

Interpreting 18th Century India and the Decline of Mughal Empire

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The eighteenth century occupies an interesting position in the history of India. In recent years it has also emerged as a major site of debate among historians. As a century that witnessed the decline of Mughal Empire in the first half of the century and the dawn of British colonial empire in the second half, the historiography of 18th century provides valuable insights into the complexities of the social, political, economic and cultural landscape of India.

True, from the point of view of the Mughal state, the 18th century was a period of crisis as with in a very short spell from 1707 to 1739, the Empire that once ruled most of the Indian subcontinent, underwent a radical contraction and fragmentation. Until the 1970s, the theme of decline dominated the historiography of the 18th century. Subsequently however attention has tended to focus on the regions that emerged as power centres and the century is now viewed as one of opportunities and economic growth.

Several earlier historians such as Sir Jadunath Sarkar ascribed Aurangzeb's religious policy and his expansionist military campaigns in western India against the Marathas for the rapid imperial decline. He characterized the peasant rebellions that ultimately destroyed Mughal political stability as a 'Hindu reaction' to Aurangzeb's religious policy which alienated the Hindus, who constituted the majority of the subject population. But some other historians notably of the Aligarh school, (Satish Chandra, Irfan Habib, Athar Ali and others) have analysed the decline as a consequence of economic crisis and believe that the roots of Mughal decline lay in institutions and systems intrinsic to Mughal administration, rather than in personalities or specific policies.

Revisionist historians (C.A. Bayly, Andre Wink, Muzaffar Alam, Frank Perlin and others) have cogently argued that we need to move away from this centrist view and look at the situation from the perspective of the periphery. The Mughal decline, according to them, is the result of the emergence of new regional elite groups into economic and political power and the inability of a distant and weak centre to control them any longer. These two divergent positions form the 'Dark Age versus economic prosperity' debate on the eighteenth century.

As the Mughal empire was a war-state, its permanence depended on its military power and constant drive towards territorial conquests. The entire imperial edifice stood on a "patron-client relationship" between the emperor who stood at the apex of a centralized administrative system and the nobility, the mansabdars, or the ruling class. The efficiency of the imperial administration depended on the functional relationship between the emperor and the nobility. A degree of competition was always present within the nobility (divided into various ethno-religious groups such as the Turani, Irani etc.) in order to have control over good jagirs. In the early 18th century it was aggravated by a pervasive economic crisis referred to by historian Satish Chandra as the jagirdaricrisis. Simply put, it referred to a mismatch between the availability of jagirs and the growing number of jagirdars. J.F. Richards has argued that the crisis was artificial and it was not due to any real scarcity of resources. The jagirdari crisis is however believed to have triggered rampant faction

fighting among court nobility at the Mughal court in the early 18th century ,causing increasing weakness of the army .It proved fatal as ultimately the stability of the empire depended on its military might.The nobles now became more interested in carving out autonomous or regional power centres for themselves,which resulted in a virtual fragmentation of the empire.

Historian IrfanHabibhas shown in his research (The Agrarian System of Mughal India) that peasant exploitation associated with land revenue collection resorted to by the jagirdars owing to frequent transfer of jagirs,caused agrarian crisis culminating in recurring peasant revolts under the leadership of local zamindarsin the late 17th and early 18thcenturies.This failure of the agrarian system had a debilitating impact on Mughal economy and it weakened the structure of the empire.

For revisionist historians of the 18th century however,the agrarian disorder should not be viewed as a symptom of decline because that wouldnot capture the complexities of social transformation that had occured in early 18th century and paved the way for the emergence of regional power structure at the expense of centralized Mughal state.As MuzaffarAlam has pointed out,'consistent economic growth and prosperity' rather than poverty and crisis,thus provided the context for 'local political turmoil'.C.A.Bayly has also argued that the decline of the Mughal state was not tantamount to absolute decline of economy,asowing to decentralization and commercialization,there were areas of surplus that coexisted with areas of stagnation and decline.Indeed the emergence of regional states such as Bengal,Awadh and Hyderabad,marked a major turning point in the political landscape of 18th century India.In her 'Great Firm' theory of the decline of the Mughal Empire,Karen Leonard has stated that loss of confidence in Mughal authority during the reign of later Mughals, forced merchants and bankers to migrate to provincial centres and shifted their loyalties to regional rulers.

In this way our endeavor should be to arrive at a convenient middle ground between conventional and revisionist historiographybecause we cannot wholly reject the argument of either of them.That a great imperial system had collapsed by the mid 18th century is irrefutable .But the idea of decline is perhaps an inadequate theme for understanding the 18th century Indian history for two reasons.Firstly,because the Mughal system continued even long after the de facto demise of the empire.In the second place, a lot more than mere decline happened, as has been pointed out by historian Lakshmi Subramanian that the century witnessed the growth of rich and diverse religious and cultural traditions in different regions of India.We may therefore conclude with the apt observation of SekharBanyopadhyaythat " the 18th century in Indian history is not a dark age, nor an age of overall decline."