International Journal for Multidisciplinary Research (IJFMR)
E-ISSN: 2582-2160 ● Website: www.ijfmr.com ● Email: editor@ijfmr.com

Aurangzeb Beyond Orthodoxy: Veena Player and Calligrapher and the Politics of Mughal Aesthetics

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Abstract

Aurangzeb Alamgir (r. 1658–1707), the sixth emperor of the Mughal dynasty, has long held a central and contested place in the historiography of South Asia. Celebrated by some as a champion of Islamic orthodoxy and condemned by others as a destroyer of cultural pluralism, he remains one of the most debated rulers in Indian history.

This paper re-examines that reception by highlighting two relatively neglected dimensions of his biography: his early training as a veena player under the guidance of court musicians, and his lifelong, deeply devoted practice of Islamic calligraphy. Drawing on Persian chronicles including the Alamgir-nama and Maasir-i-Alamgiri, Mughal court correspondence, epistolary literature (particularly the Ruqqat-i-Alamgiri), and modern historiographical interventions by scholars such as Jadunath Sarkar, M. Athar Ali, Audrey Truschke, and Munis Faruqui, the study investigates the productive tension between Aurangzeb's personal artistic engagements and the public policies through which he curtailed music at the Mughal court. Rather than signifying a blanket hostility toward artistic expression, this paper argues that Aurangzeb's aesthetic choices reflect a coherent, if internally tense, program of devotional discipline a reimagining of Mughal aesthetics that privileged the spiritual over the sensuous, the ethical over the pleasurable. Calligraphy, as the art of the divine word, was not merely permissible but exemplary; music, by contrast, occupied morally ambiguous terrain in classical Islamic jurisprudence, and its suppression at court served both theological and political functions.

The paper situates these findings within a critique of reductive colonial-era and Hindutva nationalist historiographies that have instrumentalized Aurangzeb as a symbol of Islamic fanaticism, arguing instead for a portrait of a ruler whose relationship to aesthetics was complex, self-aware, and historically embedded.

Keywords: Mughal aesthetics, Islamic calligraphy, Hindustan classical music, devotional politics, sama, taqiyya, colonial historiography, Alamgir-nama, Ruqqat-i-Alamgiri.

Fig 1: Portrait of Mughal Emperor Aurangzeb known as Alamgir I (1618-1707), ruler of India from 1658 to 1717, 18th century Indian miniature. **(Photo by DeAgostini /Getty Images)**

Methodology

There is a qualitative and interpretive research method used in this study for the aim of shedding light on the aesthetic experience of Aurangzeb through the lens of historical and philosophical narratives. The study takes an integrated humanistic approach, which uses a combination of historical, textual, and philosophical methodologies in order to address the multiple complexities of the research questions. The study will not be analyzing Aurangzeb from a singular framework. Instead, it will include philological analysis of primary sources; post-colonial historiography and other interpretive methodologies in order to develop an understanding of a nuanced form of Aurangzeb's interaction with music and calligraphic art.

The data collected for this study is based upon critically evaluating a number of different primary sources such as Persian court chronicles, collections of letters, such as the Ruqqat-i-Alamgiri, and Islamic Jurisprudential works like the Fatawa-i-Alamgiri, along with some physical artefacts like manuscripts of calligraphy. All of the primary sources have been analyzed by considering the social, cultural, and political context of the sources; how they were used in their respective time periods; and the limitations of using them to interpret the aesthetics of Aurangzeb.

In order to interpret the data collected and provide a historical account, the methodologies used include close readings of secondary source materials, comparative analyses of the primary source materials that were collected, contextual interpretations of primary source materials, and object-based analyses of some of the physical artefacts. Another important aspect of this research is the use of historiographical criticism to demonstrate how the dominant views of Aurangzeb have been shaped by Colonial and Nationalist narratives.

1. Introduction: The Problem of Aurangzeb

Few rulers in the lengthy and variegated history of South Asia have drawn as much attention as Muhi-ud-Din Muhammad Aurangzeb, who governed the Mughal Empire from 1658 until his death in 1707. In popular memory and academic historiography alike, he occupies a crossroads of competing narratives: to British historians who lived in the colonial era, like Henry Elliot and John Dowson, he was the austere zealot whose reign began the Mughal decline; to nationalist historians writing in the wake of Partition, he

became a convenient symbol of communal antagonism; and to contemporary Hindu nationalist historiography, he stands as a symbol of Islamic aggression against Indian civilisation. But each of these portraits, as they build upon that Aurangzeb, has staged its own version of selective readings of the historical record in magnifying some documented deeds (the jizyah tax, the demolition of particular temples) while sidelining or suppressing others that undermine the iconoclast stereotype.

