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ARTICLE

Imperial wet nurses in the reign of Mughal Emperor Akbar

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Abstract

Mughal chronicles frequently refer to royal Mughal infants being entrusted to wet nurses for breast-feeding and nurturing. The women chosen for this purpose were invariably the wives of important Mughal officials. It was believed that the quality of milk the baby received determined its future disposition. Therefore, these nurses needed to possess desirable psychological qualities and moral temperaments. They were accorded a high status and usually established a lasting relationship with their charges. As a result, the children of the emperor developed a close association with their wet nurses and their families who, in turn, became the staunchest supporters of their wards. The success, influence, and prestige of these families depended on the political fortune of the royal child they had cared for. If the prince became an emperor, they gained immense power and prestige both in life and death. They were honoured with elaborate funerals and buried in imperial tombs. This article argues that the rationale behind the use of wet nurses by Mughal royalty during Emperor Akbar's reign was not simply a medical or physiological one, it was equally a political instrument for forging ties between prominent families and royalty.

Keywords: Mughal household; wet nurse; dispositions; milk kinship; alliances

Introduction

A wet nurse—*daya* or *dayeh* in Persian (*anageh* or *anakeh* in Chagatay Turkish)—[1]was a woman who had newly borne a child and could thus breastfeed another woman's child. The use of wet nurses for new-born children was well known among the social elite since ancient times.[2] The methods and rituals of this practice varied in different periods and different societies. By the late medieval period it was customary for royalty and wealthy families across cultures to employ wet nurses to breastfeed their infants.[3] Wet

[1] See Mahmoud Omidsalar and Theresa Omidsalar, 'Daya', in *Encyclopaedia Iranica Online*, https://iranicaonline.org/articles/daya (accessed 25 July 2022). *Dayeh* also means a nurse or foster-mother: see John Richards, *A Dictionary, Persian, Arabic, and English* (London, 1852), s.v. 'دایه'. For *anakeh*, see Francis Gladwin, *A Dictionary, Persian, Hindoostanee and English* (Calcutta, 1809) and M. Pavet de Courteille, *Dictionnaire Turk-Oriental* (Paris, 1870), s.v. 'انکه'. No detailed study of the term *anakeh* is yet available in English-language scholarship. It became an honorific title for women of high rank who nursed an imperial heir.

[2] It was well-known custom in ancient civilisations like Egypt and Mesopotamia, and in Roman society. The literature on the history of wet nursing is vast and steadily growing. The classic work remains, however, Valerie Fildes, *Wet Nursing: A History from Antiquity to the Present* (New York, 1988).

[3] See *ibid.*, p. 34. A recent scholarly account of wet nursing in Europe is by Prophecy Coles, *The Shadow of the Second Mother: Nurses and Nannies in Theories of Infant Development* (London, 2015), see especially pp. 9–26. In Arab culture, the employment of wet nurses was largely limited to the wealthier classes. Prominent Meccans,

nursing became a means of forming familial alliances in many hierarchical societies. It therefore served a religious and strategic purpose.[4] In the Mughal imperial household—wherein royal and governmental interests coalesced—the practice fostered allegiance, trust, and loyalty. Numerous sources testify to royal children being entrusted to the care of multiple wet nurses within the harem (or *zanana*) of the imperial household. The nurses and their families gained prestige because of this intimate connection with the emperor's children. The bond thus formed between the child and the wet nurse and the rest of her family was equivalent to that of a blood relationship.[5] This mark of trust between them and the royal family enabled the former to intervene actively in court politics.[6] While this article discusses the reign of Jalal al-Din Muhammad Akbar (r. 1556–1605), sources from different periods have also been drawn upon by way of illustration and elaboration.

When a royal birth was imminent, some women of amiable disposition (*latif-masharib*) were chosen from leading families close to the imperial household. It was believed that the quality of milk the baby obtained determined their future dispositions. Wet nurses were chosen well before the birth of royal children. It was a high stakes game because one of the children was likely to be a future emperor. Once designated, they would sport a Turkish-style 'headdress (*mi'jar*) and dress in a cloak of distinction (*kher'qa*)' like a noble woman.[7] They enjoyed a high status among the princely and imperial households. This act of designation was a favourite subject of court painters illustrating imperial chronicles. Mughal miniature paintings represent these women very prominently,

including the Quraysh, placed babies in the care of wet nurses of the nomadic tribes probably because of high child mortality caused by disease and malnutrition in Arab settlements. Sending a child to a healthier desert environment apparently increased its chances of survival. Prophet Muhammad was, as a baby, assigned to the wet nurse Halimah of the Hawazin tribe and lived in a pastoral environment for about two years. See G. L. Simons, *Saudi Arabia: The Shape of a Client Feudalism* (New York, 1998), p. 90.

[4] Many such examples can be found in Soraya Altorki, 'Milk-kinship in Arab society: an unexplored problem in the ethnography of marriage', *Ethnology* 19.2 (1980), pp. 233–244; and Jane Khatib Chahidi, 'Milk kinship in Shi'ite Islamic Iran', in *The Anthropology of Breast-Feeding: Natural Law or Social Construct*, (ed.) Vanessa Maher (Oxford, 1992), pp. 109–132.

[5] In many cultures across the globe and throughout history, the act of breastfeeding and the substance of breast milk forge kinship bonds that were equal to, and sometimes considered stronger than, blood relationships. The classic examples from the large region of Eurasia can be found in the scholarly articles by Peter Parkes, 'Milk kinship in Southeast Europe: alternative social structures and foster relations in the Caucasus and the Balkans', *Social Anthropology* 12.3 (2004), pp. 341–358; 'Fosterage, kinship and legend: when milk was thicker than blood?', *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 46.3 (2004), pp. 587–615; 'Milk kinship in Islam: substance, structure, history', *Social Anthropology* 13.3 (2005), pp. 307–329. See also Cynthia R. Chapman, '"Oh that you were like a brother to me, one who had nursed at my mother's breasts": breast milk as a kinship-forging substance', *Journal of Hebrew Scriptures* 12.7 (2012), pp. 1–41.

[6] In contrast to popular Orientalist conceptions of women of the harem, who were frequently depicted as powerless figures serving men, these gynocentric spaces offered women substantial power. For recent scholarship that challenges the Orientalist view and argues that women were active participants in the public space and an essential element in the everyday public life of the Mughal empire, see Ruby Lal, *Domesticity and Power in the Early Mughal World* (Cambridge, 2005); for the Ottoman harem, the Orientalist's view was demolished by Leslie P. Peirce, *The Imperial Harem: Women and Sovereignty in the Ottoman Empire* (New York, 1993). For a vibrant and dynamic understanding of this conception in global cultures, see Anne Walthall (ed.), *Servants of the Dynasty: Palace Women in World History* (Berkeley, 2008); Joan DelPlato and Julie Codell (eds), *Orientalism, Eroticism and Modern Visuality in Global Cultures* (New York, 2016).

[7] For example, see the appointment of Shams al-Din Muhammad Ghaznawi's wife Jiji as infant Akbar's *anakeh*, in Maulawi Abd-ur- Rahim (ed.), *Akbarnamah by Abu'l Fazl I Mubarak I Allami*, 3 vols (Calcutta, 1873–1886), Vol. I, p. 44 (hereafter *Akbarnamah*). In place of their original name, these women often received a name suitable to their job and position—for example, 'Jiji' for Ghaznawi's wife.

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interacting intimately with children of the royal family.[8] The responsibilities of the wet nurses did not end when the child was weaned, but lasted throughout their lifetime. Wet nurses and their families became loyal followers as their own fortunes hinged upon the success of their charges. This probably made them the most influential clique in each princely household. Presumably, they were the ones who actually groomed the princes to become sovereign. The selection of wet nurses was, possibly, the first step towards the formation of a princely household.[9] If the child nursed was a prince, the family of his intimate *anakeh* (wet nurse) gained immense power and prestige when the prince reached maturity and assumed his political responsibilities. It is likely that this practice was designed to increase and strengthen the links of loyalty and service between a powerful noble family and the Mughal dynasty. Consequently, each designated wet nurse, her husband, and her extended family, along with its associates, became the most trusted supporters of the prince in adulthood.

Spiritual implications

Normative and theoretical writings of the medieval world assumed that a maternal inheritance was transferred through breast milk. Breast milk was considered a refined and purer form of uterine blood that was conveyed through the veins linking the womb to a woman's breasts. This drew upon a Greco-Roman idea that was imported into Arabo-Islamic medical theories between the ninth and eleventh centuries.[10] Ancient philosophers and moralists such as Favorinus of Arles believed that the semen of the father influenced the milk ('milk is from man'):

> [but] there is no doubt that in forming character the disposition of the [wet] nurse and the quality of the milk play a great part; for the milk, although imbued from the beginning with the material of the father's seed, forms the infant offspring from the body and mind of the mother as well.[11]

These notions were apparently shared by the Mughals. Court chronicles argue that the physical attributes and characteristics of a wet nurse could be passed onto the nursing infant through breast milk. Therefore, it was not simply nourishment but the wet nurse's very being that was conveyed through the milk. In keeping with the belief mentioned above, the personal attributes of the wet nurse's husband, too, had to be suitable. Medieval treatises—which propagated the notion that 'good milk' produces good progeny and 'bad milk', bad progeny—made the selection of a wet nurse all the more important.[12]

[8] This is the exact opposite of the royal mothers who are rarely shown suckling and interacting with their own children. See note 23 below.

