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Critical Journal of Social Sciences (CJSS)
Volume 1, No. 2 | 2025
pp. 60 – 77

HISTORIOGRAPHICAL SHIFTS IN ICONOCLASM: COLONIAL TO CONTEMPORARY NARRATIVES OF TEMPLE DESECRATION UNDER THE MUGHALS

CAMBIOS HISTORIOGRÁFICOS EN LA ICONOCLASIA: NARRATIVAS COLONIALES A CONTEMPORÁNEAS DE LA PROFANACIÓN DE TEMPLOS BAJO LOS MOGOLES

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Critical Journal of Social Sciences (CJSS)

ISSN: 3101-0415

Volume 1, No. 2 | 2025
pp. 60 - 77

Received: October 15, 2025 · Accepted: November 19, 2025

Abstract

This study explores the changing historiographical trends surrounding iconoclasm, particularly temple desecration during the Mughal period. It suggests that explanations of temple desecration should move beyond interpretations limited to religious policy or political strategies and instead consider temples as multi-functional institutions whose social, economic, educational, and religious centrality made them strong symbols of power and, consequently, targets of contestation. The study underscores that the history of iconoclasm encompasses not only the acts themselves but also their evolving representation in writing by successive generations of historians contesting the memory of temple desecration. This idea stems from long-standing debates in South Asian historiography about desecration and adaptation of sacred sites, embodying intersections of power, legitimacy, and cultural negotiation. Emerging during the early Islamic invasions in the subcontinent, these practices were often associated with proclamations of domination, appropriation of sacred spaces, and

at times, resource acquisition, later evolving into tools of political control and expressions of authority. Over time, varied interpretations of these practices have emerged. Colonialist and nationalist interpretations emphasized religious intolerance, while recent scholarship has situated these acts within broader political, social, economic, and cultural contexts. The integration of both quantitative and qualitative methods in contemporary scholarship has further contributed to diverse reinterpretations, representing an important milestone in the historical discourse of iconoclasm.

Keywords
historiography, iconoclasm, Mughal, religious policy, temple desecration

1. INTRODUCTION

Iconoclasm in medieval India remains one of the most contested themes in South Asian historiography. Central to this theme is the desecration of temples and religious images by various Indo-Muslim dynasties and later during the Mughal period. While some scholars interpret these acts as expressions of religious intolerance, others view them as instruments of political power or strategies of symbolic statecraft. The subject of iconoclasm, particularly temple desecration, continues to attract significant scholarly attention as historical interpretations and historiographical methodologies evolve over time.

This study focuses on the shifting paradigms within historiography concerning temple desecration during the Mughal period (1526 to 1707 CE), encompassing the reigns from Babur to Aurangzeb. Although the Mughal Empire officially lasted until 1857 CE, the study confines itself to the first two centuries of Mughal rule, when imperial expansion and authority were at their peak and when acts of temple desecration were most systematically recorded in official court chronicles. These chronicles from 1526 to 1707 CE serve as the primary evidentiary foundation upon which historians from various schools of thought have constructed their interpretations. The study seeks to trace how the historiography of iconoclasm has evolved using these chronicles as a consistent analytical base, highlighting the ways in which changing ideological standpoints and methodological frameworks have shaped understandings of temple desecration in the Mughal period.

1.1. The Rise of Mughal Chronicles

During the Mughal period, a distinct tradition of historical writing emerged under Persian influence, in the shape of official chronicles - "namah"[1], to document royal affairs. This

[1] Namahs, which originated from Persian tradition and mean "book" or "letters", were adopted by the Mughals as a unique form of official historiography. These texts were based on contemporary written records, such as waqai (official reports of the province) and akhbarat-i-mu'alla (court bulletins) (Sarkar, 1977, p. 98).

practice began during the reign of Akbar, who granted court historians access to the state archives (Sreedharan, 2022). While the practice of namah writing started under Akbar, earlier autobiographical works, such as Babur's "Tuzuk-i-Baburi" or the "Baburnama," established important literary and stylistic precedents for Mughal historiography.

Under Akbar, the genre reached its pinnacle with works like the "Tarikh-i-Alfi" by Mulla Ahmad of Thatta and Asaf Khan, Abul Fazl's "Akbar-namah" and "Ain-i-Akbari," all of which glorified the emperor as a universal monarch. In contrast, counter-narratives emerged in works like Nizamuddin Ahmad's "Tabaqat-i-Akbari" and Badauni's "Muntakhab-ut-Tawarikh," which offered critical evaluations of Akbar's administration and policies. This tradition continued with Mutamad Khan's "Iqbal-namah-i-Jahangiri," "Ma'athir-i-Jahangiri," and Abdul Hamid Lahori's "Badshahnama," detailing the reign of Shah Jahan.

During Aurangzeb's reign, Muhammad Kazim began the "Alamgir Nama," though the work remained incomplete after the emperor withdrew royal patronage and discouraged the continuation of official court histories beyond the first ten years of his reign (Sarkar, 2022; Goel, 2019). Nonetheless, the tradition persisted in independent works of Mustaid Khan's "Maasir-i-Alamgiri" and Khafi Khan's "Muntakhab-ul-Lubab."

