



THE EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY IN INDIAN HISTORY: A HISTORIOGRAPHICAL DEBATE

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Abstract

India had to undergo one of the most slipshod periods in its entire history in the Eighteenth-century. The Mughal Empire, which had dominated the Indian subcontinent for two centuries, began to decline due to the internal rift and external assail. Following the decline of the empire, numerous local powers antagonized with the imperial house for independence, and European powers began to invade Indian subcontinent. The eighteenth-century has been a competent subject of historiographical debate among scholars from the various schools of thoughts. It represents a phase of transition between medieval and modern periods. The decline of Mughal power in the eighteenth century was characterized by the rise of autonomous states. Earlier the historians regarded this period as Dark age or reckless rapine, anarchy and foreign conquest but recent or revisionists studies have tried to that eighteenth century states as separate entities possessing elements of dynamism and growth. This paper primarily focuses on the analysis of the debate among the historians on the history of eighteenth-century India. This paper discusses the theories of various historians from various schools viz. Aligarh Historians of Marxist School, Revisionist School, Cambridge School and Neo-revisionist. These historians have been dealing with the decline of the Mughal Empire, the rise of autonomous states and their economic prosperity and British siege in India.

Keywords: Mughal Empire, Decline, Eighteenth-century, Debate, States, Prosperity, British.

Introduction

The Eighteenth-Century India marked a very important period in the history of early colonial India. The Eighteenth Century in India was characterized by two critical transformations which changed the structure of power and polity and initiated important social and economic reconfigurations. One is the transition from the Mughal state to regional political orders (Awadh, Bengal, Hyderabad etc.) in the first half of the eighteenth century; the other is the rise of the English East India Company as a sort of Company or colonial state in the late eighteenth century. Both these events have been studied by historians in particular, who debate not the nature of change in the eighteenth century but also its implication for the establishment of early colonial rule in India. The historiography of the first half of 18th century highlighted the Mughal decline as well as the 'continuity' that was seen by the other historians who contributed to developing the revisionist school of thought. For a long time, the 18th century was considered an era of darkness, characterized by Mughal political disintegration, economic decline, warfare and disorder. However, in the past four decades, a series of new regional-centric (revisionist) studies have emerged, emphasizing the vibrant aspects of the century with different lenses. These studies together have solidified enough evidence to suggest that the first half of the 18th century was not a century of absolute and all-encompassing darkness, but rather saw the politico-economic decline of a few regions while many other regions flourished culturally, socially and economic boom.

The controversy on political decline of the Mughal Empire has triggered a debate in regarding nature of economic and social change in eighteenth-century India. The political demise of the Mughal Empire is the most important development of the first half of the eighteenth-century India. This cataclysmic event has attracted the attention of generations of historians who continue to debate the causes of Mughal decline. This led to the development of the two major schools of thought, a group of historian (Aligarh School of Marxist Historians) argued in support of that the decline of the Mughal Empire as a consequence of the economic crisis and exploitation by the ruling class and the other school (Revisionist School) argued in regard that the political turmoil in terms of regional assertiveness triggered by economic prosperity. These two divergent positions form the 'Dark Ages versus economic prosperity' debate on the eighteenth century. (Alavi, 2002, p. 2)

Debate:

The early historiography of decline of Mughal Empire focused on the administrative and religious policies of individual rulers and their nobles. Both the British administrator-scholars and the Indian nationalist historians of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries assessed the empire in terms of the character of the ruling elite. (Alavi, 2002, p. 3) In the works of Jadunath Sarkar the spotlight remained on Aurangzeb, the emperor who oversaw the imperial downfall. His religious policy, in particular, and later his Deccan campaigns were identified as the chief cause for the decline of Mughal Empire. Sarkar characterized the peasant rebellions that ultimately destroyed Mughal political stability as a 'Hindu reaction' to Aurangzeb's Muslim orthodoxy. (Alavi, 2002, p. 4)

