

ETHICS AND THE MORAL RESPONSIBILITIES OF POWER IN THE PHILOSOPHY OF ZAHIRIDDIN MUHAMMAD BABUR

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The legacy of Zahiriddin Muhammad Babur (1483–1530) is most commonly framed in political and military terms — as the founder of the Mughal Empire, a skilled general, and a cultural innovator. Yet beneath the conquests and chronicles lies a powerful, reflective philosophy of governance shaped by ethics, introspection, and a deeply personal understanding of justice. Babur’s writings, especially the Baburnama, reveal a ruler who saw leadership as a moral responsibility entrusted by God, and who believed that power must be regulated by ethical principles, self-awareness, and spiritual accountability.

Babur’s understanding of kingship draws heavily from Islamic notions of power as an amanat — a trust (amānah) from God that must be exercised with restraint and responsibility. This conception is rooted in the Qur’anic worldview, where those in authority are accountable not only to the people but also to the divine source from which all legitimacy flows.

Unlike rulers who viewed authority as a right to dominate or enrich themselves, Babur regarded it as a heavy burden. His reflections often carry an undertone of unease with the moral weight of command. He openly questions whether his decisions were just, whether his campaigns caused undue suffering, and whether he lived up to the standards of a just sovereign. This attitude distinguishes him from many of his contemporaries and situates him in the tradition of philosopher-kings who see power as a sacred responsibility.

Justice — ‘adl in Islamic philosophy — forms the cornerstone of Babur’s political ethics. He does not define justice abstractly but rather demonstrates it through action: fair taxation, careful appointment of officials, compassion in warfare, and respect for local customs and communities. Babur criticizes rulers who exploit their subjects or abuse their power, equating tyranny with moral corruption.

“Without justice, no kingdom can last. With justice, even a fragile state finds peace.”
(Baburnama, paraphrased)

This principle echoes the teachings of earlier Muslim thinkers like Al-Mawardi, who emphasized that justice sustains the state and that injustice is a precursor to collapse. Babur understood that ethical governance was essential to political legitimacy. For him, the sword could win territory, but only justice could hold it.

Babur’s ideal leader is not merely militarily capable, but morally upright, intellectually curious, and spiritually grounded. Throughout the Baburnama, he praises individuals for their

character — honesty, loyalty, modesty, and reason — rather than their wealth or power. These virtues are not simply personal preferences but part of his leadership model.

He respected advisors who spoke truth to power, and he did not isolate himself from criticism. He placed value on listening, consultation (shura), and intellectual humility. These attitudes, rare among rulers of his time, show a commitment to ethical inclusivity in governance, which resonates with both Qur'anic and Turkic political traditions.

Moreover, Babur saw that ethical leadership required moral discipline. He struggled against his own weaknesses — including indulgence in alcohol and personal pride — and often recorded his efforts to restrain himself. This candidness is part of his ethical model: acknowledging one's flaws is the first step toward overcoming them.

One of the most remarkable features of Babur's political thought is his willingness to subject himself to moral judgment. In the Baburnama, he does not present himself as infallible. He recounts failures in battle, errors in diplomacy, emotional losses, and personal flaws with philosophical honesty. These moments of reflection elevate his memoirs from political chronicles to a form of ethical autobiography.

His self-critique has a larger purpose: it is an expression of spiritual accountability. Babur saw leadership as a constant process of self-correction, not only in service to the people but in preparation for divine reckoning. He did not seek perfection, but rather strove for conscious moral striving (mujāhada).

Babur's ethics were not confined to the court or the battlefield — they extended to the everyday lives of his subjects. He was acutely aware of the impact of political decisions on the poor, the displaced, and the voiceless. He recorded natural disasters, famine, and social hardship not as background events, but as matters of serious concern.

He saw it as the ruler's duty to alleviate suffering, protect life, and promote dignity. In his view, a successful government was not measured by wealth or territory, but by the well-being of its people. This humanitarian impulse places Babur among the most ethically conscious rulers in Islamic history.

Although a capable and often ruthless general, Babur did not glorify violence. He showed a consistent preference for negotiation, honorable treatment of prisoners, and minimizing harm where possible. His restraint during the conquest of Delhi and his treatment of local rulers after victory demonstrate a moral framework guiding military power.

This reflects the Islamic concept of jihād al-nafs (the struggle of the self) being greater than physical battle. True victory, in Babur's view, came not from destroying the enemy but from mastering the ego and governing with integrity.

Zahiriddin Muhammad Babur's philosophy of power is grounded in a rare combination of political experience and ethical clarity. For him, ruling was not about conquest or domination,

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but about service, justice, and self-restraint. Power without ethics was a danger to the soul and to society.

Babur's political legacy rests not only in the empire he founded but in the moral framework he left behind — a vision of leadership as a sacred trust, constantly evaluated by conscience and by God.

In an era of instability and ambition, Babur reminds us that great leadership begins not with control over others, but with mastery of the self.

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