These chronicles not only celebrated the dynasty but also documented their acts of temple desecration. Shaykh Zain's "Fathnama," composed for Babur, describes "Allah" as the "destroyer of idols from their very foundations" (Goel, 2019, p. 138), a model that Babur sought to emulate by breaking the idols of the idol-worshippers. The "Tarikh-i-Baburi" records the destruction of Hindu and Jain temples in central India (Goel, 2019). In Badauni's "Muntakhab-ut-Tawarikh," Akbar is shown granting "pargana of Lakhnou as Jagir" (group of villages offered as land grant) to Mahdi Qasim Khan, who then marched to demolish temples (Al-Badaoni, 1990). While another section of this work recounted the fall of "Nagarkot Temple" in Himachal Pradesh, describing mass killings, idol desecration, and a mosque erected in its place (Al-Badaoni, 1990).

The "Shash Fat'h-i-Kangra" celebrates Jahangir's conquest of Kangra Fort (1620), portraying it as an endorsed royal victory. Jahangir's "Tuzuk" mentions desecration of temples at Ajmer, Kangra, and Varanasi, while Shykh Abul Wahab's "Intikhab-i-Jahangir Shahi" details the destruction of Jain temples in Gujarat with their idols thrown at mosque entrances to be trampled (Goel, 2019). Similarly, Abdul Hamid Lahori's "Badshahnama" records Shah Jahan's demolition of seventy-six temples in Varanasi, the razing of Bir Singh Dev's grand temple at Orchha, and temple conversions in Kashmir (Elliot, 1875). Inayat Khan's "Shahjahannama" further describes royal ordinances for destruction of temples at Orchha (Khan, 1990).

Aurangzeb's era generated even more extensive records concerning the destruction of Hindu religious sites and the exclusion of Hindus from administrative positions. Bakhtawar Khan's "Mirat-i-Alam" noted the widespread demolition of Hindu shrines (Goel, 2019). Muhammad Kazim's "Alamgir Nama" recounted the desecration of temples in Bihar and Bengal (Goel, 2019). Saqi Mustaid Khan's "Ma'asır-i-Alamgiri" documented the emperor's

general order to demolish schools and temples in Varanasi, Mathura, Rajasthan, and beyond (Sarkar, 1947). Contemporary compilations such as Inayatullah's "Kalimat-i-Tayyibat", "Ganj-i-Arshadi" and Ishwardas Nagar's "Futuhat-i-Alamgiri" further substantiated these actions.

To summarize, the Mughal chronicles play an important role in comprehending not only the period's political culture but also the methods through which actions such as temple desecration entered the historical record and were later interpreted. This study seeks to highlight their timeless role as foundational sources for reconstructing the intricacies of Mughal policy and the developments of historiographical debate, tracing how the origins of iconoclasm under the Mughals were constructed, contested, and reinterpreted from colonial to contemporary times.

2. METHODOLOGY

This study employs a historical narrative approach to trace the evolving interpretations and paradigmatic shifts in the study of Mughal iconoclasm and temple desecration. It involves a critical review of the works of historians representing different schools of thought: Colonial, Nationalist, Marxist and Modern to analyse how interpretations have evolved over time and substantially changed or redefined our understanding of Mughal India history.

In accordance with this strategy, literature was chosen through a targeted study of significant historiographical sources that discuss iconoclasm, temple desecration, and administrative policy in the Mughal context. Each selected work was examined for its interpretive framework and engagement with foundational court chronicles and material evidence. Rather than attributing contemporary judgments to earlier interpretations, the study attempts to understand how historians' analytical decisions and ideological positionings influenced their portrayal of such historical events.

This paper, using a historical narrative method, maps the evolution of interpretations surrounding temple desecration under Mughal rule, without reducing the analysis to a mere comparison of different schools of thought. The analysis follows changes in historiographical focus, highlighting the primary analytical priorities, like the religious, political, economic, or symbolic, that have shaped each era's understanding. By tracking these developments sequentially, the study identifies key turning points like new sources, evolving theories, and methodological innovations that have influenced historians' perspectives on the subject. Presenting this evolution in a narrative form reveals the broader patterns and trajectories that have shaped scholarly debates on Mughal iconoclasm across generations.

3. COLONIAL HISTORIOGRAPHY

Mughal histories were initially interpreted by colonial historians who, following their conquest of India during the empire's decline, approached this subject through a distinctly Western lens. Their perspective portrayed the rulers of the Orient as "absolute" and "oppressive," framing their reign as a period of "economic stagnation" and "societal decline"

(Bernier, 1916). These representations sought to legitimize colonial domination over India by emphasizing alleged despotism and backwardness in precolonial polities. Drawing on European travel accounts, gazetteers, memoirs, and early findings of the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI), their writings established a foundational framework for interpreting Mughal iconoclasm.

