanish Habsburgs. As far as Hormuz was concerned, he had made concessions to the British in the meantime.

28 Roe, Embassy: 258–63; Jahangir, Jahangirnama: 199.

29 Jahangir, Jahangirnama: 121–23.

30 Stronge, ‘Imperial Gifts at the Court to Hindustan’: 171–75.
he left the court some weeks later, more than 500,000 rupees had been spent on re-gifts in the form of money, robes of honour, gem studded daggers, jewels, a horse and an elephant with a costly saddle and trappings. Giving and re-giving were carefully choreographed by the respect the giver wanted to express to the receiver and by the magnificence he wanted to claim for himself.

European and Mughal rulers and their envoys, thus, shared a common ground of diplomatic gift-giving practices that were shaped by a series of similar habits, rites and expectations. In both contexts, diplomatic gifts were indispensable elements of an embassy. Presented in a public ceremony, diplomatic gifts were part of the symbolic communication by which political messages could be conveyed and by which honour and prestige could be expressed or withheld. The type of object that had a cross-cultural valence was characterised by a high monetary value, rarity, costly material and aesthetic value. It was significant in this sense, that Jahangir appreciated a small, gem studded casket that Roe offered from his own belongings, but despised the cheap paintings, ordinary jars and small knives that Roe brought from England. The worthiness of these things would not have been acknowledged in a European diplomatic context either.

**Courtly Gift-giving—Shared Practices and Diverse Meanings**

In a recent compendium on courts and residencies in the Holy Roman Empire, gifts within the courtly society are understood as media of asymmetric relationships of dependency. Only in exceptional cases like diplomatic dealings or contacts with close family members were gift exchanges at court characterised by a balanced reciprocity. Mostly, gift-giving responded to a differentiated hierarchy with the prince at the top. Through gift-giving he assigned honour, prestige and rank to individual members of the court. For anybody outside the court, a costly gift was crucial to add authority to his request or to garner interest at all.

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31 Ibid.: 175.
33 Scheller, ‘Schenken und Stiften’: 531–32. See also Scheller, ‘Rituelles Schenken an Höfen der Ottonenzeit’.

Made in the context of medieval and early modern European courts, at first sight, these observations seem to align with practices at the Mughal court to an astonishing degree. Gift exchanges between the Mughal elite and the pādishāh both reflected and constituted their asymmetric relationship. Presents among the nobility and the royal family corresponded to a subtly graded hierarchy, and by the end of the sixteenth century every visitor and mansābādār had to make an offering in order to bring forward his request or to preserve and enhance his status.

Niccolao Manucci (1639–1717) who spent several years in the service of Shah Jahan’s son Dārā Shukōh and Aurangzeb’s son Mu’azzam, stated:

> It is a custom established throughout India that without friends and without interest nothing can be done. Even princes of the blood royal, if they want to carry out any purpose, cannot do so without paying. It is such a usual thing to give and to receive that when any eunuch or any princess asks the king for something as a favour to some general or officer, be it an appointment or some other favour of any consequence, the king never omits to ask how much has been received.34

Many careers of Mughal mansābādārs testify to these observations. The history of Shaikh Ḥasan, titled Muqarrab Khān (d. 1646), a physician, serves as a case in point. Jahangir saw him as a close intimate and during his reign he rose to be one of the highest mansābādārs of the empire, holding various offices as provincial governor.35 Even though Muqarrab Khān was held in high esteem, his career underwent a serious setback when, shortly after 1610, the death of a young woman, who had been seduced and restrained by Muqarrab Khān in his house, became known. As a consequence, his social status was seriously damaged, and his income reduced.36 Two years later, by carrying out a special task, he managed to regain the pādishāh’s favour. Shortly after returning successfully from his mission, his rank was

