From Court Dress to the Symbol of Authority: Robing and 'Robes of Honour' in Pre-Colonial India

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Kingship wore multiple masks. Coercive in one context, beneficent in the next, *padshahs* or *rajas* had numerous roles and ceremonies available in their repertoire to deter defiance, stimulate acquiescence, and recompense fidelity. While kings preferred to delegate coercion, they liked to dramatise their own giving of pleasure. Whatsoever their own background, be it Hindu or Muslim, kings were rarely afraid to use objects, symbols and ceremonies from other cultural models or some times mixed them in hybrid forms. The exchange of gifts and distribute of patronage played a vital symbolic function in committing people to one another, in establishing or renewing political discourse. The sources stressed the intrinsic, morale-enhancing value of beneficence although the practical goal of incorporating dependents gave added incentive. The exchange of presents played a special role in segmented society with political communities fragmented at the higher levels. The ceremonial occasions in which gifts were given in stateless society embodies the central insights of Marcel Mauss' slightly less 'spiritual' hypothesis that every gift comes with obligation, gift and obligation form part of a unified system, and that this gifting system affects many other aspects of culture. (1967: 79) However, the structure and dynamics of Mauss' gift-exchange theory cannot be applied to the 'robes of honour' or *khil'at* ceremony in pre-colonial India. Nevertheless, robes of honour occurred in most investitures in the period under examination without an expectation of reciprocity. The 'robes of honour' was used both for group solidarity within elites and at the margins of empires to integrate new groups. Arjun Appadurai states that political gift was a type of contract, a pledge of loyalty and incorporation that was nevertheless morally superior to the pure contract. (1986: 5-25)

Garment giving as a ceremony binding donor and recipient can be documented across much of Eurasia, from ancient near east to China and as far west as medieval Iceland. (Hambly 2001: 193-222) In traditional Islamic society, however, the ceremonial exchange of articles of clothing known as *khil'at* (plural *khila*) between a superior and an inferior was virtually ubiquitous. The term *khil'at* is an Arabic word meaning 'robe of honour' and it was used interchangeably with the Persian term *sir-o pa* (literally, 'head to foot'). Indeed, a number of scholars have written of medieval Islamic states operating an honours system through grants of clothing which may be compared to the various titles, honours, and distinctions conferred by modern governments. The robe of honour practice was well established during the early Abbasid period in Baghdad. By way of Samanid Bukhara, the Ghaznavids and Ghurids introduced ceremonial robing in northern India. The custom was in regular use in the Delhi sultanate, all of the Deccan kingdoms and had spread into the Hindu society. Ceremony was in use in Vijayanagar, specifically as a means of connecting the kingdom to the Islamic culture. We have a rich abundance of both visual and written documents of this ceremony from Mughal Empire. By the late eighteenth century, in much of the rest of India the robes of honour ceremony had become common, even standard, at both Muslim and Hindu courts. We found the ceremony common in Mysore and the Panjab, Bengal and Western India, Central India and Himalayan Kingdoms. The ceremony and its meanings and implications appear frequently and regularly both in official and in private correspondence. We will return to this debate in another section of this treatise.

The ceremony in all of its culture variety was much more than the public adoption of a high-value textile as symbol of office, within a culture, robing ceremony established a personal link from the hand of the giver—king, religious leader, head of a sect, ambassador—to the receiver—nobles, general, official, and disciples or acolyte. The present work is intended to challenge current thinking on religious and regional boundaries of 'culture' raises semiotic issues about imagined communities, and addresses problems of kingship. Once a practice like *khil'at* was established, it conceivably took on a life of its own, developing, refining and changing to suit local and dynastic needs. It is an attempt using *khil'at* ceremony as a thread to examine interactions of traditions and beliefs of the diverse societies, within which the ceremony travelled. In using the word 'travel', I

refer to Edward W. Said's concept of 'travelling', which he elaborated in his famed work *'The World, the Text and the Critic'*. (1983) Said argues that like people, ideas, theories and beliefs travel and, in their 'travel', undergo transformation, evoke resistance, misreading, and also subversion, and sometimes are themselves comfortably appropriated. Within this paradigm of 'travelling theory', we can best describe the robes of honour practice in far larger world.

According to the Muslim theory of sovereignty, the emperor possessed absolute authority in the empire. The person of the emperor embodied the state and to challenge him, his name or anything that symbolised his authority, was to challenge the empire. The Muslims claimed a whole set of symbols and ceremonial acts to represent this highest authority and the dynastic ideology connected with it. According to the David F. Lindenfeld (1988: 30-50), symbols or in a broader sagacity, embodiments condense complex meanings of parts of system of thought into a single expression. Symbols, physical objects and ceremonial acts, can easily transmit ideas and values because they are simple and therefore understood by the majority. A symbol or ceremony is usually understood in an intuitive manner rather than by a complicated process of interpretation and articulation. As a factor in social processes, the embodiment of a certain type of idea often serves as a focus of a personal or group identification. Furthermore, embodiments are also able to cross social lines. The range of meanings of an embodiment may overlap those of several systems, making it possible for embodiments to serve as vehicles of communication among the groups that these systems help to define. Just as the symbols of the imperial sovereignty conveyed the ideas and values that were part of the Muslim ideology, so their extensive use implemented a very direct and formalised means of control. Any attempt to abuse or defy the rules and regulations laid down by the Muslim emperor could be punished summarily in an efficient, individual way.

I

It is generally assumed that the culture of South India has remained more authentically and purely 'Hindu' than that of North India, where cultural forms and practices—even within a Hindu context—have been greatly altered through a long period of contact and interaction with Islamic forms. Hindu lands, even when not ruled outright by Muslims, were subject to the cultural and even political attraction of

surrounding Muslim states; in most cases, Muslim traders or other traders from Muslim-ruled states formed their most active and continuous link with India. The present study tries to give an overview over the Muslim tradition and beliefs that came into existence and flourished during pre-colonial India.