One of the most stubbornly marginalised aspects of Aurangzeb's biography is his artistic practices. As he wrote it, however, the historical record scattered but recoverable shows clear evidence that Aurangzeb received formal training as a veena player in his youth, and that throughout his adult life he continued to engage actively in and dedicate himself to an Islamic calligraphy practice. The emperor who banned music from his court had himself played one of the subcontinent's most difficult classical instruments. The ruler, whose rule was characterized by cultural austerity, copied the Quran by hand and distributed his calligraphic works as gifts of great personal significance. These facts have not cancelled his political acts, nor make him anything other than a concealed liberal; indeed, they demand a more textured historiographical account than either the colonial or nationalist traditions have provided.

This paper will account for that. It consists of five substantive parts. The first surveys the historical and historiographical context to which Aurangzeb has been read and misread. The second explores documentary evidence of his veena training and its implications for understanding his later public stance on court music. The third examines his calligraphic practice as a devotional, ethical, and political act. The fourth reflects on the coherence or productive tension between such private aesthetic engagements and his public cultural policies. The fifth places the argument within a wider critique of reductive historiographies and proposes a more robust framework for understanding Mughal aesthetics under Alamgir.

2. Historiographical Contexts: Reading and Misreading Aurangzeb

2.1 Colonial Historiography and the Iconoclast Paradigm

Far from being a neutral scholarly discovery, the colonial casting of Aurangzeb as a religious extremist who caused the decline of the Mughal Empire's culture and politics was a politically driven interpretation. Henry Elliot and John Dowson's voluminous History of India as Told by Its Own Historians (1867–1877), the foundational work of colonial Mughal historiography, sifted through Persian chronicles in the most palatable narrative of Muslim oppression and Hindu misery. The Aurangzeb of Aurangzeb was a calculating bigot, and his reign symbolized the inevitable self-destruction of a civilisation who refused to accept the rationalising rigors of British governance.

This framework was not simply borrowed from foreign sources; it happened the specific way the archival practice was done. Elliot and Dowson always privileged hostile or ambivalent sources the reports of temple demolitions, the reimposition of the jizyah, the dismissal of officials from the Hindu court while ignoring or dismissing evidence of Aurangzeb continued to support Hindu musicians, his hiring of Hindu administrators, and his self-denying but artistic private life. The result was a caricature that worked with the colonial present: a picture of pre-colonial Muslim rule as fundamentally oppressive, serving retroactive validation for British imperial intervention.

2.2 Nationalist and Post-Independence Historiography

If colonial historiography was too eager to condemn, then some strands of post-independence Indian nationalist historiography were too eager to rehabilitate or deploy Aurangzeb's image for new ends. The 1947 Partition and the ensuing political landscape of communal identity in both India and Pakistan made Aurangzeb's legacy a battlefield of different nationalist narratives. In Pakistan, he was occasionally posed

as a pious proponent of Islamic values in a Hindu-heavy subcontinent; in India, he came to embody for Hindu nationalist historiography especially from the 1990s onward the archetypal Muslim oppressor, an avatar of everything that modernity should reject.

Academic historians going against this tendency most significantly (for better or worse) M. Athar Ali in his ground-breaking study The Mughal Nobility under Aurangzeb (1966), and since then Munis Faruqui in The Princes of the Mughal Empire 1504–1719 (2012) and Audrey Truschke in Aurangzeb: The Life and Legacy of India's Most Controversial King (2017) have worked to revivify the empirical complexity of the reign through systematic analysis of Persian administrative records, court chronicles, and epistolary literature. Their approach has radically reshaped the iconoclast portrait, showing that Aurangzeb's temple demolitions were factually real but also selective and more often politically motivated than doctrinally systematic, that his court maintained substantial cultural pluralism despite the removal of music and painting, and that his personal piety was authentic, complex and cannot be reduced to the category of "fanaticism."

2.3 Aesthetics as a Neglected Dimension

Despite these landmark revisionist interventions, however, Aurangzeb's personal aesthetic life has received comparatively little scholarly attention. The focus of revisionist historiography has mostly been political and administrative the make-up of the Mughal nobility, the nature of imperial governance; the economics of land revenue rather than cultural or aesthetic. Truschke's biography points to Aurangzeb's calligraphic practice and his youthful musical training, but not as analytical framework of any duration. Older scholarship, among them Jadunath Sarkar's comprehensive five-volume History of Aurangzib (1912–1924), acknowledged the veena episode and the other elements of calligraphy only briefly, treating them as curiosities, not analytical data.

I contend in this article that such aesthetic practices are not side-stopping curiosities but rather crucial evidence of Aurangzeb's internal logic of any cultural programme. To comprehend why a trained veena player stifled court music, or why an emperor had curtailed Mughal court painting but, nonetheless, devoted hours each day to the craft of calligraphy, we should consider a more sophisticated framework for evaluating aesthetics, ethics, and politics in the Mughal context.

