



# BĀBOR, ṢAHĪR-AL-DĪN MOḤAMMAD

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**BĀBOR, ṢAHĪR-AL-DĪN MOḤAMMAD** (6 Moḥarram 886-6 Jomādā I 937/14 February 1483-26 December 1530), Timurid prince, military genius, and literary craftsman who escaped the bloody political arena of his Central Asian birthplace to found the Mughal Empire in India. His origin, milieu, training, and education were steeped in Persian culture and so Bābor was largely responsible for the fostering of this culture by his descendants, the Mughals of India, and for the expansion of Persian cultural influence in the Indian subcontinent, with brilliant literary, artistic, and historiographical results.

Bābor's father, 'Omar Šayḡ Mirzā (d. 899/1494), ruled the kingdom of Farḡāna along the headwaters of the Syr Darya, but as one of four brothers, direct fifth-generation descendants from the great Tīmūr, he entertained larger ambitions. The lack of a succession law and the presence of many Timurid males perpetuated an atmosphere of constant intrigue, often erupting into open warfare, between the descendants who vied for mastery in Khorasan and Central Asia, but they finally lost their patrimony when they proved incapable of cooperating to defend it against a common enemy. It was against that same enemy, namely, the Uzbeks under the brilliant Šaybānī Khan (d. 916/1510), that Bābor himself learned his trade as a military leader in a long series of losing encounters. Bābor's mother, Qotlūk Negār Ḳanūm, was the daughter of Yūnos Khan of Tashkent and a direct descendant of Jengiz Khan. She and her mother, Aysān-Dawlat Bēgam, had great influence on Bābor



during his early career. It was his grandmother, for instance, who taught Bābor many of his political and diplomatic skills (*Bābor-nāma*, tr., p. 43), thus initiating the long series of contributions by strong and intelligent women in the history of the Mughal Empire.

Bābor presumed that his descent from Tīmūr legitimized his claim to rule anywhere that Tīmūr had conquered, but like his father, the first prize he sought was Samarqand. He was plunged into the maelstrom of Timurid politics by his father's death in Ramazān, 899/June, 1494, when he was only eleven. Somehow he managed to survive the turbulent years that followed. Wars with his kinsmen, with the Mughals under Tanbal who ousted him from Andijan, the capital city of Farḡāna, and especially with Šaybānī Khan Uzbek mostly went against him, but from the beginning he showed an ability to reach decisions quickly, to act firmly and to remain calm and collected in battle. He also tended to take people at their word and to view most situations optimistically rather than critically.

In Moḥarram, 910/June-July, 1504, at the age of twenty-one, Bābor, alone among the Timurids of his generation, opted to leave the Central Asian arena, in which he had lost everything, to seek a power base elsewhere, perhaps with the intention of returning to his homeland at a later date. Accompanied by his younger brothers, Jahāngīr and Nāṣer, he set out for Khorasan, but changed his plans and seized the kingdom of Kabul instead. In this campaign he began to think more seriously of his role as ruler of a state, shocking his troops by ordering plunderers beaten to death (*Bābor-nāma*, tr., p. 197). The mountain tribesmen in and around Farḡāna with whom Bābor had frequently found shelter had come to accept him as their legitimate king. He had no such claims upon the loyalty of the Afghan tribes in Kabul, but he had learned much about human nature and the nomad mentality in his three prolonged periods of wandering among the shepherd tribes of Central Asia (during 903/1497-98, 907/1501-02, and 909/1503-04). He crushed all military opposition, even reviving the old Mongol shock tactic of putting up towers of the heads of slain foes, but he also made strenuous efforts to be fair and just, admitting, for instance, that his early estimates of food production and hence the levy of tributary taxes were excessive (*Bābor-nāma*, tr., p. 228).

At this point Bābor still saw Kabul as only a temporary base for re-entry to his ancestral domain, and he made several attempts to return in the period 912-18/1506-12. In 911/1505 his uncle Sultan Ḥosayn Mīrzā of Herat, the only remaining Timurid ruler besides Bābor, requested his aid against the



Uzbeks—even though he himself had refused to aid Bābor on several previous occasions. His uncle died before Bābor arrived in Herat, but Bābor remained there till he became convinced that his cousins were incapable of offering effective resistance to Šaybānī Khan’s Uzbeks.