Until the seventeenth century, the Islamic society that was associated with the Islamic religion was the most expansive society in the Afro-Eurasian hemisphere and had the most influence on the other societies. Increasingly in recent years, scholars have begun to recognise the Islamic antecedents behind a number of characteristic cultural manifestations of the medieval India in such diverse areas as military technology and strategy, political and administrative institutions, and above all the material culture of the court. In an article originally published in 1970, Marshall Hodgson wrote that 'by the sixteenth century, a visitor from Mars might well have supposed that the human world was on the verge of becoming Muslim... most of the East Christian, Hindu, and Theraveda Buddhist peoples found themselves more or less enclaves in an Islamic world where Muslim standards of taste commonly made their way even into the independent kingdoms, like Hindu Vijayanagar or Norman Sicily'. (Hodgson 1993: 97, 120, 176) Recently Phillip Wagoner (1993, 1996: 851-80), John MacLane (1993) and Richard Eaton (1994) subjected linear image sketched by Hodgson to considerable and elegant nuancing.

If one were to move beyond the confines of religious doctrine and practice to examine the secular culture of India's ruling elite, it would become apparent that Islamic-inspired forms and practices altered Indian courtly life during the medieval period. This has also been anecdoted by the widest-travelled man of the middle age Ibn-Batuta.[1] (1986) Indeed they continue to leave their impress on many aspects of traditional Indian culture even today. One of the most profound instances of Muslim influence in medieval India appears in the system of men's court dress.

In pre-colonial India, each of India's many regional courts embodied a unique combination of expressive sacred and political traditions. A court incorporated distinctive symbols that identified and linked it with the people of the region it ruled. Each court further signified its relationship to its particular source of authority. Combined with symbols peculiar to it, a regional court also shared certain elements modeled on the Muslim imperial court. The Muslim courts in India itself reflected an amalgam of Persian, Turkish, Central Asian,

Indian, and specifically dynastic traditions. Thus, certain symbols were peculiar to a single court, like *Tika,* a forehead mark on Rajput ruler at the time of installation; *Kabayi,* a long tunic; *Kullayi,* a high conical cap to Vijayanagar Empire and a hereditary title such as *Peshwa* conveying the founder of the dynasty's relationship to the Maratha Emperor Shivaji. While other symbols held similar meaning in virtually all the imperial and regional courts. These virtually universal symbols included ritual gestures of greeting and appropriate location in court with respect to the emperor and other notables. It also includes substances and words presented or received, and formalities of departure, the submission by an inferior of an offering of gold or silver coins to a superior as a *nazr* (Arabic, 'a vow') and bestowal of a cloth of honour by the superior on the inferior, a *khil'at* (Arabic, 'something taken off' by the superior). The central institution of these ceremonial interactions was the *durbar* or formal court or levee. The involved ceremonials of the states served in large measure as a reconfirmation of genealogical, economical or military status among the elite. In the rituals of the *durbar*, the precise relationships among the lineage head of the ruling lineage, his relatives, and the other elite groups of the state were given visible form and substance. Any increase in status through marriage, augmented landholding, or the renewed confidence of the ruler would be mirrored in the award of robes of honour, titles, or other honours by the *durbar.*

It appears that the traditional Indian mode of court dress was largely replaced during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries by a new system based on the use of garment types, which had originated in the Islamic world. In the words of K.M. Ashraf, 'the Hindu aristocracy in medieval India largely followed the Muslim nobility in their dresses'. (1970: 211) With regard to court dress transformed into robes used for honour, the practice has had a long and intimate association with Islam. The term *khil'at* first appears in the seventh century, when the bestowal of garments became both institutionalised and common in the entourage of the *Caliph* (whose members were even termed *ashab al-khila*). According to Clement Huart, the *khil'ats* as well as the nature of other rewards had a distinctly Persian tradition. (1972: 148)

> The usual rewards of merit were titles, gifts of money, and post at court. The gift of a robe of honour from the king's wardrobe was a very ancient custom...Sapor II [Sassanian king of Persia] gave the Armenian general "a royal garment, an ermine fur, a gold and silver pendant to attach to the eagle

on his helmet, a diadem, breast ornaments, a tent, carpet and gold vessels. To reward the grand Mobed who brought him some good news, Ardashir I, filled his mouth with rubies, gold coins, pearls, and jewellery". (emphasis mine).

In the mid-1920s, F.W. Buckler also points out that all kings in the Middle east, both ancient and Muslim, employed robes of honour. (1927-28: 238-49) When the king gave these dresses to his servants, he was incorporating into his own body, by mean of certain symbolic acts, the person of those who shared his rule. During the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, however, the practice became more pervasive even than prevailing in the vast, but culturally similar, Islamic world.[2] In pre-colonial India the presentation of robes of honour regularly accompanied, for example, the investiture of an heir apparent, accession to high office or even appreciation of a particularly fine poem.

Bestowal of robes by the king minimally consisted of a turban, a gown, and a girdle or sash. There were, in fact, several distinct categories of *khil'at*. The typical gift was a three-piece set of garments issued by the general wardrobe (*khila' khana*), consisting of a turban (*dastar*), a long coat with a full skirt (*jama*), and a waist-scarf (*kamarband*). More elaborate was the five-piece set, issued by the storehouse (*tosha khana)* for presents, consisting—in addition to the three articles listed above—of a jeweled turban-ornament (*sarpech)* and a band (*balaband*) for decorating the turban. Even more elaborate was a seven-piece set consisting of headdress, long coat, close-fitting jacket, two pairs of trousers (probably *shalvar*), two pairs of shirts (*kamis*), two girdles and a scarf. (Tavernier 1985: 18, 32; Hossein Khan 1990: 15; Irvine 1962: 29; Streusand 1989: 141-42) Indubitably, most valuable of all was a garment or set of garments worn personally by the emperor (*malbus-i khas*). The chronicles do not normally specify whether the emperor had worn a given robe or not. The *khil'at* was commonly luxurious garments (often, Chinese silks) and was embellished with brocades, velvets and goldthreads. If recipient was important enough, the robes decorated with jewels was presented accompanied by other symbols of the emperor's esteem, such as a bejewelled sword, saddle, or turban ornament and a fine steed. Unlike the Chinese *dragon* and *python* robes of Ming and Qing emperors of fifteenth and sixteenth centuries,[3] pre-colonial robes' hierarchy was not explicitly defined in chronicles. The presentation of robes 'suitable to their rank' is an

axiom that occurs often in, for example, the *Shahajahan Nama*. (1990: 224)