Colonial historiography of the Mughal era was strongly influenced by Francois Bernier's theory of "Oriental Despotism," articulated in his "Letter to Colbert" from 1670 which depicted Hindustan as a land characterized by "arbitrary power, economic stagnation, and social decline." Viewing the Mughal Empire through an imperial lens, colonial historians portrayed the rulers as "despotic" and "religiously intolerant," relying on partial translations and selective studies of Persian chronicles such as Abul Fazl's "Akbarnama" and "Ain-i-Akbari," Jahangir's "Tuzuk-i-Jahangiri" and the "Babur-Nama." Owing to the limited accessibility to the Persian texts, European travelogues composed largely of personal observations or second-hand accounts became the building blocks of the colonial construction of Mughal history, particularly shaping the discourse on temple desecration and iconoclasm.

The writings of European travellers, like those of Francois Bernier, Jean-Baptiste Tavernier, and Niccolao Manucci, gained particular significance in shaping colonial and later historical understandings of Mughal India. Bernier's travel observations from the 1660s, first published in French in 1670 and later in English in 1916, described the Keshava Deva temple in Mathura as "an ancient and magnificent temple of idols" (p. 284), reinforcing its architectural brilliance and artistic excellence of Indian craftsmanship at the time. Tavernier (1889) likewise reinforced this by referring to it as "one of the most sumptuous buildings in all India" (p. 240–241). The narrative of its desecration entered colonial discourse primarily through Niccolao Manucci (1907), who noted the demolition of the Keshava Deva temple under Aurangzeb and the construction of a mosque in its place. Manucci also noted the renaming of the site as "Essslamabad" (Islamabad), a claim reflecting colonial attempts to interpret Mughal state actions within a framework of religious conquest.

In the early seventeenth century, William Finch (an English merchant for the East India Company) made an important observation that influenced evidence-based interpretations of iconoclasm. As documented by William Foster in "Early Travels in India" (1921), Finch, during his travel to Ayodhya, observed Hindu worship at the ruins of "Ramkot" in Ayodhya, which he identified as the site of Rama's temple, suggesting an earlier Hindu structure. The location corresponds to the area later known as the "Babri Masjid–Ram Janmabhumi" site, key to one of India's most contested historical and political debates. This connection illustrates how colonial-era documentation later became intertwined with modern interpretations of temple desecration and the continuity of Hindu worship under Islamic rule.

By the nineteenth century, colonial documentation extended to archaeological surveys that further amplified temple desecration narratives. James Prinsep's "Benares Illustrated" (1831) provided detailed documentation of Varanasi's architecture, including the Kashi

Vishwanath temple's earlier "cruciform layout" described in the *Kashi Khanda* (detailed account of Kashi) of the *Skanda Purana*. Particularly distinctive were his drawings depicting the "Gyanvapi mosque" situated on the temple site, adjacent to a platform built by the Hindus, which he interpreted as evidence of Hindu religious continuity despite Islamic appropriation of space. Similarly, M.A. Sherring's "Benares: Past and Present" (1868) provides a detailed account of temple desecration under Aurangzeb, noting sites, like the "Krittivasesvara, Bindu Madhava, Vishwanath, and Bakaria Kund," where mosques were built on the ruins of these demolished temples. Sherring's work highlights remnants such as the "Lat Bhairava" pillar and the memory of minarets known as "Madhavarao Ka Dharhara," which help preserve traces of valuable structures, implying pre-existing temples (Jain, 2025) and the place's layered history of conflict, adaptation, and resilience.

Expanding upon such documentation, Sir Henry M. Elliot, with John Dowson in "The History of India as Told by Its Own Historians" (1867-77), established a narrative portraying Muslim rule as an era characterized by "idols mutilated, temples razed, forcible conversions, and massacres," which led Hindus into "the lowest depths of wretchedness and despondency" (Vol. I, p. xxi). Excerpts from Mughal court chronicles, translated and considered alongside European travellers' accounts, their work selectively framed iconoclasm with a convincing account of religious tyranny, which reinforced the narrative of British rule as a civilizing intervention in India.

Archaeological and administrative surveys from the nineteenth century further reinforced this interpretive framework. Alexander Cunningham, the first Director-General of the Archaeological Survey of India, in his 1871 report on Mathura, recorded local traditions attributing the demolition of the Keshava Deva temple to Aurangzeb. He claimed to have verified this by physical evidence such as slabs bearing Nagari inscriptions reused in the mosque's pavement, and the mosque's back wall was built directly on the temple's original plinth. F.S. Growse's "Mathura: A District Memoir" (1874) added specificity by dating the Keshava Deva temple destruction to 1669, "the eleventh year of the reign of the iconoclastic Aurangzeb" (p. 126). He noted that the mosque erected on its ruins was "of little architectural value," while describing Govinda Deva temple as "the most impressive religious edifice that Hindu art has ever produced, at least in Upper India" (p. 126).