The Eighteenth-Century India emerged as a politically chaotic and economically crisis-prone period. A different approach was adopted by scholars from the late 1950s, those who largely conformity with the Marxist framework began to provide explanations of Mughal decline in materialist terms. (Ali, 2006, p. 84) 'Jagirdari Crisis' of the eighteenth century developed by Satish Chandra in which held the structural flaws in the working of the Mughal institutions of jagir and manasab responsible for the fiscal crisis of the



late seventeenth century (Chandra, Parties and Politics at the Mughal Court, 1707-1740, 1973, p. xiv). Jagirdari Crisis of the eighteenth century has been defined by Satish Chndra in the following words: "The available social surplus was insufficient to defray the cost of administration, pay for wars of one type or another and to give the ruling class a standard of life in keeping with its expectations" (Chandra, Parties and Politics at the Mughal Court, 1707-1740, 1973, p. xiv) The Mughal failure to ensure the smooth functioning of these institutions became most pronounced during Aurangzeb's reign and was to herald the process of imperial collapse (Chandra, Parties and Politics at the Mughal Court, 1707-1740, 1973). In the 1980s, the later work of Satish Chandra once again shifted the focus to the economic aspects of the politico-administrative imperial crisis. He argued that as jagirs became few and relatively infertile, the discrepancy between the estimated revenue (jama) and the actual yields (hasil) intensified. This had an adverse impact on the ability of state functionaries to ensure the regularity of revenue collection. A jagirdari crisis with distinct economic undertones finally undid Mughal stability (Chandra, Medieval India: Society, the Jagirdari Crisis, and the Village, 1982).

In his work *The Agrarian System of Mughal India, 1556-1707*, on the agrarian system of the Mughal Empire, Irfan Habib broadly accepted and underlined the centralized nature of Mughal Polity and the large share of the surplus that the Mughal land-tax represented (Ali, 2006, p. 84). At the same time he insisted that the centralized ruling class of the Mughal empire coexisted, in a relationship of collaboration and antagonism, with another scattered, localized hereditary 'junior' ruling class, that of the zamindars, who were smaller co-sharers in the surplus. He explained Mughal decline and the consequent political and social unrest in fiscal terms (Ali, 2006, p. 84). Irfan Habib asserted that 'the peculiar feature of the state in Mughal India was that it served not merely as the protective arm of the exploiting classes, but was itself the principal instrument of exploitation' (Habib, 1963, p. 257). Habib argued that the high rate of land revenue demanded by Delhi caused large-scale rural exploitation, leading to peasant migration and rebellion. This created an Agrarian Crisis that resulted in the weakling of the empire's political edifice (Alavi, 2002, p. 4). One major reason for the open defiance of the local landlords might have been the increasing oppression of the jagirdars. The earlier emperors tried to keep them in check through a system of rotation. Irfan Habib (1963) has argued that because of this Mughal system, and by taking advantage of it, the jagirdars oppressed the peasantry. As they were frequently transferred, they did not develop any attachment of any long-term interest in the estate and tried to exact as much as possible during their short tenures, without any consideration for the peasants (Bandyopadhyay, 2004, p. 9). This led to the decline of empire's economic atmosphere.

The decline of the Mughal Empire is also viewed as a 'cultural' failure. Athar Ali in his work *Mughal India: Studies in Polity, Ideas, Society and Culture*, stated that "cultural and ideological failure" as the root cause underlying the incapability of the Islamic political formations to modernize or revolutionize their armies and productive capacities. No new innovations were made in the field of technology. India saw no conscious attempt to design new artillery weapons, the making of muskets and guns remained a mere craft, with no touch of science, but European world already did revolutionize in the field of technology and science. Emphasis was still on compiling works like *Majmu-al-Bahrain* and proving the universality of Vedanta. Although cultural dynamism is undoubtedly important for the grasp of new ideas and for developing or absorbing higher levels of technological and productive capacities, arguing that there was a sudden arrest and subsequent stagnation of the entire Muslim cosmological universe is too sweeping a claim. More so, given that these states had long showed tremendous ability for adopting and inventing new technologies for warfare, assembling early modern forms of governance (especially rational bureaucracies) and possessed trading networks that displayed a great deal of social flexibility and porosity. Due to all these reasons, the empire politically and economically became vulnerable (Ali, 2006, pp. 338-343).