II

The practice of robing was well established during the early Abbasid period in Baghdad and involved the *Caliph* presenting a former article of his clothing to someone who thereby became—if he was not already—a dependant. Behind the transfer of this piece of property lay the notion that the article of clothing carried the *baraka* (essence) of its former possessor and influenced the behaviour of the receivers. The *Caliphs* shared the general attitude of the population that clothes were a visible sign not only of wealth, but also of God's favour to human beings. Even when the rulers gave out a large number of robes of honour, these were, at least brushed across his shoulder to infuse them with his essence. As the practice spread beyond the caliphal court (or was delegated to the *Caliph's* representatives in the provinces), and as autonomous or breakaway regimes established themselves, the practice gained momentum. *De facto* rulers, while still acknowledging a titular caliphal suzerainty distributed *khil'ats* on their own behalf to those whom they chose to reward or promote. In the eastern lands of the caliphate, this was markedly true of such dynasties as the Saffarids, Samanids, Buyids, Ghaznavids, and Seljuqs. (Hambly 2001: 193-222; 2003: 31-49) As affirmed earlier, the Ghaznavids and Ghurids introduced ceremonial robing in India. For example, the Persian history of the Ghaznavids: *Tarikh-i-Yamini* of Al-Utbi and the *Tarikhu-s-Subuktigin* of Abul Fazl Al Baihaki describe Mahmud's receipt of a silk robe and title of *Yaminu'd-Daula wa Aminu'l-Millah* from the *Caliph* of Baghdad in November AD 999; and the same chronicles also describe occasions of Mahmud's honouring of his nobles (Elliot and Dowson 1964: II, 24, 74-5).[4] Intermittently, from the time of Shamsuddin Iltutmish (AD 1211-1236) to that of Firuz Shah Tughluq (AD 1351-1388), diplomatic exchanges between the sultans of Delhi and the Abbasid *Caliphs* in Baghdad (and following the Mongol sack of Baghdad in AD 1258, in Cairo) were accompanied by caliphal gifts of robes of honour. The practice of giving robes of honour was fully developed at the court of Kublai Khan, as described by Marco Polo. (1969)

Robe of honour is a fascinating exploration of the possible common origin and subsequent development of investiture across medieval Christianity and medieval Islam. Clothing symbolised

authority, conveyed information about rank at court, and could be used to negotiate the power. Its long connected history began on the western borders of China and reflected the production and distribution of the silk. It is common knowledge that silk was China's contribution to the world. Expensive and rare silk textiles have always been considered as luxury items. Before the period under study, textiles notably silk textiles were major form of wealth in many societies. Religious activities, if concerned with the accumulation, consumption and display of wealth, inevitably involved silk transactions.[5] During earlier periods of *Caliph's*, the material from which the robes were made were generally described as being silks. Fine textiles especially of dazzling silks symbolised a high status and were important materials that contribute to the opulence of the *Caliph's* court. The *Caliphs* loved the feel of silk as it was also usually used in *tiraz* system (embroidery), and unlike their contemporary emperors in T'ang China and Byzantium, they did not mind their subjects also wearing silk textiles. As the *tiraz* institution represented Islamic religious and political authority, the name of the authority was inscribed on most textiles produced under the Islamic regime. In fact, the court often set the fashion for the people. For example, *Caliph* Mutawakkil (AD 847-61) wore a shiny half-silk textile called *mulham* in public, and in so doing spread this fashion among his people. *Caliphs* also showed their favour by showering their subjects with silks and robes. *Caliph* Mu'tasin (AD 833-42) bought Turkish slaves to build a new army. He dressed them brocade with gilded belts. In the court of *Caliph* Radi (AD 934-41), his courtiers invariably received money and robes from him. (Al-Masudi 1989: 229-39, 411)

III

The robes of honour ceremony represented and enacted a specific kind of loyalty and it conferred an unambiguous legitimacy. Acceptance of *khil'at* was an explicit recognition of the personal authority and largesse of the giver and was in return recognition of the honoured position of the receiver. This position could be of the king (as in the case of the *Caliph* honouring the early Sultans of India), ambassador, official, successful general or creative poet. By donning attire from the hand of the king in court, the recipient became part of the elite. Buckler found the *khil'at* centrality concerned with incorporation, through the gifts joint banqueting of the nobility and the ruler reinforced this incorporation. Buckler's idea of kingly

incorporation, however, cannot explain many actual examples of the ceremony and, indeed, entire categories of the *khil'at*. For example, Buckler finds *nazr* (a gift from the recipient of the *khil'at*) a necessary part of the ceremony. *Khil'at* occurred, however, in most investitures in pre-colonial India without *nazr*.

In presenting robes of honour, the emperor was symbolically making the recipient an extension of himself, and hence delegating some of his authority. To accept robes of honour was an honour, but also acknowledgement on the part of the recipient of subordination to the donor. The ceremony always had an audience that was generally elite and courtly. It is important to analyse the values, practices, and points of contestation that defined *khil'at* as a specific system of honour. The use of the robes of honour by persons holding and seeking political authority is the main concern here. The significance of the *khil'at* lay in its symbolism, and its value depended less on its material value than on its intrinsic meaning. Part of its meaning derived from the fact that the robes came from the personal wardrobe of an exalted personage, and that in theory (if rarely in reality) it might have been worn by the donor. F.W. Buckler stressed the bodily contact with the garment that was involved. He urges that the *khil'at* was a symbol of 'continuity or succession'. That continuity rested on a physical basis depending on the contact of the body of the recipient with the body of the donor through the medium of clothing. (Buckler 1927-28: 238-49) Or, to put it somewhat differently, the donor included the recipient within his own person through the medium of his wardrobe. To my knowledge, this subject has not been properly explored in Hindu India. The newly installed king in ancient India also had a practice to give one of a variety of items to a man when he appointed him—a turban or headband (*patta*), an umbrella (*chart*), a *vastra* (always un-sewn garment or draped) or an ornament (*alamkara*) such as a necklace. However, such gifts do not seem to have been made into important court ceremonies in early medieval India, but they appear to have had much the same purpose, as argued by Buckler. According to C.A. Bayly, 'gifts of a new cloth or clothes attended every major life cycle ritual in pre-industrial [Hindu] society in India'. (1986: 286-92)

The robing custom was in regular use in the Delhi sultanate. In response to the quatrain composed by Al-Jamaji, Sultan Iltutmish ordered his release from prison and granted him a *khil'at* (Siddiqi 1992: 8). In return for his gifts or presents (*khidmati)* to *Caliph*