Comparable observations by other colonial historians extended these interpretations beyond Banaras and Mathura. Walter Lawrence described Kashmir in "The Valley of Kashmir" (1895), as the "holy land of the Hindus" and documented the vestiges of desecrated Hindu temples as evidence of Mughal iconoclasm, noting that nearly every village contained relics of antiquity (p. 161). Similarly, the Sun Temple at Multan, one of Northern India's most celebrated shrines and longstanding pilgrimage centres was frequently cited as an example of religious desecration, even before the Mughal period. According to Edward Maclagan's "Multan Gazetteer" (1926), the temple was last destroyed by Aurangzeb and replaced by a Jama Masjid; however, earlier literary evidence complicated this narrative. In the seventeenth century, French traveller Jean de Thévenot described Hindu pilgrims visiting this

site, worshipping an idol with "a black face cloathed in red Leather" and "two Pearls in place of Eyes," with offerings collected by the local governor (Sen, 1949, p. 78). Thévenot indicated that, despite reports of destruction, the site continued to function as a Hindu place of worship.

A.K. Forbes, in "Rasmala" (1878), described the desecration of the Sun Temple at Modhera, Gujarat. The author observed that the temple was "nearly complete, although indentations are visible upon some of the columns, such as might have been made in wood by sharp weapons, to which the Mohummedans point as marks of the swords of the Islamicate saints" (p. 195, 196). By corroborating archaeological observations with local accounts, Forbes established this narrative of attack on the temple structure by Islamic invaders.

Through gazetteers, archaeological surveys, and translated chronicles, colonial scholarship thus constructed a narrative that portrayed temple desecration by the Mughals as systematic and religiously motivated. By aligning excerpts from court chronicles with European travelogues and juxtaposing administrative reports and archaeological documentation, colonial historians transformed these interpretive accounts into seemingly verified historical facts and Mughal iconoclasm as a central and defining aspect of India's past. Within this interpretive framework, rooted in the idea of Oriental Despotism, Indian society was portrayed as stagnant, irrational and morally inferior in contrast to Europe's progressive rational order.

While colonial writings laid the groundwork for later scholarship by systematically compiling records of Mughal administration, temple policies and regional architecture, their analysis, however, reflected selective interpretations shaped by colonial ideology. Their tendency to emphasize political instability and religious prejudice thereby served to legitimize British rule as a corrective to centuries of Oriental despotism. They overlooked the administrative intricacies, economic pragmatism, and cultural syncretism aspects of Mughal governance. In summary, colonial historiography, though instrumental in preserving crucial textual and architectural records, ultimately offered a monolithic narrative of religious persecution.

4. NATIONALIST HISTORIOGRAPHY

Nationalist historiography developed in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as a direct response to colonial portrayals of India's past. While colonial interpretations depicted Mughal emperors as "despotic rulers" who allegedly destroyed the Hindu institutions and culture, nationalist historians re-examined the primary sources to establish a narrative that glorified India's historical agency and cultural resilience in the face of repeated invasions and threats.

Initially, this school of thought focused on dynastic histories of ancient and medieval India to counter colonial interpretations. Over time, it expanded its analytical scope to include

elements like 'religion, caste, language, economy, and culture.' Eminent historians like R.C. Majumdar, Jadunath Sarkar, R.P. Tripathi, K.P. Jayaswal, R.C. Dutta, S.R. Sharma, Sita Ram Goel, and Meenakshi Jain contributed to the evolution of this interpretive framework.

Within this interpretive framework, the religious policies of the Mughal emperors, particularly Aurangzeb, garnered significant attention. Jadunath Sarkar's "Studies in Aurangzeb's Reign" (1933, 2022) provided a detailed thematic analysis of the emperor's life and administration, grounded in a systematic analysis of a range of primary sources. Central to this were Aurangzeb's personal letters, which gained much evidentiary importance due to the absence of an official chronicle in the later years of his reign[2].

In the context of temple desecration, Sarkar attributed religious reasons to his actions and observed that Aurangzeb "…began to give free play to his RELIGIOUS BIGOTRY," highlighting the emperor's heightened zeal and systematic intensification of attacks on Hindu temples (p. 11). He substantiated this interpretation by citing various orders, or "farmans," directed by the emperor to destroy the temples and educational institutions, alongside administrative measures like the reimposition of "jizya" (pilgrimage tax) and the restriction of Hindu rituals like "Tuladana," large gatherings in fairs, and other Hindu festivals.

In a similar vein, S.R. Sharma's "The Religious Policy of the Mughal Emperors" (1940) traced the evolution of Mughal religious policy and proposed a two-phase analytical theory. In the first phase, the rulers preceding Akbar are examined; they primarily relied on military strength while imposing a poll tax (jizya) and pilgrimage tax on dhimmis (non-Muslims) in exchange for protection and the right to practice their religion. The second phase, starting with Akbar, was marked by a deliberate policy of religious tolerance that encouraged temple construction and abolished the jizya and pilgrimage tax. This policy was followed, though in lesser degrees, by his successors Jahangir and Shah Jahan.