[9] The scholarly account of the Mughal princely households is by Munis D. Faruqui, *The Princes of the Mughal Empire, 1504–1719* (Cambridge, 2012), especially Chapters 2 and 3.

[10] Arabo-Islamic medical scholars, particularly in the medieval context, translated Western medical and philosophical classics into Arabic, including texts by Hippocrates (*circa* 460–*circa* 377 BCE), Plato (*circa* 427–*circa* 347 BCE), Aristotle (*circa* 384-*circa* 322 BCE), Dioscorides (*circa* 40–*circa* 90 CE), Favorinus (*circa* 85–*circa* 155 CE), Soranus (*circa* 98–*circa* 138 CE), and Galen (*circa* 130– *circa* 210 CE), consequently, they acquired many Greco-Roman ideas in the fields of nursing and medicine. For an overview of this development, see Hassan Kamal, *Encyclopedia of Islamic Medicine*: *With a Greco-Roman Background* (Cairo, 1975).

[11] See Aulus Gellius, *Noctes Atticae 12.1.20*, (trans.) John Carew Rolfe (Cambridge, 1960), pp. 358–359: 'Just as the qualities of the father's "seed" are able to form likeness of the body and mind, so the qualities and properties of the milk have the same effect.'

[12] The attitudes to wet nursing in the medieval period probably owed much to ancient medical literature by Soranus and Galen as well as to Latin translations by Gerard of Cremona (*circa* 1114–1187 CE) of Arabic texts by Ibn Sina or Avicenna (*circa* 980–1037 CE). Though there are wide divergences of opinion among medical authorities,

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Thus, a 'chaste' wife of a 'nobly born' husband made for an ideal wet nurse for royal Mughal offspring.[13] This is the sense one gets from 'official' records, Persian couplets, and even from the morals taught through miracles described in Mughal chronicles.[14]

They also believed that dispositions were influenced by the close intimacy that gradually developed between the wet nurse and child: 'after being together for a long time the character of nurse and child become assimilated'.[15] This notion of 'intimacy' was the same for both the wet nurse and the (dry) nurse with little difference seen (in our sources) between the two.[16] Both categories of nurses were essential and valued members of the royal household: caring for the nutritional and emotional needs of the growing child. It was, however, the wet nurses who displayed special fidelity and attachment. In referring to the selection of wet nurse and the influence of breast milk, Emperor Akbar's minister and historian Abu'l Fazl (1551–1602) in his great imperial chronicle, the *Akbarnamah* (*circa* 1598), records that '... the wet nurse did not just provide physical nourishment of the child, but her milk was a conduit for her necessarily good temperament and spiritual inclinations'.[17] Abu'l Fazl believed that the disposition of wet nurses had to be 'fused with spirituality', for it was through their 'benign breasts' that the prince's (Akbar) 'mouth was sweetened by the life-giving fluid'.[18] He thus describes how 'chaste ladies of holy characters' first introduced milk into the infant Akbar's lips:[19]

> Nurses of balanced temperament mingled with spirituality then wrapped him in a blanket that was purer than a veil before the eyes of an immaculate, and laid that divine, heavenly body politely and respectfully upon the breasts and bosoms of chaste ladies of holy character, who placed the breast of kindness to his lips and sweetened his plate with soul-nourishing milk.

virtually all believed that the wet nurse's characteristics would be transmitted to the baby. For discussion and references, see Avner Giladi, 'Breast-feeding in medieval Islamic thought: a preliminary study of legal and medical writings', *Journal of Family History* 23.2 (1998), pp. 107–123.

[13] Commonly used phrase in Mughal contemporary sources. For instance, see *Akbarnamah*, Vol. 1, pp. 43–44.

[14] For a few distinctive instances of dreams and miracles, see *Akbarnamah*, Vol. 1, pp. 14–15, 43–44, 187; Wheeler M. Thackston (ed. and trans.), *The History of Akbar by Abu'l Fazl*, 5 vols (Cambridge, 2015–2018), Vol. I, pp. 47–51, 147–149, 567 (hereafter *The History of Akbar*). For discussion and references of dreams and miracles in Islam, see A. Azfar Moin, *The Millennial Sovereign: Sacred Kingship and Sainthood in Islam* (Delhi, 2017), Chapter 3.

[15] For an overview of this ancient idea, see Avner Giladi, *Infants, Parents and Wet Nurses: Medieval Islamic Views on Breastfeeding and Their Social Implications* (Boston, 1999), pp. 48–53.

[16] Though pre-modern authors made a theoretical distinction between midwife, wet nurse, and (dry) nurse, in practice, in the period under study, the functions of the latter two merged on some occasions. A close relationship was fostered not only by wet nursing, but also through close contact between nurses and their charges. The role of nurse, assigned to trusted women, was supervisory and continued for an unspecified period. Maham Anakeh, who was Akbar's nurse, served him from the time he was in the cradle until his ascension to the throne. Her family was extremely influential during the early years of his reign. Maham became 'Superintendent of the Nurses'—one of the most prestigious positions given to a non-royal woman. At her death in 1562, Akbar joined the funeral procession for some distance out of Agra, and a tomb was built as part of the mourning (*Akbarnamah*, Vol. 2, p. 177; *The History of Akbar*, Vol. 3, p. 547). Maham's sons developed a special bond with the emperor and were notable officers of the court. Her younger son Adham Khan—who was about Akbar's age and a childhood playmate—was elevated to the rank (*mansab*) of *panj-hazari* or commander of 5,000 troops. His older brother, Muḥammad Baqi Khan, served Akbar faithfully until the end of his days. Abu'l Fazl opines, 'His Majesty devoted great attention to the care of [Baqi Khan's] family' after his death in 1584 (*Akbarnamah*, Vol. 3, p. 437). For Maham's position, also see note 23 below.

[17] *Akbarnamah*, Vol. 1, p. 44; *The History of Akbar*, Vol. I, p. 149.

[18] *Akbarnamah*, Vol. 1, p. 43; *The History of Akbar*, Vol. I, p. 147.

[19] *Akbarnamah*, Vol. 1, p. 43; *The History of Akbar*, Vol. I, p. 147.

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An appropriate verse is cited:

> They induced milk for his lips; they mixed together milk and sugar
> He drank not milk from the nurse of hope but water from the spring of the sun.

This imagery of almost divine nursing seems to depict a royal infant being suckled by 'goddesses' in the form of women and is reminiscent of ancient Egyptian and Near Eastern tradition.[20] In order to bolster their political legitimacy, Mughal literature depicts divine and royal human kings as those who had nursed at the breasts of 'goddesses'. In the religious realm, currency was given to the idea that the milk of divine wet nurses (goddesses) transferred the essence of divine power through suckling.[21] The premise was interpreted similarly by Abu'l Fazl:

> Herein lies the divine wisdom of inducing various natures (*masharib*) through a variety of classes in order that the regal body might reach various stages and be acquainted with different type of divine manifestation, or it might be in order that it be obvious to intelligent persons of insight that this fresh sapling of fortune [Akbar] is from the limpid water of the brook of divine emanation, and not that he ascended spiritual levels through physical nourishment, since it is obvious to all what these persons' level of spirituality is and what the degree of these chosen ladies' exalted and holy rank is.[22]

Miniature paintings prepared in the Mughal atelier also dwell on the theme of divine wet nurses suckling royal children. The babies wrapped in swaddling bands are shown being suckled by feeders depicted as deities (or wet nurses) wearing distinguished headdresses (comparable to Egyptian Hathor, the goddess of fertility), as the royal mothers lie magnificently in bed.[23]

[20] See Stephanie Lynn Budin, *Images of Woman and Child from the Bronze Age: Reconsidering Fertility, Maternity, and Gender in the Ancient World* (Cambridge, 2011); and Anne K. Capel and Glenn E. Markoe (eds), *Mistress of the House, Mistress of Heaven: Women in Ancient Egypt* (New York, 1997).

[21] For instance, *Akbarnamah*, Vol. 1, p. 227; Henry Beveridge (trans.), *The Akbarnama of Abu'l Fazl*, 3 vols (Calcutta, 1897–1921), Vol. 1, p. 456 (hereafter *The Akbarnama of Abu'l Fazl*) records, 'he who drew milk from the breasts of the divine favour and obtained nutriment from the celestial nurse would receive no determent from evil imaginations'.

[22] *Akbarnamah*, Vol. 1, p. 44; *The History of Akbar*, Vol. I, p. 149. Abu'l Fazl employs the Arabic term '*mashrab*' (plural *masharib*) or 'the place from where one drinks' to describe the source of a wet nurse's pious tradition and lineage. In Sufi text the term is usually used to depict the master (*shaykh* or *murshid*) as a mother who nurses his disciple (*murid*) with the 'milk' of knowledge and tradition.

