

Eureka Journal of Humanities and Social Research (EJHSR)

ISSN 2760-4934 (Online) Volume 2, Issue 6, June 2026



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THE ADMINISTRATIVE AND MILITARY STRUCTURE OF THE BABURID EMPIRE: AN ANALYTICAL STUDY OF CENTRALIZATION AND INSTITUTIONAL MECHANISMS

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Abstract

The Baburid Empire (1526–1858) represents one of the most sophisticated examples of a centralized bureaucratic state in the early modern Islamic world. This paper examines the core institutional frameworks that enabled the Baburid emperors to govern a vast and ethnically diverse subcontinent. It scrutinizes the pivotal role of the Emperor as the absolute sovereign and analyzes the functional specialization of the central ministries, including the Vakil, Diwan-i-Kul, and Mir Bakshi. Furthermore, the study explores the synthesis of Central Asian Timurid traditions with indigenous Indian administrative practices, which reached its zenith during the reign of Jalal-ud-din Muhammad Akbar. Special attention is dedicated to the Mansabdari and Jagirdari systems as the twin pillars of Baburid military-administrative governance, highlighting how the non-hereditary assignment of revenue land prevented local separatism. The article offers a comparative historiographical literature review, analyzing perspectives from Aligarh and Central Asian historical schools. It expands upon the economic foundation of the empire through Todar Mal's Zabt system and currency reforms, and traces the structural vulnerabilities, economic pressures, and subsequent decentralization that led to the eventual decline of the empire, offering a comprehensive evaluation of its institutional legacy.

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Keywords: Baburid Empire, State Centralization, Mansabdari System, Jagirdari System, Subah, Todar Mal's Reforms.

1. Introduction

The establishment of the Baburid Empire in 1526 by Zahir-ud-din Muhammad Babur marked a transformative epoch in the political and administrative landscape of South Asia. Emerging as a direct continuation of the Timurid statecraft traditions of Central Asia, the Baburid polity was not merely a military hegemony but a highly institutionalized bureaucratic state. The synthesis of the Chaghatai and Timurid concepts of sovereignty with the existing socio-political structures of the Indian subcontinent resulted in a resilient administrative model that sustained the empire for over two centuries.

While Babur and his successor Humayun focused primarily on territorial consolidation and military survival, it was the third emperor, Jalal-ud-din Muhammad Akbar (r. 1556–1605), who systematically designed the administrative machinery. The core challenge of the Baburid state was the governance of an immense, pluralistic society with deeply entrenched regional identities. To overcome this, the empire evolved a unique centralized apparatus where loyalty to the crown was tightly interwoven with military rank, agrarian revenue management, and institutionalized checks and balances. Understanding the structural efficiency of this apparatus requires a detailed analysis of its historiographical background, central ministries, provincial subdivisions, and fiscal foundations.

2. Historiographical Perspectives and Literature Review

The study of the Baburid administrative apparatus has generated significant debate within early modern global history, splitting scholars into various ideological and regional analytical camps. Investigating these distinct

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historiographical traditions is essential for understanding how the institutional structure of the Baburid state is interpreted today.

2.1. The Aligarh School and the Agrarian Imperial Framework

The dominant paradigm in the mid-to-late twentieth century was established by the Aligarh School, spearheaded by scholars such as Irfan Habib and Satish Chandra. Habib's seminal work, *The Agrarian System of Mughal [Baburid] India (1556–1707)*, radically shifted the focus from imperial court biographies to economic and structural mechanics. Habib argued that the Baburid state was an exceptionally centralized fiscal pump designed to extract agrarian surplus from the countryside to sustain an urbanized military aristocracy. According to the Aligarh thesis, the administrative coherence of the empire was preserved by the rigid control over the Mansabdari and Jagirdari mechanisms, which left little room for regional autonomy. Satish Chandra further broadened this framework by examining the social composition of the nobility (*Nobility Under the Mughals*), emphasizing that the political stability of the empire depended entirely on the delicate balance of factions within the imperial court.

2.2. The Central Asian School and Timurid Continuity

In contrast to the Eurocentric or purely subcontinental perspectives, the Central Asian school of historiography, prominently represented by Sabahat Azimjanova and contemporary Uzbek historians such as G. Satimov, places a profound emphasis on the institutional continuity from the Timurid Empire of Transoxiana to the Baburid state in India. Azimjanova's extensive analysis in *The State of Babur in Kabul and India* illustrates that Zahir-ud-din Muhammad Babur did not abandon his ancestral concepts of statecraft upon crossing the Indus. Instead, the early Baburid administrative structure preserved the institutional memory of the Timurid diwans, the judicial enforcement of Chaghatai customary law (*Yassa*) side-by-side with Islamic jurisprudence, and the distribution of land grants

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reminiscent of the Central Asian Soyurghal and Tuyul systems. Uzbek historiography underscores that the highly refined court etiquette, the military arrangement of the left and right wings (baranghar and juwanghar), and the administrative centralism of Akbar were structural evolutions of the political ideas found in the Tuzuk-i-Baburi (Babur's memoirs) and the Tuzuk-i-Timuri (Timur's institutes).

