As an entity, Nazi Germany embodied a unique sense of nationalism and militarism that remains unparalleled in human history. The expression of these nationalistic tendencies in brutal programs such as the ethnic cleansing of the Jewish people serves as a stark reminder of the propensity of harm when such sentiments are involved. In post-war literature that seeks to understand such a dark time in European history, there exists a multitude of work that attempts to understand the roots of such an ideology. When one examines the factors that enabled Nazi ideology to take root within German society, one is naturally drawn to more immediate factors to the rise of the NSDAP such as the Diktat of Versailles or the economic maladies that the Weimar Republic was subject to. However, an examination of Germanic history reveals that the German state had embodied similar sentiments periodically throughout its history. In a society, which was influenced by rhetoric that placed emphasis on historical injustices, it is important to consider the role that Germanic history and its appropriation by the NSDAP played in cementing this ideology within the minds of the German people.
In this paper, we shall examine the ways in which the NSDAP appropriated medieval German history and Classical History in general to give credence to an *Origin Myth* for the Aryan Race and create legitimacy for a *Thousand-Year Reich* that was rooted in history. By casting light on the necessity of this myth creation, its intricacies and the impact it had on Germany’s policy-making regarding diverse matters ranging from military organization to eugenics, this paper seeks to determine whether the NSDAP was successful in distilling these ideals within German society and the impact they had on German nationalism and militarism. It will be argued that through this appropriation that was apparent in education, institution building, architecture and the collective identity of the German people, the NSDAP did indeed manage to successfully appropriate Germanic history in order to supplement their policy objectives.

Before we examine the sorts of elements that were appropriated by the NSDAP, it is important to understand the necessity for such myth creation. In Mein Kampf, Hitler himself drew parallels between the predicaments Germany faced and historical endeavors. The operations of the Teutonic Knights, a predominately German Christian order active in the Holy Land and the Baltics during the Middle Ages, for example, was used to give credence to the Nazi idea of *Lebensraum* or living space for the German nation in the east. Even though Hannah Arendt’s understanding of totalitarian regimes remains controversial, in her works, she is right in pointing out that such regimes create ‘a fictitious world’. However, the manipulation of one’s environment and circumstances by the state is often accompanied by a historical regeneration that seeks to instill certain ideals within society. In the case of the NSDAP, the state strived to
create a narrative of a ‘millennial war’ that had its roots not only in medieval Germanic history but also within Europe’s larger Classical roots (Chapoutot). The Nazi conception of history itself arose from a desire to reorient historical studies as a field that was predicated on legend-creation rather than an emphasis on facts (Hitler). However, much of this necessity for the manipulation of history for political objectives arose from a desire to redeem the impact that the Great War had on the German identity (Chapoutot).

The restructuring of German history by the NSDAP in fact had roots in a much larger German tradition of anti-intellectualism that took hold in the late eighteenth century (Lacoue-Labarthe et al). It sought to challenge the Entitlement ideals of Europe that had a foundation on Platonic reason. The Germany that Hitler and the NSDAP strived to create had its foundations on chivalry, valor and the masculinity that both of them entailed. In order to achieve this it was convenient for the Nazi Party to invoke the Holy Roman Empire or the Teutonic Knights as they embodied the very aesthetic that was suitable for the German war machine as envisioned by Nazi ideologues. At the center of this engineered aesthetic lay emphasis on devotion, obedience and communality (Shichtman & Finke). While, the Nazi designs of expansion perhaps had a more cohesive goal than the Drang nach Osten (Drive to the East) of the Teutonic Knights or even the Crusades in the Levant, they were dependent on the very same fanatical militarism from the Middle Ages. The purpose of this appropriation was to create an ethos that had deep links with historical identity in order to craft support for policies that were based around the idea of a superior Aryan Race (Chapoutot). However, an appropriation of history also allowed Nazi institutions such as the SS to gain historical legitimacy and catered for consensus building within their members (Burleigh).
The imagery of a knight in armor remained as an effective propaganda tool for the NSDAP over a wide array of issues. Whether it was to garner support for the Reich Farmer’s Day or anti-KPD rhetoric, the image of a Swastika adorned knight-in-armor served as a reminder of what ideals the German race was being built around. The armor signified the masculinity that the NSDAP associated with the German race and the sort of chivalry through action that was expected of the German people (Shichitman & Finke). However, medieval history was to a large extent romanticized in order to create this image. The Holy Roman Empire provided several elements that the NSDAP could conveniently appropriate to serve their cause. At certain points in history, medieval Germany went through waves of militarism and fanaticism that were similar to the Nazi aggression in Europe. More importantly though, the Holy Roman Empire gave credence to the idea of a heroic German who was anointed by destiny in order to protect the German race. Thus, the veneration of figures such as Charlemagne, Henry the Lion and Frederick Barbarossa served to cement the status of Hitler and the NSDAP as simply a new generation of protectors that stemmed from the same lineage of history. For this purpose, medieval German history was reoriented with the help of the German academia. In fact, scholars of ancient history were delighted by the fact that perhaps Latin and Greek influences would be replaced by a truly Germanic antiquity (Chapoutot). Charlemagne, the founder of the Holy Roman Empire, was rebranded as a German rather than a Frankish king in order to maintain the continuity of the ‘superior race’. However, it is important to consider whether such appropriation of historical narratives was in Germany’s context a purely Nazi phenomenon. While it is true that Bismarck’s Germany and even political parties that were contemporaries of the NSDAP often used medieval imagery to generate support for their
respective political objectives, the NSDAP was perhaps the first entity to do it with unmatched efficacy which allowed them to obtain tacit approval from society for their programs. The Deutschland Volkspartei (German National People’s Party) famously published a poster in 1921, shown below, that summed up the sentiments of Germans with regards to relations with the Poles. The poster titled ‘Save the East’ shows a towering German garbed in the robes of the Teutonic Order and being subdued in an unfair fight by Poles and Bolsheviks. Thus, if one is to determine how the NSDAP managed to appropriate history to such a great extent and repackage it for the German people, then one needs to remain cognizant of the fact that Germany itself was a very suitable incubator for such a reengineering of history due to the distrust of intellectualism that had been built up steadily.
The Ministry of Propaganda was not the only facet of state machinery that was involved in this rebranding of Germanic history. In fact, it is incorrect to assume that the leadership of the NSDAP had a singular and coherent stance regarding the usefulness of appropriating elements of the Holy Roman Empire (Wilson). In speeches, even Hitler himself attacked the Holy Roman Empire as an entity of squabbling princes who betrayed the German race. However, he recognized the significance of certain personalities and eras of the Holy Roman Empire that could be used to rally support for the Nazi created *Fatherland* being merely a continuation of the old *Reich*. It is interesting to note that the Holy Roman Emperors of yore would naturally place an emphasis on crown jewels and other legitimating insignias that would travel from capital to capital as new kings came and went. These jewels at different points in history were housed in Aachen, Innsbruck and Vienna. However, the NSDAP, a part of modernized Europe where monarchies were becoming less and less relevant, sent an SS guard to bring the Habsburg Crown to Nuremburg, the headquarters of the party. Clearly, the NSDAP top brass still believed in the legitimacy that was centered on such insignias of historical significance that would give them the divine right to lead the German race. Other NSDAP leaders such as Alfred Rosenberg were even more reluctant to draw such links between Hitler’s Germany and antiquity (Wilson). In fact, Rosenberg feared that the revitalization of orders such as the Teutonic Knights would undermine Nazi authority and was more pragmatic about such matters. On the opposite end of the spectrum were party members such as Heinrich Himmler who were fascinated by medieval traditions and history. In fact, Himmler was part of *Thune* a society that was based on reverence of medieval figures.
Under Himmler’s command the SS appropriated elements such as the Teutonic Knights as many of the values that Himmler wanted to instill among his men were similar to those that were the guiding principles of the Teutonic Knights. A similar emphasis on heritage in order to be a member of the SS was instituted but perhaps the most poignant indicator was Wewelsburg Castle, which was the headquarters of the SS. It served as the medieval backdrop to the heinous designs of Himmler and the SS. Himmler’s own room within the castle was named after his patron saint, Henry the Lion. The castle also had a roundtable for Himmler and his 12 highest-ranking officers who could congregate in an Arthurian setting of sorts. Apart from architecture, the SS as an organization also strived to inculcate medieval ideals of chivalry and valor within its ranks. In fact, just as genealogy was an important factor when becoming part of the Teutonic Knights, the same was true for the SS as well. Members of the SS had to prove their ancestry to some 20 generations (Chapoutot).

While one could label Himmler’s fascination with the medieval as being one that was personal and had nothing to do with a cohesive party line, it is important to recognize that Himmler and his SS remained, till the end of the war, as the elite protectors of the Third Reich. In fact, this goes to show that Hitler and other party leaders recognized that for the efficacious functioning of the SS, it was necessary for linkages to be drawn to Germany’s past. The SS as an organization itself was envisioned as the vanguard of the new Germany that the NSDAP sought to create. Ideologically, it was important for it to embody a chivalric code that was derived from Germany’s past (Bendersky). Himmler himself stated that ‘our existence, so closely confined between life and death, experiences at the same time through history an immeasurable expansion. It teaches us to feel like a link in a chain which stretches from
millennia and stretches into millennia so that in our consciousness the legacy of the past and the duties of the future merge into an indissoluble unity which establishes a law for the struggles of the present’ (Burleigh). In fact, the SS was not the only institution that tried to appropriate elements from medieval history in order to suit its needs. The *Ordensburgen*, which were training institutions for young Nazi members, had a program of taking these youths to scenic medieval castles throughout the German countryside where they were instructed along the same chivalric lines that a member of the Teutonic Knights would have gone through. In fact, a British journalist in the 1930s reported that these schools concentrated much more on ‘brawn over brains’ (Burleigh).

The purpose of this myth creation was to solidify policy objectives that were based around the expansion of Nazi Germany. It was not simply enough to cite the injustices of the Armistice of 1918 as the rallying point for the German people and its military forces. It was more effective to couple these injustices with the image of a glorious historical past. In order to create an *Ethos* for a cause that stressed upon racial superiority, the Nazi leadership needed to go above and beyond the routine vilification of Bolshevism and ‘traitors’ such as Erzeberger. It was necessary to create a myth that showcased the German race as the wielders of destiny and the best way to do so was to draw links to medieval times where such stories of kings being touched by destiny were already present and just needed to be woven into one cohesive narrative. As the NSDAP eventually managed to solidify their hold over German society it was also necessary to shift from a focus of historical attacks on the Bolsheviks or Jews and create propaganda that targeted other nation-states such as the Poles or even create their legitimacy in
states such as Norway, where the NSDAP tried to portray itself as Nordic kin who stemmed back to the Vikings of Scandinavia.

If the only goal of this appropriation of history were to create historical legitimacy for Nazi policy objectives then manipulating the history of the Holy Roman Empire and Germanic entities such as the Teutonic Order would have been enough for the NSDAP. However, the NSDAP sought to inculcate not only a historically derived ethos but to lay the groundwork for the genos of a superior Aryan race. The trouble with relying solely on medieval history was that the German experience of that era in history was bound by constraints that were antithetical to the aims of the NSDAP such as noble principalities and more importantly the Catholic Church. While the party did frame individuals such as Charlemagne as being chosen by destiny, there was no escaping the fact that Holy Roman Emperors to varying extents did derive their authority from the Papacy. The weakening of the Church during the era of the Enlightenment had allowed for intellectual movements to emerge that attempted to draw linkages with Europe’s pre-Christian and in a sense, ‘mythical’ roots (Lacoue-Labarthe et al).

A study of history reveals to us that the imitation of the ancients, both intentional and unintentional, impacted the creation of the modern nation-state and its development during the years of the Enlightenment. The NSDAP, through its appropriation of Classical History, attempted to reverse this trend. Nazi ideologues were cognizant of the reality that European identities and to a greater extent the German identity was based on imitation of other cultures. Historically, Germany’s own phase of ‘enlightened thought’ was a petri dish that was subject
to French influences. Furthermore, Greco-Roman writings had heavily influenced German literature and philosophical thought. It was commonplace for members of the German intelligentsia to be well versed in both German and Greek (Lacoue-Labarthe et al). The NSDAP realized that the impact of Classical History was inescapable and it would take generations to wipe the slate clean as many German academics had called for. Instead, Classical History was tailored to suit the needs of the NSDAP and in fact supplement the myth of the Aryan Race.

For a state, that wanted to dominate the entire European continent and through it the world at large, it was necessary to redefine Germany as the cradle of civilization. Educational curriculum of the 1930s as well as academic works began to generate this idea that Rome as a civilization was propped up by the Germanic tribes that fought for the Roman legions. Eminent individuals from Classical History such as Plato and Augustus were rebranded as heroes of a ‘Nordic’ race. Parallels were drawn to the historical struggle that Germany faced and that of its Greek brethren. Through this appropriation, Germany could now claim a direct descent from the *Urvolk* (the first people) who emerge from *Urwald* (the primeval forest). Even though Plato wrote against myths and how they clouded reason, he was appropriated as a figure that had inspired Nazi thought and the aesthetic it entailed. Greco-Roman architecture was given patronage by the NSDAP and under the oversight of Albert Speer, several structures were established as well as plans for the remodeling of Berlin in Roman motifs were sponsored by the Nazi top brass (Wilson). The NSDAP through its veneration of its Greco-Roman ‘roots’ managed to create this perception that they had inherited the very struggle that their ‘Nordic’ ancestors were involved in – to keep Europe clean of racial impurities such as the Jewish race.
It is important to understand that existing literature has tried to deal with the question of appropriation but has arrived at differing conclusions. Authors like William Shirer simply paint Nazi Germany in its entirety as a product of deterministic history. According to them, Germany had its own unique *Sonderweg* (Special Path) and followed a course of history that was divorced from logic but rather a unique path that had begun since medieval history and was shaped by it. When historians have written exclusively on historical appropriation by the Third Reich, they have advocated for two reasons as to why this was carried out which are rather intertwined. The functionalist argument as espoused by authors such as Peter Wilson regards this appropriation as merely a ploy to fulfill the end goals of certain policy objectives. However, other authors such as Chapoutot and Lacoue-Labarthe concentrate more on the psychological aspect of this appropriation and even go far as saying that it was more of a ‘German’ phenomenon rather than a ‘Nazi’ one. The main argument of this paper is that both sides of the debate are not at all mutually exclusive. Yes, the Nazi’s did want to use history to obtain certain tangible policy goals but at the same time there was an innate desire to reorient history in order to gain legitimacy and perhaps divorce themselves with the shame that had been attached to German identity after the armistice.

