Akbar of Hindustan

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For Shahrukh
who is also quite great

Cast of Characters

Jalaluddin Muhammad Akbar: Third Mughal emperor. Ruled for just short of fifty years (1556–1605) and built the empire that bears his dynasty's name

Family

Babur: Akbar's grandfather. Ruled in Fergana, Kabul and – very briefly – Agra, where he laid the foundations of his family's ambitions in Hindustan

Maham Begum: Babur's wife, Humayun's mother (not to be confused with Maham Anaka, Akbar's nurse)

Khanzada: Babur's sister and trusted adviser to all four of his sons

Haider: Babur's cousin, Humayun's uncle. Commander and adviser in Humayun's court. Left to conquer Kashmir after Humayun's exile from Hindustan. Wrote a history of the Moghuls of Central Asia, the *Tarikh-i Rashidi*

Humayun: Babur's eldest son, Akbar's father. Lost Hindustan to Sher Shah Suri. Managed to reclaim his throne but died only months afterwards, leaving thirteen-year-old Akbar to inherit his conquest-in-progress

Hamida: Akbar's mother. Married Humayun, with reluctance, during his exile. Had Akbar when she was about sixteen and lived almost to the very end of his life and reign. Was deeply loved, respected and trusted by her son

Muazzam: Hamida's brother and Akbar's uncle. Eccentric, unreliable and increasingly violent, was eventually imprisoned by Akbar

Kamran: Akbar's uncle, Humayun's half-brother. Usually the villain in stories of Humayun's life

Askari: Akbar's uncle, Humayun's half-brother, Kamran's full-brother – and his unimpressive second-in-command

Hindal: Akbar's uncle, Humayun's youngest half-brother. Brave, chivalrous and greatly mourned by his sister, Gulbadan

Yadgar Nasir: Humayun's cousin. Plotted against Humayun once too often, executed at Humayun's orders

Gulbadan: Akbar's aunt, Humayun's sister. Lived to old age in Akbar's empire. Made an adventurous journey to Mecca, and wrote an enjoyable account of Humayun's reign and exile, the *Humayun-nama*

Dildar: Hindal's mother. Persuaded a reluctant Hamida to marry Humayun, despite Hindal's objections to the match

Sultan Begum: Askari's wife and affectionate guardian to Akbar when he was held hostage by Askari

Mahchuchak: Humayun's youngest wife and mother of his second son, Hakim. Fiercely protective of Hakim's (and her own) right to rule Kabul

Hakim: Akbar's half-brother and embattled ruler of Kabul. Was proclaimed an alternative to Akbar more than once by disenchanted warlords in Hindustan

Faridun: Hakim's uncle. Blamed by Mughal historians for instigating Hakim's incursions into Hindustan

Khwaja Hasan Naqshbandi: A descendant of the Naqshbandi Sufis. Among Hakim's closest advisers. Married Hakim's sister

Abul Qasim: Kamran's son and Akbar's cousin. Kept imprisoned and possibly executed by Akbar's command

Sulaiman: Humayun's cousin, Akbar's uncle. Replaced Humayun as governor of Badakhshan, then became its ruler. Long hoped to rule Kabul, spent his last days as Akbar's refugee-guest in Lahore

Haram: Sulaiman's formidable wife, said to be the real ruler of Badakhshan

Shahrukh: Sulaiman's grandson, Akbar's nephew. Became a rival for Sulaiman's throne in his teens, later joined Akbar's court

Sharafuddin: A distant Timurid relative who came to offer his congratulations to young Akbar, remained to marry Akbar's sister, then rebelled against him

Mirza[1] Ibrahim Husain: Best known of 'The Mirzas' – a clan of Timurids who were frequently guilty of insubordination, and worse, to Humayun and Akbar. Ibrahim was married to Kamran's daughter, Gulrukh

Mirza Muhammad Husain: Mirza Ibrahim Husain's brother. Remembered for his shock when he heard that Akbar had chased after him from Fatehpur Sikri to Ahmedabad in nine days. Was defeated in the battle that followed

Bihari Mal: Embattled heir to the Kachhwaha throne. Became Akbar's first Rajput ally – and father-in-law – when he married his daughter, Harkha, to Akbar

Harkha Bai: Kachhwaha princess, Akbar's first Rajput wife and mother of his first son, Salim

Bhagwant Das: Harkha's brother and Akbar's brother-in-law. Attained high rank in Akbar's court; married his daughter to Akbar's firstborn son (also Bhagwant Das's nephew)

Man Singh: Harkha's nephew and brother-in-law to Akbar's firstborn son. One of Akbar's star generals and among the most powerful men in his court

