MERCIFUL TYRANTS:
Why did the Mughals (1556-1707) follow a Policy of Rebel Forgiveness?

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Research Question: Why did an extractive, militaristic state forgive rebels?

Definition of 'Forgiven': rebel returns to the same station/job or is given a station/job higher than his current one.

43% of rebels forgiven = 119 / 275

Definition of 'Rebel Participant': groups and individuals that joined in a rebellion against the state, where the central government responded to them.

Methodology: I compiled a database of 275 rebels, with records of the consequence of rebellion and motivations from Official State Histories. From the data collected, I am able to analyse trends to see which types of rebels were most likely to be forgiven and which types were not.

In addition to the database, I use qualitative sources in the form of case studies, employment contracts and edicts to show how Mughals framed this policy in their own terms. Some of these case studies were recorded in Mughal art-work, a few of which can be seen at the bottom of this poster.

Question 1: Did the Mughals Forgive Rebels to get more tax?

Graph A: No. of Rebels by motivation over time
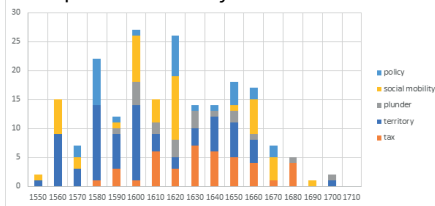
One might assume that the main reason to forgive rebels is to extract more taxes from them. This is supported by the graph on the left that shows rebels having tax motivations became more prevalent over time. Additionally, Table A shows that a large portion of the zamindars that were forgiven also had wealth taken from them, which could infer that paying taxes would lead to forgiveness.

Table A: No. Rebels for those whose motivation is Tax

Nb: only rebels for which complete data exists	total rebels with tax motivation for whom we know what happened	forgiven with tax motivation	% forgiven	and wealth taken	offered forgiveness but refused
mansabdar	0		0%		
noble	3	3	100%	1	
zamindar	23	16	69.60%	11	2
peasant	15	4	26.70%	1	
total	41	23	56.10%	13	

Table B: No. of Rebels per type of motivation

Nb: only rebels for which motivation data exists	total	% of total with the motivation	Number forgiven	% with motivation and forgiven	% of total forgiven
tax	41	20%	23	56%	26%
territory	70	34.3%	25	36 %	28%
social mobility	45	22.1%	21	47%	24%
plunder	19	9.3%	8	42%	9%
political	29	14.2%	12	41%	13%
total	204	100%	89	44%	100%

However, when we look at the number of rebels with each type of motivation in Table B, it is clear that rebellions with tax motivations (56%) are the most likely to be forgiven, the rebels with other motivations also have very high rates of forgiveness of 40% or higher. Additionally, tax forgiveness only accounts for 26% of all rebels forgiven. So then why are all these other groups also being forgiven?

Question 2: Who was the most likely to be forgiven and what can we learn from that?

Table C: Rebel Forgiveness by Class

Nb: rebels for which consequence data exists	Total	forgiven	not forgiven	% forgiven
Monarchs	13	8	5	61.5
Nobles	98	44	54	44.9
Zamindars	109	52	57	47.7
Peasants	46	11	35	23.9
Total	275	119	156	43.3

When we look at it by class in Table C, it is clear that zamindars are the most likely to rebel. However, we must keep in mind that the sources have a bias against reporting peasant rebellions, so those could be greater than we have a record of.

We also see the higher the social status (therefore likely wealthier) the rebel, The more likely they were forgiven

Graph B: % of Rebellion by class type per decade
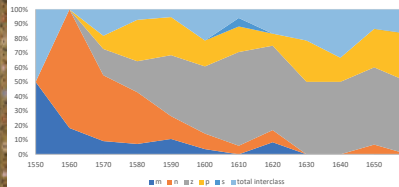
Graph B shows that the groups that were most likely to rebel over time were the zamindars, whose propensity to rebel increases over time. Whilst we should keep in mind data bias, higher classes on the whole seem to rebel very often through the dynasty.

Preliminary Findings: The initial results seem to indicate that whilst tax was possibly one of the drivers of forgiving rebellion, it was not the only one. The Mughals had other reasons for forgiving rebels with other motivations. We can get some indication that the wealthier the rebels the more likely they were to be forgiven, suggesting that wealth or social status plays a role in determining which rebels are forgiven. In Addition, we can see that zamindars were the largest rebel group and became increasingly more rebellious over time.

Possible Further Research: It is possibly in light of large and frequent rebellions led by wealthy zamindars, that the state had to forgive rebels because they were too expensive to fight. Whilst the Mughals preferred to be highly extractive, they were limited by institutional conditions they inherited that risked greater costs. Alternatively, rebels may have been too valuable to the state to not forgive. Overall, however, this research indicates that the Mughal state was perhaps not as extractive as some of the current literature suggests.

Mughal Miniatures Related to Rebellions:

References (Abbreviated):
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- Jujhar Singh Bundela Kneels in Submission to Shah Jahan, signed Bichitr, c. 1630, Chester Beatty Library

Other Sources:
- Habib, Irfan, "Forms of Class Struggle in Mughal India" in Essays in Indian History: Towards a Marxist Perception (New Delhi: Tulika Books, 1995), 233-259
- Alam, Muzhaffar, "Aspects of Agrarian Uprisings in North India in the Early Eighteenth Century" in The Mughal State 1526-1750 edited by Muzaffar Alam and Sanjay Subrahmanyam (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998), 449-474