While in Herat he sampled the sophistication of a brilliant court culture, acquiring a taste for wine, and also developing an appreciation for the refinements of urban culture, especially as exemplified in the literary works of Mīr ‘Alī-Šīr Navā’ī. During his stay in Herat Bābor occupied Navā’ī’s former residence, prayed at Navā’ī’s tomb, and recorded his admiration for the poet’s vast corpus of Torkī verses, though he found most of the Persian verses to be “flat and poor” (*Bābor-nāma*, tr., p. 272). Navā’ī’s pioneering literary work in Torkī, much of it based, of course, on Persian models, must have reinforced Bābor’s own efforts to write in that medium.

In Rajab, 912/December, 1506, Bābor returned to Kabul in a terrible trek over snow-choked passes, during which several of his men lost hands or feet through frostbite. The event has been vividly described in his diary (*Bābor-nāma*, tr., pp. 307-11). As he had foreseen, the Uzbeks easily took Herat in the following summer’s campaign, and Bābor indulged in one of his rare slips from objectivity when he recorded the campaign in his diary with some unfair vilification of Šaybānī Khan, his long-standing nemesis (*Bābor-nāma*, tr., pp. 328-29).

Bābor next consolidated his base in Kabul, and added to it Qandahār. He dramatically put down a revolt by defeating, one by one in personal combat, five of the ringleaders—an event which his admiring young cousin Mīrzā Moḥammad Ḥaydar Doḡlat believed to be his greatest feat of arms (*Tārīk-erašīdī*, tr., p. 204). Here again it seems that Bābor acted impetuously, but saved himself by his courage and strength; and such legend-making deeds solidified his charismatic hold on the men whom he had to lead in battle. Uncharacteristically, Bābor withdrew from Qandahār and Kabul at the rumor that Šaybānī Khan was coming. It was apparently the only time in his life when he lost confidence in himself. In fact, the Uzbek leader was defeated and killed by Shah Esmā’īl Šafawī in 916/1510, and this opened the way for Bābor’s last bid for a throne in Samarqand. From Rajab, 917 to Šafar, 918/October, 1511 to May, 1512, he held the city for the third time, but as a client of Shah Esmā’īl, a condition that required him to make an outward profession of the Šī’ite faith and to adopt the Turkman costume of the Safavid troops.



Bābor's kinsmen and erstwhile subjects did not concur with his doctrinal realignment, however much it had been dictated by political circumstances. Moḥammad-Ḥaydar, a young man indebted to Bābor for both refuge and support, exulted at the Uzbek defeat of Bābor, thus demonstrating how unusual in that time and place were Bābor's breadth of vision and tolerance, qualities that became crucial to his later success in India. Breaking away from his Safavid allies, Bābor dallied in the Qunduz area, but he must have sensed that his chance to regain Samarqand was irretrievably lost.

It was only at this stage that he began to think of India as a serious goal, though after the conquest he wrote that his desire for Hindustan had been constant from 910/1504 (*Bābor-nāma*, tr., p. 478). With four raids beginning in 926/1519, he probed the Indian scene and discovered that dissension and mismanagement were rife in the Lodi Sultanate. In the winter of 932/1525-26 he brought all his experience to bear on the great enterprise of the conquest of India. With the proverb "Ten friends are better than nine" in mind, he waited for all his allies before pressing his attack on Lahore (*Bābor-nāma*, tr., p. 433). His great skills at organization enabled him to move his 12,000 troops from 16 to 22 miles a day once he had crossed the Indus, and with brilliant leadership he defeated three much larger forces in the breathtaking campaigns that made him master of North India. First he maneuvered Sultan Ebrāhīm Lōdī into attacking his prepared position at the village of Panipat north of Delhi on 8 Rajab 932/20 April 1526. Although the Indian forces (he estimated them at 100,000; *Bābor-nāma*, tr., p. 480) heavily outnumbered Bābor's small army, they fought as a relatively inflexible and undisciplined mass and quickly disintegrated. Bābor considered Ebrāhīm to be an incompetent general, unworthy of comparison with the Uzbek khans, and a petty king, driven only by greed to pile up his treasure while leaving his army untrained and his great nobles disaffected (*Bābor-nāma*, tr., p. 470). Yet Bābor ordered a tomb to be built for him. He then swiftly occupied Delhi and Agra, first visiting the tombs of famous Sufi saints and previous Turkish kings, and characteristically laying out a garden. The garden provided him with such satisfaction that he later wrote: "to have grapes and melons grown in this way in Hindustan filled my measure of content" (*Bābor-nāma*, tr., p. 686).