[23] Refer to the following paintings: 'Ghazan Khan as a Baby with his Mother and Nurse', Bibliotheque Nationale, Paris, Ms. Suppl. Pers.1113, fol. 210, copy of Rashid al-Din's *Jami al-Tawarikh* (illustrated at Mughal studio); 'The Infant Akbar Placed in the Care of his Nurses by his Mother Maryam Makani', British Library, London, MS Or.12988, fol. 20v, copy of *Akbarnamah*. The iconographic evidence of the latter strongly emphasises that an imposing woman, seated next to Maryam Makani (the mother), in an overseeing position (unlike the wet nurse) is most likely Maham Anakeh—'Superintendent of the Nurses', cf. Maham Anakeh, sitting next to Akbar in the royal pavilion, in 'Detail Showing Maham Anakeh, Akbar's foster mother', Victoria and Albert Museum, London, Acc. nos. 8 and 9/117 (double page), folio from the *Akbarnamah*. That Bibi Fatima was promoted to the post of 'Superintendent of the Nurses' after Maham's death (besides being head *urdubegi*) confirms the position Maham had held. For the image of midwives (as different from wet nurses and nurses), cf. 'The Birth of Timur', British Library, London, MS Or.12988, fol. 34v, copy of *Akbarnamah*. For Maham's position, also see Henry Beveridge, 'Maham Angah', *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland* (1899), pp. 99–101; and Anthony Welch, 'The emperor's grief: two Mughal tombs', in *Frontiers of Islamic Art and Architecture: Essays in Celebration of Oleg Garbar's Eightieth Birthday (Muqarnas 25)* (Leiden, 2008), pp. 256–257.

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Considerations of faith also, perhaps, influenced the choice of wet nurses. The Mughals had ancestral links with the nomadic Mongols. We learn that the wet nurses of Chinggis Khan's children and grandchildren were chosen from among the Buddhist Naiman and Tangut people, sometimes out of 'religious' inspiration.[24] The wet nurses that Emperor Nasir al-Din Muhammad Humayun (r. 1530–40 and 1555–56) selected for his son (Akbar) were described as 'blissful and spiritually moulded cherishes (*qawabil-i-ruhani-qawalib*)'.[25] Emperor Akbar, in turn, appointed a number of women of Chishtiyya Sufi lineage to nurse his sons Salim, Murad, and Danyal. [26] A medieval Sufi text makes the connection even more explicit: 'the infant[s] drinks the milk of the [Sufi] Path and of Truth from the wet nurses of sainthood (*wilayat*)'.[27] Mughal emperors Shihab al-Din Shah Jahan (r. 1628–1658) and Muhi al-Din Muhammad Aurangzeb (r. 1658–1707) had wet nurses who belonged to noble families known for their 'virtue and piety'.[28] Apart from spiritual factors, physical attributes were another important part of selection. Nicolao Manucci, a Venetian adventurer who lived in India during Aurangzeb's reign, recounts that the emperor agonised over choosing the 'right nurse' to nurture the 'body and spirit' of the prince. He adds:

> The first [anxiety] of a king or a prince of this world who has sons ought to be to seek out a nurse of good constitution without disease, who, giving the child to suck, should strengthen its feeble limbs. The child, sharing with her milk its nurse's health, will acquire, following the royal expectations, the vigour necessary for a good ruler of the people ... as [bodily existence] of the child depends upon the milk ... for want of such spiritual milk the son will not retain the paternal qualities, nor be so successful as hoped for by his people.[29]

Throughout Mughal history, there endured an underlying anxiety about how the milk of a wet nurse affected the prince she was feeding. The spiritual and physical traits of the wet nurse were founding qualities not only for fostering a long-lasting, affectionate bond between nurse and nurseling, but also for securing the 'loyalty and service of her family and clan [*khandan*] to the dynasty'.[30] Imperial wet nurses were, therefore, very often the wives of the highest-ranking court officials. The high status of such families prompts one to argue that, perhaps, their political connections were of greater consequence to the emperor than the personal disposition of the wet nurses that was ostensibly projected as the most relevant factor in their selection. Nevertheless, the direct impact of these nurses on the life of a young prince should not be underestimated. Women who suckled royal princes were highly regarded among the Mughal elite. Great honour

[24] The assumption being that Buddhist beliefs would be transmitted to the young princes. Cf. Bruno De Nicola, 'The role of the domestic sphere in the Islamisation of the Mongols', in *Islamisation: Comparative Perspectives from History*, (ed.) A. C. S. Peacock (Edinburgh, 2017), pp. 353–376. For the interaction between Buddhism and Islam among the Mongols, see Mostafa Vaziri, *Buddhism in Iran: An Anthropological Approach to Traces and Influences* (New York, 2012), especially pp. 111–134.

[25] *The Akbarnama of Abu'l Fazl*, Vol. 1, pp. 129–133; the phrase is adapted from title of Chapter 9, p. 129.

[26] Cf. Faruqui, *The Princes of the Mughal Empire*, p. 72.

[27] Najm Al-Din Razi, *Mirsad al-ibad (The Path of God's Bondsmen from Origin to Return)*, (trans.) Hamid Algar (New York, 1982), p. 224. I wish to thank Professor Chetan Singh for bringing this passage to my attention.

[28] See Maulawi Abdur Rahim (ed.), *Maasir-ul Umara by Shah Nawaz Khan* (Calcutta, 1888–1891), Vol. 1, p. 798.

[29] Nicolao Manucci, *Mogul India or Storio do Mongor*, (trans.) William Irvine (London, 1907), Vol. 2, p. 30.

[30] The expression is taken from Abu'l Fazl's remarks in *Akbarnamah*, Vol. 1, p. 14; *The Akbarnama of Abu'l Fazl*, Vol. 1, p. 43.

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was conferred upon her husband and many privileges upon her own baby, who became a 'milk brother or sister (*kukeh*)' raised alongside royal children.[31]

Getting an heir

Royal wives in the polygamous imperial household usually brought with them valuable assets or alliances to the emperor. But this did not relieve them of the responsibility to produce heirs, especially males, to perpetuate the dynasty.[32] With infant mortality so high that barely half of all infants born alive survived into adulthood, this was not an easy task. The chances of success improved if the wives became pregnant more often. So it was important that they became fertile again as soon as possible after giving birth.[33]A good way to ensure this was for someone else to breastfeed their infants. As a result, they did not experience the contraceptive effects of lactation (which were well known) and instead entered a rapid cycle of pregnancy, birth, and new pregnancy.[34] Mughal histories are replete with such examples. For instance, Mumtaz Mahal bore Emperor Shah Jahan all the children he needed: 14 in all, eight sons and six daughters, in 19 years of marriage (1612–1633). Only six of them—four sons and two daughters—survived to adulthood. In the span of eight years between 1613 and 1620, she bore a child every year. We learn that Bhagwan Das's daughter bore Emperor Nur al-Din Jahangir (r. 1605–1627) three children—Sultan Nisa Begum, Sultan Khirad, and Sultan Khusrau—between 1585 and 1587.[35]

Moreover, there was a widespread belief that sexual intercourse during lactation would negatively affect the breast milk and, in turn, the infant itself.[36] Wet nurses were, therefore, warned to refrain from sexual intercourse for the entire duration of breastfeeding.[37] Wet nurses found indulging in sexual activity were obliged to stop breastfeeding the royal child immediately. In *Jami al-Tawarikh*, the Persian chronicler Rashid al-Din (d. 1317) recounts an incident from the Mongol prince Ghazan's childhood (r. 1295–1304):

> When his wet-nurse, Moghalchin [Budhist origin], wife of Isheng [the Khitan], had intercourse with her husband [called *nazdiki* by Rashid al-Din, literally 'getting close'], the milk of the nurse provoked diarrhea in the child, for that reason [she

[31] For example, Hajji Kukeh, Akbar's milk sister, enjoyed many privileges, including the power to recommend cases for the award of revenue-free land grants. See W. M. Thackston (trans.), *Jahangirnama: Memoirs of Jahangir, Emperor of India* (Oxford, 1999), p. 44 (hereafter *Jahangirnama*).

[32] 'It was a great [honour] for a wife to give,' says Ruby Lal, 'the birth of a son.' Giving birth to a first son was most important. The ensuing competition often resulted in each wife trying to cause the miscarriges of the pregnancies of the other wives around her. Lal, *Domesticity and Power*, p. 122; also see Soma Mukherjee, *Royal Mughal Ladies: and their Contribution* (Delhi, 2001), p. 21.

[33] After the onset of puberty, women were expected to give birth for all the years of their fecundity—perhaps 25—if their lives were not cut short by death in childbirth, the commonest cause of death for women of childbearing age. For the most detailed account of infant mortality in Mughal royalty, see Shireen Moosvi, *People, Taxation and Trade in Mughal India* (Delhi, 2008), Chapter 5. To get a sense of the ramifications of being infertile in the medieval Islamic world, see Sara Verskin, *Barren Women: Religion and Medicine in the Medieval Middle East* (Berlin/Boston, 2020), Part I. My thanks to an anonymous reviewer for referring me to this work.

[34] The obverse was that the women who served as wet nurses had far fewer pregnancies.

[35] This information is summarised from Moosvi, *People, Taxation and Trade*, Chapter 5.

