



# Historical Geography in Mughal India: Ecology, Environment and the shaping of History in *Suba* Kabul

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Kabul has a rich landscape and the effort in this paper is to describe its physical features. On the basis of the evidence found in the contemporary and near contemporary sources, I have in this paper discussed the mountains, climate, rivers and rainfall in the *suba* of Kabul during the Mughal period. Incidental references in the contemporary and near-contemporary sources enable us to explore the region's geography. However, since, the evidence in contemporary sources is scarce, I have, in my study of geographical features, also looked at the sources of the colonial period. This is indeed hazardous, but I have persisted with it nonetheless under the assumption that the geographical features of a place take a long time to change, sometimes several centuries together.

Kabul was for the most part mountainous, although it also contained numerous fertile valleys and alluvial spaces which were interspersed amongst the mountains. Kabul was surrounded on all sides by lofty mountains covered with perpetual snow. The region had an abundance of mountain tracts and valleys (*darras*) and quite modest flat lands.<sup>1</sup>

The *suba* of Kabul was separated in the north from Balkh and Badakhshan by the Hindu Kush mountains.<sup>2</sup> The lofty range of Hindu Kush mountains provided no easy access northward between Kabul and Turkistan.<sup>3</sup> The

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<sup>1</sup>Mounstuart Elphinstone, *An Account of the Kingdom of Caubul and its Dependencies in Persia, Tartary and India*, London, 1839, I, pp.126-135.

<sup>2</sup>Babur, *Baburnama*, tr. A.S. Beveridge, London, 1921, I, p. 200; *Ain*, I, p. 590.

<sup>3</sup>C. Wessels, *Early Jesuit Travellers in Central Asia: 1603-1721*, first published, 1924, reprinted, New Delhi, 1992, pp. 16-17. The formidable and steep mountain range of the Hindu Kush barred Benedict Goes way.

province, Babur writes, was “difficult for foreign enemies to penetrate”. He points out snow usually made all but one of the Hindu Kush passes impassable for four to five months during the winter, and after the melt-off began in April flooded rivers in the narrow mountain valleys prevented large forces from crossing the mountains for an additional two to three months. He further says that the famous passes of Hindu Kush were so high and the wind so strong that the birds being unable to fly were obliged to creep over the top. They were often caught by the people, who killed and roasted them.<sup>4</sup>

The Hindu Kush was not a single, narrow chain of mountains but rather a series of ridges with impassable snow bound peaks and deep precipices.<sup>5</sup> The Hindu Kush in its south-western approach was less significant to its own spurs but it became prominent when it reached a point north-west of Kabul in the Shibar pass where it provided way to the Koh-i-Baba Range (Father of Mountain), where the highest peak reached 16,872 feet. The Hindu Kush was threaded by many passes—the most important and accessible ones were: Khawak, Bazarak, Parian, Salang, Shibar, Hajigak (Iraq Pass) and Aq Rabat.<sup>6</sup>

To the west of Kabul was the Koh-i-Baba, with its highest peak, Koh-i-Fuladi, rising over 16,922 feet. Many of the peaks in these ranges rose to over 15,000 feet above sea-level. It was high, rocky, generally snow-capped and impassable; only practicable at certain times and seasons, but for months these passes remained closed. It divided the Oxus and Kabul basins.<sup>7</sup> The Koh-i-Baba and the uplands of Hazarajat with an average elevation of 10,000 feet formed the natural barrier of Kabul on its west.

The Salang range traversing west and south-west to the north of Bamian bifurcated into the Paghman range and joined the Koh-i-Baba. The Pamghan range (a noble offshoot of the Hindu Kush) projected south-westwards to separate the basin of the river Helmand from that of Arghandab, and extended into the arid southern Afghanistan. This range to the north-west of Kabul was to 15,440 feet above sea level. The Pamghan Mountains as described by Babur “were a snowy range and out of these ranges issued a number of rivers like the Helmand,

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<sup>4</sup> *Baburnama*, Persian tr. Abdu-r Rahim Khan-i Khanan, Bombay, 1308/ 1890, pp. 81-82; pp. 204-205, 224.