During the reign of these rulers, Sharma documents temple desecration, usually as a component of "military measures." Aurangzeb's reign, however, is interpreted to have brought an end to this. While he acknowledged that some of the early temple desecrations under him can be perceived as military measures, the author characterized later desecrations as an "act without the provocation of military necessity" (p. 137), indicating a purposeful shift from previous Mughal policy. According to Sharma, Aurangzeb's rule indicated a shift from political dimension to religious orthodoxy

In contrast, R.P. Tripathi, in "Rise and the Fall of the Mughal Empire" (1956), analysed Mughal religious policy, focusing particularly on Akbar's reign. Tripathi argued that the acts of temple desecration under the Mughals were majorly driven by political or military

[2] According to Sarkar (1933), the personal and official letters of Aurangzeb from various sources such as Kalimat-i-Taibiyyat, Akham-i-Alamgiri, Adab-i-Alamgiri, Raqaim-i-Karaim, and Mirat-i-Ahmadi especially captures the start and the end of his reign. Other short notes and stray letters housed in various collections have aided in supplementing data for reconstruction of Aurangzeb's character.

considerations, aimed at consolidating imperial authority and administrative cohesion in a religiously diverse empire, rather than arising out of religious hatred or intolerance.

R.C. Majumdar's seventh volume, "The Mughul Empire," in his series "The History and Culture of the Indian People," offered one of the most focused analyses of Mughal religious policies, drawing on editions from 1974 through 2022. The early emperors, Babar and Humayun, receive only brief mention regarding their religious inclinations, while Akbar's reign was studied in depth, including his liberal religious outlook and the institution of "sulh-i-kul" (universal peace). Jahangir was characterized as "tolerant in religious matters" (p. 193), though instances of orthodoxy are found in sources referencing the temple desecration at Ajmer. For Shah Jahan, Mazumdar described a ruler "more orthodox" and "less tolerant" and having "an uncompromising" religious policy (p. 212). Lastly, Majumdar attributed the decline of the Mughal empire to Aurangzeb's religious orthodoxy (p. 302), identifying a gradual narrowing of religious policies that corresponded with an increase in temple desecration.

Another major work of the late twentieth century is Sita Ram Goel's series "Hindu Temples and What Happened to Them" (1990, 2019), which clearly addresses the issue of temple desecration. Goel emphasized that regional literature from the medieval period seldom discusses Islamic iconoclasm from a Hindu perspective. The author reconstructed the situation of Indian temples during Islamic rule, drawing on chronicles, inscriptions, and archaeological evidence. He stated that idols were mutilated or removed to be buried in mosque foundations, and temples were damaged, despoiled, razed, or transformed into mosques with some modifications to the structure reusing temple elements. Goel stressed the Islamic invaders' purposeful efforts to demolish India's unique cultural and religious structures. He also strongly critiques the emerging Marxist historiography, contending that attempts to explain temple desecration as solely politically or materially motivated underplay the substantial evidence of religious iconoclasm found in inscriptions and chronicles.

In the contemporary period, Meenakshi Jain stands out as one of the major proponents of nationalist historiography. In "Flight of Deities and Rebirth of Temples" (2019, 2025), she criticized Marxist and Modern scholarship for emphasizing political elements in temple desecration and reducing them to "…transactional institutions concerning the king and deity alone" (p. 20). Jain emphasized two key points: (a) evidence of shrines rebuilt by some unidentified patrons, suggesting a community-led effort to maintain their worship customs; and (b) devotees burying holy images of their deities to protect them from desecration. The author discussed Pushpa Prasad's (1990) work on Sanskrit inscriptions from the Delhi Sultanate Period, which records Raja Ajaysimha's burial of a Durga image in a pit after the "Chandi Mahayagna" in the late 12th century, to safeguard it from destruction by the "mlecchas" (p. 5). She questioned the Marxist interpretation that viewed the appropriation of images by Hindu rulers like the Cholas as purely political acts, a framework used to rationalize Islamic temple desecration. The Cholas, she argued, restored the images in their own worship spaces, while the Islamic invaders demolished temples and defaced the deities (p. 12).

Meenakshi Jain's recent works, including "Vasudev Krishna and Mathura" (2021) and "Vishwanath Rises and Rises: The Story of Eternal Kashi" (2024), provide a detailed history of Mathura and Kashi as major Hindu religious centres. Jain provides an in-depth analysis of the many temples constructed, desecrated, and restored in Mathura and Varanasi throughout the medieval and Mughal periods. She argues that these attacks were not driven solely by political expediency but were also intended to weaken the role of these temples as centres of Hindu religious, cultural, economic, and educational life.

In summary, nationalist historiography emerged in response to colonial depictions of India's past, with the goal of restoring cultural agency and reigniting confidence in the country's continuous civilization in the face of foreign domination. They reconstructed events of temple desecration and Mughal policy through political and religious lenses. Their narratives frequently emphasized the resilience of Hindu society and highlighted the moral and cultural contrast between indigenous traditions and foreign rulers. However, driven by their time's intellectual and political imperatives, many of these works took a binary view of Indian history, dividing it into Hindu and Muslim periods. While this approach played a vital role in fostering a sense of national identity and countering colonial stereotypes, it often promoted a morally polarized anti-colonial sentiment, preventing the development of intricate, pluralistic realities of Mughal-era iconoclasm and the complexities of historical memory.