[36] See Sara F. Matthews Grieco, 'Breastfeeding, wet nursing and infant mortality in Europe (1400–1800)', in *Historical Perspective on Breastfeeding* (Florence, 1991), pp. 18–19; cf. the important analysis in Ole J. Benedictow, 'On the origin and spread of the notion that breast-feeding women should abstain from sexual intercourse', *Scandinavian Journal of History* 17 (1992), pp. 65–76.

[37] The husbands of the wet nurses, who usually appear to have offered no opposition, must have considered the 'status' that the family earned worth the sacrifice.

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was dropped] and, it was decided that a new nurse of the Buddhist Suldus people, who already had a son called Hasan, would suckle Ghazan.[38]

Apart from engaging in sex during lactation being declared a taboo, it was also believed that sexual intercourse caused menstruation and hence pregnancy. Menstruating and pregnant nurses were considered dangerous for the infants they suckled (Ar. *al-ghayla*, 'little murder').[39] Medical authorities such as Galen, Soranus, and Avicenna held that 'a gestating foetus would 'draw off' the best available food supply, thus leaving the nursling with denatured milk'.[40] Royalty was, nevertheless, at ease from the aforesaid 'dangers', when a wet nurse was engaged.

Fostering ties, fostering fidelity

Notwithstanding the strictly defined qualities that steered the search for wet nurses, it appears that equal care was invested in finding them within influential families whose loyalty could be secured for the emperor. Clearly, the nurses who nurtured the royal princes were chosen from the influential clans of the Mughal empire. Their family members were high-ranking imperial officials or had on occasion displayed fidelity and obedience towards the emperor. Shams al-Din Muhammad Ghaznawi, son of Mir Yar Muhammad Ghaznawi, a 'spiritually-minded householder' (*kadkhuda-i-darvish-manish*),[41] who had saved Humayun from drowning in the river Ganges after the defeat at Kannauj (in 1540)[42] became a trusted courtier. He was further honoured when his 'high-souled, chaste-natured' wife was appointed as wet nurse to the emperor's son—the future emperor Akbar—and granted the elevated title of Jiji Anakeh.[43] She was chosen to be 'principle nurse', and Abu'l Fazl writes that she was 'honored to suckle the prince first' after Hamida Banu Begam (Akbar's mother).[44] However, 'since the period of pregnancy of this purely framed nurse was not yet fulfilled', she could not thus suckle at first. Hamida Banu therefore asked Daya Bhawal ('respectable of chastity') who was the next in line to suckle the infant Akbar on the day of his birth; a special servant (*khidmatgar-i khas*) of Humayun, she was 'distinguished for chastity and purity'.[45] The wives of several other high-ranking nobles were also similarly honoured.

An entire section in the *Akbarnamah* is devoted to the 'Honoured Names of the Blissful Nurses and Spiritual-Moulded Cherishes *(qawabil-i-ruhani-qawalib)* of his Majesty, the King of King' and provides us with considerable information on the subject.[46] The passage quoted below illustrates that serving as the wet nurse of the emperor's son was considered a great honour. The paragraph is also transcribed in elegant *nastaliq* script (in Persian) on

[38] Muhammad Rawshan and Mustafa Musavi (eds), *Jami al-Tawarikh by Rashid al-Din*, 4 vols (Tehran, 1994), see Vol. 2, p. 1207; cf. Wheeler M. Thackston (trans.), *Rashiduddin Fazlullah's Jami al-Tawarikh: Compendium of Chronicles*, 3 vols (Boston, MA, 1998–1999), Vol. 3, p. 590.

[39] A fifteenth-century treatise on prophetic medicine (*Tibb Al-Nabiyy*) notes: 'A child is said to receive *al-ghayla* when the mother has intercourse while suckling him. When a woman is suckling and becomes pregnant, her milk too is said to receive *al-ghayla.* Such milk will throw down, that is will do harm and destroy, the infant.' See Cyril Elgood (trans.), 'Tibb Al-Nabiyy—Medicine of the Prophet', *Osiris* 14 (1962), pp. 151–152.

[40] Quoted in Grieco, 'Breastfeeding, wet nursing and infant mortality', p. 18.

[41] *Akbarnamah*, Vol. 1, p. 14 (for quotation); *The Akbarnama of Abu'l Fazl*, Vol. 1, p. 43.

[42] *Akbarnamah*, Vol.1, pp. 166–168; *The Akbarnama of Abu'l Fazl*, Vol. 1, pp. 356–358.

[43] Annette Susannah Beveridge (trans.), *Humayunnama of Gulbadan Banu Begum* (London, 1902), p. 142, note 4 (hereafter *Humayunnama*); cf. *Akbarnamah*, Vol. 1, p. 44.

[44] *Akbarnamah*, Vol. 1, p. 44. For 'principal nurse', see Beveridge, 'Maham Angah', pp. 99–101.

[45] *Akbarnamah*, Vol. 1, p. 44. It was probably important that the *anakeh* satisfy the royal mother, who wielded a great deal of political power.

[46] *Akbarnamah*, Vol. 1, pp. 43–45; *The Akbarnama of Abu'l Fazl*, Vol. 1, pp. 129–133.

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the miniature 'The Infant Akbar Placed in the Care of his Nurses by his Mother Maryam Makani'.[47] Abul Fazl writes thus about Akbar's birth:[48]

> It appears that first of all, he accepted the milk of his royal mother. Then Fakhr al-Nisa, wife [mother] of Nadim Kukeh[49] was honoured by the charge,[50] then Bhawal Anakeh, then the wife of Khwajah Ghazi,[51] then Hakima. After these, the chaste Jiji Anakeh, in accordance with her wish, obtained external and internal felicity. After her, Kuki Anakeh, wife of Togh Begi[52] and after her, Bibi Rupa had their turn of this auspicious service. Then Khaldar [the mole-marked] Anakeh, mother of Sa'adat Yar Kukeh and [Hajji Kukeh],[53] was selected for this great boon. And at last, that chaste matron, Pija Jan Anakeh,[54] mother of [Saif Khan and] Zain Khan Kukeh, acquired a stock of everlasting greatness by obtaining her wish for this great blessing.

For his part, Emperor Akbar appointed a daughter and a daughter-in-law of Shaikh Salim, a prominent member of the renowned pan-Indian Chishtiyya Sufi order, to wet nurse his eldest son, Salim (the future emperor Jahangir) and established a bond with the Chishti lineage. Salim grew up among the Shaikh's descendants and some of them were thus his milk brothers (*kukeh*).[55] Other women from the Shaikh's family also served as wet nurses to Akbar's two younger sons, Murad (d. 1598) and Danyal (d. 1604). These appointments reinforced the emperor's personal and spiritual association with the mystical Chishtiyya's Sufi order.[56] The wet nurses of emperors Shah Jahan and Aurangzeb, too, were from leading noble families.[57]

There were also, however, some wet nurses whose families did not possess great political influence based on powerful clan connections. Consequently, they depended entirely on their close links with their royal charges which, in turn, made them ardent supporters and exceptionally reliable political allies of the prince who grew up among them. To some extent (but not completely), therefore, a kind of patron–client network arose through which the patron (the prince) would give his client privileged treatment (offices and honours) and would in return expect to receive benefits (loyalty and support). On the other hand, by ascribing transmittable attributes to the milk of a wet nurse, a symbolic but

[47] A folio from the British Library *Akbarnama*, MS Or.12988, fol. 20v.

[48] The translation of this passage is from *The Akbarnama of Abu'l Fazl*, Vol. I, pp. 130–131; cf. *Akbarnamah*, Vol. 1, p. 44.

[49] She is wrongly referred to as the wife (instead of mother) of Nadim Kukeh in *Akbarnamah* and on a miniature 'The Infant Akbar Placed in the Care of his Nurses ...'. See *Humayunnama*, p. 122; cf. 'Ahwal-i Humayun Padishah by Gulbadan Begam', British Library, London, MS Or.166, fol. 26a.

[50] She was Humayun's attendant from his childhood; see *Humayunnama*, p. 185, note 3; cf. *Ahwal-i Humayun*, fol. 71a.

[51] One of the most faithful officers of Emperor Humayun; see *The Akbarnama of Abu'l Fazl*, Vol. I, pp. 130–131, note 6.

[52] An important officer of the imperial household; see *The Akbarnama of Abu'l Fazl*, Vol. I, p. 131, note 1.

[53] From an influential family; see *The Akbarnama of Abu'l Fazl*, Vol. I, p. 131, note 3.

[54] A wife of Khwajah Maqsud of Herat. Maqsud was a trusted servant of Hamida Banu Begam, 'a man of pure disposition and of integrity'; see *The Akbarnama of Abu'l Fazl*, Vol. I, p. 131, note 4; cf. p. 448.

[55] Cf. Faruqui, *The Princes of the Mughal Empire*, pp. 143–147.

[56] As John F. Richards points out: 'Akbar's own connection with and incorporation of a leading family of the Chishtiyya was of some importance to [Akbar], in that he could assimilate and share the mystical qualities of that family': J. F. Richards, 'The formulation of imperial authority under Akbar and Jahangir', in *The Mughal State, 1526–1750*, (eds) Muzaffar Alam and Sanjay Subrahmanyam (Delhi, 1998), p. 134; also see Muzaffar Alam, 'The Mughals, the Sufi shaikhs and the formation of the Akbari dispensation', *Modern Asian Studies* 43.1 (2009), pp. 135–174.