Iqtidar Alam Khan put forward his view that listed a failure to develop a technology superior to what was common: and this became the cause of the decline of the Mughal Empire. According to him the art of manufacturing and use of gunpowder in the later 16th and 17th Century and the percolation of the handguns even amongst the peasants and zamindars made the local elements confront the imperial authorities (Khan, 2004, p. 180). His evidence suggests that the Mughals from the very beginning used handguns in North India: in 1528 Babur reduced the assignments of his nobles by 1/3rd for the manufacture of fire-arms and payment to the tufangchis. By 17th century the guns were used freely. Rafiuddin Ibrahim Shirazi, in his *Tazkirat-ul-Muluk* says that the nobles were also killed in gunfights near Jagdishpur. Manucci mentions ordinary peasants with guns (Khan, 2004, p. 183). In *Zakhirat-ul-Khawarin* we have the evidence that peasants ploughing their field had their gun stuck in the ground. And thus, it is not at all surprising the peasants could now rise to face the Mughal authority: It was they who were leading the peasant revolts, which helped to the decline of empire's political stability.

The 'revisionist' approach to the analysis of Mughal polity arrived at by 'Mughal-centred' historians (Frank Perlin's expression) has now taken a number of forms (Ali, 2006, p. 86). C.A. Bayly initiates the 'revisionist' approach to the analysis of the disintegration of Mughal political and economic atmosphere. He emphasizes that 'the key note of Mughal rule had been size and centralization' (Bayly, *Rulers, Townsmen and Bazars: North Indian Society in the Age of British Expansion 1720-1801*, 1983, p. 465). He saw in the decline of the Mughal empire a positive element, where 'corporate groups' or 'social classes' played their role through the 'commercialization' and 'decentralization' of Mughal polity in the eighteenth century, in extending agriculture and intensifying commerce, and then shifted their loyalties to the British, as the most -for them beneficial power (Ali, 2006, p. 86). The British conquest was thus an Indo-British affair-the culmination of Bayly's 'continuity' thesis (Bayly, *Rulers, Townsmen and Bazars: North*



Indian Society in the Age of British Expansion 1720-1801, 1983, p. 5). In his book *Rulers, Townsmen, and Bazaars: North Indian Society in the Age of British Expansion, 1770-1870*, suggested that regional political crystallization was a consequence of three important developments. First, the emergence of a vibrant cross-caste mercantile organization and their involvement in politics, which resulted in the emergence of a new class of intermediaries. Secondly, the gentrification process which brought together a class of scribes, accountants and other Mughal service groups. Finally, the practice of military fiscalism, which meant the maintenance of large armies and their deployment in revenue collection. The impulse in Bayly's work is on rise of intermediaries which associated with the royal power, portraying on Mughal military and fiscal institutions, and their emergence as new power centres (Bayly, *Rulers, Townsmen and Bazaars: North Indian Society in the Age of British Expansion 1720-1801*, 1983). These revenue-collecting intermediaries, who attained their power from a variety of portfolios and who collaborated with English Company later in the decade, are categorized by C. A. Bayly and Sanjay Subrahmanyam as 'portfolio capitalists' (Bayly, C.A.; Subrahmanyam, Sanjay, 1988). In his more recent work, Bayly shows the increased local control exercised on the 'Indian information order' by regional polities, which resulted in the increasing bureaucratization of its formal and informal networks (Bayly, *Empire and Information: Intelligence Gathering and Social Communication in India, 1780-1870*, 1996).

