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## Colliding Cultures: Masculinity and Homoeroticism in Mughal and Early Colonial South Asia

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The period between 1550 and 1800 witnessed the beginning of a collision of cultures in South Asia perhaps greater than the Himalayas themselves.<sup>1</sup> The process of Islamic conquest of Hindu lands had begun centuries before, and in the early sixteenth century the Portuguese established a 'maritime empire' in the Indian Ocean that ignited a long, confrontational process of European colonization.<sup>2</sup> In 1526, the Mongol dynast Babur defeated the Sultan of Delhi and established the Mughal Empire.<sup>3</sup> By the death of the Sultan Aurangzeb in 1707, Mughal rule reached its zenith after the conquest of southern India, but not without intense Hindu/Muslim struggle.<sup>4</sup> Early Mughal rulers, unlike Aurangzeb and later British colonials, largely tolerated the Hindu culture they encountered in South Asia, particularly with regard to gender variance and eroticism. Homoerotic poetry and artwork appear to have flourished in the Mughal period; even prescriptive Sanskrit sexual literature was translated into Persian for the sub-continent's new rulers' erudition and enjoyment. Mughal invaders have been called 'hedonistic' by James Saslow – their artwork, poetry, and even translated sex manuals celebrated human sexuality.<sup>5</sup>

Documenting precolonial ideas regarding gender and sexuality, however, does not necessarily lead to a utopia of same-sex desire and gender variance.<sup>6</sup> Misogyny, sex/gender segregation, caste/class/status issues, age, and varying religious prohibitions must be considered. Nevertheless, understanding the patterns of traditional life in South Asia which, at a minimum, tolerated organized forms of homoeroticism and gender variation can help us to see through the fallacious claims of Nationalist movements in South Asia that have appropriated the colonizer's sex/gender ideology, and called it native.<sup>7</sup> Age and/or status-differentiated male homoeroticism was celebrated in Mughal art

and literature, male and female gender-variant individuals were incorporated into South Asian life, and gender roles appear to have been more fluid than today.

The introduction of Western ideology, a long process that peaked with direct British rule, changed traditional ways of life. The British officially annexed Bengal in 1765, and gradually spread their authority throughout the sub-continent in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.<sup>8</sup> Analysis of sixteenth to nineteenth century Mughal literature and artwork, in conjunction with European travel accounts, reveals an expression of masculinity and sexuality in Mughal South Asia that is complex and distinct from postcolonial ideology. Behavior that compromised masculine status may be called 'queer,' but it was organized and regulated in a sanctioned fashion. An intensification of 'queerness' is evident with respect to gender variance and sexuality in colonial texts.

In order to demonstrate this intensification, I will divide this paper into four sections. First, I will discuss male-male eroticism and its relationship to masculinity in the Mughal Empire. Second, I will discuss Mughal-era gender variance and male homoeroticism that continued certain facets of Hindu social organization in a Muslim milieu, as well as British reactions to this social phenomenon. Third, I will discuss what both native and British authors perceived to be 'masculine' behavior in women of Mughal and successive court structures. In conclusion, I will analyze the complex and problematic relationship between South Asian queerness and colonialism.

### **Male homoeroticism and homosocial masculinity in the Mughal Empire**

Despite Islamic celebration of homoerotic desire in poetry, Islam is not devoid of prohibitions against homoerotic sex.<sup>9</sup> The *Quran* proscribes homosexual behavior between men, but it provides a far lesser punishment than either Hebrew or Christian bible: 'If two men among you are guilty of lewdness, punish them both. If they repent and amend, leave them be. For Allah is Oft-Returning, Most Merciful' (4.16, trans. A. Yusuf Ali). Stories of Sodom and Gomorrah are interpreted as prohibiting sexual relations between men as well (*Quran* 7.80-4; 11.77-83; 15.51-74; 27.54-8). In the *Shariah*, Islamic law derived in part from *hadith* (sayings) of the Prophet Mohammed, homosexual behavior is condemned more harshly.<sup>10</sup> Homoerotic *desire*, nevertheless, was not considered sinful – in Islamic poetry,