

DURING 18TH CENTURY INDIAN SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC LIFE

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INTRODUCTION

The eighteenth century in India witnessed many epoch making events. These events restructured power equation and paved the way for the changed social and economic life. The political crumbling of the Mughal state is one of the most noteworthy developments that took place in the first half of the 18th century. There are divergent views on the nature of economic and social change in the aftermath of Mughal decline. Scholars are sharply divided between those who regard the decline as an offshoot of economic crisis and exploitation by the ruling classes and those who hold the political turmoil as a sign of regional assertiveness asserted by certain degree of economic prosperity. The Mughal collapse had aroused interest to the study of the economy and society of India in the 18th century. The scholars had divergent views on the issue of scrutinizing the century in the context of Mughal decline.

In his book on politics Satish Chandra in the Mughal court has remarked that it was really the crisis in Mughal institutions-the mansab and jagir that caused a fiscal crisis in the Mughal state leading to its ultimate collapse. Athar Ali has also highlighted how the crisis in the Mughal state was on account of -jagiri.e i.e. the lack of jagirs. Emperor Aurangzeb was acquainted with the problem. In a famous quoted document he had obviously written: 'ekanaar, saubimaar'. This remark implies that there were too few fruits of office, however,

there were too many aspirants for the fruit. These historians maintain that such a state of affairs was due to the crushing burden of expansionist wars, rebellions and the attempt by the Mughal state to please newer elements in the higher echelons of the administration i.e. within the mansabdari system. The crisis occurred because there were too many people waiting for the patronage of the empire and there was not enough land to distribute as jagirs. This implies that there was disaffection and eventually the weakening of the central structure of the Mughal state followed.

In the famous study Irfan Habib focused on the agrarian economy. He remarked that the revenue demand on the peasantry was quite high. The tendency of mansabdars to squeeze the peasantry grew with the transferability of jagirs. The abandonment of land, flight to more hospitable regions or open rebellion were the last resort that the Mughal peasantry took to resist the growing exploitation. According to Habib, the great rebellions against the Mughal state by the Jats, Satnamis, Marathas and Sikhs were in fact peasant rebellions led by local zamindars. According to Aligarh historians the Mughal state was a highly centralized revenue extracting structure. In the long run it could not satisfy the expectations of its chief support base of primarily noblemen i.e. mansabdars as well as the revenue paying peasantry, who were unable to meet the unreasonable demands of the state. In this way, the decline of

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the Mughal state was due to the decline of state institutions like mansab and jagir and the agrarian economy.

Christopher Bayly's *Rulers, Townsmen and Bazzars* and Muzaffar Alam's *The Crisis of Empire in Mughal North India* renewed the interest of historians in the 18th century. Awadh and Punjab that witnessed the peasant rebellions led by zamindars had agrarian prosperity. From Alam's evidence it is obvious that peasant rebellions occurred because they were growing prosperous and were unwilling to part with their prosperity to the Mughal state. Besides, Chetan Singh in his work stated that in the peripheries of empire the Mughal state's relations with communities was hardly formal. The 18th century has the implications that the decline of the Mughal state did not indicate an overall economic decline. Likewise, the political and social forms also survived in those areas where the Mughal control had been limited.

The 18th century was marked by economic and social reconfigurations that resulted in the new regional political order. Some historians maintain that the Mughal collapse set in a process of economic and social decay as well while some regard it that around the late 18 century transition in the polity, society, and economy of India was taking place as the English East India Company had acquired political supremacy. The regional histories of the period had added new dimensions to this phase.

The early historiography of the Mughal decline was around administrative and religious policies of the individual rulers and their nobles. Jadunath Sarkar held that Aurangzeb and his religious policy and his Deccan campaign were responsible for the Mughal decline. Later he pleaded that the peasant rebellions that destabilized the Mughal state as a 'Hindu reaction' to Aurangzeb's Muslim orthodoxy was responsible for the decline.'

Scholars like John F. Richard did not subscribe to the idea that there was lack of useable land in Deccan. He expressed the view that Deccan was not a deficit area, but it was bejagiri (the absence of jagirs) that was a major factor of the economic crisis of empire. In 1980s Satish Chandra modified his idea and changed to the economic aspects of the politico administrative imperial crisis arguing that the quantum of land to be given as jagirs became few and relatively infertile. As such, the discrepancy between the estimated revenue (Jama) and actual yields (hasil) got wider. This did not have a good impact on the ability of state functionaries to ensure the regularity of revenue collection. A jagirdari crisis with distinct economic implications finally paved the way for Mughal stability.