The need for such appropriation of history arose from the need to psychologically reorient the average citizen of the *Reich* (Chapoutot). As discussed earlier, the NSDAP tried to ingrain a physical aesthetic within the masses but it was also important to psychologically reorient loyal citizens as well. When creating an identity it was important to answer the question of origins as well. As that very identity was based on exclusionary racial lines, it was important to create an *Origin Myth* that could instill that sense of pride within the German masses.
Karl Richard Ganzer, who was in charge of the Nazi historical institutes, published a history of Germany that portrayed the Nazi government as continuity of a thousand years of Imperial rule. At the height of the Blitzkrieg, he managed to sell 850,000 copies (Wilson). This goes to show that the portrayal of history in the medium of relatable legends and myths was popular in German society. In fact, the success of this appropriation has to do with the post-war mindset of the German masses. The embarrassment brought about by the aftermath of the First World War was a blemish on a German identity that had historically developed since the days of Rome and more so after the founding of the Holy Roman Empire. While appropriation of seemingly different strands of historical narratives is commonplace in state building, the Nazis were the first to use it to form a collective identity that was meant to supplement their endeavors in Europe. It is true that even the British monarchs drew a manipulated heritage that stemmed from Augustus and the French monarchy drew even more incredulous links to the ancient Kingdom of Israel but both lacked the sort of communal identity that the NSDAP sought to build. In the greater scheme of things, especially considering how the war panned out for Germany, it might seem far-fetched to attach a great amount of weight to the appropriation of Classical and Medieval history. However, through this myth creation, the Nazi party managed to frame themselves as stalwarts and protectors of the German race. In fact, this restructuring of history allowed Hitler and his party to cement their position as torchbearers of German destiny; the very same anointing by destiny that was framed around individuals such as Charlemagne and Frederick Barbarossa.


Any conceptualization of political oppression under Stalin is incomplete without an engagement with the network of forced labour camps or Gulags that developed and spread under his rule. Not only criminals but also those considered political enemies were exiled and sentenced to Gulags in vast numbers by the Soviet state. Where on one hand the Gulags were an instrument of state tyranny, they also served an economic purpose as the forced labour was utilized to fulfill Stalin’s ambitious industrial, infrastructural and agricultural projects. As a consequence of this conditions in the Gulags were incredibly cruel and dehumanizing. Inmates were subjected to abuse and long hours of difficult labour. The purpose of this essay is to explore if inmates, despite this oppressive climate, tried to negotiate or cope with their situation, through a close study of daily life in the Gulags. What forms did these coping strategies take and to what extent were they shaped by conditions in the Gulags? In light of these questions the paper attempts to prove that although the Gulag was an oppressive and dehumanizing set up, survival and coping strategies employed by Gulag inmates to a significant extent were also shaped by social relations, networks, arrangements and values that were necessitated by and emerged from the Gulag itself. This will be demonstrated through an examination of certain aspects of Gulag life which includes (a) the development of cooperation and collaboration amongst Gulag occupants (b) theatre and
music (c) social and power hierarchies and (d) Gulag values. The paper will assess how, in each of these cases, inmates attempted to overcome challenges posed by Gulag life. To do so the paper will largely rely on examples from the lives of actual Gulag survivors, taken mostly from memoirs and oral histories. In examining the Gulag this way this paper aims to foster a more complex understanding of terror and state repression under Stalin. Furthermore, it complicates the study of Gulags as a social phenomenon; a unique social space not merely shaped by a set of political orders or economic policies imposed by the capital. It will show that relations between Gulag prisoners were not only characterized by the common performance of labour and attempt to understand Gulag prisoners as possessing at least some level of agency in so far as they responded to and were shaped by their experiences. Lastly and most importantly I hope to illuminate the difficulties in establishing a unified conception of coping strategies within the Gulag. As will be shown, these were diverse and shaped by a variety of factors.

An important issue this essay attempts to emphasize is that as the Gulag expanded and matured as an institution it also generated its own particular ways of living. The Gulag was preceded by a “penal-servitude system” in pre-communist Russia and in fact hard labour was one of the severest criminal punishments even before the establishment of the communist regime (Ivanovna 7-8). It is under Stalin however that forced labour developed into an institution in the form of the Gulag. As already stated above, the Gulag performed multiple functions in Stalinist Russia, playing an integral role in the economy and state persecution. To elaborate a little further, through the course of Stalin’s rule the regime carried out mass arrests against those it accused of being political enemies such as kulaks or rich peasants and sentenced millions to Gulags through a series of show trials. Where on one hand the category of political enemy was unfixed and the accusations against most were vague to begin with, one could even be given a
sentenced by virtue of simply being related to an accused person. Estimates suggest that nearly “18 million people passed through the prisons” during Stalin’s era (Death and Redemption 1).

The labour was used for instance in infrastructural projects and the excavation of natural resources like gold, coal and timber. The living and working conditions in the Gulags were harsh and highly exploitative. Often, the images and ideas evoked by the term Gulag are those of unending hard labour, mass subjugation, starvation and death. To a great extent all these factors did characterize Gulag life. But surely it should be possible to render a more complex picture of daily life in an institution which imprisoned millions of people. Anne Applebaum in her book in her book Gulag: A History states that the “The Gulag had its own laws, its own customs, its own morality, even its own slang. It spawned its own literature, its own villains, its own heroes…” (Gulag: A History 10). Understanding the Gulags as an experience however not only requires the study of the ways in which inmates interacted with each other as well as the space around them but also the manner in which they could negotiate with and survive such a difficult experience. After all, although many of the prisoners perished in the Gulags, many also survived.

The earlier historiography surrounding the subject worked with a limited framework. In his paper “Researching Daily Life in the Gulag”, Steven Barnes asserts that following the collapse of the Soviet Union, which was accompanied by increased access to state archives, most research on Gulags was devoted to “…quantitative aspects of Soviet terror, political control over the Gulag, and economic production in the camp system…” (“Researching Daily Life in the Gulag” 377). Though important, such an approach is however limiting if used on its own. Any conceptions of the labour camps formed on the bases of quantitative, political or economic analyses overlook lived experiences within the Gulag and are instead inclined to treat Gulag inmates as an undifferentiated mass of equally subjugated forced labourers. An earlier work by
Robert Conquest for instance presented Gulag life as a “steady march towards death” (*Death and Redemption* 8). Barnes’ argues that this approach does confirm that the Gulags “were a brutal institution in a brutal polity” but does not add anything more to the study (“Researching Daily Life in the Gulag” 378). Barnes’ own book *Death and Redemption: The Gulag and the Shaping of Soviet Society* as well as Applebaum’s *Gulag: A History*, on the other hand, looks at other factors like survival strategies. They study how power hierarchies were constructed within Gulags and how inmates could manipulate these to acquire some form of agency. An essential body of sources that shed further light on to this includes oral histories and memoirs that give an account of daily life in the Gulag through the eyes of those that experienced it. In addition to providing a more detailed picture of the extent of oppression in the Gulag, they also show that in this society it was possible for inmates to develop ways of coming to terms with their predicament and surviving the suffocating and grim atmosphere. In this paper I attempt to synthesize the arguments and examples presented within these sources to show that the diverse ways in which people chose to cope with Gulag life. Although the aforementioned sources do explore ways of surviving or coping, in this essay I hope to establish a more direct correlation between these strategies and ways of life and social structures generated by the Gulag. This allows me to explore facets of Gulag life, such as power hierarchies and the internalization of Gulag values, which at first glance might not qualify as examples of survival strategies and argue that in a way they can be seen as such.

Forging new relationships and establishing cooperation networks in an otherwise hostile environment of the Gulag was one way in which inmates were able to cope with their situation. As already stated, sentencing people to forced labour camps was one of the most common ways in which the Stalinist regime dealt with those it considered political enemies. As a result, several
millions of people were banished to Gulags without proper trials and this was largely responsible for disrupting social and family life across the Soviet Union. Gulags were mostly situated at the peripheries of the state, often in regions with harsh climatic conditions, like the camps at Kolyma, making it difficult for inmates to stay in any kind of contact with their families and friends. Another way the terror state severed familial and social ties was by producing such circumstances that it became dangerous for people to be associated with someone identified as a political enemy. In his paper “Stalin and the Politics of Kinship: Practices of Collective Punishment, 1920s-1940s”, Golfo Alexopoulos states that “In the Soviet Union, political enemies were rounded up in groups of kin, family ties marked people as disloyal, and "counterrevolutionary" charges against one person threatened also his or her relatives” (Alexopoulos 91). This, not surprisingly, greatly dissuaded family members and friends from reaching out to inmates in the camps. In other cases the children of those arrested were placed into “…children’s homes, their names were changed and their families lost them forever” (Sliozberg xiv). This shows that the Gulag system imposed a great sense of isolation on the inmates. However, some survivors accounts suggest that inmates dealt with their isolation by establishing new friendships and systems of cooperation, on which amongst other things they could rely on for emotional support. Survivor Ada Federolf remembering her reunion with her friend Ariadna Efron after a long period of separation describes it as such: “…There it is, prisoners’ happiness, the happiness of simply meeting a person” (Gulag: A History 281). These “survival networks” included the formation of groups amongst those who shared ethnicity, the establishment of “independent networks of acquaintances over years in the camps” or an acquisition of one or two close friends (Gulag: A History 281).
A pertinent example of the importance of such mutual support can be found in a memoir titled *My Journey: How One Woman Survived Stalin's Gulag* by Gulag survivor Olga Lvovna Adamova-Sliozberg, who was arrested in 1936 with her husband during the purges of the 30s. The introduction of her memoir states that Sliozberg’s husband was shot soon after his arrest and she had to spend the next twenty years in imprisonment “…separated from her children, parents, profession and home…” (Sliozberg xiv). In the book she describes her arrival at a labour camp in Magadan after having spent four years in a prison and remembers feeling glad to be amongst people again (Sliozberg 76). More telling, however, is the recollection of her friendship with a fellow inmate named Igor Adrianovich Khorin. She says, “I really became true friends with Igor. This was the only bright page in my camp life. Our friendship was infused by a warm poetic love for literature. I did everything in my power to introduce him to literature” (Sliozberg 88). This shows that although both these individuals were brought together by their common isolation and it gave them immense comfort in the harsh environment to be able to establish a communion over their shared love for literature and story-telling. In this way at least temporarily they could find respite.

Another way some prisoners negotiated with their environment was through engagement with creative or artistic activities like theatre and music, to the best of the capacities. As will be shown, this was not merely important because of the respite it provided to the performers but also to those who were audience to these performances. The environment in the Gulag including the hard labour and persecution was responsible for causing many to feel disconnected from their sense of humanity. Some tried to retain this sense through an “involvement in some larger intellectual or artistic project” such as memorizing poetry (*Gulag: A History* 283). Furthermore, within the camp people could become providers of non-tangible goods according to Applebaum
Butt

(Gulag: A History 284). For instance, Applebaum adds, that though surprising it was possible within the setting of the camp for those with the relevant talents to perform in theatres or camp orchestras. Participants could get some time off from work and even be supplied better clothes and shoes. Equally important is the fact that this allowed them to “…regain some feeling of humanity” in an atmosphere that was designed to strip them off it (Gulag: A History 284). Although such activities would benefit the individuals participating in them more, it was to a lesser extent also comforting for other prisoners who were sometimes an audience to these performances. Therefore, “even for those who did not receive special treatment” witnessing theatre for instance could provide “tremendous moral support, something which was also necessary for survival” (Gulag: A History 285). In addition to this, a former inmate Gustav Herling states that for concerts “the prisoners took their caps off at the door, shook the snow from their boots in the passage outside, and took their places on the benches with ceremonious anticipation and almost religious awe” (Gulag: A History 285). This yet again shows that even in their isolation, both performers and audience could come together and form small and temporary communities. It also reinforces the point made in the previous argument that it was possible through such social participation for inmates to lend support to one another and thus cope with their predicament as a community.

The Gulag however was also a setting where unique social hierarchies emerged over the years and were used by prisoners, either actively or passively, to negotiate with their situation and acquire some level of autonomy. This shows that not all ways of coping with and surviving the Gulag were as incorporative or cooperative in nature. A noteworthy point to consider here is that punishments at the labour camps were given in accordance with the kinds of crimes a particular was supposed to have committed. As a result of this the authorities also differentiated
between the prisoners on the bases of the “prisoners’ perceived redeemability” which would in turn shape power dynamics amongst prisoners themselves (*Death and Redemption* 81). This also demonstrates why the Gulag had to be a social site and why authorities had to identify prisoners not only as economic agents but also as social ones whose role in society could be molded and reshaped as considered suitable. Thus, both those accused of having broken a law or committed a crime against the state had to serve sentences but their sentences depended on how the authorities categorized them. In his book *Death and Redemption: The Gulag and the Shaping of Soviet Society* Steven Barnes states that “Categorization in the Gulag served as a source of power, both in the relationship between authorities and prisoners, and among the prisoners themselves” (*Death and Redemption* 81). Barnes identifies three main categories prisoners were initially sorted into:

... category one for prisoners requiring ‘strict social isolation’; category two for those not belonging to the laboring classes who committed crimes owing to their class habits, views or interests and category three for all prisoners not belonging to the first two categories (*Death and Redemption* 82).