Salim: Akbar's eldest son. Born of Harkha as the boon Akbar sought from God, Salim became the bane of Akbar's old age. Led the last prominent rebellion against Akbar and succeeded him as Jahangir

Man Bai: Salim's first wife, Bhagwant Das's daughter, and mother to Salim's first son, Khusro

Salima Sultan: Akbar's cousin, Bairam Khan's widow and thereafter Akbar's wife. A trusted adviser to the family, played a key role in negotiations between Akbar and Salim

Murad: Akbar's second son. A favourite of his Jesuit tutor Father Antonio Monserrate, unpopular with Akbar's nobility. Died while Akbar lived

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[1] 'Mirza' came to mean 'prince' or 'young nobleman'. At this time, however, it was used to identify descendants of Timur. Everyone from Babur to Humayun and his brothers, Akbar to all his cousins spread far and wide across Central Asia and spilling into Afghanistan, Persia, China and Hindustan would be 'mirzas'.

Daniyal: Akbar's youngest son. Enjoyed hunting, horses and poetry. Died while Akbar lived, despite Akbar's desperate efforts to save him

Khusro: Salim's first son. A favourite of Akbar's and a contender for his throne

Foster Family, Family Friends and Frenemies

Maham Anaka:[2] Generally, and incorrectly, said to be Akbar's foster mother; more likely the superintendent of his nurses. Loving, protective and ambitious, she played a prominent role in the early years of Akbar's reign

Adham Khan: Maham Anaka's son. Memorably and brutally executed by Akbar for murdering Akbar's foster father

Shamsuddin Muhammad Ataka:[3] Akbar's foster father and his attendant from Akbar's infancy. Loyal and ambitious, rose to a high rank during Akbar's reign before being killed by Adham Khan. His family remained powerful and became known as the 'ataka khail' – clan of the ataka

Jiji Anaka: Wife of Shamsuddin and one of Akbar's most beloved foster mothers

Aziz Koka:[4] Son of Shamsuddin and Jiji. Akbar's milk brother, best friend and most outspoken critic

Zain Khan Koka: Another of Akbar's milk brothers. Best known for leading imperial troops against the Afghans of Swat and Bajaur and losing control of the campaign in which Birbar perished

Shihabuddin Ahmad Khan: Maham Anaka's friend, relative and second-in-command. Served in Akbar's court for decades after Maham Anaka's death

Abul Ma'ali: A great favourite of Humayun's; of handsome appearance and villainous nature. Plotted against Akbar and his family, briefly held the throne of Kabul

Bairam Khan: Became Akbar's regent when Humayun died. Without him, Akbar might not have had an empire in Hindustan. Generous, ambitious and sometimes vengeful, was ousted in a coup led – most likely – by Maham Anaka

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[2] Anaka means 'foster mother'.

[3] Ataka means 'foster father'.

[4] Koka means 'milk brother'.

Abdur Rahim: Bairam Khan's son. Orphaned at age four when Bairam Khan was murdered, brought up by Akbar in whose court he rose to Bairam Khan's rank of khan-khanan – khan of khans

Husain Quli Khan: Bairam Khan's nephew. Once disparaged by Akbar for not having fought so much as a chicken, his father was executed for supporting Bairam Khan's rebellion. Rose to high rank as governor of both Punjab and the east, yet never seems to have gained Akbar's affection, and was mistrusted by some of Akbar's Sunni warlords because he was Shia

Tardi Beg: A tight-fisted but ultimately loyal warlord who served Humayun and – very briefly – Akbar. Was executed at Bairam Khan's command

Munim Khan: Akbar's ataliq – guardian – when Akbar was a prince. Allied with Maham Anaka against Bairam Khan. Led Akbar's conquests into Bihar and Bengal, battling on Akbar's behalf into his eighties

Jouher 'Aftabchi': Humayun's ewer-bearer, served Akbar for decades and wrote an account of Humayun's reign, including his exile from and return to Hindustan, the *Tezkereh al Vakiat*

Ali Quli Shaibani: An Uzbek warlord who was loyal to Humayun and helped establish Akbar's rule in Hindustan. Led the Uzbek rebellion, the first serious insurrection against Akbar

Bahadur Khan: Ali Quli Shaibani's brother and co-captain of the Uzbek rebellion

Ibrahim Khan: Uncle to Ali Quli Shaibani, participated in the Uzbek rebellion

Sikander Khan: Uzbek fief-holder in Oudh. Participated in the Uzbek rebellion, pleaded his way back to Akbar's court

Shahim Beg: A soldier in Humayun's court, then Akbar's. The great and undeserving love of Ali Quli Shaibani's life

Abdullah Khan: One of the many Uzbek warriors who accompanied Humayun on his return to Hindustan. Governed Malwa briefly. Joined the Uzbek rebellion against Akbar