[57] See biography of Aurangzeb's *kukeh*, in Rahim (ed.), *Maasir-ul Umara*, Vol. 1, pp. 798–813.

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powerful bond was created between the child and the wet nurse. The physical and spiritual nourishment that this represented, particularly for princes who became rulers, should not be underrated. It made the office of wet nurse one of great prestige and influence. In brief, the relationship itself, along with its socio-political consequences was immensely complex. It incorporated multiple factors: the pre-modern understanding of human physiology, convictions of faith, commitments of fealty to the ruler, and the politico-military reality of clan organisation.

Forms and functions

When a woman from the royal family was six or seven months into her pregnancy, several expectant women residing in the imperial household were chosen as wet nurses in accordance with Mongol tradition.[58] On the day of Akbar's birth, as soon as the baby had been cleaned and wrapped in 'swaddling bands', followed by the call to prayer, the *adhan* whispered in the child's right ear, and the *iqamah* in the left, then the *tahnik* (a prelacteal feed) was performed by wet nurses, signifying happiness and prosperity.[59] Thereafter, the baby Akbar was formally handed over to the chosen wet nurses. This is contrary to Abu'l Fazl's description of Akbar accepting 'the milk of his royal mother' before being given over to the wet nurse. The nutritional and immunogenic qualities of maternal colostrum produced immediately after birth was not understood throughout most of the medieval period. On the contrary, it was considered 'bad' milk of dubious colour, possessing evil properties fatal to infants. Abu'l Fazl's account apparently draws upon his imagination of the event.[60]

No clear rules existed regarding the number of wet nurses that were to be appointed for each child, or the prerogatives they were to enjoy. Nevertheless, the custom of choosing several wet nurses simultaneously was common, at least for princes. This anticipated the possibility of someone's pregnancy not 'maturing' in time for the prince's birth, as in the case of Jiji Anakeh. Another might not have had sufficient milk, or it may have been judged unfit, while others might have been called away to 'care for their own children'.[61] Equally, if not more, important was the fact that the occasion opened possibilities of harnessing the loyalty and resources of powerful families to serve the royal family. The Persian text in the miniature entitled 'The Infant Akbar …' of the *Akbarnamah* confirms

[58] See Rawshan and Musavi (eds), *Jami al-Tawarikh*, Vol. 2, pp. 864–865.

[59] See *Akbarnamah*, Vol. 1, p. 43. Infants' palates were rubbed with pre-masticated dates (or with honey) and Allah's blessing invoked on them. This ritual is said to have come from the Prophet Muhammad, who would chew a date and place it into the mouth of a new-born child as a blessing. It should be noted that the person who performs *tahnik* was a righteous and pious person. This also serves to confirm the 'pious' standing of the Akbar's wet nurses. For discussion and references of this ritual in Islamic tradition, see Avner Giladi, 'Some notes on *Tahnik* in medieval Islam', *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 47.3 (1988), pp. 175–179.

[60] Even early medical authorities that urged maternal nursing advised full recuperation (generally until the post-partum flux had ceased and the mother had been ritually 'cleansed', usually one week following birth). See O. Temkin (trans.), *Gynecology of Soranus of Ephesus* (Baltimore, 1956), Book II, pp. 88–89. This notion was repeated in Muslim medical writings; see, for instance, Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya, *Tuhfatul Mawdud bi-Ahkam al-Mawlud* (Bombay, 1961), p. 137. In fact, most infants were denied this rich nourishment and were entrusted to a wet nurse's care until the mother began producing normal milk, usually one week after birth.

[61] We find an example from Mongol Emperor Chinggis Khan's family (whose customs influenced those of the Mughals). A nurse, called Saruq (Naiman), was chosen to nurse Qublai (b. 1215), the son of Sorghaghtani and Tolui (Chinggis's daughter-in-law and son), when she was seven months' pregnant. However, when the nurse's son was born and required more care from his mother, Qublai was entrusted to another woman of the Tangut people who went on to enjoy great influence on the life of the future emperor. See Rawshan and Musavi (eds), *Jami al-Tawarikh*, Vol. 2, pp. 864–865; John A. Boyle (trans.), *The Successors of Genghis Khan* (New York, 1971), p. 241.

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the names of ten wet nurses of the infant Akbar. But it further adds that: 'many other fortunate cupolas of chastity were exalted by the excellence of this service'.[62] It appears likely that initially an infant was suckled by a number of wet nurses. After a while, only a few of them would be retained to continue nursing until the child was weaned, probably between two and three years.[63]

In his autobiography, *Jahangirnama*, Jahangir writes pointedly that the venerable Shaikh Salim Chishti's (d. 1572) daughter-in-law, mother of infant Shaikh Bayazid, was the 'first person who gave me milk, but not for more than a day'.[64] After that he was (like his father Akbar) suckled by a number of wet nurses. Among them was the celebrated daughter of Shaikh Salim (and mother of Qutb al-Din) who probably suckled him until he was weaned.[65] Indeed, there were several distinguished women who would put the infant symbolically or actually to the breast for a short time. In doing so, they created a web of relationships that was meant to be as significant and long-lasting as that based on blood.[66] Among the Mughals, as in some other cultures, suckling at the same breast, either actually or symbolically, established consanguineal relationships: a 'milk kinship' (sometimes referred to as foster kinship) between children and wet nurses or their husbands.[67] Having milk siblings expanded one's kinship network and provided more people one could call on for support at critical times. While a prince reached maturity, several of his foster mothers, foster fathers, and foster brothers formed a strong protective circle around him. Upon his assuming the throne, this group could become the most influential clique at the court where the dynamics of kinship moved the levers of power. Many important families were happy to provide wet nurses to the royal family so as to make political capital from the strong emotional bond thus forged between the wet nurses and the princes. Others sought power by trying to marry their daughters into the imperial family.

The bond between co-nursers—that is, between the suckled son of the wet nurse and her princely ward—was believed to be stronger than that between the *kukehltash* or *kukeh* (milk brothers and sisters) in general.[68] In fact, it often proved stronger than the contentious relationship between princes of the blood. As only the sons of the emperor could legitimately hope to ascend the throne, disputes among biological siblings were common

[62] *Akbarnamah*, Vol. 1, p. 44; *The Akbarnama of Abu'l Fazl*, Vol. 1, p. 131. W. H. Lowe's presumption that Akbar had three nurses is seemingly incorrect; see W. H. Lowe (trans.), *Muntakhab-ut-Tawarikh of Abd al-Qadir Badauni* (Delhi, 1973), Vol. 2, p. 49, note 4.

[63] For an impressionistic example, see *Akbarnamah*, Vol. 1, p. 227; *The Akbarnama of Abu'l Fazl*, Vol. 1, p. 456. It should be noted that weaning babies after two years was common practice in many ancient and medieval societies. For a discussion of the literature on this practice, see Giladi, *Infants, Parents and Wet Nurses*, p. 63, notes 99–102; also see Philippe Aries, *Centuries of Childhood: A Social History of Family Life*, (trans.) Robert Baldick (New York, 1962), p. 34.

[64] *Jahangirnama*, p. 35.

[65] See *ibid.*, p. 62. Emperor Jahangir fondly remembered her in his autobiography.

[66] Note that Mughals retained residual affiliations to pre-Islamic practice which does not fit comfortably with certain requirements and stipulations of Quranic law. The exact conditions of suckling (or *al-rida'a*) that would constitute an impediment to marriage remain ambiguous.

[67] There also existed the notion of the 'sire's milk' (*laban al-fahl*). Muslim jurists and scholars such as Sarakhsi adopted the view that a wet nurse's husband should be regarded as the 'milk father' of his wife's nurselings. Just as semen was believed to be the cause of her pregnancy and childbirth, intercourse with her husband was seen as the source of the nurse's milk. See Muhammad ibn Ahmad Sarakhsi, *Kitab al-Mabsat* (Cairo, 1906–1913), Vol. 30, pp. 293–294; for a useful discussion, see Mohammed Hocine Benkheira, '"The milk of the male": kinship, maternity and breastfeeding in medieval Islam', in *Medieval and Renaissance Lactations: Images, Rhetorics, and Practices*, (ed.) Jutta Gisela Sperling (Farnham, 2013), pp. 21–36.

[68] The precise definition of a wet nurse's children remained ambiguous. All close relatives of the wet nurse who were of a sufficiently youthful age could have plausibly been called *kukehltash*. Cf. *Dictionnaire Turk-Oriental*, p. 473.