Mustausin of Baghdad in 1227 AD, Iltutmish was given *khil'at* in addition to standard, ring, vest, a special turban, saddle, and Arabians horses by the *Caliph.* (Siddiqi 1992: 31) Ceremonies pertaining to the granting of *khil'at*s under Tughlaq are described in Masalik-*ul-Abasar fi-Mamalik-ul-Amsar.* It has been estimated that Muhammad Tughlaq presented 2,00,000 robes every year. (Siddiqi 1992: 118-19: Zaki 1981: 23-40) Robes of honour were in common use during fifteenth-century, mainly under the Lodi Kings. (Sirhindi 1986: 15-19) Nor was the ceremony restricted to exchanges between Muslims. For example, following his victory at Tarain in 1192 AD, and the execution of Prithviraj Chauhan, Muizzuddin Muhammad Ghuri granted the latter's son a *khil'at* when he confirmed him as governor of Ajmer. (Nizami 1998: 110; Habibullah 1961: 61-2) A fifteenth-century account of the fall of the Rajput principalities of Siwana and Jalor to Alauddin Khalji describes how the Brahmin Madhava, enraged by his Raja's treatment of his family, made his way to Delhi to betray his homeland to Alauddin, who rewarded him with a five-piece robes of honour. When subsequently, the sultan sent an intimidating message to Jalor, it too was accompanied by a robe of honour. (Bhatnagar 1991: 3)

IV

Babur's Chagtayid and Timurid ancestors were quite familiar with the robing ceremony. For example, after Timur's victory over the Ottoman Sultan in AD 1402, he distributed robes of honour to all his relatives, the great *amirs,* men of learning, and foreign ambassadors. (Franklin 1834: II, 7) Babur sought to reinforce his authority by frequent gifts of robes of honour. Amidst the gift-giving and receiving ceremonies of Babur reign, robes of honour played a conspicuous part. (Babur 1970: 537, 628-34, 650, 677, 679, 685) Babur rewarded men of religious eminence, relatives, faithful followers and the representatives of potential rivals with robes of honour and other gifts. (*Ibid.*: 537; Abul Fazl 1989: I, 256) A significant transformation in the use of robes of honour during Humayun's reign was the sheer number of robes given out. The *Humayunnama* mentions a feast given by one of Humayun's principal wives during which 7,000 robes were given out. After his victory over Sultan Muhammad Lodi, Humayun gave out 12,000 robes of which 2000 were special. (Gulbadan 1989: 69, 114, 126; Badauni 1973: I, 451; Ahmad 1936: II, 46) The *Akbarnama* mentions

that 12,000 and 10,000 *khil'ats* were carried to Mecca at two different points of time by the leaders of the caravan sponsored by the emperor. (Abul Fazl 1989: III, 271, 306; Ahmad 1936: II, 452; Haider 1998: 1-4) The *Ain-i-Akbari* mentions that 1,000 full suits of costly fabric were made up each season and 120 were kept in readiness at all times. (Abul Fazl 1989 a: I, 96) Predictably, therefore, the granting of robes became a routine matter in the Mughal period. They were bestowed on a large number of nobles on regular occasions throughout the year. Such occasions were the start of the solar and lunar New Years, and the king's solar and lunar birthday, *Id*, the anniversary of succession, and important life-cycle ceremonies, promotion into the *mansabdari* system and promotion within it. Further transformation of the robes of honour took place under Akbar. It was elevated as a fashion to match the increasing luxury of the court. Robes of honour were now no longer the Chinese silk and furs of central Asia, they were of brocades, velvets and gold thread silks typically found in Mughal paintings. We can follow subtle changes every few years in the size of the sash, or the number of ties, or the size of the chest opening, or a popular fabric.

By the time of Akbar's reign, the granting of robes of honour had been transformed from a strictly kingly privilege to one held even by commanders in the field. This is contrary to the belief of earlier scholars that this process was started during the reign of Jahangir. (Gordon 1996: 235; Hambly 2003: 39; Maskiell 2003: 102) Munim Khan gave a horse and a complete robe (*sar-o pa*) to Ali Quli Khan who had repaired a fort near Varanasi in preparation for battles with the eastern Afghans. (Mukhia 2004/05:164-65) By the time of Nagarkot campaign, Akbar's commander Husain Quli Khan also honoured the representatives of Takht Mal (Choto) Raja of Nurpur with robes of honour as a part of the submission process. (Hutchison 1982: I, 142)

An interesting example of the ubiquity of robing is provided in Abul Fazl's *Akbarnama,* about the battle of Tukaroi (March 3, 1575) in which Munim Khan and Todar Mal achieved a stunning victory over Sultan Daud Khan of Bengal. There was great celebration in the Mughal camp when Daud Khan, finally perceiving the futility of continued resistance, appeared before Munim Khan on April 12, 1575, and partook of a formal 'banquet of reconciliation'. Here was a political rite, a ritual of incorporation, in which symbolism was everything. Displaying warm affection, the Mughal general advanced to the edge of carpet laid out in a ceremonial tent specially

arranged for the occasion. There he greeted the defeated king. Daud ungirdled his sword and set it aside. Munim Khan then presented the Afghan with a Mughal sword, an embroidered belt, and a cloak. Whether or not Akbar had actually worn the cloak, by donning it Daud Khan became ritually 'incorporated' into the body of the emperor, which formally ended Daud's independence. Daud and his kingdom were now bound to the emperor. (Abul Fazl 1989: III, 183-86; Badauni 1973: II, 194-200; Qandhari 1993: 237-38) Among the surviving Mughal miniatures of *durbar* scenes available in a manuscript of *Akbarnama,* Daud Khan has been shown wearing a robe which presumably had just been given to him as *khil'at.*[6] During Jahangir's reign, Mirza Nathan also gave away *khil'ats* with several other transactional objects, such as a horse and a dagger in the field. A memoir by Mirza Nathan provides several eyewitness accounts of how *khil'ats* were used to create and cement political relationships in early seventeenth century Bengal. (Nathan 1936: I, xix-xx, 21, 63, 70, 137, 230, 292, 576-80, 747) By the time of the Balkh campaign (AD 1640-47) during the reign of Shahjahan, the Mughal commander carried several thousand *khil'ats*, which he gave out in the field when the campaign was somewhat successful. (Innayat Khan 1990: 355)