These identities or categories were not strictly rigid in the Gulag. Barnes later adds that “Identity in the Gulag primarily operated along two axes: who the prisoner was prior to their arrival in the Gulag, and who the prisoner had become while in the Gulag” (*Death and Redemption* 81-2). The assigning of these identities was not a one way process. The prisoner could respond by “taking on and giving form to” these identities and thus embed these categories even further into Gulag social life (*Death and Redemption* 82). In other words, some acquired agency by means of defining themselves against others. Depending on how they well or poorly they served their sentences and were able to make a case for their social and ideological
progress, it was possible for prisoners to climb up these categories. In this case, therefore, coping involved claiming particular kind of identities and shedding others so that some inmates were able to reduce the intensity of their sentences.

Unfortunately, in some cases prisoners achieved this at the expense of their fellow prisoners. For instance, it was possible for inmates to become trusties and in some cases even camp guards. A trusty was anyone who chose to collaborate with camp authorities and as a result was able to get easier jobs and even the “power to decide what sort of work ordinary prisoners were to do” (Gulag: A History 270). As a result they would have to aid camp authorities to ensure an effective implementation of the system. Applebaum states that it was easier for criminal prisoners to become trusties as opposed to political ones. The latter were considered enemies of the state and thus more problematic. Consequently the criminal prisoners could be seen exploiting this distinction and adopting “the dehumanizing rhetoric of the NKVD…” (Gulag: A History 261). However, it was possible for other prisoners to become trusties too, as elucidated in the following example.

Former inmate Isaak Filshtinsky’s recollection of a friend he once made in the camps demonstrates how such hierarchies worked. She had been arrested after being reported by a friend for making some problematic comments. Filshtinsky recalls that when she first arrived she was scared and timid as most inmates. He would walk her from work for the short time she was at his camp before she was transferred to another camp. Three years later he would see her again and by this time she had been promoted to the position of an unsupervised worker. He adds that this was a “privileged group” that “could make a little extra money”, “buy provisions” and “…If artful enough, they could have a ‘private life’” (Gulag Voices 93). He adds that she had adopted both crude language and demeanor. By the time he would see her again some years later she had
undergone yet another transformation. She now had a desk job and was married to a
commandant (Gulag Voices 94). She addressed Filshtinsky rudely and evidently as an inferior.
Even though she recognized her old friend, she remembered him as a “goner” (Gulag Voices 94).

Even though it has been argued that “choosing to become a trusty was simply a matter of
choosing to live”, it cannot be denied that this required the active maintenance of social and
power hierarchies within the Gulag. (Gulag: A History 273). Filshtinsky himself would become a
trusty of a lower rank. The previous example demonstrates that climbing up power hierarchies in
the camp to ensure survival could become problematic and intensify repression. However there
were some who did not actually report on others or adopt derogatory language against them. To
Gulag survivor Solzhenitsyn, however, even when “collaboration was indirect” it was “damaging
nonetheless…The ‘work trusties’—the norm-setters, bookkeepers, engineers—did not actually
torture people, but they all participated in a system that forced prisoners to work to their deaths”
(Gulag: A History 273).

Some prisoners coped with Gulag life by internalizing particular Gulag values which
allowed them to not only accept their situation in a way but to also understand their sentences as
serving a particular purpose. One factor that characterizes the Gulag as a social space is the
existence of particular social values which the system had to uphold. The Gulag system did not
merely serve an economic or penal function. The camps were also meant to be corrective in
nature so as to socially transform the prisoners so that they may be reintegrated into Soviet
society after they had served their sentences. The instruments to initiate the necessary social
reform amongst prisoners were values which corresponded to values the regime wished to instill
within the broader Soviet society. An examination of the kind of ideas and rhetoric that
circulated around the Gulag shows that amongst other things these values included the virtue of
physical labour and its transformative power. In the introduction to their collection of oral histories from Gulag survivors called *Gulag Voices*, Jehanne M Gheith and Katherine R. Jolluck state that “…if labor was to make the new Soviet man and create socialism on earth, then the hard labor camps were an important part of that project” (Geith and Jolluck 4). For instance, the Stakhanovite Movement exemplifies the elevated status given to hard labour in the Soviet Union. “Named for the record-breaking Donbass coalminer, Aleksei Stakhanov”, this movement urged ordinary people to follow Stakhanov’s example (Fitzpatrick 74). Those who did, received recognition and reward from the state, sometimes even turning into “ordinary celebrities” (Fitzpatrick 74). Similarly, examples show that ideas like the virtue of labour were also upheld and circulated within the Gulag system and in some cases hard labour was even rewarded. Consequently for some inmates it became possible to give a meaning and bring focus to their predicament by believing the idea that hard work was in fact a means of redemption. Hence Geith and Jolluck add, “Many of our interviewees reveal that they, in fact, internalized this value and regarded labor as the center of their lives …” (Geith and Jolluck 4).

An interview with Sira Stepanovna Balashina sheds further light onto this idea. Balashina belonged to a peasant family and was subjected to exile and forced labour as a result of dekulakization. As part of her sentence she was to perform logging which was “considered one of the heaviest forms of labor” (Geith and Jolluck 19). Despite this Balashina speaks of her labour with a sense of pride and reveals that it became the “central feature” of her life (Geith and Jolluck 19). It is stated that, “She demonstrates no resistance to Stalin’s plan to turn the exiled kulaks into subservient subjects…” (Geith and Jolluck 19) In addition to this Balashina received medals for her labour which she still hangs on the walls of her home and speaks of with “satisfaction” (Geith and Jolluck 19-24). The book explains her response through the idea that
“For someone who began her adult life with the stigma of being an “enemy of the people,” as kulaks were regarded, the receipt of labor medals probably felt redemptive” (Geith and Jolluck 23).

Of course it can be argued that several survival or coping strategies did not emerge from social contexts in the Gulag and that the conditions in the Gulag in fact made it increasingly difficult for people to cope. For many inmates coping depended on maintaining connections with the outside world. This could be achieved for instance through the House of Meetings where inmates were allowed to receive visitors. It is logical to assume that the hope that they would one day be released would also have been a source of strength. Imprisonments in the Gulag were indeed also consistent with releases. However it is doubtful as to how much the individual prisoner could rely on the hope for release as a source of strength. Although upon their arrest, prisoners received particular sentences, records show that these sentences once completed could easily be extended. It is partly because of this reason that some inmates chose to negotiate with realities within the Gulag, while others collaborated with authorities and tried to climb power hierarchies to convince them that that they were fit to be released. Furthermore, the internalization of Gulag rhetoric and ideas did not always result in the strengthening of peoples’ resolves to survive. As already demonstrated, these values were internalized regardless of a person’s actual guilt. Yet they molded some prisoners’ self-perceptions in ways that they came to internalize the idea that they had done something wrong and focused on that sense of guilt instead of the redemptive power of labour. One prisoner, Nina Ivanovna carried such guilt and depression with her for years after her release (Geith and Jolluck 106). She states “I had felt that I was an awful person since I couldn’t tell anyone about being in prison, or prove that I had been
there, and also because I signed [the false confessions]. I punished myself, I didn’t stand up for myself…” (Geith and Jolluck 106-7).

The purpose of the paper however as already stated is to broaden the understanding of Gulags as a social space and to present the difficulty in establishing a cohesive conception of survival strategies within the Gulag. It began with the acknowledgement that life in the Gulags was a harsh and dehumanizing experience where coping effectively was a challenging task. While I still maintain this fact throughout the paper, I have attempted to show that for some people it was nonetheless possible to derive surviving and coping strategies within the space and social structures of the Gulag itself. This reinforces my previous assertion that it is hard to think an example where a way of coping was adopted by all or most Gulag inmates. In fact any attempt to do so does so with the risk of restricting the possible ways to comprehend and process the Gulag as a lived experience.

To conclude, I have shown survival strategies in the Gulags were shaped by a variety of factors and could take several forms. I have also demonstrated that it is important to study the emergence of these strategies within the broader context of the Gulag itself and that this can only be achieved through a close engagement with daily life in the Gulag.
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1947 marked the start of one of the bloodiest migrations of the 20th century. India’s split with its colonial rulers resulted in a disintegration of its secular cultural where communities of Sikhs, Hindus and Muslims had peacefully co-existed for centuries. With the declaration of independence however each respective group scrambled to a country where they could exert their identity. Muslim families, who had been settled in India for decades, left everything behind and fled to Pakistan in order to realize their dream of a Muslim majority country. Some people fled to escape the violence that was spreading to every village and city, where neighbors turned on each other and butchered, kidnapped and raped fellow citizens. Train stations and streets were littered with desecrated bodies as there was no perceivable end to the blood bath that ensued. Margaret Bourke-White, an American photojournalist, who had witnessed the opening of Nazi concentration camps earlier that year, wrote that Calcutta’s streets “looked like Buchenwald.” While there is no exact number, the estimated death toll of the violence is between a couple of hundred thousand to 2 million people. A major proportion of this figure were women who were, as they often are in times of war, used as objects to inflict a greater impact on the men they are associated with. They thus faced violence at both the expense and hands of men. Some families chose to kill their women in order to avoid the dishonor that would result from them being raped.
by Hindu or Sikh men. By 1948, the violence had died down and in its wake rose a plethora of literature that focused on the violence women had faced: forced conversions, forced marriages, rape, kidnappings, murder etc. To the extent that this resulted in a narrative that depicted women solely as individuals who had suffered at the hands of men in the context of the independence movement. While it is true that during the independence movement women on both sides of the border faced an immeasurable amount of violence, the singularity of this narrative is inaccurate and unfair. This paper will attempt to demonstrate that women took part in the exceedingly charged political environment of India by involving themselves in the public sphere, participating in a culture of nationalist literature and exercising influence in the domestic sphere.

The women in India were politically active since the early 20th century, comprising of middle class and elite women who started setting up institutions to fight for political representation. The All India Women’s Conference (AWIC) was set up in 1927 and dealt first with women franchise issues and later the nationalist movement as a whole. It is important to note that modernization played a major role in the shift of women to the public realm of politics. The women’s suffrage movement took place within the framework of the 1919 and 1935 constitutional reform. It can be divided into two periods, 1917-28 and then 1928-37. In the first phase, women dealt with the granting suffrage from the British and the approval of the provincial legislatures for women franchise and eligibility to the legislature on the same basis as men (property rights). In 1917 a delegation of women appeared before the secretary of state Manugu and asked for the right to vote as a social reform. The initial British rejection united both the Muslim League and Congress as a united front as both took up the mantle of women’s reform as part of their political aims. In 1918, the British decided that the issue of women’s suffrage would be dealt with under the 1919 All India Act in the provincial legislature on a case by case basis.
The second phase of the suffrage movement dealt with the issue of enlarging women’s franchise and how they would be represented in the legislature. In 1921, the Bangiya Nari Samaj, which consisted of high class Hindu elite women rallied for a resolution in women’s suffrage. The resolution however was rejected by the Bengal Legislative Council and it wasn’t until 1925 when the Muslims realized that a low women turnout would result in a 40% reduction of seats available to the Muslims in Bengal, did they reconsider. Both organizations continued to operate and played an imperative role in the reform of the personal law, where Muslim organizations focused on women’s rights on the basis of the sharia law and the AWIC tried to make an inclusive policy.

In her presidential address to the 9th AIWC Rustomji Faridoonji talked about the unity of all Indian women: 

As you know, our Conference has no party politics; each member is, her individual capacity, free to work with any party she chooses. Our work is not among separate entities, but we are a united force, with the one ideal of seeking the welfare of the country...We women have an advantage over men; we have started with an all-India consciousness. While the conference was open to all women, they were divides between both religious groups that could not be ignored. Begum Shah Nawaz, as early as 1906, insisted on separate electorates believing that it was only through securing separate seats for Muslim women could they successfully voice their concerns. After 1920, the congress’ main policy was a united India which came into direct conflict with the League’s policy. Begum Shah Nawaz who had been part of both the second and third round table conference, held a strategizing position in the AWIC for the constitutional reform in 1932 and held her ground on separate electorates. She pointed out that since women did not enjoy property rights in Punjab under the Sharia law they would not be able to vote, as men’s franchise was based on property rights. The AWIC’s failure to recognize the opposition to
joint electorates presented by Muslim leaders resulted in an irreparable rift between the two sides. AWIC’s increasing insensitivity towards the demand for separate electorates led to rising anger and in 1932 the Karachi members of the AWIC walked out of the ongoing session. The rest of the Muslim members soon followed suit and resigned. Begum Shah Nawaz then decided to organize a Muslim Woman’s league in Punjab, which became an extension/sub-continent wing of the Muslim League. The Women’s League and the AWIC became completely estranged by 1940 as their political demands remained on opposite spectrums. Apart from partaking in politics through organizations, the women in India led processions, held speeches and picketed shops. They were active participants of the swadeshi movement and nonviolence movement.