5. MARXIST HISTORIOGRAPHY

The post-independence phase of Indian historiography witnessed a significant transformation with the prevalence of Marxist interpretation, which challenged previous frameworks rooted in colonial and nationalist schools. Historians such as D.D. Kosambi, Mohammad Habib, Irfan Habib, R.S. Sharma, Romila Thapar, Satish Chandra, and Richard M. Eaton re-evaluated Persian as well as indigenous sources, employing new methods of analysis. Their scholarship moved beyond literal and dynastic interpretations to emphasize the underlying social, economic, and political complexities, fundamentally reshaping the study of India's history.

Muhammad Habib's "Sultan Mahmud of Ghaznin: A Study" (1967) is often considered as one of the earliest texts for this school of thought that directly challenged the colonial interpretations of temple desecration. Habib argued that such acts arose primarily from political and economic motivations, rather than religious ones. He highlighted that temples often housed monetary wealth, making them major targets for invaders seeking resources to support future expeditions. Additionally, temple desecration was viewed as a strategy to control opposition, rather than as a consistent practice. Habib critiqued the colonial dependence on European travel accounts for their interpretations and instead advocated for the use of more traditional sources like the *farmans*, biographies, chronicles, and administrative records.

Satish Chandra's study extended this approach by examining Mughal religious and fiscal policies within their administrative setting. In "Jizyah and the State in India during the 17th Century" (1969), Chandra attributed Aurangzeb's reimposition of jizya in 1679 to financial and administrative requirements, such as replenishing the royal treasury after the abolition of certain taxes and creating jobs during the "jagirdari crisis" by establishing a department dedicated to jizya collection. In "Historiography, Religion, and State in Medieval India" (1996), Chandra argues that, while Aurangzeb's early temple desecrations were motivated by religious orthodoxy, they eventually became instruments of political strategy. Temples were viewed as "retaliatory targets," mere objects to be demolished in the case of rebellion (Chandra, 1996, p. 156).

Similarly, Romila Thapar, who was not limited to studying the Mughal period, significantly advanced the economic reasons for temple desecration as an Indian historical phenomenon. In "Narratives and the Making of History" (2000), Thapar revisited the instance of Gujarat's Somanatha temple and underscored the considerable wealth that temples acquired through donations and pilgrim taxes, much of which was directed into purposeful investments by temple authorities. Thapar argued that Mahmud of Ghazni's attack on the Somanatha temple was motivated by wealth gain and a desire to curtail the Arab monopoly on Indian trade (p.71).

One of the important works by Richard M. Eaton, titled "Temple Desecration and Indo-Muslim States" (2000), analyses temple desecration by Islamic invaders between 1192 and 1760 CE. Eaton observed that temples were typically "looted, redefined, or destroyed," which contributed to "detaching a defeated raja from the most prominent manifestation of his former legitimacy," putting a strong political dimension to these acts (p.104). He further noted that "Above all, the central icon housed in a royal temple's 'womb-chamber' and inhabited by the state-deity of the temple's royal patron, expressed the shared sovereignty of the king and the deity" (p. 105), suggesting that attacking the temple's central image is symbolic of defeating the ruler.

Eaton's narrative is further extended by his observations of inclusive and pragmatic policies from Akbar to Aurangzeb's reign, which included instances of issuing grants for the construction of Hindu institutions, contrary to the narrative of religious resentment. He documented selective instances of temple desecration, like in Orchha, by Shah Jahan in 1635, as a political situation and reaction to the Hindu king's revolt and the subsequent destruction of a mosque. Resonating with Satish Chandra's view, Eaton interpreted it as a calculated political manoeuvre to manage dissent and keep Hindu rulers in check and reinforce state authority, rather than a religious act.

Overall, Marxist historiography provides a distinct understanding of temple desecration, inferring such acts primarily as being shaped by political, economic, and administrative purposes. Instead of viewing attacks on temples by Mughal rulers solely through a religious lens, literature indicates that rulers often sought to acquire resources and diminish the legitimacy of rival kings through the capture, modification, or demolition of temples. These

were calculated moves within broader strategies of governance and power consolidation. The Marxist view further clarifies that temple desecration incidents were not sporadic; rather, they were typically connected to local political disputes or uprisings and used as retaliatory measures. Also, historians have pointed to instances where Mughal emperors extended support to Hindu institutions, such as issuing grants for construction and safeguards, underscoring the pragmatic and inclusive nature of state policies during this period.

While the Marxist approach has expanded the scope of historical analysis by highlighting administrative and economic dimensions, it is not without its shortcomings. By relying primarily on official records and centrally produced documents, this school risks overlooking the lived experiences, ritual significance, and emotional responses of diverse social groups. Such a top-down focus may at times undermine the profound cultural and religious meanings that temple sites held for local communities, as well as the variety of responses to desecration and reconstruction.