ECONOMIC CONDITION

In some states the political power was commercialized in the 18th century. This amounted to the fact that the merchants began to participate in politics. For example, the banking family of Jagat Seths in Bengal became chief financiers of the nawabs. He provided credit and participated in revenue farming. The power that these merchant bankers enjoyed was most obvious when there was a conflict between the Bengal ruler Sirajudaula and the East India Company. The Seths exercised their clout and power to ensure the defeat of the former in the Battle of Plassey [1757]. The commercialization of political power boosted the use of objective monetary values to further social relationships. It became a common practice that houses, proprietary rights of landholders and village headmen, statuses and offices could be leased and sub-leased as relationships between various groups underwent a transformation. The new states that were emerging in India also set this process of sharing power to incorporate groups other than merchants and bankers in their bid

for military power and finance. The Marathas and Sikhs reciprocated and patronized the influential peasant castes, mercenaries and pioneer settlers on frontier lands in a bid to consolidate the base of their state.

The economy was sound before the arrival of British men. There were hardly any sustained famines that occurred. Bengal witnessed a devastating famine in 1770 after the inauguration of Company rule. Population, trade, prices, and production all indicated an upward trend which broadly assured a positive trend. Urbanization is also a significant trait of economic prosperity but the story was more complex. Ashin Dasgupta rightly analyzed that out the decline of some cities, the growth of others was made good. Older Mughal cities such as Delhi, Agra, Lahore and Burhanpur witnessed a decline with Mughal political fortunes. Some commercial cities such as Surat and Masulipatnam also had a decline as European companies snatched away the international trade from Indian merchants. These cities were substituted by colonial cities like Chennai, Mumbai and Kolkata and the inland cities and capitals of regional kingdoms: Fyzabad, Benaras, Hyderabad, Lucknow, Srirangapatam and Bangalore. Mirzapur, Kanpur and Baroda which were trading cities at that time also came into being to service trade. Surprisingly, inland trade prospered and traders could maintain their networks in the face of the growing political divide. Political divide in fact made the credit network stronger. By 1850s Jagat Seth was able to send the entire revenue of the eastern provinces as a hundi drawn on his agents in Delhi. B.R. Grover has asserted that local rural commercial production got new markets in the provincial kingdoms. In this way the market was compensated for any disruptions caused by the decline of the Mughal state. The regional courts were making conspicuous consumption which further encouraged production and provided

employment to labours who were out of the traditional agrarian sphere. Christopher Bayly has highlighted the fact that commerce, urban development and specialist agricultural production was replicated in the 18th century along other routes. Traditionally these routes had existed along the route of Delhi and Bengal during Mughal times. This pointed towards an economic shift-between the newer political centres of Lucknow and Kolkatta via Benaras and Patna.

It is a fact that inter-regional trade was growing. Marathas captured cloth, food grains and cattle from the Gangetic plain. Cotton wool and hides from the northern Deccan, sugar from Benaras, and cloth from Carnatic were made available to Mysore. Some regions had got specialization in products and the volume of trade among provinces was large. Gujarat got textiles from Bengal. Malabar and Coromandel were dependent on food supplies from Bengal. Similar prices in the major coastal trading towns showed that markets had integrated to a large extent. Long distance trade managed to get goods from localized centres of production. There was even some evidence for artisan-entrepreneurs who became owners of workshops. Some historians were so enthusiastic to argue that 18th century India indicated signs of proto-industrialization. Christopher Bayly has pleaded that the ensemble of economic activity that was dealt with by entrepreneurs in the 18th century including revenue farming, private trade, warfare and loans, made them into enterprising 'portfolio capitalists'.

Due to the contribution of war the 18th century economy has also attracted the attention of historians. Normally historians have witnessed the growth of warring states as disturbing the Mughal peace and playing havoc with the economy. But the historians such as Christopher Bayly asserted that there was another aspect related to devastation. The

matter of fact is that many traditional trade routes were attacked and as such the sense of insecurity was created among the merchants. The movement of goods suffered. Consequently the routes had to be changed. But war gave an impetus to production too. Towns and villages in Awadh made a contribution to a flourishing market for saltpetre, swords and matchlocks. Afghan Rohilla towns were popular for their bows and arrows and the trademark Rampur daggers. Jhansi was renowned for its cannon foundries. Boot makers and liquor distillers also had a roaring business. Similarly grain merchants who had to supply food grains and fodder to the large armies had to catch trains as they moved across provinces. In a way war became synonymous with employment and the golden opportunity to create wealth as the numerous ancillary industries grew.

According to the historians, 18th century witnessed devastation due to Mughal decline and also rapid adjustment as economic forces realigned, re-grouped and re-established themselves in more hospitable areas. The historians has characterized the period as dynamic. They have expressed the view that this was the basic reason why the European companies were eager to India in the first place. It is very simple to infer that India was a lucrative destination for Europeans and it is why these trading companies whose governing motive was to make profit came to India. If the 18th century India had suffered the economic decline, then no European companies would have opted for India. In fact there was a big tussle among the European forces to have a dominant presence in India.

