

THE EVOLUTION OF THE *MANṢAB* SYSTEM UNDER AKBAR UNTIL 1596–7

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The organization of the nobility of the Indian Mughal Empire in numerical grades (*manṣabs*) is now generally recognized as one of the basic elements of its administrative and military structure. Equally general, perhaps, has been a recognition of the *manṣab* system's many complexities. However, by combining the information in Abu 'l-Fazl's *Ā'in-i Akbarī* with a number of 17th-century texts and documents, it has been possible to construct a tolerable picture of the working of the *manṣab* system during the 17th century. In many respects, the basic features were first delineated by Moreland and Abdul Aziz,¹ but their views have been greatly refined, and often substantially revised, by M. Athar Ali and Irfan Habib.² It is now accepted as beyond argument that by Akbar's death (1605), *manṣab* was explained in two numerical representations: the first, *zāt*, determined the holder's personal pay (*ṭalab-i khāṣa*) and status in the hierarchy; the second (*sawār*) indicated the number of horsemen to be maintained by the holder and set the amount sanctioned to cover their pay (*ṭalab-i tābīnān*). In each case, the rank-number was converted into monetary claims and military obligation by means of the schedules (*dastūr al-'amals*) in force at the time. The system undoubtedly gave to the Mughal nobility and military machine a high degree of uniformity and regularity in its functioning, which is likely to have contributed greatly to the stability and strength of the Empire.

The question of how the *manṣab* evolved before it reached, what may, by 1605, be called its classic form (summarily described above) has elicited diverse answers. Both Moreland and Abdul Aziz held that a single numerical rank existed before Akbar, the number directly indicating the size of the cavalry contingent that the rank-holder was expected to maintain.³ Moreland further supposed that as this number became more and more a sham in terms of cavalry actually mustered, Akbar introduced the second (*sawār*) rank in his 11th regnal year (1566–67). Hereafter the new and usually smaller numerical rank indicated the size of the cavalry contingent to be maintained, while the first became what in course of time came to be called the *zāt* rank, indicating personal pay and status only.⁴ A. J. Qaisar, in a short but important paper, has cast doubt on the existence of numerical ranks before Akbar, and argued that the two ranks (*zāt* and *sawār*) came into existence simultaneously in the 18th regnal year (1573–74).⁵ Irfan Habib seems tacitly to accept Qaisar's finding that the two ranks were established in that year; and he continues to assume, as do practically all the previous writers, that the *Ā'in-i Akbarī*, in assigning to *manṣab*-holders a single rank in a list belonging to a period as late as the 40th regnal year

(1595–6), has simply given the *zāt* ranks and omitted to supply the *sawār* ranks.⁶

It is true that the absence of primary administrative documents makes the unravelling of the process of evolution of the *manṣab* system during Akbar's reign a difficult undertaking. But it has seemed to me that a study, *de novo*, of all the passages in our various authorities bearing upon the subject might yet give us sufficient light to enable a fresh interpretation to be made. In some respects the results could even be definitive.

To begin with, my reading of the sources leads me to concur with Qaisar that no numerical ranks existed before Akbar, or indeed until his 18th regnal year (1573–4), when according to Abū 'l-Faḥl, Akbar instituted the new system of ranks.⁷ The specific statement that these ranks of the 18th regnal year were numerical is made only in the description of this measure by Badā'ūnī and Mu'tamad Khān, but in their accounts the ranks appear clearly as innovations with no reference to any previous system of a like sort.⁸ The earliest record of the actual award of *manṣab* in terms of a numerical rank comes from the 21st year (1576–7).⁹

If numerical ranks did not exist earlier, the question how salary payments were made and military obligations imposed before Akbar, and during his early years then follows. Although there is no reference to numerical ranks during Humāyūn's reign, he did attempt some sort of classification of nobles, and in his time salaries were fixed according to that gradation. Khwāndamīr tells us that "at the command of the Emperor, Hindū Beg has fixed the salaries of the military personnel and also the grades (*marātib*) of the Imperial servants".¹⁰ It is further stated that "the royal (lit. grand) *bakhshīs* gave the stipend (*'alūfa*) and grades as written on the *sahams* (lit. 'arrows')".¹¹ But there is no mention of military obligations corresponding to the grades. It certainly seems difficult for any connexion between the size of military contingent and these grades to have existed, because Humāyūn created no more than twelve gradations, designated "arrows" (*tīr* or *saham*). To each of the twelve classes, into which the entire personnel were divided, was allotted one *saham*. This system of gradation covered everyone, starting from the Emperor himself down to the door-keepers and camel-drivers and included the divines, the *sayyids* and scholars as well.¹² One can hardly imagine that military contingents could have been the basis, or even one of the criteria, of such a gradation.