Another instrumental role women played during the independence movement was the spread of nationalistic ideas. Both Muslim and Hindu women helped in politicizing urban and rural populations by printing women’s magazines and articles. After the Muslim members split with the AIWC, they reorganized themselves into a Muslim Woman’s league. The primary aim of this national level wing was to "to carry out intensive propaganda amongst Muslim women throughout India in order to create in them a sense of greater political consciousness" [Mirza 1969:41] Muslim league women were successful in mobilizing women to support the Pakistan resolution in 1940 and to vote for the Muslim league in the 1945-46 elections. The importance of the press can further be examined through the case study of the British Indian magazine called Stri Dharna, roughly translated to ‘The Sphere of Woman’. While it was run by British feminists in the start, the magazine quickly took charge of spreading Indian ideas of both nationalism and femininity. During the 1930s the magazine increased its ideas of nationalism and hoped to tie these down with Gandhi’s ideas. The magazine even printed advertisements that supported notions of Pan-India. One advertisement read: ‘Madam ... Are you buying Indian Goods –
clothes and furnishings? By buying Indian materials you clothe yourself in patriotic glory and obtain more than your money’s worth’” Thus encouraging women to support the independence movement by buying local products and boycotting British goods. The magazine printed articles on important political debates like purdah reform, child protection, widow remarriage, girl’s education etc. It supported the participation of women in the legislature and emphasized the importance of unity through political mobilization. Like one Hindi contributor said: ‘Women should establish women’s organizations to protest together against their state of oppression.’ This was the notion that many women put forth through varying forms of literature, encouraging women to step out into public realm and fight for their rights. Furthermore, the magazine printed full texts of bills presented in the Indian legislature, along with editorial analysis and names of representatives so that women could contact them directly about their work and the stances they were taking in the legislature. The magazine encouraged women to go out act as individuals and fight for a new political system, one that ensured their political and religious rights. This method of propaganda proved to be very effective especially for Ghandian politics, as many women flocked to aid him in his policy of noncooperation. The magazine used propaganda to encourage women’s representation in politics and as a method to fight against the British government. Stri Dharna is a quintessentially example of how literature was enabled by women for the independence movement. Another example is the spread of the swadeshi movement through various literary means. Women from all over the nation from every caste, creed and religion engaged in spreading ideas of freedom, nationalism an empowerment.

While women were partaking in politics in the public sphere, the private sphere underwent an ideological revolution of its own. Ideas of the feminine and motherhood were redefined to fit in with the discourse of political parties. The nurturing element of the mother was
highlighted in party politics, as women were seen as responsible for molding the mentalities of the men at home. It was made evident by various nationalist leaders that women could contribute to the movement by staying at home and functioning as propaganda outputs. As Lady Haroon discussed: “It is the women who can mould and un-mould their men-folk, and their sense of responsibility that I make this appeal—not only to vote solidly for the women candidates of the Muslim League but also to influence men-folk, their fathers, brothers and husbands to stand united, solidly under one green banner of the crescent and star of the Muslim League.” (20 Dawn, 15 December) Furthermore, women were able to make political statements and contribute to the nationalist movement by remaining at home. This worked in the favour of women from traditional households and Muslim families. Gandhi was also very traditionalist in his imagining of the women and their duties, emphasizing her familial obligations, it wasn’t until the 1930s that Gandhi reconstructed his ideas concerning women and encouraged them to enter the public sphere. The concept of motherhood was perceived in terms of ‘nurturer of civilization’, this was now expanded to include the Indian mother as ‘defender of civilization’ too. This insinuated that the Indian mother was much more nationalist in nature for the Indian mother was now identified in terms of the Bharat mata. Her duties as a mother and a citizen of the nation were synonymous. This notion of Bharat maata aroused great political sentiment. Women no longer complained about their sons/fathers/brothers being hauled off to jails on account of their political activities since their allegiance as mothers was to their nation. Women, thus contributed to the political environment because their roles in the domestic sphere had been redefined. Moreover, the spinning of cloth khadi was an integral part of Gandhi’s civil disobedience movement and women perceived themselves as contributing greatly to the political movement by spinning and weaving within the bounds of their houses. Women also provided
lessons in weaving so that a greater number of people could take part in the civil disobedience. They also provided political asylum to politicians hiding from British forces. Thus, the women in the public sphere, acted as agents to the nationalist movement by propagating ideas to the family and taking part in the noncooperation movement.

Following the independence of the subcontinent from British rule both Pakistan and India partook in massive population exchanges. Once the borders had been demarcated an approximate 14.5 million people migrated to what they considered the country of their religious majority. Along the way, they were met with sectarian violence, where every Sikh, Muslim, Hindu was against the other. This resulted in fighting along the border, in trains, villages etc. Women found themselves to be under the most threat, conceived of as property in a very patriarchal society, men would target them in an attempt to tarnish the honor or reputation of the other. This resulted in scores of women being raped, brutally murdered or kidnapped. Women who survived these acts of violence were often forced to spend their lives with their rapists, after forcefully being converted. The literature that emerged from this bloody time period is often centered on these women. Manto’s short stories on partition is a classic text that explores the dark reality of the independence. Other works include: Dastaan, Silent Waters, Pinjar, Train to Pakistan etc.

Many scholars have argued that the women’s role in the Indian nationalist movement was merely symbolic and they held no accountable power. The Muslim league supported women’s rights primarily because it helped further their political aims. An example of this is the resolution for women’s suffrage that was rejected but was later supported by the Muslim League because they feared it would decrease the amount of seats they would win. It can be argued that had there been no urgency for the formation of Pakistan, the league would possibly not have supported the women’s movement as orthodox views frowned on the female presence in the public sphere. The
league primarily drew up on the social discourses of gender and modernization of the time in order to create a social rhetoric it could rely on for the furthering of its political needs. This erased all possibilities of a feminist movement growing organically, thus stunting the women’s movement from the very beginning. Furthermore, there were certain discourses around the female body that were created in order to supplicate the nationalist movement, beginning the late 19th century. The construction of the concept of the ‘new women’ and ‘common woman’ were essential to the nationalist movement, for a woman had to be either one. The ‘new women’ attempted to amalgamate British liberal values into the Indian conception of a woman. The result was the new woman who was characterized by her higher education and docile nature. She was soft spoken, well-mannered, and upheld all domestic responsibilities. In contrast, the ‘common woman’ was uneducated, brazen, promiscuous and vulgar and thus lacked the sophistication of a woman from the middle class. By identifying women into two polarizing categories, the Indian man ensured that women would fall under a specifically catered one. The ‘new woman’ proved favorable for the nationalist movement as it explained and contained the movements of women. The ‘common girl’ however prevented women from exploring political views in the public realm. By the 1930s however, the idea of the new woman was reconstructed to accommodate for the changing political environment, she was now allowed to enter the public sphere of politics. This was accompanied by a focus on the feminine and the importance of motherhood so that women could be used to achieve political goals as symbols of national unity. It is thus apparent that the Nationalist movement not only benefited from their nationalist activities but also from the restricting women into presupposed identities.

In conclusion, the narrative associated with women around the nationalist movement has often been drowned by the much more intense recreation of the violence women suffered during
the migration of 1947. It is believed that due to the age of modernization, women from the 20th century onwards began to enter the public domain and demand for political rights. However, in the case of Muslim Indians, it was rather an appropriation of the social modernization discourse where the individual interests of a group were being over shadowed by the greater interests of the Muslim nation. Regardless, Indian women entered the public sphere and organized themselves into groups where they demanded political representation, the AWIC being a prime example. Apart from being part of all women organizations, women throughout India took to the streets when the time came. They organized meetings, demonstrations, held speeches etc. Many even went to jail for their political activities. When Gandhi called for support for the boycott of salt, Indian women readily accepted and marched to the salt depot to manufacture salt, an act that was illegal. When he held his famous salt march, they rallied behind him and formed an integral part of his political support. Another important area where women were an integral part of the nationalist movement was the political propaganda that was spread all over the country, against the British state and in favor of the independence movement. Magazines and articles, long with nationalist poems and songs, were published by women in support of the political movement. This spread of ideas was imperative for the rallying of support for the political parties. Lastly, women were perceived of as having great influence over the domestic sphere. They influenced their domestic realms in whatever capacity they could to support the movement. The women of India were thus active members of the community who took great part in the developments that led to Mountbatten’s historic declaration of Independence, it was as much of a feminine victory as a male one.
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Parallels between Safavid and Mughal Iconography

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Art can play a vital role in the development of a country. Often it can be seen that emperors commissioned art to further their political motives. Sometimes new laws introduced were given religious flavour to make them appeal to the public or prevent a mass opposition. Other times paintings were commissioned incorporating religious symbols to gain legitimacy by the emperor. However, the extent to which these efforts were fruitful depended on the religio-political dynamics of the country. In the Safavid dynasty, where the majority of the population was Muslim, such efforts were successful because religion acted as a unifying factor and hence the assimilation of message through art was easy.\(^1\) On the contrary, Mughal dynasty’s population comprised of a mix of religions hence religious incorporations into paintings appealed to a certain fraction and thus other methods had to be employed to gain support of the general public. Both Mughals and Safavids have used art in similar and yet different ways to realize their goals. Safavid art tilted more towards religious aspects which gave higher significance to Hazrat Ali, whereas the Mughal art tilted towards its rulers thereby showing their significance and supremacy. For this paper, only the reigns of Shah Ismail of Safavid dynasty and Jahangir of Mughal era are analyzed and parallels are drawn about the usage of iconography in the paintings.

The dominant religion in Safavid dynasty was Shi’i Islam which had a tradition of rich popular art. Under the realm of pictorial art, portable \textit{shama’il jibi} (the pocket pious image) held a special place and continues to do so even today.\(^2\) Portable \textit{shama’il} is a devotional object that is said to have powers that bring protection and blessings to its owner. It is a rectangular wooden object roughly about the size of 15-20cm by 10 cm which is covered in painted papeir mache and occasionally holds a mirror.\(^3\) One distinct feature of this devotional object is that it always carries

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\(^2\) Ibid.
\(^3\) Ibid.
a polychrome image (*shama`il*) of the holy figures in Shiism, which in most cases is Ali bin Abi Talib, the first Imam and successor of Prophet Muhammad.⁴ Most of the panels either bear the image of Ali alone or with the Prophet, his wife Fatima or his two sons Hassan and Hussain. The faces of female figures are veiled while males are often unveiled and painted clearly.⁵

The *shama`il* is one of the numerous spiritual objects possessed by Sufi followers that aid in reaching trans state in order to discover the inner *noor* (light) of the heart. This process is called the *vejhe* exercise. “The exercise involves focusing one’s eye on the image of Ali while concentrating on one’s own heart and practicing *dhikr-e-Ali*, that is, tirelessly repeating the name of the first imam, which is also one of the names of God. The goal is to achieve contemplation of the ‘interior imam’, that of the heart of enlightened individual, in the form of light (*imam-e nurani*, literally “imam of light” or *nuraniyyat-e imam*, “the luminous radiance of the imam”)...⁶ However, it is important to note that the *shama`ils*’ are usually for the novice dervishes for whom “it is forbidden to concentrate on the mental image of the order’s of the master’s face, because they risk lapsing into ‘idolatry’ and the ‘cult of the master’, and also without physical aid they are incapable of visualizing ‘the face of light’ of the imam”.⁷ Hence, these pictorials are given to them for a limited amount of time so that they can practice and eventually become apt at paying no heed to ‘idolatry of the master”⁸ and while doing so achieve the *noor* of the enlightened heart. Thus, it can be seen that the Safavids were occupied with the practice of enlightening heart and placed great importance on the usage of light or *noor* to achieve their religious goals. However, for them this *noor* was not visible to the naked eye but that had to be envisioned through the heart.

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⁵ Ibid.
⁶ Ibid., 28.
⁷ Ibid.
⁸ Ibid.
Appendix 1 shows one of such portable *shama’ils* that are used by Sufis to achieve the *noor* “light” of heart. It shows Ali sitting with his two sons Hassan and Hussein. The image is surrounded by mystical poems. On top it is written, “*ey shir e khoda* (O lion of God)…” and the rest is faded while on the bottom it is written, “*dar ha ye omid bar rokham baste shodeh* (the doors of hope have closed before me”). Moreover, to the right is written, “*ey sahib e dhu l-faqar e qanbar fathi* (o master of dhu l-faqar…grant me an inspiration/opening) whereas on the left it is written “*gosha ye dar e khaybar fathi* (O you who open the door of khayber-famous battle of Ali-grant me an opening/inspiration)”. The reading begins in at the top of the panel and rotates in an anticlockwise direction. In essence, the inscriptions glorify Ali and implore the person to turn to him for help and inspiration in desperate times.

The above mentioned *vejhe* exercise and the spiritual practice of ‘vision by heart’ have roots in ancient times and can be dated back to the third century. It is linked to ancient terms of *zahir* and *batin* which mean secret and exoteric respectively which are addressed in theology as well. “God entails two ontological levels; that of Essence (*dhat*), which corresponds to the secret, non-manifest level, His unknowable Face, and that of the names and attributes (*asma wa sifat*), corresponding to God’s revealed Face”. Thus, Shiism allows devotees to see the inner light by allowing Ali to act as a meditational subject. It is absolutely impossible to see the essence of God, however, on the other end it is possible to see the names of God which is revealed through the imam. The physical vision is impossible but the light of imam can be seen by the heart.