36 Muqarrab Khān’s rank was reduced to half. On the importance of rank, see below. Jahangir, Jahangirnama: 111. William Hawkins, who fought out his own quarrels with Muqarrab Khān when he was mutāšaddī of Surat, also reports on the incident and the following mission to Goa. See Foster, Early Travels: 83–89.
increased again and he was appointed governor of Delhi. Additionally, he carried out a therapeutic bleeding on Jahangir and was awarded a gem-studded dagger for his services. After he regained his status, Muqarrab Khan made sumptuous offerings. In 1613, he paid his respects to Jahangir, offering a gem-studded flask, a European hat, a bejewelled object in the form of a bird, a costly European saddle, twelve Arabian horses and numerous other precious things. The same year he was appointed hakim of Surat. In August 1615 he offered a sarpéch (a turban ornament), a ruby and an extraordinary gem-studded throne. Several months later, his personal rank was increased to 5000, making him one of the highest amirs and another 10 months later he was appointed governor of Gujarat. Although there was no automatism between costly offerings, the rising of rank and the appointment to offices, the history of Muqarrab Khan indicates that political and social advancement was impossible without an adequate offering to the ruler. Within the courtly society gift-giving was determined by a strict hierarchy. Again, Manucci made some telling observations. He reports, for example, how in 1679 Aurangzeb complained about a birthday present from his mother—amounting after all to 50,000 rupees—arguing that she had offered a more valuable one in precedent years. In 1691, Asad Khan, too, criticised one of the princesses for offering him a box for betel leaves of enamelled silver while his son had received a box and a spittoon of gold, covered with precious stones. ‘Asad Khan, seeing a present of such small value, complained, and said that at the least he deserved a present equal to that of his son, for he was the father, and held higher rank, being, moreover, chief minister of the empire.’ The princess answered that he was only in their service while his son was her relative. Similar to medieval and early

37 Jahangir, Jahangirnama: 133, 134, 137; Ali, Apparatus of the Empire: 53–54 (J391, J401, J417); Rezavi, ‘Aristocratic Surgeon’: 159. In the context of negotiations with the Portuguese Viceroy in Goa, Muqarrab Khan was asked to purchase European rarities for Jahangir. When he returned from this mission in March 1612 he brought with him several exotic birds, which highly pleased Jahangir.
38 Jahangir, Jahangirnama: 138.
39 Ibid.: 141, 143.
40 Ali, Apparatus of the Empire: 55.
42 Mukhia, Mughals of India: 102.

modern European courts, gifts were supposed to be commensurate with rank, office, age and family relations, not only between the giver and the receiver but also among different receivers.\textsuperscript{45}

On an abstract level, therefore, gifts at the Mughal court can certainly be described as a medium by which unequal relationships, power and social status within the Mughal elite could be modulated, controlled and reproduced. The power of gifts to reflect and shape social relationships was a transcultural one that worked both in early modern Europe and Mughal India. But what do we gain from such an analysis? The characterisation of courtly gifts as a medium obscures more than it reveals in a comparative context. As similar as some gift-giving practices at European and Mughal courts may seem, their logic and meaning was not identical, but rooted in different historical and cultural contexts.\textsuperscript{46}

The differences began with the meaning of rank and ultimately with the organisation of the Mughal elite. Because the Mughal nobility was organised in a system of rank that was foreign to Europeans, gifts to the ruler assumed a different meaning. It is well-known that every official of the bureaucracy and every officer of the army, from the princes of blood to the lowest clerk, were assigned a \textit{mans\textsuperscript{ab}}, a numerical military rank that indicated the social status of that person and the number of horses and troopers that he was obliged to keep.\textsuperscript{47} The assignment of a \textit{mans\textsuperscript{ab}} was a prerogative of the \textit{p\textashah\textash}, even though high officials could and did make recommendations. Promotions and degradations of rank were important tools of governance. Every misfortune or merit, every deed that aroused the ruler’s favour or disfavour could result in an increase or decrease of rank, as the biographies of many \textit{mansabd\textash}s show. Some \textit{mansabd\textash}s ended with the same rank they held at the beginning of their career, others successfully climbed the ladder.\textsuperscript{48} A career depended on merits and mistakes, offices,

\textsuperscript{45} For further examples, see Mukhia, \textit{Mughals of India}: 100–04.
\textsuperscript{46} The subsequent spelling of Persian expressions and names follows the Encyclopaedia of Islam (EF), except for words that are known and commonly in use in a simplified form like the term ‘Mughal’ and the names of rulers like Akbar, Jahangir, Shah Jahan, Aurangzeb, etc. In these cases I follow the spelling suggested by the Encyclopaedia Britannica Online.
\textsuperscript{48} Ali, \textit{Apparatus of the Empire}: xvi–xxi.
political factions at court, ethnicity and, ultimately, the ability to gain the pādishāh’s favour. Mansabdārs, then, were dependent on the ruler much more than European nobles. Although ‘sons of the household’ enjoyed the privilege of receiving a rank in any case, a mansab was not hereditary. In order to preserve a mansab, nobles had to strive for the ruler’s grace. The same was true for land assignments. Mansabdārs did not hold a fief, but a jāgīr, a piece of land that granted financial income but not the right of ownership or the power to dispose of the inhabitants. Like the mansab, a jāgīr was not assigned for a lifetime, but only for a couple of years. Apart from some hereditary territories of the Rajputs, these lands reverted back to the ruler after the holder’s death.