Aides and Advisers, Commanders and Courtiers

Birbar (Mahesh Das): A minstrel who became one of Akbar's closest friends. Comrade-in-arms in Akbar's theological adventures. Died in a military mishap, leaving Akbar distraught. Lives on in popular lore as Birbal

Abul Fazl: Akbar's star historian, biographer, and, eventually, friend. Paid with his life for Akbar's trust in him when he was assassinated by order of Prince Salim. Wrote the *Akbarnama* and the *Ain-i-Akbari*

Faizi: Akbar's poet laureate and close friend. Abul Fazl's elder brother

Shaikh Mubarak: Abul Fazl and Faizi's father. An outcaste from the court ulema at the beginning of Akbar's reign, he rose to great power over time

Asad Beg: An old employee of Abul Fazl's, wrote an account of Abul Fazl's assassination. Led an embassy to Bijapur and introduced Akbar to the art of smoking tobacco

Abdul Qadir Badauni: Talented translator, enthusiastic warrior and bitter critic of Akbar's arrogance and heresies, of Akbar's favourites like Birbar and Abul Fazl, and of Akbar's self-important court clergy. Wrote a secret account of Akbar's reign, with all his complaints, as part of his *Muntakhab-ut-Tawarikh*

Nizamuddin Ahmad: Rose to the high post of bakshi in Akbar's army during the later years of the long Gujarat campaign. Wrote the most dispassionate contemporary account of the first forty-odd years of Akbar's reign, the *Tabakat-i Akbari*

Shaikh Abdun Nabi: Akbar's sadr, chief justice. A powerful scholar and jurist until he fell out of favour, was exiled, and later imprisoned and murdered

Makhdum-ul-Mulk (Maulana Abdullah Ansari): A leader of the ulema in the Suri court, remained powerful in the first half of Akbar's reign. Was exiled along with Shaikh Abdun Nabi. Died of fright when arrested

Muhammad Yazd: A Shia scholar in Akbar's court. Initially favoured by Akbar, but later issued a fatwa encouraging rebellion against the emperor. Drowned in an 'accident' possibly engineered by Akbar

Pir Muhammad: Bairam Khan's arrogant and bloodthirsty deputy. Was exiled by Bairam Khan but returned as a commander to Akbar's court after the regent's downfall. Drowned in the Narmada when his horse was bit by a camel

Asaf Khan (Khwaja Abdul Majid): A clerk in Humayun's court. Became a military commander under Akbar. Led the conquest of Rani Durgavati's kingdom. Joined the Uzbek rebellion, but only briefly

Baba Khan Qaqshal: Leader of the Qaqshal clan of warlords who settled in eastern Hindustan and led the Bengal rebellion – the last serious attempt by Akbar's nobility to remove him from the throne

Shahbaz Khan: A hot-tempered Punjabi commander in Akbar's court; instrumental in subduing the Bengal rebellion

Todar Mal: Star financial adviser, reformer and general in Akbar's court. Led Akbar's armies (including against the Bengal rebels) as well as he led many of Akbar's administrative and revenue reforms

Muzaffar Khan: Another of Akbar's star financial advisers. Often fell out of favour because of his blunt manner. Redeemed himself with military success in the east. Executed by the Bengal rebels

Shah Mansur: One of Akbar's great accountants (and, like all his great accountants, greatly unpopular with Akbar's nobility). Was hanged at Akbar's command on false charges

Tansen: A singer of legendary talent, whom Akbar poached from Panna. Became one of the luminaries of Akbar's court

Hakim Abul Fath: A Sunni refugee from Shia Iran who became a great favourite of Akbar's. Was part of the disastrous military campaign in which Birbar died

Amir Fathullah Shirazi: A man of many talents, from astrology to mechanics. Was invited to Akbar's court and led some of his administrative reforms, though he did not encourage Akbar's theological adventurism

Bir Singh Bundela: Son of Raja Madhukar of Orchha. Allied with Prince Salim and assassinated Abul Fazl

Missionaries

Father Rudolf Aquaviva: Leader of the first Jesuit mission to Akbar's court

Father Antonio Monserrate: One of the three priests who comprised the first Jesuit mission to Akbar's court (along with Father Rudolf Aquaviva and Father Francis Henriquez). Was appointed tutor to Murad and other

children of the nobility. Wrote an account of his experiences, *The Commentary of Father Monserrate, S.J. on his Journey to the Court of Akbar*

Father Hierosme (Jerome) Xavier Navarrois: Leader of the third Jesuit mission to Akbar's court. Travelled with Akbar's camp to Kashmir and on his last campaign to Khandesh