In the first decade of Akbar's reign, evidence of any link between the size of contingent maintained by a noble and the salary paid to him (usually in the form of *jāgīr* or *tuyūl* assignment) is hard to find. Shams ud-dīn Muḥammad Atka Khān's petition to the Emperor, made in the 6th year (1561–2), makes it obvious that salaries were fixed by the Emperor for individuals in quite an arbitrary fashion. In complaining of the unfair fixing of salaries, the petitioner advanced loyalty, and services rendered, as the acceptable criteria for this

purpose; he does not even mention the size of contingent actually maintained.¹³ There are a number of other references in the *Akbar-nāma* and the *Ṭabaqāt-i Akbarī* indicating that up to the 18th regnal year, the salaries were specified without defining, at least explicitly, associated military obligations.¹⁴

The measures adopted by Akbar in the 11th year (1566–7) (taken by Moreland to signify the institution of numerical ranks) are then the earliest, where an attempt to impose the obligation of maintaining a certain number of troopers is made. Abu 'l-Faḥl says:¹⁵

“... For all the *umarā'* and the Imperial servants, the (number of) retainers (*naukar*) was fixed and it was settled that everyone would keep some in readiness for service. The troopers belonging to nobles were divided into three categories; and it was ordered that the first kind would get 48,000 *dāms* per year, the second 32,000 *dāms* and the third 24,000 *dāms* per year”.

This passage led Moreland to believe that the second (or *sawār*) rank had now been introduced. However, the passage is not only vague about the size of the retinue to be maintained, but the system it envisages shows a fundamental difference from the *manṣab* system proper. Here the system of territorial assignment (*jāgīr*) is taken for granted and the number of troopers is fixed in conformity with it, instead of awarding a rank first, defining the number of troopers on its basis, and then assigning the *jāgīr*, as was the case under the evolved *manṣab* system.¹⁶ This is made particularly clear by Mū'tamad Khān's exposition of the same measure (of the 11th regnal year). He says that “the number of horsemen to be maintained by the nobles was fixed in accordance with the *jāgīrs* (held by them)”.¹⁷

It also does not seem possible to determine the precise basis on which the troopers were categorized in the 11th year. However, in later years, the rates varied according to the race of the noble or the number of horses per trooper. Nevertheless, the salaries quoted here, per trooper, appear to be very high in comparison with the rates fixed later (in the 40th year, 1595–6).¹⁸ It is possible, however, that the rates of the 11th year were high because the *jama'* (the expected net revenue realization) was greatly inflated.¹⁹ Quite naturally, if the *jama'* was high, the division of its amount by a low rate of salary would have resulted in the imposition upon the assignee of the obligation to furnish an impossibly large contingent. It must also be remembered that the *dāgh* or branding system had not yet been introduced; so whatever might be the military obligation fixed in theory, it could not in actual fact have been effective in the absence of a system of muster and brand.

What was achieved in the 11th year had, therefore, little to do with the fixing of numerical ranks. The 11th regnal year saw simply an attempt to work out the size of military obligation from the estimated revenues of *jāgīr*, with the use of some fixed salary rates per trooper. The *Iqbāl-nāma* adds that the regulations continued until the *dāgh* was introduced in 1573–4.²⁰ This means, in other

words, that the numerical ranks did not really come before the 18th year (1573–4).

One piece of evidence which seemingly contradicts all of this and appears to project the existence of the numerical ranks (*manṣabs*) right back to the beginning of Akbar's reign is offered by the list of nobles given in the *Ā'in-i Akbarī*.²¹ Abu 'l-Faḥl assigns numerical ranks also to those nobles who died long before the 18th regnal year, or even the 11th year (e.g., Bairam Khān, Tardī Beg and a number of others). This needs some explaining. Qaisar has suggested that Abu 'l-Faḥl has assigned posthumous ranks to those who died before the 18th year, in order to place them in the same list as the other nobles in hierarchical order.²² He bases this contention on the list of Akbar's nobles in the *Ṭabaqāt-i Akbarī*,²³ which does not give numerical ranks to any noble otherwise known to have died before the 18th or 19th regnal year.