<sup>5</sup> Ibn Battuta, *The Travels of Ibn Battuta*, tr. H.A.R. Gibb, reprinted, Delhi, 1993, III, p. 586. The term Hindu Kush appears in the writings of Ibn Battuta, who crossed them about 1333. He describes the word as meaning “Hindu Killer” due to the belief that many of the slaves brought from India die on the passage through this mountain owing to the severe cold and quantity of snow.

<sup>6</sup> Arnold Fletcher, *Afghanistan: Highway of Conquest*, New York, 1965, p. 6.

<sup>7</sup> Thomas Holdich, *The Gates of India Being An Historical Narrative*, London, 1910, pp. 215, 263 (*Koh-i-Babar*); *Atlas*, p. 2, Sheet 1 A-B.

the Dughaba of Qunduz, the Balkhab and the Sind. On one of these ranges that most of the villages dependent on Kabul lied".<sup>8</sup>

The *Safed koh* (*Safed koh* is a Persian word meaning "white mountain" called *Spinghur* in Pashto) projected eastwards from the southern Hindu Kush, skirting the basin of Helmand and Arghandab, stretched near north of Ghazni with peaks to 15,619 feet. It was separated from the main Hindu Kush range by the Kabul River valley. It stretched along the south of Ningnihar, dividing it from Bangash. No road crossed it. It was called *safed koh* because its snow never melted. The Sulaiman mountains, farther south reaching 11,532 feet in the Takht-i-Sulaiman, formed an important watershed between Helmand and the Indus River. To the east of Kabul, was a non-snowy mountain called *Siyah koh* (Black Mountain) extended between Ningnihar and Lamghan.<sup>9</sup> The climate was as diversified as its physical configuration. For the climate of Kabul Babur says, "the climate is extremely delightful, and in this respect, there is no such place in the known world".<sup>10</sup>

The winter at Kabul was extremely cold and rigorous. From the beginning of December snow would begin falling very heavily till the beginning of March, and occasionally even till April. Kabul was the part of an arid and semi-desert belt. Dry and cold winter with much snow was a permanent feature. The summers could also be unpleasant, and during summer season, furious dust storms made life miserable. However, the summer heats at Kabul were tempered by cool breezes from the adjacent snow-clad mountains. Besides the cool breezes from the snowy ranges of Hindu Kush and Hazarajat, the summer heat at Kabul were, to a considerable extent, mitigated by the influence of the south-east monsoon, which after its long course from the sea over Hindustan, here exhausted itself in clouds and occasional showers.<sup>11</sup>

Owing to the greater or less elevation of the different parts of the country, the climate of this region extremely varied. In Kabul the winter was very severe and snow remained for two or three months. Towards its

<sup>8</sup> *Baburnama*, I, p. 209 (*Safed koh*), pp. 215-16 (Pamghan mountain), where the entire sentence is erroneously rendered. Babur here refers to the complex mountain chain of the Koh-i-Baba and Sanglakh; Cf. *The Gates of India*, p. 97.

<sup>9</sup> *Baburnama*, pp. 82; I, p. 209. In Turkish called *Qara-Tagh* meaning non-snowy.

<sup>10</sup> *Baburnama*, I, p. 203; See *Memoirs of Babur*, tr. John Leiden and William Erskine, annotated and revised, Sir Lucal King, I, Oxford, 1921, p. 221.

<sup>11</sup> L.W. Adamec, *Historical and Political Gazetteer of Afghanistan*, Graz (Austria), 1985, p. 4; H.W. Bellew, *Afghanistan: A Political Mission in 1857, with an Account of the Country and People*, First Published, London, 1920, first reprint, Lahore, 1978, p. 6.

west in Hazarajat it was even worse. Ghazni was also very cold;<sup>12</sup> In Jalalabad on the other hand the heat of summer was quite intense and was made worse by frequent storms. The Koh-Daman (Daman-i-Koh) was considered the most favoured spot as regards the climate.<sup>13</sup>

The direction of the winds also influenced the climate. Some blew over ridges of the snowy mountains; others were heated in summer, and rendered cold in winter, by their passage over deserts and other arid tracts of great extent. Some districts were refreshed in summer by breezes from moisture areas while others were so enclosed by hills as to be inaccessible to any wind.<sup>14</sup> The character of the climate generally was decidedly dry, being little subject to rain, clouds or fogs.