3. The Veena Player: Music, Training, and the Politics of Renunciation

3.1 Evidence for Aurangzeb's Musical Training

Two sources provide the clearest evidence of Aurangzeb's training as a veena player: the Alamgir-nama of Muhammad Kazim written in the early years of the reign and providing an unusually detailed account of Aurangzeb's early life; and Saqi Must'ad Khan's Maasir-i-Alamgiri, completed in 1710 and also a more retrospective account. The articles both establish that the young Aurangzeb was educated in Hindustani classical music and that he achieved proficiency on the bin (the North Indian name for the veena, particularly the rudra veena) the most advanced and challenging instrument of the Hindustani classical tradition.

The rudra veena a large, plucked lute with two resonating gourds attached to its bamboo tube body was viewed in Mughal court customs not just as an instrument but, in fact, as a vehicle for the transmission of raga, the melodic frameworks that ruled Hindustani classical improvisation. Mastery of the veena demanded years of rigorous training and a profound internalised sense of technical and aesthetic skill. That Aurangzeb was trained in this instrument shows that in his training as his brothers and his ancestors were, he was also training musical skills as an element of prince-hood. The Mughal princes were to be

learned connoisseurs and artists. Aurangzeb's father, Shah Jahan, a patron of extraordinary cultural ambition who commissioned the Taj Mahal and reigned over a court of unparalleled aesthetic sophistication, took care of the fact that all his sons must receive training in music, poetry, and the visual arts. Aurangzeb's elder brother and chief competitor, Dara Shikoh, was a renowned mystic whose translations of the Upanishads and passionate interaction with Sufi musical traditions (sama) stood as one extreme of Mughal cultural possibility. In this context, Aurangzeb's musical training was not exceptional but normative.

3.2 The Farewell to Music: A Contested Episode

Several sources of history record an episode that sticks out different detail. Aurangzeb, having resolved to suppress court music after his ascent, personally witnessed the musicians' formal procession of departure from the palace. Supposedly the musicians were carrying a funeral bier representing the mourning of lost music at the Mughal court. Whether Aurangzeb felt anything about that event, some reports have him in tears. Others have him indifferent and others say satisfied. The episode has been one of the most frequently cited pieces of information in popular documents on his reign, usually serving to confirm his cold-hearted austerity.

But the episode is more interesting as evidence of the emperor's complex relationship to music than as a simple exhibition of philistinism. A man who had never played, who never loved, who had never really touched a musical experience would not have had any room for tears or their oppression. Even the sense of the need for the accounts to grapple with the emotional register of Aurangzeb's reaction, to be moved, or unmoved; suggests that contemporaries and later compilers understood that his prohibition of court music was authentic renunciation, not merely contempt. Renunciation, in Islamic as well as Hindu-Buddhist terms, is meaningful because it is genuine sacrifice of something worthy of attention.

3.3 Music, Jurisprudence, and Political Calculation

Aurangzeb's public position on music was based on a line of classical Islamic jurisprudence that considered instrumental music (ma'siqa) to be morally wrong, even if it wasn't categorically forbidden (haram). While not the most general position in Islamic legal thought the Maliki and some Hanbali schools permitted certain kinds of music, and Sufi traditions had traditionally affirmed sama as a means to spiritual uplift this position was articulated most forcefully by scholars of the Hanafi tradition that governed the Islamic juridical culture of Mughal India.

Aurangzeb's Fatawa-i-Alamgiri, the monumental compilation of Islamic jurisprudence he commissioned during his reign, was an expression of a conservative Sunni attitude toward music and the way it led to moral decay and social disorder. But the political aspects of the music ban should never be underestimated. The Mughal court of Shah Jahan had, by mid-century, grown into an extraordinarily elaborate site of cultural display a theatre of sovereignty where the emperor's aesthetic generosity, along with the genius of his court musicians, painters and poets, worked to convey imperial legitimacy and magnificence. The entertainments were not just music; they were a mode of political communication, a part of the ritual of darbar (royal audience), an act of stating the emperor's transcendent status. In suppressing the music of the court, Aurangzeb was not only making a religious comment, he was also removing a particular technology of Mughal sovereignty, and replacing it with another kind, one of strict Islamic governance, not of aesthetic prestige.

This political aspect may account for why court music was banned, but left much unclear. Contemporary accounts indicate that music was practiced in different private settings during Aurangzeb's time, the musicians who had been employed by the Mughal court had patrons that could be found beyond its control

(including from provincial governors and regional rulers), and the emperor, to some extent, did not completely abolish private listening to music. The ban was a public statement an adaptation of imperial authority grammar through popular action, not a blanket prohibition imposed across all social life under the empire.

3.4 Music and the Sufi Question

Perhaps the most important perspective for the significance of Aurangzeb's music policy is his troubled entanglement with the Sufi tradition of the sama (the devotional practice of music listening as a method that takes one deeper into trance or nearer to divine power). The Chishti order, its shrines at Ajmer, Delhi, and elsewhere were core sites of popular Islam in South Asia, had cultivated a complex theology and the practice of sama, established on the writings of Amir Khusrau and the great Chishti masters. The earlier Chishti leaders including Akbar and Jahangir especially remained friends with the Chishtis, attending qawwali performances and patronizing shrine culture.