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10 Ibid.
11 Ibid.
12 Ibid., 28.
13 Ibid., 29.
14 Ibid.
Nonetheless, in the paintings on the shama’ils, Ali is shown with a halo around his head which signifies his supremacy and unmatched knowledge. It reveals that Ali had already reached the stage where he has had the vision by the heart and thus now should be revered by his followers if they wish to achieve a similar outcome. Hence, seeing or gazing holds an important position in Shiism as by seeing the lightened face of imam in the heart, one is able to see the revealed face of God.15

A similar concept to the Safavids where people try to reach the noor (light) of the enlightened heart can be found in the Mughal era too. However, the concept of light is slightly altered to incorporate the visible light as compared to the inner light of that of the Safavids. In Mughal art, the association of a halo with the king can be repeatedly seen. This has been borrowed from classical Indian art where the halo signified divinity and sacredness but in medieval Indian art (Mughal art) it was also exploited to accentuate the mundane authority and superiority of the Mughals16. Abu Fazl narrates that:

“Royalty is a light emanating from God, and a ray from the sun, the illuminator of the universe, the argument of the book of perfection, the receptacle of all virtues. Modern languages call this light farr-i-izidi (divine ray), and the tongue of antiquity called in khiyan khura (sublime halo). It is communicated by God to the Kings without the intermediate assistance of any one, any men, in the presence of it, bend it forehand of praise towards the ground of submission”.17

Thus, in light of the above statement, it can be seen that the inclusion of light or halo in the paintings was a deliberate effort by the artists. In the Safavid dynasty, light was achieved with Ali

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15 Ibid., 30.
17 Ibid., 46.
playing the mediatory role while in the Mughal dynasty, halos were assigned to emperors to give them worldly mundane and authority. Hence, it is understood that the symbol of divine light was restricted only to the emperor and some holy men and princes as they were the most important men of the court. The halo in the portraits of Emperor Jahangir can be viewed in relation to his auspicious title “Nooruddin (Light of Faith)” which was adopted by the emperor himself on the day of his coronation.¹⁸ This mere title tries to imply that he was the beholder of light and had the power to lead its people into the right direction, thereby acting as the defender of the faith.

In another instance, Abu’l Fazl says:

“…and they look upon prostration before His Majesty as a prostration performed before God; for royalty is an emblem of power of God, and a light shedding ray from this Sun of the Absolute”.¹⁹

Thus, light or halos in Mughal paintings endorsed the notion that royalty was entitled to rule as it was the wish of god and hence following and obeying them would bring blessings to the people as they would be serving their rightful ruler. The reason for bestowing importance, illustrated by the halo, on the emperor and not a religious figure was that the Mughal dynasty did not have a single state religion that could act as a binding force. In order to appeal to the public, the emperor had to find a common thread and exploit that, which in Mughal case was the emperor himself who had unquestioned authority. However, in presence of a unifying factor such as religion in Safavid dynasty, light or righteousness was achieved by practices such as vejhe and importance was given to the mediator, such as Ali, for achieving the ultimate goal.

Another underlying feature of Safavid paintings was the recurrent depiction of lion. This can be traced back to Imam Ali’s mother’s dream where she saw a moving star which turned steel

¹⁸ Ibid., 48.
¹⁹ Ibid.
sword and then into a lion. The Prophet Muhammad encountered the lion but instead of attacking him, it lay down and licked his feet. Once Ali was born, Fatima named him Haydar (lion) in memory of her dream. After the advent of Islam, Imam Ali received the titles of *Asadullah* (lion of God) and *Sayfullah* (sword of God) which referred to these very dreams. Hence, in Shi’i oral accounts, Ali is mentioned as preexistent, celestial, in the form of a lion which can be accessed through mental and visual imagination.

Since Ali is one of the important figures in Shi’i Islam, his depiction is common in most of the paintings. For example, in the *Miraj* paintings a lion image is often included to ensure the presence of Ali. Some traditions believe that the purpose of *Miraj* was revelation of Ali as the successor of Prophet Muhammad. Moreover, in some paintings, the image of Quran was replaced by that of a celestial lion to symbolize Ali. The motivation behind this was to respond to claims that during the Khilafat of Hazrat Usman, the Quran was altered at the hands of Sunnis to eliminate the mention of Ali and his *valayat*, the *ahl al-bayt* and the imams from the official Quranic recension. Hence, in the form of Ali, depicted as a lion, an unaltered Quran is represented which was revealed to the Prophet during his ascension.

According to other traditions, calligraphic lions symbolize the esoteric dimensions of Ali’s nature. These were “to communicate the inherent spiritualized conjunction between the lion-like characteristics of Ali, acquired by his spirit during his lifetime and a lion’s body symbolizing the eternal existence of Ali after death: it deals with calligraphic lions whose bodies are constructed of sacred formulas related to Ali Ibn-e Abi Talib, a genre which the sacred texts making up lion forms created a calligraphic enigma with a hidden message that signifies the esoteric dimension of

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20 Ibid., 63.
21 Ibid.
22 Ibid., 64.
23 Ibid.
Ali as ‘the lion of God’, his common epithet’. Moreover, in Bakhtiari tradition, lion is referred to as wild animal which is a sacred one signifying virility. Hence, by signifying Imam Ali as a lion, the painter refers to his qualities of strength, bravery, vigor and spirit.

In the same vein, it can be seen that lions were frequently illustrated in Mughal art too. However, unlike the Safavids, they did not hold any religious connotations. The Los Angeles County Museum of Art holds an enigmatic painting titled “Jahangir Killing Poverty” that can be dated back to 1620 and is attributed to Abu al-Hassan (Appendix 2). The painting shows Emperor Jahangir standing on a lion that is sitting close to a lamb peacefully enclosed in a globe. The globe is placed on an old man who sits on a fish. Jahangir shoots another man, who is slightly darker, in the left eye while a *putto* hands over arrows to the emperor so he can permanently vanquish the specter of misery. The emperor has an enormous halo and is crowned by two other *puttis*. A fourth *putto* holds a chain of bells, which is called the chain of justice, at one end while the other end is attached to a building like object. The inscription above Jahangir states:

> “Blessed portrait of is supreme majesty who dispatches his eager shafts into poverty and who, through his rectitude and fairness, is laying new foundations for the world”.

In order to better understand the painting, we need to analyze the circumstances during which the painting was commissioned. Jahangir at the time was distressed by the question of Qandahar and the rivalry for prestige and power between the Safavid Emperor Shah Abbas and himself. The city of Qandahar was situated on the Afghan-Indian border and was a trading center. Hence, there was a constant dispute between the two dynasties over the claim to the city and in

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24 Ibid., 122.
25 Ibid., 196.
27 Ibid.
1622 the Safavids managed to capture the city. However, the Mughals captured the city without a fight in 1637 when the Persian governor, Ali Mardan Shah, handed over the keys of the city to Shah Jahan’s officers.\textsuperscript{29} However, this acquisition was short lived and the Safavids permanently captured the city despite three successful expeditions by Shah Jahan in 1649, 1652 and 1653.\textsuperscript{30} Thus, given the tense relations between the two dynasties that negatively affected the economy, Jahangir wanted to pose himself as a ruler that was concerned with the welfare of the people. The chain of justice and the killing of poverty were thus political statements that the emperor wanted to make.

Likewise, while doing so, a lion was painted close to a lamb sitting peacefully. This was not a realistic portrayal since in real life the lion would have been tempted to kill the lamb whereas in the painting they were placed peacefully next to each other. In doing so the artist was trying to send a message that the emperor was all powerful and had control over the affairs of the state (killing poverty) and over the animals since he was able to control and even prevent the lion from killing the lamb. Consequently, he was even powerful than the lion that is known as the king of the jungle and described as a powerful and ferocious animal. However, it is interesting to note that the Safavids used a lion depiction to refer closely to the attributes of Imam Ali while the Mughals used it to boast about emperor’s power. As mentioned before, the reason Safavids mustered support through religious art was because majority of the population was Muslim and it was easier to control them if the state controlled the beliefs that the masses withheld. Conversely, the same could not have been done for Mughals since the population was a mixture of various religions. Gathering support through religious art would only have appealed to a particular fraction thus

\textsuperscript{29} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{30} Ibid.
failing to act as binding force in favour of the emperors’ rule. This led to the depiction of the same animal with different meaning in the two dynasties.

In addition, pictorials have always been used as a means to further their religio-political legitimacy claims and thus sometimes there was a shift away from previous techniques to incorporate new themes. During the reign of Shah Ismail, there was a shift away from the traditional way of rendering Prophet Muhammad to one where prophet was painted with a veil to obscure his personal traits with prophetic light.\(^{31}\) This new technique was centered on a series of paintings that include Prophet Muhammad’s ascension (Miraj). There were three major innovations in these paintings; the sky was rendered as prophet ascended, facial features were obscured and lion figures were added to the painting as the celestial stand-in for Imam Ali.\(^{32}\) The main purpose of these paintings was to provide a visual for the Shi’i exegetical texts (tafsir).\(^{33}\) Moreover, these allowed “for both royal patrons, visual material offered fitting opportunities to engage in discussions about either their own nature(s) or their unrivalled proximity to the Prophet Mohammad, Imam Ali or God.” \(^{34}\) In the case of Shah Ismail, the paintings created a great confusion that purposefully hid the protagonists’ identity and also created a link between heavenly and earthly spheres through the notions of ascension and descension to and from the sky. This merger of Shah Ismail’s identity with that of Prophet reinforced the idea that the emperor channeled Muhammad’s nature and authority. In addition, the entrance into the heavens not only represented Muhammad’s ascension but also Shah Ismail’s entry into the realm of pre-eternity and cemented his role as the ruler of the world.\(^{35}\)

\(^{32}\) Ibid., 47.
\(^{33}\) Ibid.
\(^{34}\) Ibid.
\(^{35}\) Okada, *Indian Miniatures*, 47.
Nizami’s Khamsa consists of numerous manuscripts including *Makhzan al-Asrar* (The Treasury of Secrets) (Appendix 3) that shows this new shift in technique of paintings.\(^{36}\) This painting shows Prophet Muhammad seated on a human headed *Boraq* making his way over the *Kaaba* and numerous other buildings towards the round opening in the sky.\(^{37}\) From the sky the angels look down upon the Prophet and present offerings to which the prophet replies by gesturing his hands and crossing them over his chest in a gesture that most likely represents a prayer. His headgear has the Safavid rod inserted into it while his facial features are not distinctly painted. In the lower right corner men are seen standing around the *Kaaba* whereas in the lower left corner men are situated below palm leaves and two minarets. Right below the trees appears a *minbar* and a doomed brick building bearing the inscription, “*Allah Muhammad va Ali, sana 910 (1505)*.”\(^{38}\) Above this edifice appears another building in blue and gold star tiles that bears the inscription, “*al-baqi huwa Allah* (He Who remains is God)”.\(^{39}\) Around the vertical and top horizontal folios a number of shrine like structures are made surrounded by date palm leaves that signifies the terrain over which prophet made the *Miraj*, that is, through Hijaz towards Mecca. Since the painting was dated, it can be found that the painting was commissioned during the era of Shah Ismail.\(^{40}\) Also, despite the loss of pigments the specific features and motifs strongly suggest that the artist to make the painting was Sultan Muhammad himself, a renowned Safavid artist.\(^{41}\)

The composition reveals new iconographic developments. One of such features is the round opening in the sky through which angels look down at the Prophet. It had significant implications
for the understanding of the *Miraj* paintings. “Nizami’s *Makhzan al-Asrar*, in fact, described the Prophet’s ascension as a breach through the covering of the fixed stars (*satr-i kavakib*) and the curtain of physical creation (*parda-yi khalaqat*) drawn so that he might reach the abode of the Lord. Likewise, in Nizami’s text, Muhammad lifting of the head is described as going above the veil of nature (*giriban-i tabi’at*) at the same time as the hand of union (*tawhid*, i.e. God) draws back the curtain (*hijab*). Such metaphors stress Muhammad’s arrival in the realm of veil; that is, a piercing through the skies to reach a space beyond temporal boundaries and freed from earthly causalities”.42 Even though the motif of the celestial opening was present for three centuries within the text of Nizami, it was incorporated into paintings at the time of Shah Ismail’s reign because it was a way to propagate his own cult by claiming divinity through allegorical potential of upward and downward heavenly motions undertaken by Prophet Muhammad and Ali on the night of *Miraj*.43

Moreover, the primary goal of Muhammad’s prophecy according to Shi’i exegetes was to receive the revelation of Ali’s guardianship, or *valayat*. According to Ibn Babawayh al-Qummi(d.381 AH), God opened the doors of the sky so that Muhammad could see Ali who was the ultimate source of light on the night of *Miraj*.44 Since Shah Ismail considered himself as ‘Truth’ (*al-Haqq*), it was important to pose the protagonist to have breached the sky receive divine decree to rightful rule. Shah Ismail himself proclaimed this in the verse:

> By the Shah’s command I had come from pre-eternity  
> Do not be troubled for now I have come again.  
> From pre-eternity I am in love with the Twelve Imams

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42 Ibid., 53.  
43 Ibid.  
44 Ibid., 54.
But now I have come to this mundane world.\textsuperscript{45} Hence, based on the evidence from ruler’s poetry it can be said that opening of the sky in the paintings was coherent with the political goals the ruler was trying to achieve.