Chieftains, Kings and Queens

Sher Shah Suri: Founder of the Suri dynasty. Evicted Humayun and his brothers from Hindustan

Salim (Islam) Shah Suri: Sher Shah Suri's son and successor. His death led to a succession battle that allowed Humayun to return to Hindustan

Muhammad Adil (Mubariz Khan): Claimed the Suri throne after Salim Shah Suri died, murdered Salim Shah's young son

Hemu (Raja Bikramjit): A grocer who rose to administrative and military command in the Suri court. Brilliant general and de facto regent to Muhammad Adil. Defeated Mughal forces in Delhi and titled himself Raja Bikramjit. Lost the second battle of Panipat a few weeks later and was executed

Shah Tahmasp: Ruler of Iran and unpredictable host to Humayun during Humayun's exile

Shah Abbas: Emerged as shah of Iran after a long and bloody succession battle following Shah Tahmasp's death. Had regular diplomatic relations with Akbar, whom he referred to as 'shah baba', or king father

Raja Maldeo: Ruler of Marwar. Refused Humayun shelter during his desperate journey through Rajasthan

Rana Prasad: Ruler of Umarkot. Offered shelter and an alliance to Humayun and Hamida during their exile. Akbar was born in his fort

Sultan Adam: Ruler of the Gakkhars. Refused an alliance with Kamran and handed him over to Humayun instead

Kamal Khan: Sultan Adam's nephew. Claimed the Gakkhar throne and took it from Sultan Adam with Akbar's support

Sultan Abdullah: Ruler of Turan, Akbar's neighbour to the north. Had regular and sometimes tense diplomatic relations with Akbar's Hindustan

Sultan Baz Bahadur: Ruler of Malwa, best known for his musical talent and love for Rupmati. Lost his kingdom to Mughal forces led by Adham Khan and eventually joined Akbar's court

Rani Durgavati: Ruler of Gondwana, greatly admired by Mughal historians. Lost her kingdom to Mughal forces led by Asaf Khan and took her own life

Rana Udai Singh: Ruler of Mewar when Akbar besieged Chittorgarh. Left the defence of Chittorgarh to Jaimal

Jaimal: Rajput commander, greatly admired by Mughal historians. Allied with Akbar's relative Sharafuddin in the conquest of Merta, then with Udai Singh in the defence of Chittorgarh. Shot by Akbar during the siege

Rana Pratap: Son and successor of Rana Udai Singh. Resisted the Mughal conquest of Mewar until the end of his life, most famously against Man Singh in the battle of Haldighati

Rai Surjan Hada: Ruler of Bundi, cousin of Udai Singh. Surrendered Ranthambore to Akbar and joined his court

Sultan Bahadur: Last prominent king of Gujarat's Muzaffarid dynasty

Muzaffar Shah (Nannu): Propped up as a scion of the Muzaffarid dynasty by the Gujarati nobility, considered a pretender by the Mughals. Led a long struggle against the Mughal conquest of Gujarat. Slit his own throat when caught

Chenghis Khan: Not to be confused with Akbar's famous ancestor and founder of the Mongol empire in the thirteenth century, this Chenghis Khan was one of several powerful chieftains who ruled various parts of Gujarat between the decline of its Muzaffarid dynasty and its conquest by Akbar

Sher Khan Fuladi: Among the Gujarati chiefs who resisted Akbar's incursions. Allied with Mirza Muhammad Husain against Akbar in the great battle for Ahmedabad in 1573

Itimad Khan 'Gujarati': Another powerful Gujarati chief, though more inclined to ally with Akbar than his peers. Sent Akbar an African elephant while Akbar was besieging Chittorgarh. Eventually joined Akbar's court

Sultan Sulaiman Karrani: Ruler of Bengal and able to keep Mughal ambitions in the east at bay until his death

Sultan Daud: Younger, and reputedly very handsome, son of Sultan Sulaiman Karrani. Far less successful than his father at maintaining either his throne or diplomatic peace with Akbar. Lost one battle after another, managed to sweet-talk a truce out of Munim Khan but was captured and beheaded – reluctantly – at Husain Quli Khan's orders

Yusuf Shah Chak: Ruler of Kashmir. Negotiated a truce with Bhagwant Das but to little avail. Was imprisoned by Akbar

Chand Bibi: Regent and de facto ruler of Ahmednagar, led the defence of the fort against the Mughals. Greatly admired by Abul Fazl – who negotiated with her at one point. Murdered by her own men

Sultan Raja Ali Khan: Ruler of Khandesh. Allied with the Mughals

Sultan Bahadur Shah: Son and successor of Sultan Raja Ali Khan. Broke Khandesh's alliance with the Mughals, was besieged in Asirgarh, eventually surrendered and was imprisoned

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Prologue

Sometimes, in the dimly lit passages of time, there shines a light so bright it dazzles the ages. Such was the flare, at any rate, that burst across the Mongolian sky one dark night, blazing into Alanqoa's tent, her astonished mouth, and then her womb.