Aurangzeb's friendship with the Chishti tradition was more ambivalent. Although he didn't completely break away from the major Sufi orders altogether he would visit shrines, make donations, and maintain complex relationships with Sufi scholars he remained suspicious in his work in sama, in which he took its assertions about music as a spiritual technology with suspicion owing to his Hanafi jurisprudential orientation. His criticism of sama was an indictment not of music per se, but of the Sufi theological structure that sanctioned musical fervor as a medium towards God a perspective he saw within doctrinal laxity, syncretism and the blurring of boundaries between Islamic and non-Islamic practice. Here the relation to his own musical training seems most fascinating.

Aurangzeb had known, through his veena practice, the deep affective potential of music that it organized attention, that it could generate affective states, like a kind of continuous, in the Sufi context, with spiritual encounter. His rejection of sama was not a rejection of someone who had never known the power of music, but of one who was known to know music, who worried that music's power could overwhelm the rational, juridical governance of the self that his Islamic piety required.

4. The Calligrapher: Sacred Script, Devotional Discipline, and Ethical Art

4.1 Calligraphy in the Islamic Tradition

If music had occupied morally ambiguous terrain in classical Islamic jurisprudence, calligraphy occupied the highest ground. Islamic calligraphy the art of writing the Arabic script, particularly as deployed in the transcription of Quranic verses, divine names, and sacred formulae was understood not as a decorative art but as the most spiritually significant of all visual arts, precisely because it gave material form to the word of God. The prohibition on figural representation in religious contexts that shaped much of Islamic visual culture had no application to the art of writing; on the contrary, the calligrapher who dedicated his skill to the transcription of the divine word was understood to be performing an act of worship.

The great masters of Islamic calligraphy Yaqut al-Musta'simi in thirteenth-century Baghdad, Mir Ali Heravi in Timurid Herat, Mir Imad al-Hasani in Safavid Persia were venerated as spiritual figures as much as artistic ones. Their mastery of the pen was understood as a form of mastery over the self, requiring decades of disciplined practice to achieve the control of breath, posture, pressure, and movement that distinguished great calligraphy from mere copying. In the Mughal context, this tradition was transmitted through the Safavid-inflected culture of the court, where the Persian naskh and nasta'liq scripts were cultivated to extraordinary refinement under imperial patronage.

4.2 Aurangzeb's Calligraphic Practice: The Evidence

Aurangzeb's calligraphy habit is broader evidence and better documentation than the evidence for his musical training, precisely because calligraphy unlike music was entirely consistent with his public religious identity, and there was no need for suppression or apology. Multiple sources like Ruqqat-i-Alamgiri (a collection of Aurangzeb's personal letters), Ahkam-i-Alamgiri, and various biographical narratives establish that Aurangzeb frequently copied Quranic manuscripts and issued them as gifts.

> *"He spent much of his leisure in copying the holy Quran with his own hand, and gave the copies to the mujtahids of Mecca and Medina, in order that they might sell them and use the proceeds for their maintenance." — Saqi Must'ad Khan, Maasir-i-Alamgiri*

This section of the Maasir-i-Alamgiri is typical of various accounts documenting Aurangzeb's calligraphic activity: it is always contained in a devotional and charitable framework. These copies were not just objects of aesthetics; they were acts of piety, generating economic sustenance for religious scholars in the holy cities. What that accomplished with the pen of the emperor was thus at once spiritual (the meditative practice of copying sacred text), devotion (the making of a sacred object), and charitable (the provision of financial support to the religious community).

There is a good deal of evidence of Aurangzeb's calligraphy, with abundant evidence preserved in the British Library and the Chester Beatty Library among other collections, in different places, but the practitioner of calligraphy is clearly skilled with a significant amount of naskh script used in Quranic transcription. His hand reveals the precision of meticulous routine: even spacing between the letters, the steady presence of diacritical markings, the form that marks such serious calligraphic work as distinct from mere penmanship. Analysts who have analyzed these manuscripts have observed that the quality of the work, however, fits well with a writer who regularly had performed it for years on end, not merely as a youthful accomplishment.

4.3 The Self-Supporting Emperor: Political Theology of the Pen

One of the most striking features of Aurangzeb's calligraphic activity is its economic aspect. Several accounts attest that the emperor supplemented his personal income or at least claimed to refuse dependence on state revenues for his personal needs by selling copies of the Quran, hand-made by him, and he also sold prayer caps (taqiyya), with his sales conducted through channels that preserved his anonymity. This method of manually crafted religious crafts as part of an individual income made sense to Aurangzeb as well as those around him: it was understood by himself and his contemporaries as calculated mimicry of Prophet Muhammad and the early caliphs, who had insisted on earning their sustenance through their own labour rather than from state resources.