Muzaffar Alam in his work *The Crisis of Empire in Mughal North India: Awadh and the Punjab 1707-1748* study of early eighteenth-century Awadh provides evidence of the enormous economic boom and prosperity which resulted in zamindari unrest in the region. Economic prosperity was a consequence of increased commercialization and the monetization of the economy that was initiated in the heyday of the Mughals. The wealthy zamindars took advantages of their newly acquired assets and refused to comply with Mughal commands (Alavi, 2002, pp. 9-10). He argued that, the decline of centralization of Mughal power must have been a complex process of decentralization, in which local elites who had prospered under the Mughal hegemony began to appropriate more of the symbols and substance of sovereignty. Article on eighteenth-century Bihar, Alam reinforce his fiscal growth argument with evidence from both regional and imperial Persian literature and Urdu poetry; this material, unlike the court chronicles, touches on the lives of a multitude of social groups. Based this material, Alam concludes that the eighteenth century 'crisis' is a far more complex issue than the Delhi-centred administrative and fiscal studies of empire have so far projected (Alavi, 2002, p. 10).

Karen Leonard arrived with the 'Great Firm Theory of the Decline of Mughal Empire', published in *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, vol.21, no.2, 1979. According to her, the exploration of the availability and distribution of economic resources had neglected one group whose relationship to the Mughal state and whose roles in the political system was quite crucial: the bankers – *sahukars*, *shroffs* and *mahajans* – particularly those in the 'great firms' (Leonard, 1979, p. 151). It was these great firms which played an important role in the decline of the empire. She argued, the indigenous banking firms were inevitable allies of the Mughal state, and that the great nobles and imperial officers 'were more than likely to be directly dependent upon these banking firms'. And thus, the great firms' diversion of resources, both credit and trade, from the Mughals to other political powers in the Indian sub-continent contributed to its bankruptcy and ultimately the downfall (Leonard, 1979, pp. 151-155). There was the increasingly important role of banking firms' in revenue collection. It is abundantly clear that by 1750 it was bankers who controlled access to the actual collection of land revenue, through provision of credit or cash (Leonard, 1979, p. 158). The period of imperial decline coincided with the increasing involvement of banking firms in revenue collection at regional and local levels, in preference to their continued provision of credit to the central Mughal government. This involvement increased from 1650 to 1750, and it brought bankers, more directly than before, into positions of political power all over India. This cataclysm of the growing power of these great firms paved the way of the decline of the Mughal Empire.

On first reflection, 'Great Firm' theory does offer a probable explanation for the downfall of Empire from 1690 to 1720. But then a serious challenge to the thesis is given by J.F. Richards who finds 'serious problems of documentation' in this theory. In fact Karen Leonard herself admits that all her data is derived from secondary sources. Further Richards finds it hard to agree with Karen Leonard and argued 'I am far from certain that the term great firm, as defined by Leonard, is useful for a discussion of the economy of Mughal (Richards, 1981, vol.23, no.2, p. 289). According to him there were different kinds of commercial groups who carried on the essential services in different fields: grain dealers or moneylenders (*baqqal*, *mahajan*) associated in financing the land-tax system by lending cash to peasants, village headmen, rural aristocrat; and they also purchased, stored, shipped and sold grain etc. from *qasbas* to larger towns and imperial cities. The moneychangers or money lenders (*sarrafs*) specialized in short term finance through *hundis* (bills of exchange) and a limited form of deposit banking. They also dealt with the coins and metal (Richards, 1981, vol.23, no.2, p. 289). Similarly, another group was that of brokers (*dallals*) who were 'a highly specialized commercial group'. J.F. Richards's study of the Mughal administration in Deccan challenged the idea that there was a shortage of usable *jagirs* in the region (Alavi, 2002, p. 4). His conclusion that the Deccan was not a deficit area questioned the belief that *be-jagiri* (the absence of *jagirs*) was a major cause of the crisis of empire (Alavi, 2002, p. 4).