Qaisar's explanation of the ranks assigned to the earlier nobles in the *Ā'in-i Akbarī* as "fictitious" ranks seems reasonable, since Abu 'l-Faḥl's task was to compile a comprehensive list of all the grandees of the Empire (*buzurgān-i jāwīd-daulat*), whether dead or alive, until the 40th year; while he professedly wanted to avoid the "unbecoming task" of recording their deeds and misdeeds. The easy way adopted was simply to place them according to their *manṣabs*.²⁴ But he was faced with the problem of assigning proper places to those who had died before the *manṣabs* were introduced; and he had no option but to place the earlier nobles among different groups of *manṣab*-holders, thus giving them posthumously, as it were, ranks broadly corresponding to what he deemed to have been their status at the end of their careers.

Nizām ud-dīn in his *Ṭabaqāt-i Akbarī*, on the other hand, offers short notices of nobles (avowedly of ranks of above 500 only), which are not arranged according to any hierarchical order. He therefore records *manṣabs* which were actually awarded. I have checked all his names with indexed references in the *Akbar-nāma*, and my finding is the same as that of Qaisar: there is not a single instance in his notices of a *manṣab* being assigned to any noble who is known to have died before the 18th year. Such earlier nobles as are listed under different *manṣabs* by Abu 'l-Faḥl, here appear without any *manṣab* whatsoever.²⁵ Nizām ud-dīn's list is, then, another proof that no numerical ranks existed before the 18th regnal year, and thus corrects the contrary impression which the *Ā'in*'s list conveys.

We may now pass on to the crucial measure undertaken in the 18th regnal year (1573–4), and examine what was done then, particularly the question whether twofold *manṣab*-ranks were instituted at that time. Abu 'l-Faḥl says that in that year the *dāgh* was introduced, and the ranks (*marātib*) of the Imperial officials were fixed.²⁶ These innovations were actually put into effect during the next year (the 19th regnal year, 1574–5).²⁷ It is under the accounts

of the latter year that we have the first instance of the use of the word *manṣab* in the sense of rank and not (as hitherto) a post or office.²⁸

Mu'tamad Khān treats of this measure at some length. His vision therefore merits attention. He says (under the 19th year):²⁹

"... *Manṣabs* from *dahbāshī* (10) to *panjḥazārī* (5,000) were established and the salary for each was fixed. A regulation to the effect that the *manṣabdārs* would separately bring their personal horses and elephants for branding (*dāgh*) was imposed. A trooper, if capable of being a *sih-aspa* (horseman with three horses) would bring three horses; if capable of being *do-aspa* (horseman with two horses), two horses; if capable of being a *yak-aspa* (horseman with one horse only), he would bring one horse for the *dāgh*. In this way the pay (*alūfa*) for everyone was fixed".

It emerges from the above passage that the salaries of the *manṣabdārs* were fixed according to their *manṣabs*, while the rates for their troopers were sanctioned separately. Moreover, the *manṣabdārs* were to maintain a separate stable of animals (elephants and horses) on their own according to their *manṣabs*.

A significant point is that both Abu 'l-Faḥl and Mu'tamad Khān categorically state that the ranks were fixed "in proportion to (their) fidelity and organisation (*sar-kardan*) of a unit" and "capacity for leadership and resolution in command of a unit".³⁰ In other words both suggest that the rank was related to the size of the contingent maintained by the *manṣabdār*.³¹ At the same time, they make no suggestion that there were twofold (*zāt* and *sawār*) ranks; and thus they provide no support at all for Moreland's assumption that twofold ranks already existed, or for Qaisar's suggestion that the measure of the 18th–19th year itself directly created twofold ranks.