Just like the Safavids, the Mughals also wanted to cement their claim of being the legitimate rulers of the sub-continent. They sought viable means of seeking legitimacy by adhering to Timurid lineage, use of Central Asian court etiquettes, architectural and pictorial renderings, and even soliciting the approval of Sufis who in theory staked a moral claim of being the God’s representatives on earth. Their followers believed that they had the power of making and unmaking kings and kingdoms.\textsuperscript{46} “In ottoman genealogies, such as silsila-nama, the rulers of Turkey are shown to be descended from illustrious ancestors such as ancient prophets and Islamic Caliphs. In a similar fashion, Mughal emperors decided to underscore the supremacy of spiritual power over temporal power and thereby exalt Islamic religious orthodoxy. The spiritual heritage conferred legitimacy on the temporal power that the Mughal monarchs designed to exercise over India. In the “dynastic portraits” imperial iconography recorded the official transfer of temporal power by showing grand Mughal handling a globe or crown to his successor; the presence of a holy man or a mullah beside the emperor likewise conveyed the ruler’s uncontested spiritual authority”.\textsuperscript{47} One of Jahangiri era paintings illustrates this idea. The painting titled “Jahangir preferring Sufi Shaikh to Kings” show Jahangir offering a book to Shaikh Hussain of the Chisti clan, a spiritual descendant of Sheikh Salim, in the presence of other worldly emperors (Appendix 4).\textsuperscript{48} The one with the red turban appears to be the artist himself who holds a painting of two horses and an

\textsuperscript{45} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{46} Simon Didby, \textit{The Sufi Shaikh as a Source of Authority in Mediaeval India} (New Delhi: Islam et Societe en Asie du Sud Purusartha, 1986), 61.
\textsuperscript{47} Okada, \textit{Indian Miniatures}, 36.
\textsuperscript{48} Fred S Kleiner, \textit{Gardner’s Art through the Ages: Non-Western Perspectives}, Vol 1, 14th Ed. (New York: Cengage Learning, 2009), 974.
elephant, costly gifts to the painter from the emperor while the one in white headdress appears to be Ottoman.⁴⁹ The European emperor is assumed to be James 1 of England even though the emperor had not met him. The reception of the book tells us about the hierarchy of powers. The Sufi receives the book by spreading a cloth and then holding it with his hands while the emperor offers it using his one hand. Even though the Sufi is more experienced, the fact that Jahangir is shown giving him the book shows that he is more knowledgeable even though he is much younger. The inscription says; “although to all appearances kings stand before him, Jahangir looks inwardly toward the dervishes [Islamic holy men]” for guidance”.⁵⁰ Thus, Mughals turned to Sufis who were considered religious scholars to gain legitimacy while the Safavids went a step further and sought legitimacy by directly portraying them parallel to important Islamic figures. A deliberate confusion was created in the Miraj paintings so that the identity of the Prophet could have been mistaken for that of the emperor.

In a nutshell, even though the Safavids and Mughals had overlapping themes and motives that they tried to achieve through art, their approaches were different. Safavids took a more religion based approach while the Mughals took a relatively neutral approach with comparison of the emperor to worldly beings. This notion is validated by the use of light and lion in addition to gaining legitimacy through Miraj paintings for Safavids and incorporations of Sufis for Mughals.

**Plates**

Fig. 1: Imam Ali with his two sons Hassan and Hussain

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⁴⁹ Ibid.
⁵⁰ Ibid., 975.
Fig. 2: Jahangir killing poverty

Fig. 3: Treasury of Secrets
Fig. 4: Jahangir preferring a Sufi sheikh to kings

Bibliography


Portrayal of Woman through Art: An Analysis of Akbar Era Miniatures

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HIST 315: Modern and Mughal Miniature Paintings

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An artist’s work often accounts to more than what meets the eye as one delves into the cultural and social dynamics channelled. Only after acknowledging the political, economic, geographical and emotional context behind a painting can one fully grasp the magnificence of the artwork enmeshed with historic events and stories. Art has consistently presented itself as a platform to express the diverse ideas and emotions for individuals, groups, and therefore, the society. Then, as society moves through the fabric of time, the change it compels for or undergoes, can be traced from the depiction of its subjects. Being necessary actors in society, women therefore have been recurrent subjects of paintings from all cultures. However, they are often depicted in a fashion the society views them or expects them to be viewed as. The status and position of women is observable from the reference and representation in the paintings produced by their societies during a particular period of time.

The roles that women are prescribed in art across societies often moulds them in a sensual manner with exceptions contingent on their relation to the leading character. Their input seems permanently inconsequential and insignificant in the grand theme of the painting when compared to the male counterpart. Wherever we do detect an iconic art featuring a woman, it is presented as a celebration of either her sensuality or the affluence of her family by rendering her in fine materials and jewels galore. For the purpose of this essay, focus shall be narrowed to studying the representation of women figures in Mughal miniature paintings particularly under Akbar’s era. Specific miniatures shall be analysed over the bases of themes and their symbolic significance.

Ruling for around six decades, Jalal-ud-din Akbar brought great stability to his land as he established his position through loyalty from and amiability for the conquered. An alliance with
the Rajput rulers improved administration across the acquired land as he integrated their provinces into the newly formed central government. The administrative unit as well as the military regime under Akbar often employed native Rajputs. Preferring allegiance and merit over ethnic and religious affiliations gained him popularity across the diverse demographics of the subcontinent. Akbar effectively propelled the idea of tolerance and acceptance between Hindu and Muslims; he abolished the “tribute tax”, banned persecution of non-believers, translated Hindu literature for laymen in his *Maktab-khana*, and partook in several Hindu festivals. Hindu-Muslim marriages were favoured, in fact two of Akbar’s own wives were Rajput princesses. Matrimonial alliances too helped Akbar cement his position as one of the most popular of the Mughal emperors. ¹

Emperor Akbar always remained intrigued by The Unknown, devoting institutions and commissioning groups for the purpose of contemplating and understanding it. This enthusiasm in religion and philosophy opened doors for several opportunities as he remained inviting towards new material arriving from beyond the realms of empire. Pioneering the new, his atelier produced an exceptional collection of miniatures under the plethora of inspirations available. The historian Abu’l Fazl highlights in *Ain-i-Akbari* (Institutions of Akbar) the Emperor’s great fondness for art and his constant effort to encourage painting as a means of knowledge and amusement. He remained proactively involved in the artistic processes and constructive criticism, ‘His Majesty having indicated the scenes to be painted’.² During his early years, Akbar himself acquired familiarity with the work under the master-painter Abdus Samad who was

famously referred to as Shirin-qalam (Sweet Pen). This early engagement with painting further led him to develop a dissenting view from the “staunch” contemporary Muslims –

“Bigoted followers of the letter of the law are hostile to the art of painting; but their eyes now see the truth. One day at a private party of friends, His Majesty, who had conferred on several the pleasure of drawing near him, remarked: 'There are many that hate painting; but such men I dislike. It appears to me as if a painter had quite peculiar means of recognizing God; for a painter in sketching anything that has life, and in devising its limbs, one after the other, must come to feel that he cannot bestow individuality upon his work, and is thus forced to think of God, the Giver of life, and will thus increase in knowledge’”

This proves to show his predilection for art not through rebellion against religion, but through amalgamation of the two into complementary disciplines. He venerated art to recognize God and His creations in a way that his contemporaries could not comprehend. His reign began in 1556 and ended with his death in 1605 throughout which he devoted great time in patronising and critiquing art production spanning over the extraordinary Hamza-nama in the 1560s to the second imperial copy of his own biography, Akbar-nama in around 1604. Art in his era transformed from his predecessors in terms of inclusivity and establishment of reign on the basis of legitimacy of his rule through the people, irrespective of their demographic particulars. His generic renditions of human figures focused on story-telling and documenting more than registering the essentials of detail and perspective. Hindu and Persian elements were initially adopted which then were enhanced overtime with European techniques and themes in

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animating figures and developing atmospheric perspective. This essay picks paintings from the latter half of 16\textsuperscript{th} Century, the golden years of translations, philosophical debate, and notably miniature painting, to comment on the prevalent depiction of Akbar’s women.

Women as objects for entertainment and performance has been the norm even before and long after the Mughal Empire. Groups of female dancers and musicians graced occasions amongst nobility to signal celebration and mark hospitality towards the Emperor’s guests. One such scene of frivolous festivity is depicted in Figure 1, an Akbar era painting from 1565 titled “Dancers at Akbar’s court”.

Figure 1: Dancers at Akbar’s court. c. 1565, Watercolour and gilt on paper, 230 x 156 mm \textsuperscript{4}

\textsuperscript{4} Andrew Topsfield, Paintings from Mughal India (Oxford: Bodleian Library, 2008), 13.
A young emperor Akbar can be seen sitting under a structure on the top right of the miniature, adorning a strikingly red robe and a gold jewel-encrusted headdress exuding royalty. The Mughal style architecture is apparent in the patterned roof and platform, small niches, and Persian-inspired pillars, however the structure does not contain many subjects or background noise of overpowering patterns behind Akbar, so as to pronounce his presence as an emperor. A degree of three-dimensionality can be noticed in the side view of the stairs, and seems to disappear as the painting resembles a flat surface elsewhere in the pillars, the canopy, etc. Fronting Akbar are a pair of nobles being introduced by an elderly courtier situated beneath a regal canopy decorated with an extensive pattern. Other noblemen and servants can be seen painted along the vertical frame forming a distorted semicircle. Moving away from the margins to the middle ground, one immediately encounters the trio of dancers flailing their arms, indulging themselves to the rhythm offered by drums, tambourines, and a flute/shehnai. Right beside the dancing-women we observe a little boy who bites his finger due the overwhelming beauty and verve of the dancing ensemble. The overall vibrancy is amplified by the presence of a starry-tiled floor under the subjects in action.

Apart from Akbar, the title features the second main element of the painting – the dancers. The image can be cut into two halves horizontally, where the upper half highlights the dialogue between Akbar and the nobles, and the lower half directs all attention to the swaying ladies (Figure 1A). The top tier, which in itself is a statement about its subjects relative importance to the dancers, has been adorned with more intricate details in the canopies and the structure which shows a greater status of this lot as compared to the less-decorated lower half. Akbar’s
lack of enthusiasm about the performance depicted in the other half signifies that these events would be common occurrence in his courts, and not solely aimed towards pleasing the Emperor.

Regardless, the dancers take centre stage while looking to different corners of the painting as if inviting audience from all around. The unnaturally still faces exude confidence as they lock gaze with the voyeurs. The little boy on the right margin comments on the composition of the audience comprising of different age groups, all equally bewildered by the splendour of the ladies. Their gripping beauty can be crudely summed up in three familiar words: young, tall, and fair. The emperor’s court would require only the finest of individuals to be exhibited in court, thence the epitome of beauty as understood by society, and therefore the miniature artists, can too be summed up by the preceding adjectives. The bold curvature of their slender bodies is highlighted from under the folds of fabric; breasts are drawn with an exaggerated roundness and definitive shading, and the bend of the legs can be made out from under the vibrant and voluminous clothes. The swiftness of their movement has been expertly captured by the artists in the flounce of the dresses and the scarves. However, the clothes worn do not resonate the same aura of expensive due to a lack of pattern and detailing which is often reserved for
portraying royal women. The performers’ attire is made complete with jewels and magnificent headdresses which serve to add flamboyance. A contrast between the dancers and musicians is an interesting observation as well; the female musicians are drawn relatively hidden in the corners with half bodies and/or side profiles as compared to the dancers in the foreground. The choir women seem relatively older which suggests demotion to supplementing someone else’s performance as females acquire more years and lose their desirability. Moreover, the right-most individual bears a disproportionately larger head, minimal bodily curves, plainly detailed clothes than the dancers all hint to a lower rank of the musicians in court and/or lower attention paid by miniature artists. However, the realistic creases in the dupattas (scarves) and flair in their flowing dresses still point to the artist’s eye for illustrating lifelike images.

It is indeed astounding how a combination of simple extension of lines and strokes can be used to draw profound ideas. When painting humans, it is the skill of the artist that allows him to produce an object which upon a glance can be distinguished as either male or female. Figure 1 featuring both sexes several times gives us an opportunity to understand the intricacies required to depict feminine or masculine individuals. The lighting of the face is one important component of the sketch; the contouring employed towards a male face intends to delineate the chin and the jawline, showing a ruggedness in the character, whereas women are painted in softer lights to present a smoother skin tone. The painting particularly shows the dancers and even the musicians in lighter skin tones versus the male counterparts who have a variation in their complexion across the canvas. Women have been painted with fuller lips smeared with shades of red, while men are either given thin lines or thicker outlines over the skin colour itself. This directs yet another component ideal for a female body. Another recurrent characteristic is the
peculiar way of drawing feminine hair; all women have centre-parted hair lengthening from under the headdress and resting on the forehead from each side. Men instead have bare foreheads as their hair are pulled back into the headdress, and only extend to join the beard. The headdress and the jewellery too differ as we compare gender. Necklaces for women often have numerous bands and begin closer to the neck, whereas men have a relatively longer neckpiece of pearls knotted in a single string. Women are also seen adorning an anklet enhancing the feminine elegance through additional jewellery.

The next painting under observation is Figure 2 revealing Akbar in a more private setting. Scenes of an amorous exchange between a man and a women are not a regular subject in the paintings of his era whereas public activities such as court performances, hunting or fighting scenes were abundantly shown. Nevertheless, historically these fleeting moments of private pleasures have been frequently captured in the Indian subcontinent, especially in the Hindu schools of art, where the love between a man and his beloved was set to denote the love between God and his devotee. Akbar’s atelier then producing this subject matter is not too surprising. This painting titled “Akbar and a girl with a wine cup” traces back to the year 1575, ten years after the former painting.
Two figures, a man and a woman, stand in the middle of the painting enlarged and highlighted against the relatively smaller and darker elements in the background. The multiple shades of blue taking over the subtle orange in the sky hints towards night falling. The man reaches out his hand to tactfully brush his consort’s hand as he goes for the wine cup held within. The man in reverence of the pulsating touch looks down to fill himself with the scent of the blossomed sprig. The almost euphoric mood painted seizes the emotions of the first touch of the evening. The man is understood to be Akbar in his early years through the distinct facial features. He meets a maid or a concubine in the private setting of a zanaan-khaana (harem) fortressed by foliage and

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5 Topsfield, *Paintings from Mughal India*, 15.
a Mughal-style architecture resembling the one in Figure 1. The structure bears an opening from behind the half-furled draperies suggesting an “amorous expectancy” that shall follow from the current exchange. The lover connects with his consort in the middle of the frame and all that the elements in the setting propose their unison. Along with the inviting structure in the top-left, we notice two sets of intertwined branches behind the lady pointing towards an imminent union of the two protagonists of the painting.