Who knows when Alanqoa lived? Over 2000 years before she saw the light of day, her luckless ancestor Qiyan had seen his entire tribe massacred. Only Qiyan, his cousin and their wives survived. The four found refuge in Argana-qun, an Edenic valley surrounded by high mountains; and here, upon a meadow lush with water and fruit, the tribe rebuilt itself. Eventually, when the valley would hold them no longer, the men and women travelled out, no longer fugitives but an unstoppable force. An iron mountain that blocked their way they melted with bellows. Two millennia after Qiyan's desperate escape, his descendants – the Qiyat – returned to rule Mongolia.

Alanqoa was a Qiyat, married to her cousin, the king – but when that light flew into her tent, the king was long dead and Alanqoa herself ruled the Mongols. Anticipating protests from literal-minded chieftains who might not understand how their widowed queen was suddenly with child, she commanded some trustworthy men to witness the miracle. They stood guard around her tent as the stars rose and the darkness grew, their silence interrupted by the unearthly sounds of night and the shuffling of feet. And then, as one, the men let out a cry. It was as Alanqoa had said! A magnificent light had made its unerring way across the sky and into the tent of their queen.

Nine months later, she delivered three boys: Baqun Qataqi, Bughutu Salji and Bodhonchar Qa'an. Few in the modern world will find their names

familiar; yet few in the modern world will not have heard of their descendants. Chinghis Khan, Timur the Lame, Akbar the Great – men who would grab the world by the scruff of its neck and claim it as their own. And why should they not? They were, after all, the Niru'un. Born of Light.

I

Exodus

> 'The first degree of dutiful obedience is not to scowl with knitted brows when trials befall, but regarding them as the bitter remedies of a physician, to accept them with a cheerful countenance.'
>
> – Akbar, Happy Sayings, *Ain-i-Akbari*

Five thousand elephants draped in European velvet and Turkish brocade, hung with chains of gold and silver, lined the road to the newly built stone palaces of Fatehpur. Between every pair of these fluorescent beasts sat a cheetah upon a dais, dressed with equal excess in bejewelled golden collars and rich cloth. Arabian and Persian horses with saddles of gold were part of the spectacle, too; and, lest anyone find it wanting in glitter, oxen carts held up displays of gold embroidery.

The palaces were also decorated, the whole city was festive – as was only fitting. This was Akbar's city of victory. Only three years since its foundations were laid and, already, Akbar had marched west from Fatehpur and conquered Gujarat, sailed east from Fatehpur and conquered Bihar. Only two decades into his half-century-long reign, and Akbar's Hindustan was becoming the pre-eminent power in the region, if not upon the globe: the rulers of Iran and Turan had sent envoys to their increasingly formidable neighbour; the Portuguese in Goa, Daman and Diu were 'submissive', and possibly of one mind with the Deccani chiefs 'greatly affected' by the sheer pace at which Akbar was expanding his realm.[1]

And yet, the elephants in all their finery, the cheetahs in their jewels and the tremendous quantities of gold gleaming in the late October sun were not

in honour of yet another military triumph, nor meant to overawe yet another foreign ambassador. The reception had been arranged for a far more humble – you might even say pathetic – audience: the recently widowed, erstwhile ruler of Badakhshan, who had spent the last two decades far less productively than Akbar, nursing a 'few paltry ambitions'[2] with little success, until he was evicted from the 'the stony land of his birth' by his own grandson.[3] This failed and hapless man had been accorded the greatest deference by Akbar's nobility all the way from the banks of the Indus to the imperial capital, where the glory of his reception so overwhelmed the poor man that, upon catching sight of Akbar, he leapt off his horse and ran towards the emperor, ready to fall at his feet.

Akbar, too, dismounted to greet his guest. The old man scurrying towards him, his Central Asian features lightly bearded and slightly flushed perhaps, was Akbar's uncle, Mirza[4] Sulaiman, the last of a generation of uncles who had conspired, it would seem, to give Akbar the worst possible start to his career – and the only one who remained, now, to witness his extraordinary rise. The glamour, the pageantry, was for his benefit, for what use is all the world's success if it cannot be flaunted to family?

Sulaiman was satisfyingly overawed, and Akbar was gracious in his majesty, speaking kindly to his aged relative, entertaining him at a banquet, and promising him troops to help him regain his lost kingdom. It was twenty years, at least, since uncle and nephew had met, and it isn't unlikely that the conversation turned to the past. Certainly, Sulaiman, as he marvelled at Akbar's court – the splendour of its gardens and buildings, the profusion of food and drink – must have marvelled, equally, at how things had changed since he last set foot in Hindustan.