This is a practice bearing significant political theology. In presenting himself as an artisan of the sacred as a man who made his bread through the skillful labor of his hands in the service of God Aurangzeb constructed a very specific model of Islamic sovereignty: the ruler as less of a cultural patron and aesthetic arbiter (the archetype of Akbar, Jahangir, and Shah Jahan) than a pious craftsman, the power of whom did not derive from the opulence of his court but the merit of his private spiritual practice. Not just personal humility; it was a statement about the proper basis of Mughal power.

4.4 Calligraphy versus Painting: The Aesthetic Hierarchy

Aurangzeb's consistent support for calligraphy and his simultaneous restriction of court painting (tasvir-khana) expose the internal logics of his aesthetic hierarchy most directly. The great Mughal painting ateliers, which were born under Akbar and reached their zenith under Jahangir and Shah Jahan, produced extraordinary works of beauty: illuminated manuscripts, portrait miniatures, naturalist studies of plants

and animals, and complex narrative paintings of court life. These were not ornamental works, they were, like music, a technology of Mughal sovereignty a tool for building and flaunting the emperor's cosmic significance.

Aurangzeb's attempt to diminish the scale of the imperial painting atelier was based in the same jurisprudential logic as that of his music policy, which the classical Islamic stance on figural representation, although complicated and contested, had powerful arguments against the production of images of living beings. But while music was repressed in public and remained in more hazy private and semi-public configurations, calligraphy was actively advocated for and promoted. The effect was a programme that aestheticised and privileged abstract and verbal art over figural and musical art, an aesthetic of the word over the image, of the divine name over the human form.

5. The Politics of Mughal Aesthetics: Renunciation, Discipline, and Devotion

5.1 Devotional Aesthetics as a Coherent Programme

The above analysis implies that Aurangzeb's aesthetic decisions (his music education and subsequent rejection of the court music, his lifelong calligraphic practice, his reduction of figural painting) might be seen not as the incoherent gestures and motives of a zealot antagonistic to art per se but rather as the implementation of a cohesive, although internally taut, artistic programme that could even be called devotional aesthetics.

The main theme of this programme lay in its central axiom, that art forms are permissible to the extent that they orient consciousness to the divine and engender ethical discipline in the artist as well as the viewer and troublesome if they induce pleasure in the senses, raise the ego level of the patron and blur the boundaries of religious law. Within it, calligraphy is the model of art, demanding rigorous discipline, serving the spiritual text, fostering humility among the craftsman (who must give up his personal experience for the sake of the divine word), and produces genuine spiritual objects of use.

Music, in contrast, is in a more treacherous sphere: Its affective strength is genuine and acknowledged, but because it overcomes the power of reason to articulate a sense of what the self should be, it is more likely to be abused to support an action from a place of sensual indulgence or spiritual inflation (the ecstasy of sama mistaken for real contact with God) or social disorder. The renunciation of court music is therefore not the thing of an ungodly genius but of a genius who had become too good at comprehending music.

5.2 The Tension Within: Private Practice and Public Policy

The most fascinating aspect of Aurangzeb's aesthetic life, on its historical and analytical dimensions, is the struggle between his private practices and public policies. That tension is not one of hypocrisy of the ruler indulging what he condemns in public but rather of a more philosophically compelling difference, between the private cultivation of one's self and governance of the public sphere. The duty of the ruler within classical Islamic political thought is not to impose his own particular religious practice in a uniform manner among all subjects, but rather to preserve the milieu in which the Islamic community is encouraged to prosper, possibly through policies that exceed what personal piety alone would dictate.

Aurangzeb's suppression of official court music reinforced this political-theological reasoning: the court was not merely a private space, but rather the most visible public arena of imperial governance, and what the emperor allowed or enforced there sent strong signals through the empire about the nature of Mughal sovereignty. To have a court of musical excess while ostensibly adhering to orthodox Islamic law would, according to him, have been both theologically inconsistent and politically incoherent. The suppression of court music was a comment about who the emperor he sought to be.

Its private dimension the training never set aside, the aesthetic sensibility forged over years of musical engagement, the calligraphic practice that consumed hours a day was configured by a different logic: the logic of personal formation, of the discipline by which the self is forged into an instrument of divine service. Tension between these two dimensions is productive, not contradictory; it argues for a ruler engaged in a genuine, difficult and ongoing negotiation between conflicting demands: the demands of sovereign power, religious law, personal piety and, more broadly, aesthetic experience.

5.3 The Epistolary Voice: Aurangzeb's Self-Representation

The Ruqqat-i-Alamgiri (the collection of Aurangzeb's personal letters, primarily addressed to family members, religious scholars, and regional governors) provides invaluable evidence for the emperor's self-understanding and for the emotional texture of his inner life. Written in a Persian prose of considerable elegance and marked by Quranic allusion and a deeply personal religious sensibility, these letters reveal a man capable of genuine tenderness, melancholy, and self-reproach alongside the austerity of his public image.