Despite the fact that chronicles of the reign of Akbar reveal a fairly clear picture of the robing ceremonies of that period as compared to many other chronicles, scholars working on this theme, such as John Richards (2001), Stewart Gordon (1996; 2001; 2003), Gavin Hambly (2001; 2003) and Gail Minault (2003), have not paid adequate attention to them. Instead, they have regarded sources like *Baharistan-i-Ghayabi* of Mirza Nathan (1936) and *Padshahnama* of Lahori (1867) as richer sources for studying robing ceremonies. Douglas Streusand even suggests that Abul Fazl has not paid attention to the exchange of gifts (1989: 139-40). On the contrary, chronicles of the reign of Akbar are replete with accounts of robings. Abul Fazl, in his *Akbarnama*, alone recounts more than a hundred incidents of ceremonial robing including the exchange of other gifts.[7] Akbar's other chronicles too refer repeatedly to the centrality of the *khil'at* ceremony. During the reigns of Jahangir, Shahjahan and Aurangzeb, the ceremonial granting of *khil'ats* continued to carry great weight. [8]

The robe of honour was also transformed into an explicit symbol of submission under Akbar. It never played this role in Babur's time. At Akbar's court, Afghan and rebel officers who turned loyal were

pardoned with robes of honour.[9] A distinguished service of a military or non-military nature was not the only reason for the award of a *khil'at*—even a message of condolence could be wrapped in it. Akbar sent *khil'at* with a condolence message to Raja Man Singh on the death of his son. (Abul Fazl 1989: 1142) Jahangir sent *khil'ats* to the children of his father-in-law, Itmad-ud-Daula 'to take them out of their mourning garments' (Mukhia 2004/05: 165). Bahadur Shah, the last ruler of the Mughal dynasty, also conferred mourning *khil'at* upon the sons of deceased noble Maulvi Aziz-ud-din.[10] *Khil'ats* were often used to win over political opponents or to make allies out of adversaries.

V

It is evident from the preceding discussion that the robe of honour or *khil'at* was new in medieval India. The core symbol of the *khil'at* ceremony was a cloak that was the outermost, most visible garment of courtly life. The outfit presented by the king was similar to those worn by nobles and the king. In fact, its adoption as court dress and bestowal by a king as *khil'at* represented a radical departure from earlier tradition of Indian court dress. Prior to the introduction of the cloak in fourteenth or early fifteenth century, men at non-Muslim courts in north India did not customarily wear any upper garment. Instead, they left their chests and arms exposed, or at most, loosely draped their shoulders with a long, rectangular piece of untailored cloth (*ambaram*). About the dress of common people, Abdul Razzaq Samarqandi also remarks that the Hindus did not cover their chest except loins. They tied fine cotton stuffs from their navels to their knees. (1989: 305; Babur 1970: 519) K.M. Ashraf also remarks, 'a dhoti or a single sheet or long cloth below the waist was a sufficient and respectable dress of Hindus in medieval India'. (1970: 213)

Despite the novelty, however, the robe was not totally an unprecedented invention of the medieval India. On the contrary, evidence overwhelmingly suggests that it appeared as an adaptation of items in common use throughout the Islamic world. A chronicle of the mid-fourteenth century suggests that the prosperous classes of India wore a fine cotton or silk full sleeves coat from the neck to the knees (*qaba*), resembling the short coat of Baghdad and *nasafis* of Egyptian that were usually made of plain white cotton or silk.[11] (Ashraf 1970: 212; Ansari 1974: 4) Expectantly, the ultimate source for medieval Indian robe is some form of the *qaba*, a garment that is

mentioned in Arabic literary sources from as early as the seventh century. Its subsequent history has been traced in detail by historians of Islamic dresses. (Dozy 1845; Mayer 1952; Stillmen 1986; Stillmen & Stillmen 1986) In its early Arab form, the *qaba* was worn as an outer tunic, or robe, covering the body shirt known as *kamis*. It was long sleeved with neck slit front opening that may be closed with buttons. Most importantly, the *qaba* is clearly identified in contemporary sources as a luxury garment, which was often made of expensive fabrics such as brocade (Arabic *dibaj*). By the eleventh and twelfth centuries, during the period of Seljuq ascendancy, a variant form known as the 'Turkey *qaba*' (Persian *qaba turki*) became widespread throughout the central Islamic lands. Probably, the medieval Indian robe is based on the Arab style *qaba,* and not on the differently constructed Turkey or Timurid versions. These Timurid variants are both short sleeved—a type apparently designated by the Turkey term *dagala*—or long-sleeved, and worn open in front.

The factors accounting for the adoption of *khil'at* may be traced to the sharply opposing attitudes to the body that underlie the Islamic and traditional Indian systems of dress. In the Indian system, prior to the impact of the Islamic culture, the body was viewed as an integral aspect of the person and, as such, was held to reflect the inner state and qualities of the individual.[12] Within such a cultural context, the function of clothing is not to conceal the body, but to reveal, frame, and accentuate its forms. These are precisely the functions served by the traditional Indian upper garment—a sheer, untailored cloth draped loosely over the shoulders. To this attitude, the Islamic viewpoint stands in direct opposition. The uncovered body is held to be naked and shameful, and it is said that clothing has been provided by God to cover men's nakedness—a purpose well achieved by many varieties of tunics and *khil'at*s that characterise the Islamic system of dress. Not only is the body to be covered, but clothing should be loose fitting, so as not to reveal the forms of the body beneath. There was popular dictum in a medieval Persian: 'Neither men nor women should wear a tight robe beneath which their body is revealed; it is related in the traditions that women who wear such robes are accursed.' (Meisami 1991: 91)