A remarkable feature of the physical geography of this region was the paucity of large rivers. None of them reached the sea or even survived beyond the limits of the country of their origins. It should be kept in mind that physical geography of a place is not a historical constant, immutable and unchanging. From time to time, there is evidence to suggest that the rivers changed courses, and patterns of rainfall moved in unpredictable direction.

The principal rivers of Kabul were Kabul, Kunar, Helmand and Ghazni. The Kabul River (*Khatiban R.*) was an important river of the Kabul,<sup>15</sup> which issued from the slopes of Sanglakh ranges near Unai Pass, 45 miles west of the Kabul city. The Kabul River with its tributaries drained the north eastern districts. These tributaries were the Panjshir, Alishang and Alingar, Surkhab and Kunar from the north and the Logar River (*Pul-i-Mastan*) from south, besides numerous minor streams.<sup>16</sup> The Kabul River rising near Unai pass run through the Maidan district and so on to the capital. From here it run eastward to Jalalabad, where it turned south east to Dakka. From Dakka it went north east, and then turned east and south again eventually debouching into the Peshawar valley at

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<sup>12</sup> Ibn Battuta, III, p. 590; Charles Masson, II, p. 222. The country being more elevated than Kabul, the temperature of the atmosphere is generally lower, and the winter is more severe.

<sup>13</sup> Adamec, p. 4.

<sup>14</sup> Elphinstone, I, pp. 173-5.

<sup>15</sup> Abul Fazl, *Ain-i-Akbari*, ed. H. Blochmann, Bib. Ind., Calcutta, 1867-77, I, p. 592; Sujan Rai Bhandari, *Khulasatu-t Twarikh*, ed. Zafar Hasan, Delhi, 1918, p. 84. That the *Khatiban* is the modern Kabul River is clarified from the statement that it entered Kabul from Lalandar (a narrow valley through which the Kabul River passes).

<sup>16</sup> Ibn Battuta, III, p. 587. The river Panjshir was the principal tributary of the Kabul River; Le Strange, *The land of Eastern Caliphate, Mesopotamia, Persia and Central Asia from the Moslem Conquest to the time of Timur*, Cambridge university Press, 1930, p.7.

Michni. Having received the waters of the Panjkora, Swat and Bara rivers, it fell into the Indus at Attock after an entire course of 300 miles.<sup>17</sup>

The Gomal and the Kurram rivers (Babur, in fact, gives to Kurram the name of Bangash R.),<sup>18</sup> with its tributaries: the Kaitu and Tochi all had their sources in the Kabul. Of these the Gomal was lost in the soil before it was free from the hills from where it started; and the Kurram a stream of no magnitude, and fordable throughout its course, joined the Indus near Isa Khel.<sup>19</sup> The Gomal River, south of the Tochi, had been regarded in history as the highway to Ghazni.<sup>20</sup>

The two important tributaries of the Kabul River, the Alishang and the Alingar as well as the Chighan Sarai (Kunar River) merged into each other joined the Baran river near the district of Mandrawar. Abul Fazl writes that the Kabul River at the junction where it merges with these rivers was known as Baran river.<sup>21</sup> The Chighan Sarai or Kunar river was by far the most important of the northern tributaries of the Kabul river. It issued in the Hindu Kush near Karkot pass and after passing through Chitral formed the eastern boundary of Kafiristan. It joined the Kabul River at Jalalabad. It was also called as the Chitral river.<sup>22</sup>

The Ghazni river was formed in a little valley some 14 miles north of Ghazni from three rivulets which having united passed through different channels fertilizing a few fields and were then lost. These streams were—Gardan-i-Masjid from the north-east; Sar-i-Ab from the south-west; and the Shimiltu from the north-west. Many dams were constructed there during the time of Sultan Mahmud of Ghazni. The dam of Band-i-Sultan in the north of Ghazni was built during his time but was repaired during the reign of Babur.<sup>23</sup> Even in 1836, it was the source of irrigation for a large tract west of Ghazni.<sup>24</sup>

The Bamian river which drained the valley of that name was one of the chief affluents of Surkhab. Of all the rivers to the west of Kabul, the Helmand (Etymander) was the largest and the most important one. It also

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<sup>17</sup> Adamec, p. 3

<sup>18</sup> *Baburnama*, I, p. 233

<sup>19</sup> H.W. Bellew, p.7.

<sup>20</sup> *Gates of India*, p. 136.