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and the wars of succession could be both fierce and bloody.[69] All princes had an equal claim and the heir was one who asserted his supremacy: by eliminating all opposition and—if necessary—all opponents. Gulbadan Begam in *Humayunnama* comments that royal siblings were 'not brothers' but rather strangers and mortal 'enemies'.[70] On the other hand, there are examples of *kukeh* attached to each other, for all intents and purposes, as true brothers with steady fidelity. Emperor Akbar refused to punish the treacherous behaviour of his *kukeh*, Mirza Aziz.[71] Emperor Jahangir considered his *kukeh*, Qutb al-Din Khan, 'really worthy' and to be relied upon.[72] Emperor Aurangzeb's youngest son, Kam Bakhsh, was prepared to offer his life for the sake of his *kukeh*, whom the emperor wanted to punish for killing a royal eunuch.[73] Rushen Kukeh is noted in chronicles beseeching emperor Humayun's help in the name of his mother Bibi Fatima 'whose milk the emperor had suckled'.[74]

Milk kinship, along with its methods of creating and limiting ties, can thus be viewed as a strategy to manage social relations. Within the Mughal royal family, at least, such relationships seem to have had greater emotional resonance than those of blood. At another level, they had also served to strengthen the familial bond between imperial half-siblings. In the case of female babies of the Mughal family, it was a custom to squeeze the nipples of a suckling child so that a small 'milk drop' emerged—believed to ensure the future well-being of the breast—and the brother of the infant would be asked to suckle the 'milk drop'. Emperor Jahangir described his closeness to his younger half-sister Shakar al-Nisa Begam (d. 1653) thus:

> From her infancy and childhood until now she has been constant in her love for me. Rarely does such affection exist between brother and sister. The first time, as is customary, they squeezed my sister's breast and a drop of milk came out. His Majesty my exalted father said to me, 'Baba, drink this milk so that in reality this sister of yours may be like a mother to you'. The omniscient knows that from the day I drank that drop of milk I have felt within myself, along with sisterly and daughterly affection, that type of love that children have for mothers.[75]

The many forms that connections based on breast milk displayed and the purposes to which they were put are interesting.[76] Social relations were altered on account of the connection between a mother's blood and milk, and the notion that milk flowed from a woman because her husband's semen circulated in her body. A man's wet nurses, his

[69] Mughal historians have ignored the 'wet nurse' relationships in much of such in-fighting. Wet nurses' families used all means at their command to secure or protect the succession right of their charge. This is the subject of the author's ongoing research.

[70] *Humayunnama*, p. 201; cf. *Ahwal-i Humayun*, fol. 82b.

[71] See Motamad Khan, *Iqbalnamah-i Jahangiri*, (eds) Abdul Hai and Ahmad Ali (Calcutta, 1865), pp. 230–231.

[72] See *Jahangirnama*, p. 62.

[73] See Saqi Musta'idd Khan, *Maasir-i Alamgiri*, (ed.) Agha Ahmad Ali and (trans.) Jadunath Sarkar (Calcutta, 1947), pp. 398–400; also see Manucci, *Mogul India*, Vol. 2, p. 466.

[74] In *Humayunnama* (p. 122) Gulbadan Begam refers to her as 'Fatima Sultan Anakeh, mother of Rushen Kukeh'. Jawhar Aftabchi states that Rushen Kukeh's mother was Humayun's wet nurse. See Jawhar Aftabchi, *The Tezkereh al Vakiat or Private Memoirs of the Moghul Emperor Humayun*, (trans.) Major Charles Stewart (London, 1832), p. 72. Rushen Kukeh, who shared his mother's milk with Humayun, established a lifelong companionship with the emperor. They also went through the latter's early adversities together.

[75] *Jahangirnama*, p. 39.

[76] The manipulation of such ties to create neighbourly alliances, or to evade the obligations of sexual seclusion (*hijab*), or even to prevent undesired preferential marriages in modern Saudi Arabia are documented in the article by Altorki, 'Milk kinship in Arab society', pp. 233–244; for Shi'ite Iran, see Chahidi, 'Milk kinship in Shi'ite Islamic Iran', pp. 109–132.

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milk sisters, as well as some other groups, became part of his *maharim*: those with whom marriage was forbidden because of close kinship.

'Milk relationship' among the Mughals apparently predated their contact with Islam. For centuries it was a distinctive form of fostering allegiance among community members throughout Eurasia, Africa, and Oceania. Moreover, the terms *anakeh* (milk mother), *atakeh* (milk father), and *kukeh* (milk brother and sister) were in use among the nomadic tribes to whom the Mughals linked their ancestry.[77] The free admittance of the *kukeh* to the harem —which was otherwise permitted only to near kinsmen—reveals the distinctive nature and the acceptance of milk kinship. The author of *Tarikh-i-Rashidi* mentions how milk relatives of chieftains used their proximity to the chiefs to increase their own political and social prominence.[78]

As in the case of the Abkhaz of pre-modern Eurasia studied by Peter Parkes,[79] it was possible for adults in Mughal India to establish 'milk kinship' through 'symbolic suckling' at the breast. The relationships thus formed involved identical moral obligations. Nicolao Manucci, who was for some time in the entourage of Dara Shikoh, gives an account of 'symbolic suckling' between adults. Manucci described how Aurangzeb's brother, Dara Shikoh, compelled Raja Rajrup of Nurpur (now in Himachal Pradesh) to fight on his side against Aurangzeb by making the Rajput raja his son:

> To gain him more securely to his side, he [Dara Shikoh] allowed his wife [Nadira Begam] to send for the Raja to her harem ... She addressed him as her son, and said she looked on him as in the place of her son, Sulaiman Shikoh ... She offered him water to drink with which she had just washed her breasts, not having milk in them, as a confirmation of her words. He drank with the greatest acceptance and swore he would be ever true, and never fail in the duties of a son.[80]

Moral obligations were sanctified in this ritual idiom of sacred breast milk by which oaths of loyalty were sworn. This exploited the parallels between blood and milk, thereby creating a fictive kinship that substituted for one based on descent.

Honour and preferment

It is apparent that the wet nurse and her family held a position of considerable honour in the Mughal imperial household. However, they came to enjoy an even higher status if the prince they had nursed ascended the throne. Abu'l Fazl, in his own elegant style, states: '... *anakeh* and her *khandan* would become famous throughout the seven climes'.[81] The ritual observance of filial piety towards them by the emperor further confirmed their elevated position. The wet nurse, particularly, was granted numerous favours while she was alive. In death, she was mourned by the highest in the land, accorded a grand funeral, and buried in a tomb fit for the royalty.

The family of Shams al-Din Muhammad, known as the *atakeh-khail* or foster-father clan (in Mughal history), was an example of such power and influence during the reign of

[77] See Mahomed Kasim Ferishta, *History of the Rise of the Mahomedan Power in India, Till the Year A.D. 1612*, (trans.) John Briggs (Calcutta, 1909), Vol. 2, p. 212.

[78] Mirza Muhammad Haidar Dughlat, *The Tarikh-i Rashidi*, (ed.) N. Elias and (trans.) E. Denison Ross (Delhi, 1974; reprint edition), p. 459.

[79] Parkes, 'Fosterage, kinship and legend', pp. 587–615; cf. for symbolic breastfeeding in Islamic society and its nuances, see Giladi, *Infants, Parents and Wet Nurses*, p. 28.

[80] Manucci, *Mogul India*, Vol. I, pp. 295–296. As we know, Rajrup later soured Nadira Begam's milk by delivering a military *coup de grace* to Dara Shikoh.

[81] *Akbarnamah*, Vol. 1, p. 15; *The Akbarnama of Abu'l Fazl*, Vol. 1, p. 45.

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Akbar and in the early years of Jahangir's rule. Shams al-Din's wife, Jiji Anakeh, had been Akbar's principal wet nurse. Her son Mirza Aziz was, therefore, a milk brother (*kukeh*) of the emperor, and became an eminent *amir* of the imperial court. After Akbar ascended the throne, Shams al-Din and his sons and kinsmen all occupied high positions.[82] In the words of Jahangir: 'Emperor Akbar raised *atakeh*'s family from the dust of the roads to such wealth and dignity as to make them the envy of their peers.'[83] Shams al-Din held important positions in the court, including that of *wakil* (adviser or minister). After the death of Shams al-Din, Emperor Akbar not only reiterated his milk relationship with Khan-i Azam Mirza Aziz Kukeh (d. 1624) by making him 'one of the greatest *amirs*', he also 'tolerated the most astonishing pettiness from him'.[84] Akbar, while ignoring the treasonous behaviour of Mirza Aziz Kukeh, commented, 'between me and Aziz there is a stream of milk (*juh-ishir*) which I cannot cross'.[85] For much of the reign, Mirza Aziz Kukeh held important positions.[86] During its last ten years he was appointed *wakil*, the highest-ranking minister, with a *mansab* of 7,000 *dhat* and 6,000 *suwar*.[87] In Akbar's time, this was a *mansab* rank that only members of the royalty were granted.[88]

Members of the *atakeh-khail* continued to receive much affection and substantial favours in various ways.[89] While touring the province of Panjab in 1571, Akbar honoured Mirza Aziz Kukeh by residing at his mansion (in Dipalpur).[90] When the latter's sister Maha Banu breathed her last in 1599, the emperor was residing in the Mirza's house and personally 'soothed' him and his mother, Jiji Anakeh.[91] One of the Mirza Aziz Kukeh's daughters was married to Akbar's fourth son Murad and another to Khusrau, the eldest son of Jahangir. Later, Emperor Jahangir, too, treated Mirza Aziz kind-heartedly. The Mirza was imprisoned several times by Jahangir for outright treachery, but was always forgiven because, as Jahangir writes, 'his mother had given her milk to my father'.[92] Emperor Akbar had great affection for his *anakeh* and mourned her death so deeply (in 1600) that he 'shaved off his head, beard and moustaches' [93] as part of the ritual of mourning

[82] Abu'l Fazl states that they were 'elevated from the *nadir* of the dust to the zenith of heaven'. See *Akbarnamah*, Vol. 1, p. 14; *The Akbarnama of Abu'l Fazl*, Vol. 1, p. 43. For important members of Shams al-Din or Atakeh's family, see M. Hidayat Hosain (ed.), *Tazkira-i Humayun wa Akbar by Bayazid Bayat* (Calcutta, 1941), pp. 176–187.