VI

Let us now briefly consider the materials from which robes were

made or to gain a sense of the extent and social context of their use. We have a rich abundance of both visual and written documents of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries that are quite informative, and help us to identify the formal and material qualities of the robes. The material from which the robes were made is generally described as being of cotton, silk, brocade and velvet. It was sometimes jewelled. A well known representation of Mahmud of Ghazna shows him proudly donning a silk robe of honour from the *Caliph* of Baghdad.[13] Buyid warlord Abdul-al Daula, the *de facto* ruler of the much of Iran and Iraq, was also arrayed in robe of gold thread by the *Caliph* Al-Tai in AD 977. (Kabir 1964: 56-57; Busse 1975: 275-76) The robe presented by Muhammad Tughlaq consisted of imported cloths (mostly from China, Iraq and Alexandria) velvet, damask or wool on which brocade, velvet and costly material were used. (Siddiqi 1992: 118-19) Babur was also greeted by his mother's brother Kichik Khan (Ahmad Khan of Aqsu) with embroidered Chinese brocade robe. (Babur 1970: 159-60) Abdul Razzaq describes Vijayanagar King Devaraya II's tunic as being made of *zaytuni* silk. (Samarqandi 1989: 310) Among the surviving Mughal miniatures of *durbar* scenes, some are found in the manuscript of Abdul Hamid Lahori's *Padshahnama,* available in Windsor Castle Library. Among these miniatures, Prince Khuram (the future Shahjahan) is shown wearing a close-fitting jacket of gold brocade, *nim-astin* (Beach 1997: 94-97) and Prince Aurangzeb is shown receiving from his father (Shahjahan) a gold threaded robe of honour. (Innayat Khan 1990: 208; Beach 1997:108-09) Umadat-al Mulk Shayista Khan (Aurangzeb's maternal uncle) received a robe, a *charaqab* (a Turkish-style tunic embroidered with cloth of gold) from Aurangzeb. (Nasseruddin 1950: 27-29).

The robe of honour was sometimes accompanied by other symbols of kingship including the *kawkaba* (a polished steel or golden ball carried on a pole), *chatr* (umbrella), *naqara* (drums), *alam* (tall standard with metal finial) and *tuman-tuq* (yak tail standard). Nevertheless, expensive and finely graded robes and symbols of kingship were presented to the relatives of the emperor and selected nobles who had displayed conspicuous loyalty and ability in their services. When Akbar appointed Prince Murad to the governorship of Malwa in 1591, he was awarded a flag, drum, umbrella (*chatr*), and whisk (*tuqh*). (Abul Fazl 1989: III, 911) When Mirza Rustam Safavi, the grandson of Bahram Mirza, the brother of Shah Tahmasp, who was the Safavi governor of Zamin Dawar in Afghanistan, sought

refuge with Akbar, the Mughal ruler sent tents, screens, carpets and a jewelled dagger to him in response to his request for sanctuary. When he reached court, Akbar gave him the rank of 5000, a substantial *jagir*, and later a flag and drum (Abul Fazl 1989: III, 992-94). The gifts, which Akbar sent were practical in that they were useful in the journey from Zamin Dawar to Lahore, especially in making the journey in style. In this way, the gifts indicated that Mirza Rustam would retain his high position in Mughal service.

VII

In the century before Mughal conquest—regional rulers, head of a sect, ambassadors—irrespective of their religion, fully understood and skillfully controlled both the grammar and vocabulary of this ceremony. In the Sufi tradition, the presentation of the robes by a Shaikh to his followers remained one of the core ceremonies of legitimacy and loyalty for centuries. Within the Sufi tradition, Sufi teachers had a practice to give their own 'patched' robe (*khirqa, frock* and *muraqqa*) to their followers as a visible symbol of discipleship. (Elias 2001: 275-89) Even religious leader such as the Sikh Guru Angad is credited with distributing *khil'ats* to his followers every half-yearly. Amar Dass accustomed to wear the *khil'at* acknowledged from Guru Angad as a turban on his head. In this way, he carried twelve turbans on his head by the time he was appointed the Guru. (Macauliffe 1963: 40) Within the Sikh tradition, therefore, followers expected the *khil'at* of a great teacher or Guru to intensify the piety and practice of the receiver.

By the sixteenth century, *khil'at* ceremonies were in common usage in Muslim and Hindu courts of both North India and the Deccan. We note that in sixteenth century, the *khil'at* ceremony had become part of kingly ritual in western India. For example, Chengez Khan who succeeded Sultan Mahmud in Gujarat gave away five or six dresses of honour daily from his private wardrobe. Each dress was usually worth more than 700 or 800 rupees. (Badauni 1973: II, 67) In the Deccan, too, new evidence suggests that the *khil'at* ceremony was part of kingly ritual at Vijayanagar in the fourteenth century. (Wagoner 1993; 1996: 851-80) In Bijapur, when the More family successfully completed a difficult military mission in mid-1660s, the Bijapur Sultan sent rich *khil'ats* with the directive: 'you have done good service; wear these *khil'at*s and be honoured.' (Khobrekar 1974: 130) In Awadh, receipt of the *khil'at* was

synonymous with the taking up of a particular government position.[14] (Bernett 1987: 103) The political use of the royal cloak or *khil'at* was also known in Bengal. Sultan Nasiruddin Nusrat Shah favoured the Captain of the Portuguese mission in AD 1521, with a *khil'at* that he had worn (Eaton 1994: 165).[15] Each revenue payer in Bengal presented a *nazr* for the *nazim,* titular head, and his officers. In turn, they received a *khil'at* from the *nazim.* When an important *zamindar* died, the *nazim* sent his condolence and a *khil'at* to the heir (Maclane 1993: 48-9, 106-15). Even the rulers of relatively small principalities in the Himalayan foothills are known to have practiced the robing ceremony in sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.[16]

In contrast, the early European envoys who entered the sophisticated world of the Mughal and regional court found themselves alien to this court ceremony. British found many-layered possibilities of robes presentations difficult to understand. Nevertheless, European travellers and ambassadors to India readily accepted *khil'ats* from Mughal emperors. A few, such as Jean-Baptiste Tavernier, proudly had their portraits painted in the robes they received, which clearly shows their desire to clothe themselves in the same dignities as the notables of the Mughal court.[17] As the British gradually expanded their territories in India, they largely adopted and fitted themselves into popular Mughal's ceremonies, rituals and symbols. Both the Mughal court and the British recognised that a ritual exchange of *nazr* and *khil'at* signified the submission of the British Company's officials, and of the Company itself to the sovereignty of the Mughal. By the late eighteenth century, in much of the rest of India, the *khil'at* ceremony had become common, even standard, at both Hindu and British courts. In the early nineteenth century, the ceremony became a serious issue of legitimacy between the Mughal court and the emerging British colonial state. As the British gradually conquered north India in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, they reduced the Mughal Empire to a shadow of its former self, and the Mughal emperor to a mere pensioner. In the course of these events, the British East India Company made the transition from subordinate to ruler and the Mughal emperor from ruler to subordinate.[18] This shift in power relations was symbolised by rituals of sovereignty, with the British at first offering signs of their submission, but later proving themselves prodigious present-takers (*nazr),* and gift-givers of *khil'at* to subordinates. Any Mughal attempt to reassert their theoretical supremacy was not admitted by colonial power. For example, Akbar