This political, social, economic and military organisation of the Mughal elite had a crucial impact on the meaning of gifts. If the assignment of rank and land was easily at stake and favourable relations to the Great Mughal of major importance, gifts assumed an existential role in the preservation and improvement of a mansab. Even though the social status of European nobles, too, was negotiated through courtly gifts to the ruler or high-ranking courtiers, their belonging to the nobility and their possession of land was not generally in jeopardy.

In a fundamental way the differences between European and Mughal gifts to the ruler were reflected in the notion of ‘gift’ itself. The Persian language disposes of a nuanced repertoire of words to denote various types of gifts. A present offered to superiors or an animal offered in sacrifice at Mecca could be termed ḥadiya. Likewise an excellent, rare thing worthy of being presented was termed tuḥfa and a wedding gift: ṣachuq. Finally, the present or reward given to the bringer of good news: mushtuluq. With regard to gifts from the Mughal elite, to the ruler the notion of pīshkash was of particular importance. As Ann Lambton has shown for the Persian context, the term pīshkash developed into a poly-semantic technical term from about the ninth- to fifteenth-centuries covering ‘a broad range of regular and occasional payments, from taxes and tributes to levies and gifts, which made an important if uncertain contribution to the expenses of the monarchy while emphasising both the loyalty and subordination of the giver’.

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49 Richards, Mughal Empire: 148–50.
50 Habib, Agrarian System: 216, 224, 298–300.
52 Lambton, ‘Pīshkash’: 150.

the Safavids, *pīshkash* could denote a personal tax or a tax attached to the land; at the same time, provincial governors were expected to make regular payments in the form of *pīshkash* at *nawrūz*, the traditional New Year’s festival, when they were appointed to an office or on special occasions. Likewise, vanquished enemies or rebels often had to present a *pīshkash* to the victor.53

Although these results refer to the Safavids and the concept of *pīshkash* has yet to be investigated more closely within the Mughal context, there is much evidence in favour of the assumption that the term had a similar complex meaning under the Mughals. Leaving aside the fact that Persian was the administrative language in the Mughal Empire and that the court society was strongly influenced by Persian culture, administrative documents from the province of Khandesh from the late seventeenth century show, for example, that *pīshkash* was one of the terms that could denote the revenue collected and paid in cash by the *zamīndārs* to the imperial treasury.54 Second, *pīshkash* could denote a payment to the court made by aspirants for an office or in occasion of their appointment.55 Literally, *pīshkash* means both, a tribute or a gift to a person with higher social standing, often a ruler or a patron.56 Originally, it had a fairly neutral meaning, but by the fifteenth (ninth) century it implied a hierarchical relationship between the giver and the receiver.57 And unlike the distinguished concepts of ‘gift’ and ‘tribute’ in European languages, *pīshkash* blurred the lines between the two.

Offerings presented by a *mans̱abdār* to the ruler at *nawrūz* or at any other occasion were not gifts, but *pīshkash*. Not only were they more or less obligatory, but also highly institutionalised. Since Akbar’s time,

54 Nayeem, ‘Mughal Documents Relating to the Peshkash’. It is clear, however, that a variety of terms was used according to the complex administration of land. Revenues that had to be paid annually to the holders of *jāgīrs* (or to the imperial treasury when land was part of the ‘crown domain’) were termed *jama* and different from *pīshkash* which was paid into the imperial treasury alone, and, so far as our knowledge goes, was never assigned in *jāgīr*. It was, indeed, possible to require a chief to pay both, one amount as *jama* and an additional amount as *peshkash*. Habib, *Agrarian System*, 225. On the topic, see also Moosvi, *Economy of the Mughal Empire*; Moosvi, *People, Taxation, and Trade*.
56 Steingass, *Dictionary*: 267: ‘pesh-kash: a magnificent present, such as is only presented to princes, great men, superiors, or sometimes to equals; tribute, quit-rent’.
57 Lambton, ‘Pīshkash’: 145.
manṣabdārs who did not stay at court permanently were obliged to present an offering when they visited the court. In addition to that, many courtly festivities such as the weighing ceremony of the pādishāh, the accession to the throne, the birth of a prince or princess, a military victory, and, first and foremost, the New Year festival nawrūz were connected to rich offerings from the manṣabdārs to the ruler. Jahangir, for example, usually spoke in all these instances of pīshkash. Thus, nawrūz offerings of the amirs are denoted as pīshkash, offerings from his son Khurram in occasion of a party in his house are termed pīshkash, and when Muqurrab Khān came from Ahmedabad and paid homage in December 1618, he also offered a pīshkash in the form of a costly pearl. However, Jahangir also uses the term pīshkash when he speaks of subjected local or regional rulers who, obliged by partly written contracts, had to offer a fixed pīshkash that was understood as a sign of their subjection. This pīshkash resembled a tribute. When in 1617, in the light of the victorious Mughal campaigns in Mewar and the southern advances of the Mughal troops, the Sultan of Bijapur, Ibrāhīm ʿĀdil Shāh II (r. 1580–1626), was forced to announce recognition of Jahangir’s supreme power, he delivered a pīshkash consisting of gems, jewelled utensils, elephants, and horses. Offered in the context of direct military threat, this pīshkash may be understood as a payment for being spared military ravages to both land and populace, a pīshkash that Finbarr Flood has referred to as ‘institutionalized plunder’ —the regulated handover of precious things in which ‘the victim plunders himself while saving his pride by representing such payments as gifts’. This pīshkash differed yet again from the annual tributes the Deccan sultans were later obliged to pay by treaty. After renewed military pressure a formal treaty was arranged in