That was almost exactly half a century ago. A younger, happier man, Sulaiman was part of the small army that battled Ibrahim Lodi on the plains of Panipat in 1526 and won his own uncle, Babur, a foothold in the north Indian plains. Sulaiman did not remain long in this newly conquered land, however; Babur sent his nephew to govern Badakhshan, and died soon thereafter. As a result, Sulaiman did not witness his family's ignominious reverse migration across the blue waters of the Indus, when, barely fifteen years after that spectacular if all-too-fleeting victory at Panipat, Babur's sons abandoned their father's dreams of empire.

In the fifteen years that followed, however, Sulaiman had not only witnessed but even participated in the bloody and often melodramatic

struggles for a kingdom in Kabul between his cousins – Humayun, Kamran, Askari and Hindal. Sometimes, Sulaiman had allied with Kamran, sometimes with Humayun; once, all five young men had formed an optimistic fellowship, planning to march on Samarqand. Sulaiman knew well, besides, how Akbar had spent his childhood hung in the competitive balance between his father and his uncles – how the boy was crowned king when his father died, how he was ruled by regents and challenged by warlords, how slim the chances were that he would survive. And now, having crossed the Indus a second time, no longer part of a conquering army but a lonely supplicant, Akbar's uncle would learn this, too: that all the operatic fury with which Sulaiman and his cousins had scrambled for a throne was only a pitiful game of musical chairs in the light of Akbar's achievement.

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In July 1540, Mirza Haider, Babur's young cousin and uncle to his four sons – Humayun, Kamran, Askari and Hindal – arrived in Lahore and could hardly find a place to stay. The 'throng was so great', he wrote, 'that it was difficult to move about, and still more difficult to find a lodging'.[5] The crowds were not celebratory, however; no grand coronation was in the offing, no festival or pilgrimage in progress. Instead, a great darkness was descending upon the city. Its streets were panicked, its inns sold out and its gardens packed with tents; all for one reason: a kingdom was crumbling and Lahore was its last refuge.

A little over six weeks earlier, the armies of Humayun, the second Mughal 'padishah',[6] and Sher Shah, the ambitious Afghan general, had faced each other on the banks of the Ganga, in Kannauj. As the north Indian summer crept up on them, there was an occasional skirmish, and more than occasional desertion.[7] Haider, commanding a contingent of Humayun's troops, saw little more than reluctance animate his side. A 'heated feeling ran through the army', he would write later, caustically, 'and the cry was, "Let us go and rest in our own homes."'

Thunderclouds gathered, 'with tumult, like rutting elephants',[8] showing more appetite for battle than the Mughal men. The rain was turning the ground to mush, making it impossible to camp and imperative, therefore, to battle. On 17 May 1540 – which was also Ashura, the tenth of Muharram, the day of Husain's martyrdom upon the bloody battlefield of Karbala –

Humayun and his 40,000 men charged a 15,000-strong force led by Sher Shah at Kannauj.

Perhaps 'charged' is not the right word. Haider remembers how there were twenty-seven Mughal contingents between him and the river, each marked by the fluttering banner of its commander. On the day of the battle, however, not one of these brave banners was to be seen, 'for the great nobles had hidden them in their apprehension'.

Defeated before the fighting began, the reluctant commanders packed off their untrained servants, *ghulam*s, to the front. No sooner did these men see Sher Shah advance than they were possessed of an urge to get out of his way. The resulting chaos destroyed any semblance of discipline in the Mughal army – 'the whole array was broken', writes Haider – and before a gun could be fired or a commander wounded, it was each man for himself, commander and ghulam racing each other to the river in desperate flight.

Humayun's own fate was humiliating. His water carrier and future biographer, Jouher, recalls how 'an Afghan clothed in black' struck Humayun's horse with a spear.[9] Even with his horse injured and his army in a shambles – Afghan soldiers were looting Humayun's artillery in front of his eyes – the emperor remained eager to fight, until a more sensible and anonymous hand grabbed the reins of his mount and led him to the river. Here, Humayun recognized an old elephant that had once belonged to his father, and climbed upon its back, only to realize that its driver was marching him towards the enemy. A eunuch he found hiding in the howdah whispered to Humayun to 'take off the fellow's head'.[10] Sensible advice, but Humayun knew nothing of driving an elephant; he would be stranded without a mahout. The eunuch assured the emperor that he knew a little about riding elephants and would take them to safety. Hacking at the treacherous driver with his sword, Humayun managed to push him to the ground, then, somehow, to cross the river – only to find the riverbank so steep he couldn't climb up it. Eventually, two camp men saw him and tied their turbans into a rope, by which the hapless emperor, soaked and dishevelled, clambered ashore.