II (AD 1806-37) wrote to Governor-General, Lord Minto I (about the recognition of his right to nominate his successor) in 'language more suitable to the former situation and power of the Mughals than to the present dependent condition' was taken as a mark of impertinence amounting to contumacy. In other words, he called the Governor-General 'his favoured son and servant' just as other emperor had done before him. Lord Minto declined to receive further letters in the tone of the former one and ordered the envoy to convey the Mughal emperor a 'full and explicit declaration' of the 'nature and principles' of their relationship.[19] (Spear 1991:42) The British, in their relationship with other Indian rulers, gradually demonstrated that the Company, not the Mughal emperor, was the dominant force.

It is interesting to note that regions where non-Muslims remained without intimate contact with Muslim courts were also regions that lay beyond the known world of robes of honour. For instance, we do not come across any reference to the robing ceremony in the states of the mid-Himalayan region that later came to be called the Shimla Hill States.[20] It was, perhaps, not until they encountered the British that these mountain chieftains came to know about the *khil'at* ceremony. After the British contact, the presentation of *khil'at* became a regular practice with the investiture of an heir apparent, accession to high office or even appreciation of a service rendered to the British. Most of the hill chiefs of Shimla region had remained loyal to the British and helped with money and forces in suppressing the revolt of 1857. In recognition of these services, British handsomely rewarded them with the salute of guns, *khil'ats* and honorary titles, apart from several gifts. For service rendered in 1857 revolt, *Raja* Shamsher Prakash of Sirmour received a *khil'at* together with a salute of seven guns.[21] Raja Hira Singh of Bilaspur was honoured with a salute of 11 guns and valuable *khil'at*.[22] In acknowledgement of the service of Thakur Jograj of Balson, a *sanad* was granted to him on July 24, 1858 by Lord Canning conferring on him and his heirs the title of *Rana* and valuable *khil'at*. Rana Sansar Sain of Keonthal was rewarded with the title of *Raja* along with grant of *khil'at* valued at Rs.1000. (Atichson 1929-33: 93-103)

VIII

Some interesting instances of the ubiquitousness of robing are provided in the accounts of Asad Beg Qazwini, a minor official under Akbar and Jahangir. For example, on one occasion Asad Beg

recited a verse, which was probably in an ancient Persian dialect, termed *zaban-i-ramandi.* Akbar appreciated this *bon mot* greatly. He told Khawaja Aminuddin to get a *khilat* ready for Asad Beg. A *sar-o-pa,* of a particular high value was personally chosen by the emperor, and given to another *chobdar,* Shaikh Farid. The Shaikh and Khwaja Aminuddin then took Asad Beg aside and placed the cloth on him behind a curtain and brought him back to perform *sijdah* ('complete prostration' highest form of submission or salutation) once more.[23] It will be noted that, according to this passage, elaborate ritual were enacted while giving and receiving the robes. It indicates that honoured person had to put the robes either in court or nearby robing room. *Sijdah* was a ceremony to be performed upon receipt of a *khil'at.* In another instance, before leaving for the Deccan as envoy, Asad Beg made his *taslim* (submission) and *sijdah* as was appropriate.[24] He was given a special horse from the royal stable and a brocade *khil'at* along with a royal shawl from Akbar's waist that the emperor tied on his head with his own hands. (Alam 2000:124-25) The honoured person put on the robes, right either in court or in a nearby robing room. On granting a robe of honour Seid-Gholam Hossein Khan (1990: .43) describes the procedure thus:

> The custom is that the man designed for that honour (khilat) passes into a neighbouring closet where a person prepared for that office hold over the man's turban, that which is bestowed upon him. He also assists in his putting on new clothes, that is *gown* and *sash*, over his *gown*; and in that condition, he proceeds to the presence, preceded by a principal mace-bearer, or *chobdar*, who proclaims his name and title aloud, with the reason of receiving that honour. This ceremony over, the man goes home, where he gets new clothes fitted to his body and he wears them for three days, or at least he wears the turban and the piece of jewel along with it.

The *khil'at* was the ceremony that recognised successful service, whether in war or peace, and was especially used to maintain ties when distance barred face-to-face contact. *Khil'at* arrived in far-flung province by special emissary, recipients faced the capital, bowed deeply, prostrated, donned the *khil'at* in the presence of the troops and subordinates, placed the warrant on the forehead, and bowed deeply again. Unlike the earlier period, Akbar and subsequent Mughal emperors, required a written contract (*farman,* sealed with the great seal *tugra* of the emperor) of pay and perquisites be issued for all those in the upper level of service. Reception of such an

order—usually draped within the robes—required the recipient to act as if the document were the emperor himself. Riding with his retainers, the recipient was to advance several miles to receive the messengers conveying the *farman*. The proper mode of receiving a *farman* (for example, a *farman* augmenting one's appointment) was to put on the accompanying robes of honour, place the *farman* on one's forehead, and perform *taslim*. Sultan Daud Khan after his defeat, adorned with Mughal regalia, turned his face in the direction of Akbar's capital in Fatehpur Sikri and solemnly prostrated himself. (Abul Fazl 1989: III, 185) This connotes the process of submission. When Mirza Nathan (commander) received a portrait of Jahangir to wear on his turban, he put it in place and performed the *sijdah* as if the sovereign himself were present. (Nathan 1936: 74, 261-63, 297-98) When granted an elephant, Mirza Nathan placed the elephant-goad on his shoulder to show his grateful submission. (Nathan 1936: 228) These kinds of rituals may have been effective in reasserting and strengthening the converging modes of personal authority and personal service.