2.3. The Revisionist and Centrifugal Critiques

By the late twentieth century, revisionist historians like Muzaffar Alam, Sanjay Subrahmanyam, and C.A. Bayly challenged the Aligarh school's "centralized imperial model." The revisionists argued that the Baburid state was far more decentralized and dynamic than previously depicted. They claimed that the empire functioned as a negotiated corporate state, where central authority was constantly tempered, reinterpreted, and sometimes restricted by local elites, regional gentry (zamindars), and indigenous merchant networks. Rather than a monolithic fiscal machine imposing its absolute will from Delhi or Agra, the revisionist perspective describes the Baburid administration as a fluid ecosystem that achieved stability through constant compromise, cultural assimilation, and economic alliances with regional powers.

3. The Central Administration and Ministerial Apparatus

At the apex of the Baburid administrative hierarchy stood the **Emperor (Padshah or Shahanshah)**, who wielded absolute executive, legislative, judicial, and military authority. The Baburid concept of divine right, explicitly articulated by Akbar's court historian Abu'l-Fazl, positioned the monarch as the shadow of God on Earth (Zill-i-Ilahi), whose primary duty was to maintain cosmic justice and social equilibrium. However, the compressed reality of managing millions of subjects across distinct climatic and cultural zones necessitated a sophisticated central secretariat divided into highly specialized departments.

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THE EMPEROR (Padshah)
Vakil / Wazir (Prime Minister)
Sadru-s-Sudur (Religious & Endowments)
Qazi-ul-Quzat (Chief Judiciary)
Diwan-i-Kul (Finance/Revenue)
Mir Bakshi (Military/Mansabs)

3.1. The Vakil (Grand Vizier / Prime Minister)

The Vakil was the highest official in the central administration, acting as the chief advisor to the Emperor. In the early stages of the empire, particularly during the regency of Bairam Khan, the Vakil held immense political and military power, often functioning as the alter ego of the king. To prevent the concentration of excessive power in a single office, Akbar later decentralized the Vakil's financial authorities, transforming the role into a prime ministerial position focused on general oversight, while fiscal powers were transferred to the revenue department.

3.2. The Diwan-i-Kul (Chancellor of the Exchequer / Finance Minister)

The Diwan-i-Kul was responsible for the entire fiscal architecture of the empire. This department managed state revenues, determined tax assessments, supervised imperial expenditures, and controlled the state treasury. Every provincial financial officer (Diwan) reported directly to the Diwan-i-Kul, creating a separate financial hierarchy independent of the military governors.

3.3. The Mir Bakshi (Military Secretary and Inspector General)

The Mir Bakshi was the head of the military administration. Crucially, the Mir Bakshi was not the commander-in-chief of the army (a role reserved for the Emperor or designated princes), but rather the chief administrative officer of the military apparatus. His responsibilities included the recruitment of soldiers, the

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maintenance of descriptive rolls (chehra), the branding of imperial horses (dagh), and the processing of all Mansabdari appointments.

3.4. Religious Affairs and Judiciary

The **Sadru-s-Sudur (Chief Sadr)** managed religious endowments, state charities, and stipends granted to scholars, theologians, and poets. Parallel to the Sadr was the **Qazi-ul-Quzat (Chief Qazi)**, the head of the judicial organ, who administered Islamic law (Sharia) across the empire, while local customary laws were observed by village councils.

4. Provincial and Local Governance: The Subah System

To project imperial authority from the center to the periphery, Akbar divided the empire into major administrative zones called **Subahs (Provinces)**. By 1580, the empire was organized into twelve Subahs, a number that expanded to over twenty during the late seventeenth-century conquests of the Deccan under Aurangzeb. The structural success of provincial governance relied heavily on a deliberate system of dyarchy—the division of power between two separate, co-equal provincial officials:

- **The Subahdar (Nazim):** The provincial governor, appointed directly by the Emperor. He was responsible for maintaining law and order, executing imperial decrees, commanding provincial troops, and ensuring the smooth administration of criminal justice.
- **The Provincial Diwan:** The chief revenue officer of the province. He was appointed by and remained accountable solely to the central Diwan-i-Kul. He controlled the provincial treasury, collected land revenue, and audited agricultural records.