His new kingdom was a different story. Bābor first had to solve the problem of disaffection among his troops. Like Alexander's army, they felt that they were a long way from home in a strange and unpleasant land. Bābor had planned the conquest intending to make India the base of his empire since Kabul's



resources proved too limited to support his nobles and troops. He himself never returned to live in Kabul. But since he had permitted his troops to think that this was simply another raid for wealth and booty, he now had to persuade them otherwise, which was no easy chore (*Bābor-nāma*, tr., pp. 522-35). The infant Mughal state also had to fight for its life against a formidable confederation of the Rajput chiefs led by Mahārānā Sangā of Mewar. After a dramatic episode in which Bābor publicly foreswore alcohol (*Bābor-nāma*, tr., pp. 551-56), Bābor defeated the Rajputs at Khanwah on 13 Jomādā I 933/17 March 1527 with virtually the same tactics he had used at Panipat, but in this case the battle was far more closely contested. Bābor next campaigned down the Ganges River to Bengal against the Afghan lords, many of whom had refused to support Ebrāhīm Lōdī but also had no desire to surrender their autonomy to Bābor.

Even while rival powers threatened him on all sides—Rajputs and Afghans in India, Uzbeks at his rear in Kabul—Bābor’s mind was turned to consolidation and government. He employed hundreds of stone masons to build up his new capital cities, while winning over much of the Indian nobility with his fair and conciliatory policies. He was anxiously grooming his sons to succeed him, not without some clashes of personality, when his eldest son Homāyūn (b. 913/1506) fell seriously ill in 937/1530. Another young son had already died in the unaccustomed Indian climate, and at this family crisis his daughter Golbadan wrote that Bābor offered his own life in place of his son’s, walking seven times around the sickbed to confirm the vow (*Bābor-nāma*, translator’s note, pp. 701-2). Bābor did not leave Agra again, and died there later that year on 6 Jomādā I 937/26 December 1530.

Bābor’s diary, which has become one of the classic autobiographies of world literature, would be a major literary achievement even if the life it illuminates were not so remarkable. He wrote not only the *Bābor-nāma* but works on Sufism, law and prosody as well as a fine collection of poems in Čaġatay Turkī. In all, he produced the most significant body of literature in that language after Navā’ī, and every piece reveals a clear, cultivated intelligence as well as an enormous breadth of interests. His *Dīvān* includes a score or more of poems in Persian, and with the long connection between the Mughals and the Safavid court begun by Bābor himself, the Persian language became not only the language of record but also the literary vehicle for his successors. It was his grandson Akbar who had the *Bābor-nāma* translated into Persian in order that his nobles and officers could have access to this dramatic account of the



dynasty's founder.

Bābor did not introduce artillery into India—the Portuguese had done that—and he himself noted that the Bengal armies had gunners (*Bābor-nāma*, tr., pp. 667-74). But his use of new technology was characteristic of his enquiring mind and enthusiasm for improvement. His Ottoman experts had only two cannons at Panipat, and Bābor personally witnessed the casting of another, probably the first to be cast in India, by Ostād 'Alīqolī on 22 October 1526 (*Bābor-nāma*, tr., pp. 536-37). The piece did not become ready for test firing till 10 February 1527 when it shot stones about 1,600 yards, and during the subsequent campaigns against the Afghans down the Ganges, Bābor specifically mentions Ostād 'Alīqolī getting off eight shots on the first day of the battle and sixteen on the next (*Bābor-nāma*, tr., p. 599). Quite obviously then it was not some technical superiority in weaponry, but Bābor's genius in using the discipline and mobility which he had created in his troops that won the crucial battles for him in India.

Bābor, however, was generally interested in improving technology, not only for warfare but also for agriculture. He tried to introduce new crops to the Indian terrain and to spread the use of improved water-lifting devices for irrigation (*Bābor-nāma*, tr., p. 531). His interest in improvement and change was facilitated by his generous nature. Though he had faults, they were outweighed by his attractive personality, cheerful in the direst adversity, and faithful to his friends. The loyalties he inspired enabled the Mughal Empire in India to survive his own early death and the fifteen-year exile of his son and successor, Homāyūn. The liberal traditions of the Mughal dynasty were Bābor's enduring legacy to his country by conquest.

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