Abul Fazl, Akbar's historian and greatest admirer, wrote the official and approved account of this debacle in his *Akbarnama*, ridding the story of its more farcical bits. In his telling, the emperor, 'mounted with firm foot on an elephant' – there is no mention of the eunuch who helped him ride it – made his way across the Ganga's swollen waters, and climbed ashore with

manly dignity, aided by one Shamsuddin Muhammad of Ghazni, a soldier whose helping hand would gain him the highest rank in the years to come.

For the moment, however, neither emperor nor soldier could hope for more than staying alive. That noon, writes Haider, Humayun had 17,000 men under his command; now, he rode alone upon a borrowed horse,[11] his head bare and his feet unshod.

It wasn't just his shoes Humayun had lost, but also his spirit. Riding ragged from Kannauj towards his capital, Agra, he began to speak of the women in his harem in doleful, ominous tones. Would it not be best to avert the dangers of defeat, the fate worse than death …? Humayun's youngest brother, Hindal, told the emperor to stop it. 'What it would be to your Majesty to kill a mother and a sister . . .!' cried the chivalrous prince. 'So long as there is life in me, I will fight in their service. I have hope in the most high God, that, poor fellow as I am, I may pour out my life's blood for my mother and my sisters.'[12]

The emperor was not wrong to worry, however. News of his defeat was travelling faster than he was: less than halfway to Agra, the retreating army was stopped in its tracks by 3000 villagers of Bhangaon, these 'peasants', writes Jouher, being 'in the habit of plundering a defeated army'. Humayun sent orders for his brothers Hindal and Askari, with their cousin Yadgar Nasir, to disperse the villagers, but the men began to squabble instead. Askari was fed up of fighting and 'delayed to proceed', at which Yadgar Nasir took out his horsewhip and began to ply it upon the recalcitrant prince, shouting that things would never have come to such a wretched pass if it weren't for Askari's 'discord'.[13]

His brothers, it is true, had not been pillars of support during Humayun's brief reign. Now, in almost as much danger of killing each other as of being waylaid by opportunist marauders – 'sedition raised its head on every side', writes Abul Fazl – the princes mustered the wits to drive back the men of Bhangaon, galloped to Agra, and from there, 'broken and dispirited',[14] fled north.

So it was that in July 1540, a decade after Babur died and left his progeny to grow his Hindustani kingdom – a brushstroke of land running south-east from Peshawar to Patna, with its capital in Agra, and precarious toeholds in Rajasthan and Malwa – his family huddled in Lahore, the only Hindustani city they had left, to see how, *if*, they might salvage their inheritance. Humayun, Askari and Hindal each arrived in Lahore separately, and set up

separate camps. The fourth brother, Kamran, was already in the city, having declined any part in the battle at Kannauj.[15] Besides the brothers, there was their cousin Yadgar Nasir, their uncle Mirza Haider, their various mothers, aunts, sisters and wives, and, of course, a great many chiefs of wavering allegiance.

For over two months, they held consultations, even managing to draft 'a deed of concord and unanimity', duly signed. Humayun delivered a rousing speech. 'With what difficulty had [Babur] . . . conquered Hindustan – so vast a country! If through your disunion it pass from our possession into the hands of nobodies what will the wise say of you? Now is the time to sink the head into the bosom of good counsel . . .'

It wasn't so much good counsel, however, as an outpouring of second thoughts that followed Humayun's oration. Why not move upon Sindh, proposed Hindal and Yadgar Nasir, and thence to Gujarat, and thus take on Sher Shah once again? Haider, having given Humayun a rather sharp lecture on his 'want of constancy and of purpose',[16] said let the princes and chiefs take over the hills while Haider went to Kashmir – he would send word when the valley was his, while Sher Shah would be unable to reach the Mughals in their heights. Even better, said Kamran, what if the padishah and princes marched into the hills or Kashmir as they liked, while Kamran took their women and families to Kabul? He would return to join them, of course – only later.[17]

The meeting broke up with nothing achieved. Meanwhile, every day brought news of Sher Shah's advance, and with it the realization that the princes might negotiate between themselves all they liked, but it was Sher Shah, the new star of Hindustan, who held their fate in his hands.

Kamran – always portrayed as the most self-serving of the four brothers – 'out of wickedness and blindness', writes Abul Fazl, sent a messenger to Sher Shah, offering himself as a kind of governor in Punjab. 'I will do a good job,'[18] he promised eagerly. Sher Shah, 'a thousand times emboldened by the good news of disunion', accepted Kamran's petition and sent an envoy to Lahore. The faithless Kamran organized a party for this man – sworn enemy of his dynasty! – and even 'by entreaties induced' Humayun to come.