Because the Subahdar and the provincial Diwan were independent of each other and held equal status within the province, they acted as mutual checks. A Subahdar could not access provincial funds without the Diwan's approval, and a

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Diwan relied on the Subahdar's military power to enforce tax collection. This institutional design effectively stifled regional rebellions during the empire's golden age.

CENTRAL GOVERNMENT

Subahdar Prov. Diwan (SUBAH Province)

Faujdar Amalguzar (SARKAR / District)

Shiqdar Amil / Kanungo (PARGANA / Tehsil)

Muqaddam (GRAM / Village)

Beneath the Subah, the administrative subdivisions were systematically organized:

- 1. Sarkar (District):** Headed by the Faujdar (military commander responsible for security) and the Amalguzar (revenue collector).
- 2. Pargana (Sub-district/Tehsil):** Controlled by the Shiqdar (executive officer) and the Amil or Kanungo (agricultural land record-keepers).
- 3. Gram (Village):** The lowest tier of governance, led by the traditional local headman (Muqaddam or Patel), who worked in tandem with the village accountant (Patwari) under state supervision.

5. The Mansabdari and Jagirdari Systems: Pillars of Empire

The structural core of the Baburid state was its unique military-bureaucratic hierarchy known as the **Mansabdari System**, introduced systematically by Akbar. This system eliminated hereditary aristocracy and bound every state official—civilian or military—directly to the service of the emperor.

5.1. Structure of the Mansabs: Zat and Sawar

A Mansab denoted a rank or position within the imperial hierarchy. Ranks ranged numerically from holders of 10 to holders of 10,000 (with higher ranks reserved

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exclusively for royal princes). Each Mansabdar was assigned two distinct numbers:

- **Zat:** Indicated the personal status, position in the court protocol, and the corresponding salary of the officer.
- **Sawar:** Indicated the exact number of cavalymen and horses the officer was required to maintain and make available for imperial military campaigns.

5.2. The Jagirdari System and Revenue Assignments

To remunerate the Mansabdars, the state utilized two methods: Naqdi (direct cash payment from the central treasury) or, more commonly, the assignment of a **Jagir** (revenue-yielding land parcel). A Jagirdar did not own the land assigned to him; he was merely granted the right to collect land revenue (Mal) equal to his sanctioned salary.

To prevent these Jagirdars from building permanent local power bases or exploiting the peasantry, the Baburid administration enforced strict regulations:

- **Frequent Rotations:** Jagirs were transferred to different regions every three to four years.
- **Non-Hereditary Nature:** Upon the death or dismissal of a Mansabdar, his Jagir immediately reverted to the crown (Khalisa), and his personal property was audited under the law of escheat.

6. The Economic Base and Raja Todar Mal's Reforms

The political and military structures of the Baburid Empire could not have existed without an equally advanced fiscal engine. The economic policy of the empire was marked by transition—shifting from arbitrary tribute collection to an incredibly standardized, empirically verified revenue infrastructure.

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6.1. The Zabt System and Agricultural Assessment

The pinnacle of Baburid fiscal administration was the **Zabt System** (also known as the Dahsala system), masterminded by Akbar's brilliant Finance Minister, **Raja Todar Mal**. Prior to this reform, tax assessments were based on guesswork or historical precedents, leading to friction between state collectors and agrarian producers.

TODAR MAL'S ZABT SYSTEM

1. Land Standardization (Tanab using Bamboo/Iron links)
2. Productivity Classification (Polaj, Parauti, Chachar, Banjar)
3. The Dahsala Survey (10-Year historical average of price & yield)
4. Monetization (Tax collected primarily in cash / Silver Rupees)

Todar Mal introduced four crucial steps to formalize the Zabt system:

1. Standardization of Measurement: The traditional hemp measuring ropes, which expanded or contracted based on humidity, were replaced with the Tanab—a measuring chain constructed of bamboo rods joined by iron rings. This guaranteed geometric precision across all geographical terrains.

2. Classification of Land Quality: Agricultural land was categorized into four types based on the continuity of cultivation:

Polaj: Continuously cultivated and highly fertile; never left fallow. Taxed annually.

Parauti: Left fallow temporarily for one or two years to recover its nutrients.

Chachar: Left fallow for three to four years.

Banjar: Uncultivated or barren land left fallow for five years or more; taxed at minimal promotional rates to encourage reclamation.

3. The Dahsala Assessment: The state compiled meticulous data covering a ten-year period (from the 15th to the 24th year of Akbar's reign) regarding crop yields and market prices. One-third of the average ten-year output was designated as the state's share.

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4. Cash Monetization: Unlike previous regimes that accepted payment in grain, the Zabt system strongly incentivized or explicitly demanded that taxes be paid in cash. This forced farmers to engage with local markets, accelerating rural commercialization.