The lady adorns an arrestingly yellow, six-pointed dress with a diaphanous white dupatta (scarf); the dress shows close resemblance to female attires in Deccani miniatures where women are often seen wearing pointed dresses such as in the “Lady with the Myna Bird” from Golconda in c. 1605 (Figure 2B).
Akbar on the other hand is seen sporting an imperial-quality gold brocade robe decorated with contrasting arabesque designs. The background in this painting is far less noisy than Figure 1 despite obvious structural similarities; the same tiled floor now with subtle green hues, minimal patterns, and the dull colours reserved for the structure and vegetation enhance the presence of the two subjects in the forefront.

A stark contrast appears when one compares the rendition of women in Figures 1 and 2. Multiple female dancers in Figure 1 stand slightly camouflaged on the dark patterned floor as Akbar in the top register attends to the visiting noblemen. In Figure 2, however, a lone woman stands exactly opposite Akbar as he bows his head down in reverie. Akbar and the concubine are given equal weight in the picture’s composition as their height and breadth do not differ significantly. This point itself is noteworthy as a woman who is not of a royal stature is given as

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much prominence on the canvas as the Emperor himself. Nevertheless, a clear distinction between the royal figure and the maid is highlighted through the clothing; Akbar’s arabesque embroidery on a gold cloth resonates royalty while the concubine’s clothes have been drawn plain with minimal jewellery. This does not however steal the spotlight from her in any manner. Her yellow dress pierces through the painting immediately catching the viewer’s attention. A narrow opening in the wall vertically below her emphasize her presence; the two cypress trees in the background, often used as spiritual symbols in Mughal paintings, stand erect on either side guiding the viewer to notice her presence.

The woman, despite her low status, stands firm and upright radiating sheer confidence as she holds the wine cup in her steady hands in a nearly perfect vertical position. Akbar, on the other hand, can be seen being reeled in by her overwhelming beauty. The wine cup in her hand instead of having been passed to Akbar, and Akbar’s hand touching the concubine’s hand instead of the cup comments on his relationship with the lady beyond the want for sexual gratification, where there appeals to us a level of intimacy between the two individuals. What is also peculiar is how Akbar’s hand is seen dominated by the concubine’s wine-holding hand as if to suggest the intoxicating nature of her presence has effectively subdued Akbar into submission.

Though there exist obvious differences between Figures 1 and 2, there are similarities as well. As concluded in Figure 1, beauty was conditional on the idea of youth, fairness and a statuesque build. The same idea continues a decade later where Akbar’s lover for this particular miniature is also drawn on the abovementioned criteria. The emperor himself is dark-skinned while his consort is painted substantially fair-skinned. Her figure also lacks the shading that the male figure bears, especially near the jawline. This gives way to a clearer skin with softer features. The
woman has protruding breasts which are repeatedly used in paintings to highlight the sex of the individual more definitively. Moreover, the role of the woman has remained analogous in the two paintings. Where the dancing women provided amusement through their presence, the concubine though performs a different duty but with the same intent of amusing the emperor or providing comfort through her company. The status of the female figures is contingent on their relation with the Emperor himself and their proximity to him; here too the concubine’s identity has not been revealed independent of Akbar as she is introduced as his lover. The women are either Akbar’s court dancers or Akbar’s consort; they do not hold a character independent of the patron, Emperor Akbar.

The third painting “The infant Akbar wrestles for a drum” (Figure 3) from the late sixteenth century showcases Akbar’s competence in a wrestling match against his cousin. During Akbar’s father Humayun’s exile in Iran, Akbar was brought up under the custodianship of his uncle Kamran in Kandahar. The story for this painting goes as follows: A two-year-old Akbar quarrels with his slightly older cousin Ibrahim for a painted drum. Akbar’s Uncle and Ibrahim’s father, Kamran intervenes to resolve the issue by directing the two to wrestle it out. Abu’l Fazal records that the prince “[d]espite his tender years, which made such actions very surprising, he, by Divine inspiration and celestial teaching, without hesitation girt up his loins and rolled up his sleeves, and with strong arm, which was strengthened by eternal power [sic!], stepped bravely forward’. He grappled with his adversary ‘according to the canons of the skilful and of the masters of wrestling’, and flung him on the ground.” Kamran took his son’s defeat by his brother
Humayun’s son as a bad omen, which would materialise when Kamran’s rivalry with Humayun would leave him blinded and exiled by him.  

Figure 3: *The infant Akbar wrestles for a drum.* Late sixteenth century, Watercolour and gilt on paper, 140 x 220 mm

Figure 3’s aesthetical appear differs significantly from the previous two paintings. A rather dull colour palette is opted for where no particular hue hits the eye. Different tones of the same hue have been used on the ground to illustrate changing textures from the relatively natural space to a more constructed square. Moving in from the edges of the frame one notices addition of a linear perspective in the painting; the walls converge with a slant more pronounced than the outlines of the square beneath the characters due to the square’s closer proximity. However, the artists abandon perspective as they draw the elevation under Kamran which is constructed in

8 Topsfield, *Paintings from Mughal India*, 19.
perpendicular lines and appears as a flat surface. The objects in the painting float due lack of shading and shadows especially on the bolster and vase.

![Figure 3A: Detail of Fig. 3](image)

Minimal characters have been incorporated in the frame with the action revolving around the four characters situated in the middle; the Uncle, a caretaker, and the two boys, Ibrahim and Akbar. The boys’ age is suggested through painting them smaller than the complementing characters, however their facial features do not carry an infantile appearance. Akbar’s uncle and the caretaker are drawn relatively larger in size regardless of their relative position in the painting; a seated Kamran is shown bigger than a proximate servant who stands, while the aaya (caretaker) is shown larger than the servant in front of her. The alarmed aaya is captured in movement as she rushes towards the two fighting toddlers; her movement forward is displayed through flairs in the draping clothes and in the midair suspension of the edge of the dupatta (scarf) behind her. On the contrary, we notice a passive Kamran on the left, clutching on his rosary beads, while stretching his hand towards the sprinting maid in an attempt to stop her from disrupting the fight. Despite the opposing reactions of the two figures, we observe rather hollow facial expressions which independently would not be able to resonate with the disposition of the characters. Between the overarching presence of the two custodians, we spot Akbar pinning Ibrahim down flat on the ground. The young emperor has been consistently
shown dark-skinned as in the previous two miniatures. The illustration captures the winning moment of their patron Akbar whose aggressive expression differ starkly from Ibrahim’s flabbergasted appearance through the positioning of the eyebrows near and far from the eyes respectively. Akbar’s pounce over his contender is captured in motion where his dress and thread remain afloat and his right foot mimics the springing position. Nevertheless, the motion does not topple his regal headdress which unrealistically remains intact despite his swift actions. We locate the drums positioned near the quarrelling Ibrahim and Akbar so as to allocate responsibility for the tussle. A noteworthy difference between this painting and Figures 1 and 2 is the illumination; he picture is mounted with an inner border featuring floral sprays, fishes, and heads of birds, lions, and fire-spewing dragons. These evoke an aura of puerile wonderment supplementing the depiction of Akbar’s childhood.

The portrayal of womanhood in this miniature is far less sexualised than the former paintings. The woman is Akbar’s caretaker, a possible motherly figure for him while his biological mother was mostly away. A more subtle colour palette graces the aaya closely resembling the colours used for the men in the frame; these are in direct contrast to the compelling and intense colours attributed to the dancers and the concubine who adorned more gripping hues. The body composition of the aaya is far more elusive and elderly than the former representations where now the chest and the waist is veiled under a thick, opaque chador (shawl). Even when the performers donned similar clothing, their leg profile was made obvious despite the impassable cloth to enhance their sensual appeal; the escort too was drawn with bulging breasts and a peculiarly thin waist. The aaya wears only a ring on each hand in the name of jewellery. The erotic nature of the earlier depictions is completely absent from this portrayal of the woman
figure. The multiple layers of the dense, impervious, though still fluttering attire block the viewer from studying her body any further. She sports a headdress accompanied by the supplementing *chador* only revealing the hair covering her temples, a distinctively female characteristic. However, one cannot sight any strand beyond that, whereas the previous representations were given either diaphanous head coverings or had hair extending from under the headdress.

![Figure 3B: Comparison of details from Fig. 1, 2 and 3](image)

This contrast yet again highlights the toned down sensuality and augmented respect for Akbar’s mother figure who seems more religiously inclined than the former. We could also attribute sexuality to be proportional to the age of and relation with Akbar; an infant Akbar with his caretaker does not appropriate the presence of a highly sensual character. Another image exactly replicating the abovementioned portrayal of a motherly figure is the miniature depicting the marriage of Adham Khan (Figure 3C).
Maham Aanga, Akbar’s foster mother and Adham Khan’s mother, receives utmost care and respect in positioning and sketching; she is seated right below Akbar to convey her importance in the imperial court. Her representing character is wrapped in opaque clothes with a chador covering her head optimally with no deviant strands whilst effectively concealing her body shape. The outfit painted is exceptionally loose and abandons its form as Maham Aanga sits tranquilly on the floor next to Akbar’s throne. A theme that continues to appear in the paintings, however, is the supplementary nature of the role borne by the female character. Respect and admiration surround her due to her designation as Akbar’s sitter or foster-mother. Moreover, the woman’s role in Figure 3 converges to the still-popular perception of females being nurturers while men strengthen the children through rough ways. The aaya rushes towards Akbar in her concern for the young prince; on the other hand, Kamran signals the maid to halt as he observes

Figure 3C: Marriage of Adham Khan. c. 1590-95, Watercolour and gold on paper, 33 x 20 mm

the two engaging in wrestling, a sport that was cherished in court circles. These opposing reactions give insight into the perception of the duties of motherly and fatherly figures for comfort and rigour respectively.

Society today has evolved significantly away from the architectural, technological, geographical barriers faced by the Mughal specimen of the past; however, what fails to be registered as the past is the continuing issue of gender inequality. To comprehend the existing status quo in terms of progress, one looks to these interpretation of female roles which have failed to change drastically since at least the Mughal era. Women were expected to be seen in supplementary roles as reiterated by atelier productions; in all the sample paintings chosen, the female figure gained legitimacy through the male figure and her existence was constricted to conforming with the ideal role of womanhood through either providing entertainment or comfort. Femininity was celebrated in art only when in channelled through jobs as performers, escorts/consorts, custodians, and other similar media. This reiterated the position of women to be valued only when they can be categorised in these limited ideals whilst bashing any transgression into perceived masculinity.

The rendition of female figures differs with the profession/duty and the age depicted. Younger women are painted in softer facial hues and lights to enhance their clear complexions against the rugged characteristics of male counterparts. Their bodies are given form even from under the dresses, especially when they are represented as court performers or consorts. Sinuous hair, fuller lips, accentuated eyes, slender faces, and lean bodies augment the element of femininity frequently synomnised with sensuality in miniatures. The motherly figures, contrarily, are painted with indefinable body shape under bulks of cloth; their colourless, thin lips, and narrow
eyes resemble the male rendition. However, excessive shading as in male representations is still avoided to retain some distinguishing femininity, though the jawline still is more pronounced than the past interpretations. The maid and Maham Aanga both are dramatically veiled with only minimal strands of hair visible assigning religiousness as a merit. The distinct traits of the female character, therefore, get lost in the purpose of glorifying the male protagonist. The identity of women becomes contingent on the objective of male presence, and is manipulated through a patriarchal filter to merely offer background support to the story. The dancers and the concubine gain certain characteristics better suited for women of their profession, while the aaya and the foster-mother lose their feminine grace to epitomise the piety and virtue of their role. They gain their sensuous appeal and lose it at the painters’ mercy to serve a “higher purpose”- the portrayal of a man.

http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O9292/baqi-muhammed-khan-painting-lal/.


The philosophy, politics and truth behind Gandhian fasts

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Was Gandhi a great spiritual leader or a cunning and manipulative strategist? Perhaps, this question has contradictory answers in different narratives. On one hand, there is the universally revered figure of ‘Mahatma Gandhiji’ who believed in the concept of self-immolation if it would lead to peace and equality of human beings. The other side of the coin presents an utterly different picture in which Gandhi is labelled as a tactician who knew how to play the sympathies of people for his own gains. Gandhi’s policy of hunger strikes brought him a lot of recognition and equally, praise and critique too. Gandhi’s underlying philosophy for undertaking fasts was that they purified one’s inner self, lead to one’s penance for the ‘sins’ they committed in the political sphere, and acted as non-violent means of political protests. However, then the question is arisen that did Gandhi openly preach the idea of suicide which was illegal under common law and later on, Indian Penal Code too. His critics also allege that Gandhi indirectly coerced his opponents through the hidden threat of mass violence in case of his death by fasting. On the other hand, British media ridiculed Gandhi’s campaigns and made a mockery out of the concept of fasting until death.