We are left to imagine that Humayun treated such pitiful scrambling for crumbs with the scorn it deserved, but here – as often, when it comes to the imperial family he chronicled and adored – Abul Fazl writes with an adorning pen. Gulbadan Begum, Babur's daughter and author of the *Humayun-*

nama, was in Lahore at this time, and she remembers it very differently. By Gulbadan's account, it was Humayun who wrote to Sher Shah, pleading for Lahore. After all, he wrote, 'I have left you the whole of Hindustan.'

The Afghan was unmoved. 'I have left you Kabul,' was his frosty reply. 'You should go there.'

Humayun's messenger, realizing that Sher Shah meant business, sent a runner to alert the emperor, who decamped immediately. 'It was like the Day of Resurrection,' writes Gulbadan, a fearful scramble in which people left all they had except their money. Then, perhaps in hope of a sudden change of fortune, or perhaps unable to believe the end had come, Humayun pitched his tents across the Ravi river to the west of Lahore. Three days later, Sher Shah's envoy arrived – and Gulbadan writes that it was Humayun, not Kamran, who arranged a reception for him. Worse, he even composed a bit of verse for the victorious Afghan:

> Although one's image be shown in the mirror,
> It remains always apart from one's self.
> It is wonderful to see one's self in another form:
> This marvel will be the work of God.[19]

For all the sunny optimism of his couplets, Humayun could hardly have thought it 'wonderful' to have Sher Shah mirror his accession; and if, indeed, the padishah did bring himself to look at his reflection, he would have seen a failure that no amount of philosophizing would separate from his own self. It may be that Humayun went to sleep a defeated and lonely man that night, and in that sorrowful state, he had a dream. An old man came to him, dressed in green, and told him to cheer up.

'Do not grieve,' said the vision, and gave Humayun the staff he held in his hand.

'Who are you?' asked Humayun.

'I am Ahmad of Jam,' said the old man, 'and God shall give you a son of my blood. You will name him Jalaluddin Muhammad Akbar.'[20]

For some days, an unfamiliar optimism animated Humayun's camp. One of his wives, Bibi Gunwar, was in an advanced stage of pregnancy; would she have the promised boy? It was not to be; Bibi Gunwar had a girl.[21]

Humayun's dreams, like his reality, had disappointed him. What was the point, anyhow, of visions, no matter how propitious? Whether it was Kamran

who schemed or Humayun who grovelled, there was little either man could do to stop Sher Shah – and when news arrived that the Afghan's army had crossed the Beas river east of Lahore, the Mughals did the only thing they could. They ran away.[22]

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In the way that it's usually told, as an interlude to better things, the story of Humayun is of a man undone by weakness, whimsy and sentimentality; a 'delicate king' (*padshahi latif*), as one of his own courtiers described him.[23] He was an emperor more interested in the movements of stars than in the affairs of men, and far too indulgent of his brothers – Kamran foremost – who did all they could to undermine Humayun's authority and usurp his empire.

It is possible, however, that Humayun was far less careless of his interests than he is reputed to have been. A soldier-historian called Nizamuddin Ahmad relates an odd bit of intrigue that casts a murky light on Humayun's seemingly effortless accession to his father's throne. The popular story is that Humayun fell ill and Babur offered God his own life in exchange for his son's. God accepted. Immediately, Humayun began to recover and Babur's health declined. With one last effort of will, the emperor pronounced his eldest son his heir, then took to his bed and died.

As Nizamuddin tells it, however, Babur's last days were spent against a backdrop of dizzy conspiracy. The story is this: a trusted, high-ranking chieftain in Babur's court, Mir Khalifa, conceived a mysterious antipathy towards the prince Humayun and proposed his own candidate for the throne: Mahdi Khwaja, a 'generous and liberal young man' who had the advantage of being married to Babur's beloved sister, Khanzada Begum. The idea gained traction, then quickly went to Mahdi Khwaja's head – so much so that he began plotting against his own advocate, Mir Khalifa, who promptly withdrew his support for the two-faced would-be heir, and had him arrested instead.[24]

Humayun, meanwhile, had long been aware of competing interests for Babur's throne, it seems. Sometime in the summer of 1529, eighteen-odd months before Babur died, Humayun left Badakhshan – his fief for almost a decade – and hurried down to his father's court in Agra. He went uninvited but, as he told his brother Kamran – surprised to see Humayun riding south through Kabul – 'he was always seeing [Babur] with his mind's eye, yet this was not equal to a personal interview'.[25]