Even more than Abu 'l-Faḥl and Mu'tamad Khān, Badā'ūnī explicitly relates the *manṣab*, as a single numerical rank, to the number of horsemen (*sawār*) to be maintained. His passage is of great interest and needs to be translated in full:³²

"... It was settled that first the nobles would be awarded the *manṣab* of *bistī* (20) so that each should attend with his retainers (*tābīnān*)³³ in the guard or the place or fort (lit. refuge) which has been fixed (for him). When he has presented those twenty horsemen through the brand (*dāgh*), according to the regulations, at that time he might be made a *ṣadī* (100), etc.; and elephants, horses and camels corresponding to his *manṣab* would be maintained by him according to the rules. When he has brought this number of horsemen to muster, he could, obtaining favour in accordance with his capacity and condition, reach the *manṣab* of *ḥazārī* (1,000) and *do-ḥazārī* (2,000) up to *panj-ḥazārī* (5,000), higher than which there is no rank (*pāya*)".

Significantly enough, the final *yā* (-ī, as in *ṣadī*, *panj-ḥazārī*, etc.), that was reserved in the later period exclusively to indicate the *zāt* rank,³⁴ is used here for a rank that quite evidently determines the size of the military contingent. This was not a case of loose usage by Badā'ūnī, because up till 1595–6, the

single rank that was in vogue is always indicated by the final *yā* in all our authorities.³⁵ Abu 'l-Faḥl, who is usually very careful in the selection of words, himself uses the *yā*-ending for the *manṣab* which, according to his own understanding, is certainly the rank by which the contingent is fixed. Recording the creation of *manṣabs* higher than 5,000 under the 22nd year, for the three sons of Akbar, he says:³⁶

“... (As) the troopers (*sipāh*) of the grandees and nobles (*nau'īnān-i wālā-shukoh u umarā'-yi 'ālī-qadar*) did not exceed 5,000, the rank of the prince Sulṭān Salīm was fixed as *dah-hazārī* (10,000); Sulṭān Murād was awarded the *manṣab* of *haft-hazārī* (7,000); and Sulṭān Dāniyāl was honoured with the rank of *shash-hazārī* (6,000)”.

In this passage the princes' *manṣabs* (all above 5,000) are compared with the number of troops (*sipāh*) of the nobles, clearly indicating that the number signifying rank either was on a par with, or put a ceiling upon, the size of contingents. Yet the numbers signifying the ranks have the suffix *yā*, suggesting identity with the later *zāt* ranks. Indeed, Abu 'l-Faḥl, instead of simply saying that the highest *manṣab* allowed to nobles was 5,000 (*vide* Badā'ūnī and Mu'tamad Khān above), goes out of his way to speak of “5,000 troopers” instead, so as to emphasize the inter-connexion between the single *manṣab* and the size of contingents.

This interpretation of the significance initially of *manṣab* as a single rank is further supported by the *Ṭabaqāt*'s indifferent way of expressing *manṣabs* in terms of numbers of troopers (*sawārs* or *naukars*).³⁷ Moreover in his remarks at the end of his list of Akbar's nobles, Nizām ud-dīn makes it clear that the *manṣabs* he records are also military ranks. He says:³⁸

“... Let it be known that such of the Imperial servants as maintain only 500 retainers (*naukar*) are not counted among the *umarā'* (pl. of *amīr*); the rank (*martaba*) of everyone who is mentioned here is higher than this rank, requisite for being an *amīr* (*palla-i imārat*)”.

Since Nizām ud-dīn makes explicit reference to the *Ā'īn*'s list of nobles, and since — leaving barely twenty cases aside — his list gives exactly the same *manṣabs* as the *Ā'īn*, one can safely conclude that, contrary to the general assumption,³⁹ the *manṣabs* given in the *Ā'īn*'s list are not *zāt* ranks, but single ranks that represented the number of troopers to be mustered, and at the same time determined personal pay. Abu 'l-Faḥl, therefore, is not to be held guilty of an omission for failing to record the *sawār* ranks, since as yet they simply did not exist. It may be noted that Abu 'l-Faḥl assigns his list of nobles to the 40th regnal year (1595–6) and, indeed, it contains the name of a person assigned *manṣabs* (single only) according to the *Akbar-nāma* in that very year.⁴⁰ Apparently, Abu 'l-Faḥl revised his list (available in an earlier form to the author of the *Ṭabaqāt-i Akbarī*) up to that year. It is clear, then, that at least until 1595–6, only a single rank was in vogue.