Despite the development of bureaucratic systems to enable rule over a vast territory, courtly politics in the pre-colonial India continued to be based upon personal relations with the emperor. Ceremonies linked to a person's incorporation into the imperial court resolutely glued the relationship thus created. This kind of 'amalgamation' into the empire was repeated at lower levels of courtly politics within it. Specific details of the robes ceremony varied considerably from kingdom to kingdom. The unifying factor was that a robe of honour always has high value, elite attire, suitable for courtly presence. While, ceremonial robing originated at the caliphal court, the ceremony itself never seems to have acquired a denominational character, whatever region it travelled. Robes were awarded to men of the most diverse backgrounds for all kinds of services. They were also presented to women and children, to slaves and non-Muslims. When the occasion was of great political significance, or when the donor sought to demonstrate the extent of his favour to a recipient, gifts of clothing were supplemented by other objects such as banners, horses and riding-accoutrements, swords and slaves. Although the typical recipients of such robes of honour tended to be government officials and military officers, representatives of a foreign ruler, scholars, physicians, and poets were also honoured.

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NOTES

1. In translation, Ibn Batuta's narrative recounts more than hundred incidents of ceremonial investiture (1958-94). 'Robes of honour' appears every few pages throughout the *Rihla* (Travels), 1356 CE. Ibn Batuta, probably the widest-travelled man of the middle age, covered much of the ceremony's geographical extent and often drew judgments, moral conclusions from stories of robing and his own receipt of robes. See, Gordon, Stewart, (ed.), (2003: 1-30).
2. For extended discussion on *khil'at* custom in a far larger world see, the finest anthology of articles in Gordon, Stewart, (ed.), (2001; 2003).
3. For, e.g., according to Sophie Volpp (2005:133-58), the Ming and Qing emperors' python robes (*mangyi*) were of three grades. The classical python robe was presented to officials of the first rank in recognition of the extraordinary service. The flying- fish python robe (*feiyu mangyi*), which differed from the classical python robe in that the flying fish had scales and a tail but not claws, was presented to the second rank; the horned-bull python robes (*douniu mangyi*), featuring a python with two horns, was presented to the third rank.

4. Excerpts from both are translated in Elliot, H.M. and D.J. Dowson (1964). Also see, (1964: II, 142, 144).
5. For meticulous expositions of this debate, see Liu, Xinru (1996; 2001:23-56).
6. See, on cover and jacket visual of Gordon, Stewart, (ed.), (2003), Folio from an *Akbarnama*, c.1604; Colour and Gold on paper, 23.8 x 12.3 cm. available Freer Gallery of Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington.
7. Ubiquitousness of the *khil'at* ceremony during Akbar's reign has been discussed in my 'J.S. Grewal Award' essay entitled "Islamic Court Dress", presented at 66th session of the Indian History Congress, Visva Bharati, Santiniketan, 28-30 January 2006.
8. For e.g., see Jahangir, Nuruddin (1989:13, 20-1, 68-9, 107-09), Nathan, Mirza (1936: 11, 27, 63, 73, 99, 137, 230, 292, 576-80), Inayat Khan (1990: 208, 224, 355), Naseruddin Khan (1950: 27-9, 33-43, 50-6, 115-16) and Mustad Khan (1947: 15, 20-4). Centralisation of the Mughal Empire through incorporative ritual and ceremony has also been discussed by Jos Gommans (2002). See also, Lal, Ruby (2005: 92-98).
9. For e.g., see Abul Fazl (1989: II, 119, 229, 492; III, 734-35) and Badauni, Abdul Qadir (1973: II, 44, 138-39).
10. N.A.I. Foreign Department Misc. Political, vol. 361. Palace Intelligence, Delhi, 1851-54 (28 April 1851).
11. *Masalik-ul-Abasar fi-Mamalik-ul-Amsar of Shihab al-Din al- Umari,* (tr.), in I.H. Siddiqi (1992: 128-34). Compare the description of Rajput dress in Tod, James (1920: 759).
12. If classical Indian poetry and sculpture often appear obsessed with the human body, it is for this very purpose, of communicating significant information about the character of the embodied. For extended discussion, see Cowell, E. B., and F. W. Thomas, (tr.), (1968: 54-60).
13. 'Mahmmud of Ghazna donning a robe from the *Caliph*, 999 AD', Or. MS. 20, fol. 121 r. *Edinburgh University Library.* See, the image on front cover and Figure 8.1 of Gordon, Stewart, (ed.), (2001).
14. For comprehensive discussion, see Fisher, Michael H. (1987:79-80,107,139-40,180,191, 223-25).
15. Eaton, Richard M. (1994) is quoting from *Voyage dans les deltas du Gange et de l'Irraouaddy: Relation portugaise anonyme, 1521,* (1988:333), (ed.) and (tr.), Genevieve Bouchan and Luis Filipe Thomaz, Paris: Central Cultural Portugaise.
16. For few instances of robing investiture in the Himalayan Kingdoms, see Hutchison, J. and J. Ph Vogel (1982: 75, 142, 152, 158-59, 193, 205, 228, 230-31, 240, 246-47, 249, 305, 400, 499); for eighteenth-nineteenth centuries, see also, Michael, Bernardo A. (2003: 80-94).
17. See, the frontispiece of Tavernier, Jean-Baptiste (1985).
18. The issue of legitimacy and authority between Mughal Court and British Colonial State has been elegantly discussed in the following works, Spear,

Percival (1991); Cohn, B.S., "The British and the Mughal Court in the Seventeenth Century"; Fisher, Michael H.A. (1987;1990: 420-58); Michael, Bernardo A. (2003: 80-94); Minault, Gail (2003:125-139). Also see Kasturi, Malvika (2002).

19. For more comprehensive discussions, see Nuckolls, Charles W. (1990: 529-59).
20. Cluster of twenty-eight states and *thakurais* situated between river *Sutlej* and the tributaries of the *Yamuna.*
21. *Gazetteer of the Sirmour State*, (1934: 19); Charak, S.S. (1978-79: II, 186).
22. *Memoranda on the Indian State, By the British Authority*, New Delhi (1939: 150-64); Hutchison, J. and J. Ph Vogel (1982: II, 511).
23. Qazwini, Asad Beg, *Waqa'i-i Asad Beg (Nuksha-i-Ahwal-i-Asad Beg)*, London MS, Or. 1996, 30 fols. pp. 9-10, 42; Aligarh Muslim University, MS, pp. 20-3, 106, cited in Alam ,Muzaffar and Sanjay Subramanyam (2000: 104-40)
24. Abul Fazl, in a well-known passage, describes 'regulation for the manner in which people are to show their obeisance'. See, *Ain-i-Akbari* (1989a: I, 167-68, 174), also see, Ali, Mubarak (1980:40-62).