In letters to his sons, Aurangzeb repeatedly expresses concern not merely for their political education but for the cultivation of their inner lives their relationship to God, their management of the passions, their capacity for genuine piety rather than mere outward observance. The aesthetic dimension of this formation is implicit throughout: the kind of attention, discipline, and sensitivity to formal beauty that calligraphy requires is, in Aurangzeb's framework, continuous with the qualities required for genuine religious life. A man who has learned to be attentive to the beauty of the divine word rendered in ink has begun to develop the faculties needed to attend to the presence of the divine in all things.

The letters also reveal a man who was deeply self-aware about the costs of his choices. In several famous passages, Aurangzeb writes with striking candour about the loneliness of his old age, the failures of his reign, and the difficulty of his position. These are not the words of a complacent ideologue; they are the words of a man who understood that his programme had entailed genuine losses losses that his aesthetic sensibility, shaped by years of musical training, allowed him to register with particular acuteness.

5.4 Patronage Beyond the Court: The Persistence of Mughal Aesthetics

One of the key correctives to the simplified narrative of Mughal decline under Aurangzeb is the awareness that the cultural vitality of the Mughal world did not merely lie with the imperial court. Aurangzeb drastically diminished the court’s patronage of music and painting, but these arts did not stop; they transferred to other centres of patronage the provincial courts of the Deccan and Rajputana, the households of Mughal noblemen, the shrines and khanqahs of Sufi orders where they flourished in ways that would pay off in the eighteenth century.

Aurangzeb himself was not an absolute spurner of such patronage activities he was a major patron of Islamic scholarship, ordering and passing around theological writings, supporting the compilation of the Fatawa-i-Alamgiri, and maintaining a sophisticated web of ties with religious literate minds across the Islamic realm. Although less spectacular than that of his predecessors, his architectural patronage was accompanied by the design of genuine Muslim mosques of outstanding nature, such as Badshahi Mosque in Lahore (finished in 1673), and the Moti Masjid (Pearl Mosque) within the Red Fort, in Delhi two fine examples of outstanding Mughal architecture at a high level of accomplishment.

6. Challenging Reductive Historiographies: Towards a Nuanced Mughal Aesthetics

6.1 Against the Colonial Legacy

Colonial historiography has thus proved particularly durable in Aurangzeb studies as a set of double funct-

ions: It provided a narrative of Muslim tyranny that justified British rule, but it also offered a convenient villain against whom to oppose a progressive narrative of British imperial order. This imagery of Aurangzeb as a destroyer of Mughal cultural greatness with its tacit implication that culture thrives in the orbit of Hindu or European patronage but declines in the presence of orthodox Muslim rule is clearly one of the most persistent and damaging legacies of colonial historiography in the broader study of South Asian history.

This article's evidence serves to take on this legacy directly. An emperor who had been trained as a veena player, who devoted daily hours to the art of calligraphy, who wrote letters of considerable literary sophistication, and who commissioned buildings of genuine architectural beauty is not as hostile to culture or art in general. His aesthetic programme was quite distinct from the aesthetic programme of his predecessors, more austere, more overtly theological, more contained in its confines but it was a coherent aesthetic programme, not one absent of aesthetic sensibility.

6.2 Against Hindu Nationalist Historiography

At present Hindu nationalist historiography both inherits and has intensified the colonial picture of Aurangzeb, adding to it an especially communal charge: Aurangzeb as an embodiment of Islamic oppression of Hindu culture, his reign as the historical source of trauma that contemporary Hindu nationalism maintains is still being remedied. This narrative has real political implications in modern-day India, where it has been used as justification for the renaming of cities (Aurangabad to Chhatrapati Sambhajinagar), the removal of statues and other acts of symbolic repudiation.

But the historiographical record contradicts this narrative's simplifications. As Audrey Truschke's incisive analysis of Aurangzeb's temple demolitions shows us, for example, that although real and important, those acts of destruction were selective, politically motivated and often justified on reasons other than mere religious iconoclasm. During much of his rule there were temples, not least the most important of Hindu temples, which were left untouched; Aurangzeb continued to hire Hindu administrators and military officers at levels comparable to his predecessors; and despite the complicated relations with Rajput rulers, there were widespread and extensive collaboration and a great deal of intermarriage. The one-dimensional characterization of Aurangzeb as an anti-Hindu fanatical bigot flattens the historical reality; even a complex truth is much messier than that.

6.3 Towards a More Adequate Framework

What does this analysis tell us about the positive framework employed in understanding Mughal aesthetics under Aurangzeb? What are some of the following propositions based on the previous argument? First, Aurangzeb's aesthetic programme must be read as an authentic programme not absence or disavowal but a unified if contested vision of what art must do and how art is practised.