6. MODERN *HISTORIOGRAPHY*

Building on the evolving historiography, recent scholarship on temple desecration in medieval India has moved beyond colonial, nationalist, and Marxist frameworks, emphasizing political conflict, economic pressures, and the social and sometimes environmental context of such acts. This newer approach often combines qualitative and quantitative methods to add depth to understanding of these events. Some notable scholars associated with this shift of historical studies include Zahiruddin Faruki, M. Athar Ali, Iqtidar Alam Khan, and Salma Ahmed Farooqui.

Zahiruddin Faruki was among the earlier scholars in this line. In his book "Aurangzeb and his Times" (1935), Faruki noted that dhimmis (non-Muslims) under the Mughals enjoyed a degree of religious liberty and suggested that actions of temple desecration attributed to Aurangzeb were guided by royal political ambitions rather than purely religious motivations. Faruki contended that temple desecration was sometimes a countermeasure to attacks on mosques by Hindu rulers and nobles and was guided by broader political strategies.

Scholars such as M. Athar Ali, Iqtidar Alam, and Salma Ahmed Farooqui have also suggested that the motivations behind temple desecration were guided by political ambitions and strategic responses to resistance rather than by purely religious intolerance. M. Athar Ali, in "Mughal Nobility under Aurangzeb" (1997), demonstrated that acts of temple desecration were frequently consequences of uprisings by groups such as the Jats and Marathas and reflected Mughal state policies responding to rebellion and threats to imperial authority.

Importantly, Ali highlighted a different dimension of Mughal rule, noting that during Aurangzeb's reign, the proportion of Hindu nobles in the Mughal administration increased, rising from 24.5% at the start of the period to 31.6%. He noted that this increase was not due to improved religious tolerance but rather to the widespread absorption of Deccani and

Maratha elements into the Mughal nobility as the empire extended southward and encountered severe military and administrative challenges. Athar Ali also observed that, in contrast to prior periods, the process of Rajput recruitment and advancement slowed significantly in the subsequent years of Aurangzeb's reign, with Marathas gradually replacing Rajputs in higher official positions.

Similarly, Iqtidar Alam Khan, in "State in the Mughal India: Re-Examining the Myths of a Counter Vision" (2001), highlighted Aurangzeb's conciliatory stance towards the Hindus in certain contexts, arguing that instances of temple construction coexisted with temple desecration policies. Salma Ahmed Farooqui, in "Islam and the Mughal State" (2005), stated that temples were closely tied to the political authority of Hindu nobles and rulers, and their desecration served the Mughals as a powerful strategic instrument to discipline them and assert political control.

The more recent phase of modern historiography is enriched with the employment of innovative data-driven methods by scholars, shifting from traditional narrative analysis to more fine-grained comparative approaches. Authors like Heidi Pauwels, Audrey Trushcke, Rohit Ticku, Emilia Bachrach, and Murat Iyigun have made significant contributions on this subject.

Heidi Pauwels has studied the topic of temple desecration by exploring regional histories. Pauwels, in her works "A Tale of Two Temples: Mathura's Kesavadeva and Orchha's Caturbhujadeva" (2011) and, together with Emilia Bachrach, "Aurangzeb as Iconoclast? Vaishnava Accounts of the Krishna Images' Exodus from Braj" (2018), examined temple desecration as a political strategy. She documented Akbar as a benevolent ruler, sanctioning temple building activities and making grants to Brahmins. In the context of Aurangzeb, however, she suggested, temple desecration was a result of the "Jat Rebellion" and murder of "Abd-un-Nabi" (Governor of Mathura) in Mathura, denoting this action as a political manoeuvre.

Pauwels (2018), together with Emilia Bachrach, studied the portrayal of temple desecration in the Vaishnava narrative "Srinathji ka Prakatya Varta." This text discussed the relocation of "Srinathji" (Krishna idol) from "Mount Govardhan to Simhad village in Mewar," which today is referred to as "Nathdwara." According to the regional narrative, there were repeated attacks that lasted six months and occurred 17 times (p. 495). Similarly, including local memory, Pauwels reported attack on the "Jagdish temple" in Udaipur, which was fiercely protected by 20 Rajputs and caused significant losses to the Mughal army (p. 500). As a counterattack, Rana Raj Singh's sons destroyed "one big and thirty small mosques in Ahmadnagar" (p. 500).

Audrey Truschke's book "Aurangzeb: The Man and the Myth" (2017) examined Aurangzeb's life through a new perspective, revealing the intricacies of his leadership that went beyond past historians' portrayals of Aurangzeb as an iconoclast or a religious king. Her study stressed a contextual understanding of his policies, evaluating him according to the traditions and values of his own time rather than modern standards. She observed a shift in

policies during the later decade of Aurangzeb's reign, which included the controversial reimposition of the jizya tax, restrictions on certain court practices, withdrawal from some Hindu customs, and the discontinuation of the office of formal court historian. This period corresponded with intensifying rebellions among the Rajputs, Jats, and Marathas, indicating heightened power struggles between the Mughals and regional rulers.