In the earlier stages of his life, Gandhi was not a religious zealot who considered fasting to be the answer to his many problems. But as a young adult and a student in London, the reality of life dawned upon him as he saw destitute Indian students struggling to meet the both ends meet while continuing their studies too. “The example of poor Indian students in London and the guilty sense of being prodigal with his brother’s money impelled Gandhi to economize still further…He discontinued his luxury…He begin to eat, and enjoy, boiled spinach with no
condiments. Many such experiences, he remarked, taught me that the real seat of taste was not the tongue but the mind...“¹

Gandhi was of the view that fasting purged one’s mind and soul. “In his world view, a person fasts to purify one's own self of those shortcomings, which stand in the way of achieving truth and convincing the opponent of the truth.”² Gandhi had a firm belief that an empty stomach would lessen the distance between him and God. He hoped that eventually, fasting would help him re-unite with God. “Gandhi believed that as humans, we should eat only as much as we need and no more...This train of thought taken to the extreme, leads us to a condition where even the body becomes an obstacle separating man from the infinite...The chosen emptiness of the stomach, the emptying and abnegation of the ego, the nakedness and reduction of the flesh were deliberate acts of renunciation that created space within which Gandhi could reject the seductions of the world to commune with another. If I succeed in emptying myself utterly, Gandhi wrote, God will possess me.”³ Gandhi started fasting in order to purify his inner self but after a while, he came to the realization that fasting could be used to purify and restrict others too. He started thinking that he could curb the violent tendencies of his followers through this moral act. “Gandhi used the fast not only for ridding the body of its impurities but in the fashion of the Indian ascetics, for purifying the mind and spirit. As a result of his experiments with fasting, he discovered the enormous potentialities of fasting in entirely new directions. He learned to use the fast only for self-purification but also for the purification of others...It dawnded

upon me, he says in his autobiography, that fasting be made as powerful a weapon of indulgence as of restraint.”

Gandhi believed that the political field influenced men in an immoral way and made them commit sins. His idea of paying penalty for the evils committed in the political and social circles was through fasting. He thought that the abstinence from food paved the way for his followers to ultimately abstain from all the wrong-doings. “The principle of fasting...It was deployed by Gandhi himself most often to discipline his own followers, most famously in the aftermath of Chauri-Chaura.” “At first it used to atone for the moral lapse of members of his immediate community; later on the fast was employed in a wider arena as a powerful weapon to draw people to the path of virtue and justice.” Fasting was employed as a means to learn patience and perseverance; two qualities that were most significant for satygrahis.

Gandhi often undertook fasts as a ‘non-violent’ political maneuver in order to protest against certain issues. He drew inspiration for it from the traditions of Brahmans. “Self-suffering was a traditional weapon of the Brahman, whose protest against oppressive rule was often fasting, self-injury, or even suicide, drawing upon the oppressor the supernatural sanctions of having caused the death of a Brahman. The technique was and is used in Indian homes, not merely in Gandhi’s. Members of the family express protest by abstaining from meals.”

Satyahraha played a huge role in sub-continental politics during Gandhi’s time and fasting was a tool used by him quite regularly and to some extent, effectively too. The theory of satyagraha

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5 “A Century of Political Fasting, 7”
6 Koilpillai J. Charles, “Gandhi’s Views on Health, 63”
preached the notion of truth and non-violence. “Gandhi drew on the rich traditions of religious (Hindu in his case) fasting to hone this political innovation and it soon became a central feature of the Gandhian satyagraha.”8 Gandhi’s beliefs consisted of the view that if someone harmed him in any tangible or non-tangible manner, he, himself was to blame too for he could have prevented it from occurring. He thus wanted to compensate for the aforementioned happening by means of fasting. “Consider a typical situation of this kind. Gandhi is wronged, and he knows this. The wrongdoer has to be corrected. But if (as Gandhi believes) both in essence one, he too is accountable for the evil, and so must share the punishment. Therefore, as penance, he begins a fast. It is no mere abstention, but a crucifixion of the flesh. The senses are here subdued to inspirit prayer and surrender to God.”9 Gandhi had developed certain conditions which should be fulfilled before one undertakes a fast in the political field. Gandhi did not want the policy of hunger strikes to become an arbitrary concept. Thus, he had developed certain conditions which must be fulfilled before one undertook a fast in the political arena. “First of all, one had to take into account the state of the public opinion in regard to the effectiveness of the fast. Secondly, the issue on which a fast is contemplated must be just. Thirdly, the motive which prompts fasting must be the vindication of truth and justice as the one who fasts sees them, and not embarrassment or blackmail of the adversary. Fourthly, one must be sure, at least subjectively, of a divine inspiration to undertake the fast.”10

Whenever Gandhi went on a hunger strike, it was generally assumed that it was a ‘fast unto death’ if his opponents did not give into his demands. This notion basically signifies the

8 “A Century of Political Fasting, 7”
way M.K. Gandhi was using the ‘threat’ of ‘indirect’ suicide to his advantage. One could argue that Gandhi was not directly doing anything to end his life but in accordance with the Common Law, his actions would still be considered suicide. “It would not make much sense to say that one may not kill oneself by walking into the sea, but may sit on the beach until submerged by the incoming tide…Even as a legislative matter, in other words, the intelligent line does not fall between action and inaction, but between those forms of inaction that consist of abstaining from ordinary care and those that consist of abstaining from excessive or heroic measures…Starving oneself to death is no different from putting a gun to one's temple as far as the common law definition of suicide is concerned… At common law in England, a suicide -- defined as one who deliberately puts an end to his own existence, or commits any unlawful malicious act, the consequence of which is his own death, was criminally liable.”

Suicide was later on, also made illegal in Indian Penal Code which was enacted in 1862. These facts show that historically, suicide-direct or indirect was never considered acceptable. But Gandhi incorporated this idea in the center of his political philosophy through the concept of fasting.

Gandhi’s supporters say that he always preached that his fasts should be non-compelling. He wanted people to adapt to his ideology without facing any duress. He wanted them to perform the aforementioned task at their own terms. According to Pyarelal Nayyar (who was Gandhi’s personal secretary towards the end of his life), “Gandhi frequently cautioned that "there should be no coercion. We must, by patient toil and self-suffering, convert the ignorant and superstitious but never seek to compel them by force." But by employing historical facts, his critics allege that Gandhi actually forced his opponents to surrender in front of him so they would not end up...

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being responsible for his death. The British government and his adversaries in India knew that that in case of Gandhi’s death, there would be a mass violent public upheaval which would cost them physically and financially. Gandhi used this warning of disorder and bloodshed against his political opponents. “Here the threat is directly coercive: it threatens to give the opponent negative pay-offs if he does not do as one says. Instead of stealing the first move for himself, Gandhi in effect eliminates one of the other's moves. This may only be effective if there is veiled violence waiting - if Gandhi died, the results would not just be massive mourning but some form of retaliation against the state by his grief-stricken followers. The mechanism of this…sort of threat is not that Gandhi was fasting for a principle or that he was reducing his own pay-offs, but that the opponent's pay-offs were directly altered: once Gandhi could connect his expiration with the opponent's action (or lack of action), he had a coercive tool of great power.”13 In a different reality, one may would have found it hard to believe that Gandhi was willing to risk his own life for all his missions but the precedent set by him led others to believe that he was fully determined to see his mission through. “Do it or my death will be on your hands. To the opponent this action appears irrational, for Gandhi is risking the large negative pay-off of death; but Gandhi's character and previous actions made even this commitment credible…Often this was the very mechanism by which satyagraha succeeded. Many times his fasts did result in what one British Viceroy called political blackmail…”14 Gandhi knew about the full extent of the power he held over his opponents and he knew that the outcome of the fasts would never be his death. “After he became a popular symbol throughout India and the world, he often went on fasts which compelled his opponents to act quickly and as he pleased, or else have his death on their

14 “Ibid., 146”
hands…(the) choice was not just one of issues and their pay-offs, but one of life or death for a
great man.”¹⁵ Even in the critically acclaimed movie of 1982 Gandhi, it was mentioned through
the dialogue between Gandhi and Patel that if Gandhi fasted, people would go to all sorts of
trouble to keep him alive, however, if Patel fasted, he would simple die.¹⁶

Gandhi’s fast against the Communal Award of Separate Electorates which granted
reserved seats for the untouchables proved to be quite controversial. Gandhi’s stance was that the
reserved seats for the Dalits (Untouchables) would further isolate them from the general Hindu community. Dr. Ambedkar who was fighting against the discrimination Dalits had to face on an
everyday basis strongly opposed Gandhi’s actions. He claimed that the lack of reserved seats
would culminate in Dalits being continuously oppressed by the elite Hindu classes. Gandhi came
under critique for undertaking a fast against the reserved seats for the untouchables in the first
place. The way he compelled Ambedkar to give in through the strategic maneuver of fasting till
death was also condemned by some circles because Ambedkar had no choice but to agree with
Gandhi since he did not want to be held responsible for his death either. “This fast unto death, it
should be remembered, was not against the British, the enemy, but against a component of the
national struggle, the fledgling Dalit movement led by Ambedkar. Under this pressure Ambedkar
succumbed. Perhaps it was the effect, not so much of the moral pressure as much as of the real
threat that, were Gandhi to die for the cause of Hindu unity, Dalits would be attacked by upper
caste Hindus in innumerable places…A fast unto death; a weapon he (Gandhi) was willing to
wield against Ambedkar and the demand for separate electorates for the untouchables, but not

against the upper castes to demand an end to untouchability. No wonder Ambedkar was compelled to ask, *why did he not undertake a fast unto death against untouchability?*"17

As fasting is usually considered a religious duty or task, Gandhi was also criticized for bringing politics and faith together. In the modern era, the general practice is to create a distinction between state and religion. "Politics and Religion belong to two different regions of mind even if it be held that these two regions are inter-related...by the unity, integrity or indivisibility of the human kind or human personality. For the special study, working and development of each region, we get them more conveniently separated."18 Thus, Gandhi’s approach was troublesome to different politicians of that time and later on, some historians too who disagreed with Gandhi bringing the element of religiousness in the field of politics. It was a step back for some people who recently had been ‘enlightened’ by modernity and had discarded ‘superstitious’ beliefs. “Romain Rolland has suggested that Gandhi's mission was messianic. Gandhi was 'bent upon founding a new humanity'. By his own admission, he wanted to 'spiritualize' politics and refused to believe that 'religion has nothing to do with politics'. As far as he was concerned 'the latter divorced from religion is like a corpse only fit to be buried'. It was this idealism which completely befogged Gandhi's approach to the Indian nationalist struggle. 'It was never easy', says Sinha 'to anticipate the workings of his mind. He seemed always to rely more on inspiration than on close reasoning for his political action or more precisely lack of action at a particular time."19

17 “Gandhi, Ambedkar and Separate Electorates Issue,” 1328; 1329.
The effects of an orientalist approach can be seen in this scenario too. The British media derided Gandhi’s fasts and labelled them as acts of suicide. “The majority of the press ridiculed Gandhi, depicting his fast as willful suicide, the act of a fanatic…in a desperate attempt to deflect criticism of his own political failings onto the government of India.” They used certain headlines which portrayed a preposterous image of Gandhi and his principles. Gandhi’s image was further worsened in the eyes of the British public through another tactic used by their print media. They refrained from publishing Gandhi’s pictures in the newspapers. Perhaps, actually seeing Gandhi’s decrepit and feeble body would have changed their perception of him. “News of the World’s…headlines left little doubt as to its interpretation of Gandhi’s Threat to ‘Fast unto Death’: The Death Sentence: Gandhi Pronounces His Own Doom, and A Political Stunt. Perhaps equally damaging for the epic representation of Gandhi’s fasts was the almost complete absence of photographic representations of his emaciated body from the British press. Somehow the trend toward the use of photographs to accompany and illustrate news items in Britain did not extend to coverage of Gandhi’s fasts in 1932 and 1943. By largely denying British audiences the sight of Gandhi’s frail, traditionally clad body opposed to the power of the colonial state, the government and the press denuded the fasts of some of their visceral potency.”

The signs of modernity became pretty evident in the way British people tried to explain Gandhi’s hunger strikes through scientific facts. They tried to oust any enigma surrounding Gandhi’s figure. “In her letter to the News Chronicle, (Margaret) Brady was…determined to dispel any mystique surrounding Gandhi’s fast, arguing that complete abstinence from all food

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21 Ibid., 103-104.
for longer periods than 3 weeks, living just on water and fruit juices, is a normal part of some curative treatments . . . after the first day or two no great effort of self-denial or exercise of will-power is needed to continue fasting, for one has little desire for food….Indeed, the coup de grace for the skeptical organs of the British press came with the revelation that Gandhi had imbibed lime juice sweetened with sugar on at least one occasion during the course of the fast. This was, they declared, proof positive of Gandhi’s fraudulent, carefully calculated posturing…His success in surviving fasts before 1943 may well have bred a degree of popular cynicism even without the encouragement of the press in pieces like the Daily Mail’s Nine Fasts article, with its implicit evocation of a cat’s nine lives.”22

Gandhi believed that he could purify his conscience and thought through fasting. He also believed in applying the same principle to his followers so they could learn patience and self-restraint. He thought that he could reimburse for his ‘wrongdoings’ through the same mechanism. However, Gandhi’s critics censure and disapproved his practices by labelling his acts as intentional suicide which was illegal. He was also criticized for ‘forcing’ his adversaries to succumb to his demands through the implied impendence of his death and the mass uprising that would follow it. Orientalism played its role in creating a ludicrous image of Gandhi in England as the press characterized him as a fraud and a scheming politician.

22 Tim Pratt and James Vernon, ““Appeal from this fiery bed …”: The Colonial Politics of Gandhi’s Fasts and Their Metropolitan Reception,” 108; 112.
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