

Neelam Khoja, PhD Candidate, Harvard University  
AHA Abstract

“The Butcher of Hindustan”: Ahmad Shah Abdali in 18<sup>th</sup> Century Punjab

18th century India/Hindustan has been popularly described as a century of Mughal decline/decentralization, sometimes caused by foreign invasions, and as a century of the rise of European power. This paper explores how Ahmad Shah Durrani—the Abdali Afghan who took over eastern portions of Nadir Shah’s territories after his assassination in 1748—attempted to gain and legitimize political power in 18th century Punjab. I analyze contemporary Persian sources, such as the *Tarikh-i Ahmad Shahi*, *Tarikh-i Hussain Shahi*, and *Waqai Shah Shuja*, to demonstrate how genealogy, ethnicity, and existing commercial, religious, and social networks were negotiated and leveraged for claims of authority. I problematize the overwhelming characterization of his attempts to rule over Punjab in secondary scholarship and popular writing as “invasions,” which connotes ideas of being foreign and violent. I do not deny that important cities, like Lahore and Delhi, were looted, and on more than one occasion. But to see these attempts as only invasions is misleading. This is especially true when we consider scholarship on Bengal in this period that maps out how British capitalist endeavors eventually led to an imperial and colonial project. Words like “invasion” are rarely used, thus implicitly describing British colonial rule as primarily an economic endeavor, less violent, and ironically less “foreign”. When Afghan attempts to take over have been considered, they have not been described as a commercial project turned colonial or imperial. My paper attempts to address this pejorative characterization of the Afghans by tracing how existing networks—commercial, religious, and social—were leveraged by Ahmad Shah Durrani to come into political power, gain territory, and claim legitimacy in Punjab.