6.2. Currency Reforms and Global Silver Inflow

To sustain a cash-based tax system, the Baburid state standardized its minting process, creating one of the most stable bi-metallic currency systems of the early modern world. The flagship coin was the silver **Rupiya** (weighing roughly 178 grains of pure silver), complemented by the gold **Muhr** for high-value transactions and the copper **Dam** for daily local market exchange.

The imperial mints kept open-access policies: anyone could bring silver bullion to a state mint and have it converted into official currency for a nominal fee. This policy allowed the Baburid Empire to absorb massive waves of silver flowing from the Americas via European merchants (the Global Silver Flow), turning the subcontinent into an industrial and textiles-exporting superpower.

7. The Decline of Centralized Structure and the Jagirdari Crisis

Despite its operational excellence, the institutional layout of the Baburid Empire harbored systemic vulnerabilities. During the late seventeenth century, under Emperor **Muhi-ud-din Muhammad Aurangzeb** (r. 1658–1707), the structural equilibrium between the central apparatus and regional forces fractured.

7.1. Aurangzeb's Deccan Campaigns and Imperial Over-extension

The critical turning point occurred when Aurangzeb shifted the entire geopolitical focus of the empire to the Deccan plateau. For over twenty-five years, the emperor engaged in unrelenting military campaigns to annex the Shia Sultanates of Bijapur and Golconda and to suppress the rising Maratha insurgency.

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This prolonged military engagement triggered severe administrative consequences:

- **Absentee Central Government:** The prolonged absence of the Emperor from the traditional capitals (Delhi and Agra) weakened the administrative grip of the central ministries.
- **Fiscal Drainage:** The enormous expenses of maintaining millions of troops in the Deccan exhausted the imperial treasury, directly reducing the funds available to subsidize irrigation, roads, and artistic infrastructure.

7.2. The Satish Chandra Thesis: The Jagirdari Crisis

The structural decay of the empire is best explained by the **Jagirdari Crisis** theory developed by Satish Chandra. As Aurangzeb annexed the Deccan, thousands of local Deccani nobles were absorbed into the Mansabdari system to ensure political compliance. This created a massive inflation of ranks.

THE JAGIRDARI CRISIS MECHANISM

Massive Expansion of Mansabdars (Ranks)

Severe Shortage of Be-Jagir (Available Land)

Factional In-Fighting / Corruption Among Courtiers

Over-Exploitation of Peasantry by Temporary Jagirdars

Widespread Agrarian Revolts (Jats, Satnamis)

Breakdown of Centralized Control

This structural mismatch launched a destructive cycle:

1. The Shortage of Land (Be-jagir): The number of Mansabdars grew exponentially, but the amount of cultivable, revenue-yielding land (Jagir) remained stagnant. Many officers held titles without receiving any actual land assignments.

2. Peasant Exploitation: Because Jagirdars knew they would only hold a specific piece of land for a short period before being rotated, and because land

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was scarce, they stopped investing in long-term agricultural improvements. Instead, they extracted maximum taxes from the peasantry to recoup their investments.

3. Agrarian Uprisings: This oppressive economic pressure provoked widespread armed resistance. Marginalized peasant classes joined hands with regional zamindars, sparking powerful rebellions like those of the Jats, Satnamis, and Sikhs, which chipped away at the empire's geographical boundaries.

8. Conclusion

The administrative framework of the Baburid Empire demonstrates how an early modern state could achieve remarkable centralization through institutional innovation. By merging Central Asian Timurid principles with indigenous Indian bureaucratic practices, the Baburids constructed an administrative machine that prioritized systemic checks and balances over hereditary fiefdoms. The Mansabdari system and the carefully balanced provincial dyarchy successfully neutralized decentralized factions for nearly two centuries.

Ultimately, structural flaws, fiscal over-extension in the Deccan, and the resulting Jagirdari crisis eroded the empire's foundations. However, the administrative topographies created by the Baburids left an enduring impact on South Asia, shaping the revenue and regional subdivisions that would later be inherited by the British Raj and modern South Asian states.

Endnotes

[¹]: For a foundational study on the preservation of Timurid state traditions by Zahir-ud-din Muhammad Babur, see Sabahat Azimjanova, *Gosudarstvo Babura v Kabule i v Indii* (1977).

[²]: The mathematical operation and financial impact of Todar Mal's land categorization are detailed in Abu'l-Fazl's *A'in-i Akbari*.

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[^3]: Satish Chandra's comprehensive analysis of the collapse of court dynamics is found in his definitive text, *Parties and Politics at the Mughal Court, 1707–1740*.

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