Importantly, Truschke noted that "…Aurangzeb protected more Hindu temples more often than he demolished them" (p. 83) and temple desecration was politically motivated rather than religious orthodoxy. Destroying temples, according to her analysis "served the cause of ensuring justice" and punishing political disobedience. There was much greater religious flexibility under Mughal policies compared to the draconian measures employed by the European rulers to impose their religion on the public (p. 83). In this framework, temple desecration was politically motivated rather than driven by religious orthodoxy alone.

Building upon such reinterpretations, Iyer et al. brought a quantitative shift in historiography through their study "Holy Wars? Temple Desecrations in Medieval India" (2017). Using a geo-coded dataset of temples, dynasties, and battles from 1192 to 1720, their analysis suggested temple desecration was over 30% more likely when a Muslim ruler defeated a Hindu rival in battle (p. 2). Whereas temples within established Mughal territory were generally left untouched, avoiding the risk of desecration, suggesting that their actions were driven more by political motives than by indiscriminate religious iconoclasm.

The authors further expanded this quantitative approach by linking temple desecrations to climate-induced economic stress in their subsequent study, "Economic Shocks and Temple Desecrations in Medieval India" (2018). Employing centuries of geo-referenced data, they showed that desecrations were significantly more likely during major temperature deviations, particularly in low-fertility regions, with the probability increasing by about 0.8–1.0 percentage points (p. 19). They concluded that temple destruction under Islamic rule was not primarily for looting or collateral damage but a strategic tool to quell rebellion and reinforce regime stability, exemplified by Aurangzeb's demolition of the Keshava Deva temple in Mathura in 1670 following agrarian unrest.

In a broader comparative context, Iyigun et al. study "Winter is Coming: The Long-Run Effects of Climate Change on Conflict, 1400-1900" (2017), analysed five centuries of cross-regional data and demonstrated that periods of climatic cooling were strongly associated with increased conflict, particularly civil wars and episodes of religious persecution in agrarian societies. While their study does not specifically focus on India, it suggested that climatic stress undermined state stability and heightened the risk of politically motivated violence. When viewed alongside recent quantitative studies of temple desecration, this research provided a broader, data-driven perspective on how environmental shocks interacted with political authority and religious institutions during the Mughal era.

Modern historiography marks a turning point in the study of temple desecration, advancing beyond prior interpretive frameworks by embracing source and methodological diversity. This new approach combines literary and archival analysis with regional narratives,

local memory, and quantitative data to contextualize iconoclasm within broader political and ecological frameworks. The critical reassessment of figures such as Aurangzeb, alongside studies by Pauwels, Bachrach, Truschke, and Iyer et al., highlights temple desecration as a strategic response to political resistance, economic strain, and environmental stress rather than purely religious zeal. While broad patterns link desecration to political conflict, scholars now emphasize local context and social dynamics, enriching our understanding of Mughal-era temple desecration as a multifaceted phenomenon rooted in the wider political, economic, and cultural landscapes of its time.

7. CONCLUSION

The historiography surrounding Mughal iconoclasm and temple desecration under different schools of thought reveals a long trajectory of reinterpretation shaped by evolving intellectual and methodological contexts rather than offering a fixed, uniform picture of the history. Our understanding states that Persian chronicles of the Mughal times presented temple desecration through the lens of royal duty, victory, and the affirmation of sovereignty. European travellers and early colonial officials, interpreted these events through an orientalist lens and often relying on sources outside the Mughal courts, portrayed the rulers as religiously intolerant and despotic. Nationalist historians countered this viewpoint by reclaiming India's cultural agency and resilience, reframing episodes of temple desecration through religious and political narratives that emphasized national identity. Marxist historians subsequently marked a significant theoretical shift, situating temple destruction within the dynamics of resource control, political authority, and administrative calculation, rather than purely religious motivations.

More recently, contemporary scholarship has broadened the field, drawing on both qualitative and quantitative methods and situating acts of temple desecration within broader contexts of power negotiations, local resistance, and diverse social, economic, and even environmental pressures. These approaches have begun to integrate regional histories, devotional texts, and data-driven analysis, highlighting the temple as a multifaceted political, social, and cultural institution with significance embedded in specific historical landscapes.

However, significant gaps persist, particularly in the areas of comparative analysis across regions and the in-depth study of community responses. The underutilization of oral traditions and community memory is a notable shortcoming. Though these sources need to be approached with caution due to concerns about reliability, they can provide valuable insights into resilience, survival, and continuity of traditions following episodes of desecration. Oral histories preserved through local storytelling, rituals, genealogy, and temple custodianship can illuminate newer perspectives of endurance and continuity of sacred places.

This paper suggests achieving greater scholarly rigor by combining primary sources like archival and material evidence with ethnographic fieldwork and community-based enquiry.

By analysing temples as multi-dimensional institutions serving religious, social, cultural, educational, and economic functions, we can better understand why they became targets and how Hindu societies responded to their desecration. Ultimately, the history of iconoclasm is not confined to the acts themselves but is continually shaped by the varied ways these events are remembered, interpreted, and narrated across generations.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This research was supported by the Indian Council of Social Science Research (ICSSR). The authors sincerely appreciate their encouragement and financial assistance, which made this study possible.

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