[83] *Jahangirnama*, p. 63.

[84] *Ibid.*, p. 431.

[85] Khan, *Iqbalnamah-i Jahangiri*, pp. 230–231.

[86] For his biography, see Shaikh Farid Bhakkari, *Dhakhirat al-Khawanin*, (ed.) S. Moinul Haq (Karachi, 1961), Vol. 1, pp. 80–99; Rahim (ed.), *Maasir-ul Umara*, Vol. 1, pp. 675–693.

[87] Referring to a rank (or office), see *Akbarnamah*, Vol. 3, p. 803; *The Akbarnama of Abu'l Fazl*, Vol. 3, p. 1211.

[88] Raja Man Singh, the son of Raja Bhagwan Das, was promoted to that standing too by marriage alliance. Bhagwan Das's sister was married to Emperor Akbar.

[89] A good discussion of this family exists in Afzal Hussain, *Nobility under Akbar and Jahangir* (Delhi, 1999), Chapter 2.

[90] *Akbarnamah*, Vol. 2, p. 363; *The Akbarnama of Abu'l Fazl*, Vol. 2, pp. 528–529; Khwajah Nizamuddin Ahmad, *The Tabaqat-i Akbari*, (trans.) Brajendranath De, 3 vols (Calcutta, 1936), see Vol. 2, pp. 364–365. The visit of the emperor to an officer's mansions while travelling in the region of their postings was a matter of extraordinary favour. For a pictorial depiction of Emperor Akbar being entertained by Aziz Kukeh at Dipalpur, see 'Akbar and Azim Khan at Dipalpur', Victoria and Albert Museum, London, MS. fol. IS.2/94-1896, a folio from the *Akbarnama*. Emperor Akbar is shown seated on a throne inside a tent.

[91] *Akbarnamah*, Vol. 3, p. 749; *The Akbarnama of Abu'l Fazl*, Vol. 3, p. 1120.

[92] See Alexander Rogers and Henry Beveridge (trans), *Tuzuk-i Jahangiri* (Calcutta, 1909), p. 80.

[93] He probably did it according to Turco-Mongol norms; though he tried to ensure, says Abu'l Fazl, that, 'none should share except Jiji's children, but his faithful servants followed suit'. See *Akbarnamah*, Vol. 3, p. 771; *The Akbarnama of Abu'l Fazl*, Vol. 3, p. 1153. The outpouring of grief also suggests that these women were known and loved by others beyond the harem walls.

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(as he did when his mother died in 1604). He personally carried the bier of his *anakeh* (for a short distance) to her burial.[94] Like the queen mothers, wet nurses were laid to rest in convoluted imperial tombs after being honoured with imperial funerals. As a baby, Akbar grew so attached to Jiji Anakeh that the other nurses accused her of practising witchcraft to prevent him from accepting milk from anyone else.[95]

Emperor Akbar's *atakeh* or foster father, Shams al-Din, who served Akbar until his last breath, was brutally murdered by Adham Khan, the younger son of Maham Anakeh who was fiercely jealous of Sham al-Din's position and power, and two accomplices, Khusham Uzbeg and Khuda Bardi, on 16 May 1562. At the sight of his murdered *atakeh*, Akbar was roused to extreme anger and ordered Adham Khan's execution then and there.[96] Akbar deeply mourned his *atakeh*'s loss and '... offered condolence to his sons and brothers, and healed the wounded hearts of the entire tribe by favouring and promoting the members of that loyal clan'. [97] The emperor ordered Atakeh Khan's tomb to be built next to that of Nizam al-Din Awliya's *dargah*—one of the most sacred spots in Delhi—in the immediate vicinity of Humayun's tomb.[98]

The family of Akbar's other wet nurses, too, benefitted from their services. Zain Khan (d. 1601) had gained recognition through his valour in battle and was 'distinguished for fidelity and intelligence'. But it is equally likely that he was 'the object of the favour of Shahinshah' and thereby became 'one of the great *amirs*' in the imperial household because of his milk ties to the emperor. Zain Khan's mother, Pija-Jan had 'actually' suckled the baby Akbar.[99] According to Shaikh Farid Bhakkari, a near-contemporary chronicler, 'his intimacy to His Majesty was well-known to the people of the world'.[100] He proved an influential force in Akbar's court, and the many trips that the emperor made to Zain Khan's house further prove the latter's prominence.[101] On his death in 1601, the

[94] Emperor Akbar insisted on performing many funerary rituals for her in person. See *Akbarnamah*, Vol. 3, p. 771; *The Akbarnama of Abu'l Fazl*, Vol. 3, p. 1153. Jiji Anakeh is wrongly recorded as Bica-jio (Pija-jan) in *Akbarnama*. Pija was the wife of Khwajah Maqsud of Herat and the mother of Saif Khan and Zain Khan Kukeh. On the death of Akbar's mother, see *Akbarnamah*, Vol. 3, pp. 930–931; *The Akbarnama of Abu'l Fazl*, Vol. 3, p. 1245.

[95] Abu'l Fazl describes the event by a miracle that Akbar performed when he was about eight months old: see *Akbarnamah*, Vol. 1, pp. 186–187; *The History of Akbar*, Vol. I, pp. 567–571.

[96] See *Akbarnamah*, Vol. 2, pp. 174–176; *The Akbarnama of Abu'l Fazl*, Vol. 2, pp. 269–273; Abdal Qadir Badauni, *Muntakhab-ut-Tawarikh*, (eds) W. N. Lees and Ahmad Ali, 3 vols (Calcutta, 1865), see Vol. 2, pp. 43–51. 'Emperor ordered his servants (Farhat Khan and Sangram Hawasnak) to "tie the madman [Adham Kham] up" and throw him off the terrace. Surviving the first fall, the gravely injured Adham Kham was dragged up the stairs and again thrown down, head first, whereupon he died': *Akbarnamah*, Vol. 2, p. 175; *The History of Akbar*, Vol. 3, p. 541. Comprehensively summarised and discussed by Lal, *Domesticity and Power*, pp. 196–200; also see Welch, 'The emperor's grief', pp. 256–257. For the portrayal of the death of Adham Kham, see 'Akbar Orders the Punishment of his Foster Brother', Victoria and Albert Museum, London, MS. fol. IS. 2/1896, Acc. no. 29/117, folio from the *Akbarnamah*.

[97] *Akbarnamah*, Vol. 2, p. 177; *The History of Akbar*, Vol. 3, p. 547.

[98] An excellent discussion on Atakeh Khan and Adham Khan's tombs can be found in Welch, 'The emperor's grief', pp. 255–274. This is how Welch puts it: 'built at the same time, the tombs are dramatically different in form, location, decoration, and function. To place the tomb of Atakeh Khan at the auspicious site [in contrast to Adham Khan] was a signal honour. Adham Khan was not a martyr, and his monumental tomb is therefore deprived of pious context' (p. 272).

[99] *Akbarnamah*, Vol. 1, p. 222; *The Akbarnama of Abu'l Fazl*, Vol. 1, p. 448. Pija-Jan's other son, Saif Khan, died during the conquest of Gujarat: see *The Akbarnama of Abu'l Fazl*, Vol. 1, p. 131, note 4.

[100] See, also, for his biography, *Dhakhirat al-Khawanin*, Vol. 1, p. 123; Rahim (ed.), *Maasir-ul Umara*, Vol. 2, pp. 362–370.

[101] Three formal and two informal visits are recorded in *Akbarnamah*: September/October 1583 at Etawah (Vol. 3, p. 415/617) and December 1585 near Attock-Banaras, Panjab (Vol. 3, p. 476/717, informal); April 1592 in Panjab (Vol. 3, p. 613/937); September/October 1593 at Lahore (Vol. 3, p. 644/991, informal); January 1595 in Panjab (Vol. 3, p. 698/1044). (The pagination after the slash refers to the Beveridge's English translation.)