58 Mukhia, Mughals of India: 100.
59 Ali, Mughal Nobility under Aurangzeb: 143.
60 See for these examples Jahangir, Jahangirnama: 297–99, 137, 240; for the Persian version, Muhammad Hāshim, Gahāngirnāma. Tūzuk-i-gahāngirī; Bunyād Farhang Irān, Teheran 1980: 301–02, 128, 237 (fols. 212b–13b, 88b, 165a). I am grateful to Andreas Bolletter who has cross-checked these and several other passages in which the English translation uses the term ‘offering’ with the Persian version of Muḥammad Hāshim.
61 Jahangir, Jahangirnama: 231 (‘tribute’) and Gahāngirnāma: 228 (fols. 158a/b) (‘pīshkash’). On the Deccan campaigns, see Subrahmanyam and Alam, ‘The Deccan Frontier and Mughal Expansion’.
62 Flood, Objects of Translation: 127.

1635, with the sultans of Bijapur and Golconda agreeing to an annual tribute of 2,000,000 and 600,000 rupees, respectively.\textsuperscript{63}

These are only a few examples, but they point to the importance of \textit{pīshkash} and its ambiguous meaning in the context of Mughal administration and relationships between the ruler and the political elite. The notion comprised a variety of transfers ranging from land revenues and payments to tributes and offerings with different social, political and juridical meanings.

Although travellers like Thomas Roe, François Bernier and Niccolao Manucci obtained detailed insight into the courtly society, their knowledge seems not to have penetrated the logic of gift-giving and the meaning of \textit{pīshkash} in particular, or at least their travel reports do not hint at such an understanding. But after all, these reports were written for a European audience. \textit{Pīshkash} was an alien concept for European observers and readers who clearly distinguished between gift and tribute, and were easily ready to denounce Mughal courtly gift-giving practices as bribing and corruption. However, the diversity between Mughal and European courtly gift exchanges was not due to oriental avarice as Thomas Roe suggested to his readers, but to fundamental differences in the notion of the gift and the organisation of the nobility. The rank-system and the \textit{jāgīrs} provided for a high fluidity among the \textit{mansābdārs}. Offerings to the ruler were crucial in order to preserve and to improve rank and land holding. Even though there was a considerable degree of social mobility within the European feudal society, estate belongings, fiefs and lordship did not existentially depend on gifts to the ruler, since they were hereditary.

In stressing the diversity of gift exchanges—albeit for the wrong reasons—travel writers satisfied European reading expectations about the immense riches and the despotic rulership of the Great Mughal.\textsuperscript{64} In reality, European and Mughal courts shared more gift-giving practices than Thomas Roe and others were ready to admit. Especially in terms of diplomatic gift exchanges European, Persian and Mughal envoys had a shared understanding of the importance of gifts as a means of conveying political messages, acknowledging and honouring the counterpart, and smoothing the way for negotiations. Other shared practices remain to

\textsuperscript{63} Elliot and Dowson, \textit{History of India as Told by its Own Historians}, vol. 7: 51, 57 (‘Abd al-Ḥamīd Lāhūrī, \textit{Pādshāhnāma}); Burn (ed.), \textit{Cambridge History of India}, vol. IV, 196–99; Richards, \textit{Mughal Empire}: 138.

\textsuperscript{64} On this see Siebenhüner, \textit{Die Spur der Diamanten}: chap. 2, ‘Schätze des Orients’.
be investigated. New Year’s gifts that were exchanged at early modern European, Persian and Mughal courts alike are particularly interesting in this respect. Rooted in a common heritage of antiquity, they became an established institution that spread from the Sassanides to the caliphs, from the Safawids to the Mughals and from the Romans to the courts of Burgundy, France, England and others. Further research in a comparative and transcultural perspective will shed light on these shared and yet diverse practices.

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