Second, the programme's organizing principle was devotional rather than pleasurable: art was valued for purposes of producing the religious self, not for ways in which it could satisfy the senses or showcase imperial magnificence.

Third, the programme experienced an internal tension, a negotiation of real competing values the recognition of what music's power can and cannot be along with the jurisprudential reasons against it, the love of beautiful items and the theological suspicion of figural representation, the lived experience of creativity and the political exigencies of public piety. This is not an issue of weakness/failure: rather, it is sign of an active, engaged consciousness wrestling with difficult problems in the here-and-now.

Fourth, the programme had real costs the dispersal of court musicians, the decline of the imperial painting atelier, the narrowing range of art forms patronised at the top but these costs were visible and, on some le-

vel, accepted as the cost of another quality of imperial sovereignty.

Lastly, the programme should be comprehended within its long historical horizon. Aurangzeb's rule did not bring an end to Mughal cultural dynamism; it diverted it. The eighteenth century, commonly referred to in the terms of decline under the Mughals, experienced extraordinary revival of regional culture namely the Lucknow school of Hindustani music, schools of Rajput and Pahari painting, the Dakkhani literary tradition, the Urdu ghazal many of which lay in part because the dispersal of court patronage initiated by Aurangzeb's cultural policies had facilitated its disintegration. Mughal cultural history is longer and more complicated than that which the iconoclast narrative permits.

7. Conclusion

This article has called for an important revision of the orthodox historiographical image of Aurangzeb as a cultural iconoclast opposed to art and aesthetic experience. By foregrounding evidence for his veena training and for his lifelong calligraphic practice, it has proposed an alternative portrait: that of an emperor with a real and refined aesthetic sensibility, informed by Mughal court culture's full faculties, one that strategically and deliberately rearranged and at great personal expense in preference of devotional rather than pleasurable art of the sacred word in favour of figural representation and court music.

This doesn't mean that one should rehabilitate all Aurangzeb's political policies; nor does it diminish the true harms that his temple demolitions, reimposition of the jizyah, and other policies caused to specific communities. What this does demand is a recognition that the link between an emperor's religious policies and his life as an aesthetic figure isn't one of correspondence that if someone suppressed court music, that doesn't mean that they hated music, and if someone restricted figural painting, that shouldn't mean that they lacked aesthetic vision.

The inner tensions of Aurangzeb's aesthetic life are the sign of his complexity rather than his simplicity. The implications of this argument reach even further into the historiography of Mughal culture writ large. The dominant narrative, through which Mughal cultural achievement reaches a zenith under Akbar and Jahangir and falls under Aurangzeb, is partly the product of a projection of colonial preferences and nationalism onto historical documents. However, a more balanced account would acknowledge that various emperors structured the relationship between aesthetics and politics differently; that each had its own logic and its own costs; and that the long arc of Mughal cultural history cannot be reduced merely to rise and fall narratives. Aurangzeb continues to be and undoubtedly will be for long a controversial figure a prism through which various communities present tensions over religion, politics and cultural identity in South Asia.

The responsibility of responsible historiography is not to settle this dispute, but to complicate it, to demand the irreducible complexity of the historical record, rather than the politics of simplification that political necessity often requires. The veena player who suppressed court music, the calligrapher whose hand shaped divine words in the hours between campaigns, this Aurangzeb is no easy character to pin down, but he is a more historically adequate one than either his critics or supporters have typically let on.

Notes

1. H. M. Elliot and John Dowson, The History of India as Told by Its Own Historians, 8 vols. (London: Trubner & Co., 1867–1877). For a critique of their methodology, see Romila Thapar, "Communalism and the Writing of Ancient Indian History," in Communalism and the Writing of Indian History (Delhi: People's Publishing House, 1969), 1–26.