Richard Barnett in his work *North India Between Empires: Awadh, the Mughals, and the British 1720-1801* aims to show that the eighteenth-century history of Awadh, the largest and most durable post-Mughal polity in North India and the first Indian state to come under a subsidiary alliance system with the British, is a success story of its own. Andrea Hintz in his *The Mughal Empire and*



its Decline: An Interpretation of the Sources of Social Power, Ashgate, Brookfield USA, 1997 stated that the great Mughal canopy that extended over the subcontinent gradually acquired a number of large discolorations, throughout the eighteenth century, in the form of patches that marked the emergence of a slew of successor states viz., Awadh, Bengal, Hyderabad, the Marathas and the Sikhs. These successor states worked the same type of networks to not only impede or intercept the flow of resources to the imperial centre but also reverse them permanently by annexations, usurpations and expropriations. The most signal omission in Barnett's study of eighteenth-century Awadh is its cultural life. Yet, it is in the cultural sphere that Awadh most clearly emerges as the prime successor state to the Mughals. Poets and artists deserted Delhi when the Mughal capital became unsafe (Barnett, 1980).

Ashin Das Gupta in his *Indian Merchants and the Decline of Surat: c. 1700-1750*, indicates that corporate mercantile institutions transcended political boundaries for overseeing the transportation of goods and the provision of credit and insurance services in the period of decline. Even though inland trade increased, export trade and port cities suffered relatives eclipse in the face of European advances (Alavi, 2002, p. 7). Chetan Singh, following the general region-centric trend laid out by Alam, in his *Region and Empire: Punjab in the Seventeenth Century*, suggested that the political unrest in some provinces, such as the Punjab, was linked to tensions generated between the agrarian economy of the Mughal Plains, on the one hand, and fringe tribal societies as they moved towards a sedentary existence, on the other. The latter process altered the structure of tribal societies and the increased pressure on the agrarian economy, which was already under stress. Thus, the events of the eighteenth century were rooted in the economic processes that shaped the functioning of empire from its very inception (Alavi, 2002, p. 10).

Historians belong to the Neo-revisionist school like Prasanna Parthasarathi and David Washbrook have questioned the revisionist argument on history of eighteenth-century India. Parthasarathi in his 'Merchant and the Rise of Colonialism', in *Institutions and Economic Change in South Asia*, shows that labourers in South India had enormous earnings and a much better standard of living than their British counterparts. This was due to the high agricultural productivity that enabled artisans to survive on a lesser wage and gave the industry a competitive terminal in terms of cost of production and price. High demand translated into greater power in the case of merchants (Parthasarathi, 1996). Washbrook argues that the last decades of the 18th century was a golden age for low-ritual status, non-specialized working (pariahs). The wars of the period increased demand for labour; competition among mercantilist states for trade and cash to feed their armies also created the spaces within which labour could negotiate better conditions; and finally, the drain of labour away from agricultural activities enhanced the bargaining power of those that did remain. Thus, at least for labour in some regions, the 18th century was a period of relative prosperity (Washbrook, 1993).

Conclusion

We can sum up that eighteenth-century polity; economy and society are characterized by era that reflects both change and continuity. This debate becomes profound and relevant for the historiographical debate of the 18th century, which observed the decline of great Mughal Empire and the rise of regional states and the beginnings of British colonial expansion in northern India and its impact on the local society and economy. Based on the analysis of various schools of thought it is clear that the 18th century cannot be seen as a period of total decline, be it politically, socially or economically. It was an eventful period and not just a gap between two empires or a dark period before the gift of civilization by the occidentals. It was a period marked by change as new regional polities emerged as well as indigenous economic and cultural elements were grabbing in by the Company Raj. The debate on the nature on the eighteenth-century history of India has engaged both historians studying decline of Mughal India and rise of the regional power especially in economic field and the expansion of Company's power in India.

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