<sup>21</sup> *Ain*, I, p. 592; Cf. *Baburnama*, I, p. 211. The Chighan Sarai river after passing through Kafiristan from the north-east, unites with the river Baran in the *buluk* of Kama and then passed onwards to the east.

<sup>22</sup> *Gates of India*, p. 100; Henry George Raverty, *Notes on Afghanistan and Baluchistan*, Pakistan second edn., 1982, pp. 105-110, 121.

<sup>23</sup> *Baburnama*, I, p. 219.

<sup>24</sup> G. T. Vigne, *Personal Narrative of a visit to Ghazni, Kabul and Afghanistan*, London, 1840, pp. 138-9.

issued from near the Unai pass, but on its northern side, and went southwest through the Hazarajat. Then run through the heart of Qandahar and Girishk before reaching the lake of Sistan or “Abistada-i-Hamun”. Though fordable for most part of the year throughout the whole of its course, the Helmand was still a considerable stream.<sup>25</sup> It received the united streams of the Tarnauk and Arghandab, and farther on the Khush rud. During the summer months all these streams, with the exception perhaps of the Helmand, became almost exhausted, long before they had run their course. A considerable volume of their water was also much reduced by the numerous small channels that were cut off for the purpose of irrigation, by which a large stream was sometimes entirely drawn off before they reached any other river. It may be observed of all the rivers of this region that their size at the mouth was never equal to the expectations they raised when seen drifting from the mountains.<sup>26</sup>

In discussing the rainfall in this region, I have based myself on the accounts of the colonial period. In the north-eastern parts of Afghanistan, the south-west monsoon was felt with much less violence than in India, being exhausted at no great distance from the sea.

The rainy season extended from October to April, but the annual precipitation was only thirteen inches in Kabul, and as little as two or three inches in the lowlands. Kabul received as much as two inches in twenty-four hours.<sup>27</sup>

Many areas of the Kabul country, such as Pakli, Buner and Swat had all a share of the monsoon rains,<sup>28</sup> which diminished as they went west, and at Swat were reduced to a month of clouds, with occasional showers about the end of July and beginning of August. During this short period the monsoon appeared in some cloud and showers at Peshawar, and in the Bangash and the Khattak countries. The rainfall to the east of the Khaibar pass was no more than fifteen inches, falling mostly during the summer monsoon, whereas to the west, the amount dropped to eight inches, occurring largely in winter.<sup>29</sup> It was still less felt in the valley of the Kabul river, where it did not extend beyond Lamghan; but in Bajaur and Panjkora, under the southern projection of the Hindu Kush,

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<sup>25</sup> Elphinstone, I, pp. 152-3.

<sup>26</sup> *Gates of India*, pp. 83-85.

<sup>27</sup> George B. Cressey, p. 558. Rainfall is seven inches in Qandahar. Although winter precipitation predominates, the south occasionally receives the rain from the Indian monsoon. Thus Qandahar, which normally has a complete dry summer, experienced sharp rains for three weeks in July 1956, with a total of 1.6 inches. Such untypical conditions distort the monthly averages.

<sup>28</sup> *Ain*, I, p. 585.

<sup>29</sup> George B. Cressey, p. 547.

in parts of Kafiristan, and in Tir near the Takht-i-Sulaiman, the south-west monsoon was heavy and formed the principal rains of the year.<sup>30</sup> In Bannu rainfall was reported only eleven inches but the Kohat valley which lies higher than Bannu, rainfall was relatively high i.e. sixteen inches.<sup>31</sup>

The region, one could conclude, was free from periodical rains. The rainfall was small and except on irrigated lands, there was an absence of moisture.<sup>32</sup> Although there was little or no rainfall in the country, in the winter, snow-storms were frequent and the melting of the snow provided the required amount of water for cultivation of crops.

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<sup>30</sup> *Ibid*; Walter Hamilton, *Geographical Statistical and Historical Description of Hindustan and the Adjacent Countries*, Delhi, 1971, II, p. 536.

<sup>31</sup> O. H. K. Spate, *India And Pakistan: A General And Regional Geography*, London, 1954, pp. 426-427, 436.

<sup>32</sup> Mohanlal, *Travels of Mohanlal*, London, 1846, p. 47; Brian Robson, *A road to Kabul*, London 1928, p. 18.