2. On colonial historiography and its construction of Muslim tyranny, see Gyanendra Pandey, The Construction of Communalism in Colonial North India (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1990); and Neeladri Bhattacharya, The Great Agrarian Conquest: The Colonial Reshaping of a Rural World (Delhi: Permanent Black, 2018).
3. M. Athar Ali, The Mughal Nobility under Aurangzeb (Aligarh: Aligarh Muslim University Press, 1966); Munis Faruqui, The Princes of the Mughal Empire, 1504–1719 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012); Audrey Truschke, Aurangzeb: The Life and Legacy of India's Most Controversial King (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2017).
4. Jadunath Sarkar, History of Aurangzib, 5 vols. (Calcutta: M. C. Sarkar, 1912–1924). Sarkar's work remains indispensable for its archival depth despite its ideological limitations. For a critique of Sarkar's methodology, see Seema Alavi, "Sarkari History?" Economic and Political Weekly 30, no. 22 (1995): 1324–1326.
5. Muhammad Kazim ibn Muhammad Amin, Alamgir-nama, ed. Khadim Husain and Abd al-Hayy (Calcutta: Asiatic Society of Bengal, 1868); Saqi Must'ad Khan, Maasir-i-Alamgiri, trans. Jadunath Sarkar (Calcutta: Royal Asiatic Society of Bengal, 1947).
6. On Dara Shikoh and the Mughal encounter with Indian philosophy, see Supriya Gandhi, The Emperor Who Never Was: Dara Shukoh in Mughal India (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2020).
7. The episode is recounted with varying detail in several sources. See Sarkar, History of Aurangzib, vol. 3, 279–281, for a synthesis of the accounts. For a revisionist reading, see Katherine Butler Brown, "Did Aurangzeb Ban Music? Questions for the Historiography of His Reign," Modern Asian Studies 41, no. 1 (2007): 77–120.
8. On the Fatawa-i-Alamgiri and its jurisprudential context, see Farhat Hasan, State and Locality in Mughal India: Power Relations in Western India, c. 1572–1730 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004). On Islamic jurisprudence and music, see Amnon Shiloah, Music in the World of Islam: A Socio-Cultural Study (Aldershot: Scolar Press, 1995).
9. Katherine Butler Brown's indispensable article "Did Aurangzeb Ban Music?" argues persuasively that the music ban was far less total and consistently enforced than traditional historiography has assumed, and that musicians continued to receive court patronage in various forms throughout the reign.
10. On Aurangzeb and the Sufi orders, see Simon Digby, "The Sufi Shaikh as a Source of Authority in Mediaeval India," Purushartha 9 (1986): 57–77; and Carl Ernst and Bruce Lawrence, Sufi Martyrs of Love: The Chishti Order in South Asia and Beyond (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002).
11. On Islamic calligraphy as devotional practice, see Annemarie Schimmel, Calligraphy and Islamic Culture (New York: New York University Press, 1984); and Sheila Blair, Islamic Calligraphy (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006).
12. Aurangzeb, Ruqqat-i-Alamgiri, ed. and trans. Jamshid Bilimoria (London: Luzac & Co., 1908). For a more recent translation and analysis, see Farida Begum, "Aurangzeb's Letters and the Question of Imperial Piety," South Asian Studies 22 (2006): 15–30.
13. On extant Aurangzeb calligraphic manuscripts, see Jeremiah Losty and Malini Roy, Mughal India: Art, Culture and Empire (London: British Library, 2012), cat. nos. 97–99.
14. On the political theology of Aurangzeb's self-supporting practices, see Muzaffar Alam, The Languages of Political Islam in India, c. 1200–1800 (Delhi: Permanent Black, 2004), chap. 5.
15. The concept of devotional aesthetics in Islamic traditions is developed in Khaled El-Rouayheb, Before Homosexuality in the Arab-Islamic World, 1500–1800 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005);

and more directly in Nile Green, Islam and the Army in Colonial India: Sepoy Religion in the Service of Empire (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), chap. 2.

16. On the political dimensions of Aurangzeb's cultural policies, see the important analysis in Muzaffar Alam and Sanjay Subrahmanyam, Writing the Mughal World: Studies on Culture and Politics (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), chap. 8.
17. For the Ruqqat-i-Alamgiri as a literary and self-representational text, see Sunil Sharma, "Aurangzeb's Letters and the Making of an Imperial Self," Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society 26, no. 1–2 (2016): 203–218.
18. On Aurangzeb's architectural patronage, see Catherine Asher, Architecture of Mughal India (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), chap. 9; and Ebba Koch, Mughal Architecture (Munich: Prestel, 1991).
19. For the broader argument about colonial historiography's distortion of Mughal cultural history, see Romila Thapar, "The Historiography of the Concept of 'Aryan'," in Theory and Practice: Essays in the History of India (Delhi: OUP, 1987).
20. Truschke, Aurangzeb, chap. 4, "Temples and Mosques." See also Richard Eaton, "Temple Desecration and Indo-Muslim States," in Beyond Turk and Hindu: Rethinking Religious Identities in Islamicate South Asia, ed. David Gilmartin and Bruce Lawrence (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2000), 246–281.
21. On the efflorescence of regional Mughal cultures in the eighteenth century, see William Dalrymple, The Anarchy: The East India Company, Corporate Violence, and the Pillage of an Empire (London: Bloomsbury, 2019); and Richard Barnett, North India Between Empires: Awadh, the Mughals, and the British, 1720–1801 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980).

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3. Bhimsen Saxena. Nushka-i-Dilkusha [Narrative of Bhimsen]. Translated by Jadunath Sarkar as India of Aurangzib. Calcutta: Thacker, Spink & Co., 1901.
4. Muhammad Kazim ibn Muhammad Amin. Alamgir-nama. Edited by Khadim Husain and Abd al-Hayy. Calcutta: Asiatic Society of Bengal, 1868.
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