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emperor personally visited his sister's house to console her.[102] Later, when *anakeh* Pija-Jan passed away in 1603, the emperor visited her house and 'consoled the survivors'.[103]

The children of another *anakeh* of Akbar's—namely, Khaldar—rose to the highest echelons of the nobility on account of this special relationship. Her son Sa'adat Yar Kukeh was one of the persons who escorted a retinue of royal women for an official *hajj* to Mecca.[104] Khaldar's daughter, Hajji Kukeh, was elevated to the much respected position of *sadr-i anas*: chief of the administration and organisation of the Mughal harem.[105] The post was usually assigned to influential women of the empire.[106] Emperor Jahangir granted her the prerogative to recommend deserving women for the award of *madad-i-maash*, which was a grant of revenue free land for their livelihood.[107] When Sa'adat Kukeh died, Akbar went to his house to express his grief. He condoled with Sa'adat Kukeh's sister, Hajji Kukeh, and also 'showed suitable kindness to his children'.[108] There is adequate evidence to show that even during the succeeding reigns, 'milk families' were well patronised and regularly promoted to leading positions.

Prince Salim ascended the throne, with the title of Jahangir, after his father Akbar's death in 1605. His wet nurses and their families became his most loyal and closest supporters. It was especially the family of Shaikh Salim—from whom Jahangir got his personal name Salim—who gained the most in terms of privileges and positions. Jahangir was very close to his *kukeh* Qutb al-Din Khan (Shaikh Khubu), whose mother (Shaikh Salim Chisti's daughter) had been his wet nurse. Jahangir and Qutb al-Din grew up together as milk brothers.[109] The news of Qutb al-Din's murder in 1608 affected Jahangir immeasurably. He writes touchingly in his memoirs: 'What can I write of this unpleasantness? How grieved and troubled I became! Qutb al-Din was to me in the place of a dear son, a kind brother, and a congenial friend.'[110] Qutb al-Din's mother, a dear *anakeh* to Jahangir, died in 1607; the emperor writes fondly of her in his autobiography:

> She had given me her milk and was as a mother to me or even kinder than my own kind mother, and in whose lap I had been brought up from infancy. I placed the feet of her corpse on my shoulders and carried her part of the way [to her grave]. Through extreme grief and sorrow I had no inclination for some days to eat, and I did not change my clothes.[111]

Murad Khan—whose wife Zeb-un Nisa (Dai Anakeh, d. 1671) served as wet nurse to Emperor Shah Jahan—saw his career and those of his kinsmen rise sharply when Shah Jahan ascended the throne. Murad Khan had earlier occupied an official position

[102] *Akbarnamah*, Vol. 3, p. 799; *The Akbarnama of Abu'l Fazl*, Vol. 3, p. 1197.

[103] *Akbarnamah*, Vol. 3, p. 819; *The Akbarnama of Abu'l Fazl*, Vol. 3, p. 1229.

[104] *Akbarnamah*, Vol. 3, pp. 192, 579, 656; *The Akbarnama of Abu'l Fazl*, Vol. 3, pp. 272, 878, 1006; also see Vol. 1, p. 131, note 3.

[105] Some functions of the *sadr-i anas* are enumerated in the Inyat Khan's *Shahjahannama*, (ed. W. E. Begley and trans. Z. A. Desai) (Delhi, 1990), p. 572.

[106] In Emperor Humayun's reign, the post of *sadr-i anas* was first held by Maham Begam, who was Babur's wife. After her death, Khanazada Begam (*Padishah Begam*), Babur's sister, occupied the position. In the early part of Akbar's reign, Humayun's nurse Bibi Fatima held the post of *sadr-i anas* in addition to being chief *urdubegi* (armed women retainer) in the *zanana*. During Jahangir's later reign, Nur Jahan's nurse Dai Dilaram was *sadr-i anas*.

[107] See *Jahangirnama*, p. 44. Interestingly, the walls of the harem did not prevent these women from endowing religious foundations and undertaking other acts of charity—considered appropriate for persons of high rank.

[108] *Akbarnamah*, Vol. 3, p. 656; *The Akbarnama of Abu'l Fazl*, Vol. 3, p. 1006.

[109] For more details of this family, see Hussain, *Nobility under Akbar and Jahangir*, Chapter 6.

[110] *Tuzuk-i Jahangiri*, p. 115; for his biography, see Rahim (ed.), *Maasir-ul Umara*, Vol. 3, pp. 66–68.

[111] *Tuzuk-i Jahangiri*, pp. 84–85.

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under Jahangir (*adawalati* or magistrate of Bikaner). Shah Jahan was deeply attached to his wet nurse, Dai, who was like a mother to him. The emperor granted her the great honour of allowing her to build a mosque in 1635. It is named after her as Dai Anakeh Masjid and is situated near the railway station in Lahore (Pakistan).[112] Shah Jahan doted on his *kukeh*, Dai Anakeh's son Muhammad Rashid Khan, who became his most trusted associate at court. He later died fighting in the service of Shah Jahan's eldest son Dara Shikoh.

Mir Malik Husain, the husband of Aurangzeb's wet nurse, who was one of Aurangzeb's adherents in the 1656–1659 war of succession, became a pre-eminent noble of the empire during the latter's reign.[113] He was a childhood 'companion and close associate' of Emperor Aurangzeb who held him in 'great esteem and affection'.[114] Mir Malik Husain was honoured with the title *khan-i-jahan bahadur kukeltash* in 1673, and *zafarjang* in 1675 (with a *mansab* of 7,000 *dhat* and 6,000 *suwar* and a present of one *kror* of *dams*). Although frequently differing with Aurangzeb on policy issues, he remained nonetheless in imperial favour. In November 1697, after learning of the severity of his illness, Emperor Aurangzeb visited the dying *kukeh* at his mansion and remarked movingly on his close ties with him.[115] He died on 23 November 1697 and his tomb is in Lahore. Mir Malik Husain's sons—who had developed special bonds with the emperor as his childhood playmates—had shared the same milk and were raised to 'suitable ranks' by Emperor Aurangzeb.[116]

Conclusion

Wet nursing was the usual method of feeding new-born infants among the Mughal royalty. A wet nurse not only suckled and cared for the royal baby, she was also expected to serve the prince she nursed for the rest of her life. The practice fostered an enduring emotional bond between the child and his wet nurse, which was then extended to the entire family of the wet nurse. These women often belonged to leading families of the empire. Their appointment as wet nurses was probably intended to foster close links between the imperial family and the leading lineages. The prevailing wisdom of the time claimed that the wet nurse's physical and emotional attributes passed through her milk to the child. Wet nurses were, therefore, considered crucial for the moral and physical development of royal infants. Thus, a chaste wife of a noble man was considered the ideal choice. The family background of the husband—whose 'seed' was thought to affect the wet nurse's milk—was an important consideration, but the mother's qualities mattered more. The practice of wet nurses suckling and bringing up the children increased the fertile period of the royal wives. Their continued reproductive fertility was vital for the empire's survival, particularly in light of the high mortality rate of babies during that period. It was understood that breastfeeding delayed ovulation and could thus also delay conception. Furthermore, cultural norms made sexual intercourse during lactation a taboo.

To be appointed as the wet nurse of the emperor's children was not simply a great honour, it was also a position of great power. Indeed, the post of *anakeh* at the Mughal court was the highest status that a non-royal woman could hope to attain. In addition to the abundant favours it brought, the position also conferred great honour on her husband

[112] For more details, see Syed Muhammad Latif, *Lahore: Its History, Architectural Remains and Antiquities* (Lahore, 1892), p. 163.

[113] For Mir Malik Husain's biography, see Rahim (ed.), *Maasir-ul Umara*, Vol. 1, pp. 798–813.

[114] I draw here on the inscription beneath his portrait in 'Khan Jahan Bahadur Zafar Jang Kukeltash and his Father Mir Abu'l-Ma'ali by Hunhar, Mughal, circa 1675–80', http:// www.sothebys.com/en/auctions/ecatalogue/2014/art-imperial-india-l14502 (last accessed 15 March 2020).

[115] The scene is explicitly described in Khan, *Maasir-i Alamgiri*, p. 237.

[116] Rahim (ed.), *Maasir-ul Umara*, Vol. 1, p. 798.

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(*atakeh*) and great privileges upon her own baby, who became a *kukeh*, raised alongside the royal children within the palace precincts. The nurse and her family became trusted associates and ardent supporters of the prince: their fortunes were inextricably tied to his. If the prince they raised grew up to become emperor, the husband of the wet nurse, their sons, and clan relatives (*kukeltash*) became his most faithful allies: his political eyes, ears, and sword arm. They rose fast on the Mughal political stage and wielded enormous power and influence. When Akbar ascended the throne, the position of the *atakeh-khail* was suddenly elevated on account of its wet nurse relationship. For much of Akbar's reign the *atakeh-khail* was the most distinct and influential politico-military assemblage.

Given the privileges it brought, there was intense competition to be selected as the wet nurse of a royal baby. The wet nurses sought, further, to empower and improve the careers of their kin. Clearly, the influence they exercised extended far beyond the harem walls.

It was probably Akbar who started the practice of using wet nursing in India as a vehicle to forge ties with prominent families for political ends. This helped to consolidate the power of the dynasty. Wet nurses were wives of high-ranking and loyal officials, and their bond with the royal family reinforced the position of the sovereign. Amid the silent intrigue and ruthless manoeuvring that prevailed in the palace, a prince's wet nurses and their families were the most intimate and reliable circle of confidantes with whom they shared a common destiny. Yet it must be noted that, despite the close ties of the Mughal princes with their wet nurses and the intense rivalry between siblings, their relationship with their own mothers remained reverential and affectionate.

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