The condition of the artisans, handicraft workers, weavers etc living in the towns and cities who belonged to the working class was related to growing demand for goods from regional capitals and from outside India. It appears the economic condition of such people

was better than what happened later when the East India Company acquired control over artisanal production. M.N. Pearson gave some evidence of merchant's participation in politics. However, Pearson refrains from suggesting that the Mughal finance system was dependent on merchant's credit. Muzaffar Alam's study of early 18 century Awadh provides evidence of the remarkable economic growth and prosperity which resulted in zamindari unrest in the region. Economic prosperity was a consequence of increased commercialization and monetization of the economy that was initiated in the glorious days of the Mughals. The affluent zamindars took advantage of their newly accumulated assets and disobeyed the Mughals.

SOCIETY

In his book Christopher Bayly has rightly highlighted the importance of the intermediate classes in the 18th century. Intermediaries were accumulating the wealth slowly and gradually and that formed the basis for the emerging kingdoms in the 18th century. These intermediaries were the beneficiaries from the weakening of Mughal rule. Earlier they were the Lilliputians among the giants and later they now came into the limelight. Among others these intermediaries included Hindu and Muslim revenue farmers. Here 'Farming' implied that in exchange of a fixed sum of money, the state empowered them to keep the revenue.

Normally such an arrangement was convenient to the new rulers who wanted that regular and steady payments were made to the state. The farming of such rights also covered trade and markets. Hindu and Jain merchants and bankers such as Agarwals throughout the north, Khattris from Punjab, Oswals, Maheshwaris from Rajasthan etc. were another important components of this intermediary group. Their presence bore testimony to a continuous

tradition of trading in India, as the existence of merchant castes indicates saraafs [money dealers], bazazas [cloth dealers], jouhuris [jewellers] etc. They lent money to the ordinary people as well as to rulers. They stood as guarantors of revenue. Another important group was the Muslim gentry that included scribes, accountants and other petty officials. Such people consolidated themselves in local society forming the nuclei of new settlements like qasbas [fixed gentry seats]. Such people had intimate and long experience of managing markets and revenue accounts. With the establishment of religious and educational institutions gentrification assumed the shape of cultural activity in these new settlements. Cohn had pointed out that in the Benaras region, traditional intermediaries had new power with changing circumstances. According to Cohn, intermediaries assumed new roles. They often functioned as 'hinges' between the state and local society.

In this century the development of bazaar forces made deep inroads into the subsistence character of Indian agriculture. Farmers also got involved with trade and traders with farming. The common interest of merchants and farmers in the countryside formed the 'intermediate economy'. This meant that agricultural commodity production got linked to commercial networks. This helped the new states to mobilize revenue more with the help of intermediaries. Non-food crop production such as cotton, raw silk, indigo, oil etc. was also largely prevalent. There was a tendency to localization. This means that if it was advantageous and there was enough demand, then farmers cultivated more crops. In the 18th century this can be witnessed throughout the Ganges valley as a string of ganjes [fixed regulated markets], mandis [wholesale markets] and qasbas sprang up. They testified to the process of an incipient urbanization and economic activity. Towns that came up

alongside were mere parasites that lived off the countryside.

One remarkable indicator of this failure was the response of elites in Mughal India. Despite enormous resources at Mughal's command they showed little interest in economic and scientific developments. Mansabdars invested in horticulture as this was a way of showcasing their status. They hardly took any interest in enhancing agricultural techniques.

Historian Tapan Raychaudhuri has also said that the rural sector of the Indian economy continued as a source of supply rather than a market for products. This indicated that peasants' income was not rising. It was a serious road block to the transformation of the economy. Other unfavourable factors included a pre-modern system of transport, a tradition of minutely specialized hereditary skills that were resistant to labour saving technology, and the deeply entrenched institution of caste. The very sophisticated artisanal skills and existing market networks may have resisted further change as they were able to cope with growing domestic and international demand.

CONCLUSION

The 18th century has always been considered very important in Indian history. It is normally held as a period of transition in which the Mughal empire transferred the seat of the power to the sea-based British empire. It is regarded that Mughal empire had declined due to its own contradictions and the English East India Company used the aggressive mercantilist forces of the West, thus deriving advantage of the bewilderment prevalent at that time to make India a colony. The transition that was occurring was multi-dimensional-political, economic, social, cultural and so on. To the scholars, the 18th century signaled the beginning of a new historical era of colonial rule. There were fundamental changes that

occurred with regard to society, economy, culture, politics etc and the study of these changes enable us to know the India of 18th century.

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