



HISTORY

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Interpreting the 18th century

Charles Dickens, the celebrated English novelist made an interesting comment about 18th century France in his novel 'A Tale of Two Cities'. He wrote, "it was the best of times, it was the worst of times". This statement is relevant to India in the 18th century as well.

Features of 18th century India

Socio Economic Scenario

There is intense debate among scholars – both Indian and European-regarding the features of 18th century India. Some

are of the opinion that there was more evidence of prosperity and growth than decline, while others have identified definite signs of degeneration and crisis in Indian society and economy. A third group of scholars put forth the view that there was nothing to suggest that the flow and progression of events had in any manner been disturbed and that 18th century India was nothing but a continuation of 17th century India.

The principal focus of historians while discussing the history of 18th century India, has been the decline of the Mughal Empire and the rise of successor states. Certain other issues like the aspirations of the Marathas to build an empire challenging both the Mughals and the British and the steady rise of the East India Company particularly after 1765, have also to be considered as developments that characterized this period. Historians of the late 19th century like William Irvine, Jadunath Sarkar, have dwelt primarily on the weakness of the Mughal Empire, its weak rulers as well as the internal faction fighting of the Mughals.

Decline of the Mughal Empire

Historians like Jadunath Sarkar believed that weak emperors and incompetent commanders were primarily responsible for the downfall of the mighty Mughal Empire. But a study of this century will show that there was no dearth of able politicians and generals as is proved by the presence of such personalities as Nizam ul-Mulk, Abdus Samad Khan, Saadat Khan, Safdar Jung, Murshid Quli Khan or Sawai Jai Singh. The problem lay in the fact that such able personalities were pre-occupied more in self-aggrandisement and had little concern for the fate of the empire, so much so that they often contributed to the process of decline. But this was due to the weaknesses inherent in the Mughal institution than with personal failures. There were no more conquests in the later years of Aurangzeb, which was followed by a period of constant shrinkage of the resources of the empire. This is what ruptured the functional relationship between the emperor, and the aristocracy, on which depended the efficacy of imperial administration.

De-urbanization and economic crisis are the other issues that have been linked to the decline of the Mughal Empire. Prof. Ashin Dasgupta has pointed to the decline of important

centres of economic activity like Surat, Masulipattam and Dacca in support of the theory that the economy was in a shambles. Based on reports such as that of the Count of Modav-a Frenchman who visited North India around 1774 and stated that Agra and Delhi were in a devastated state, or Mir Taqi Mir, a court poet in Delhi, who had gone to visit the Nawab of Awadh at Faisalabad, who on being asked where he come from had remarked that he came from Delhi "jo ek shahar tha ----" (Delhi which was once a city) it has been argued that a certain level of de-urbanization prevailed at the time.

However, new research has refuted these views, C.A. Bayly for instance in his book "On the bazaars, markets and towns of North India" has pointed out that new urban areas, corporate groups and trade centres were evolving. Muzaffar Alam has shown that Awadh, Bengal and Punjab were steadily becoming prosperous. He has compared the jamadani or revenue demand mentioned in the Ain-i-Akbari to the revenue demand in the 18th century and shown that the amount had almost doubled. Mazaffar Ali sums-up the situation by stating that decentralization and commercialization, around this time had produced a group of upstarts or a new regional power

elite, who started to monopolise the resources of the empire, with the exclusion of hereditary Mughal nobility or khanazads.

Emergence of Successor States

Successor states of the 18th century can be broadly divided into two types – a) The states founded by Mughal nobles or those who had close contacts with the Mughals-Bengal, Awadh, Hyderabad and Jaipur, b) States which were anti Mughal like the Marathas, Jats and Rohillas. However, there did exist vast differences between one region and another. This development has to be viewed against the backdrop of the Maratha aspirations at forming an empire and the devastating effects of the rise of the East India Co., as a dominating power, first in Bengal and then in the rest of India.

Successor states whose founders were connected with the Mughal Empire.

Successor State-Bengal

The province or subah of Bengal gradually became independent of Mughal control after Murshid Quli Khan

became the governor in 1717. Behind the veneer of formal allegiance to the Mughal rulers, he enjoyed a considerable amount of autonomy and initiated almost a dynastic rule although he regularly sent revenue to the imperial treasury. Bengal had lucrative trading facilities and this combined with her political stability and increased agricultural productivity during Murshid Quli's period, contributed to her growing importance among merchants and bankers. Increasing investment of the European trading companies led to surplus bullion being brought by them to buy Bengal goods. Alongside the rise in prices of agricultural produce and other goods particularly coarse cloth, it may be noted that revenue collection had shot up by 20% between 1700 and 1722 due to the efficient collection system put in place by Murshid Quli Khan, which was operated through powerful intermediary zamindars. The constant pressure on the zamindars to pay revenue in time and its regular remittance to the imperial treasury in Delhi brought powerful financiers and bankers into great demand. They provided securities at every stage of the transaction and enjoyed unprecedented patronage of the government. The most significant story of such collaboration was the rise of the banking house of Jagat Seth, who

eventually became treasurer of the Bengal government in 1710 with strategic control over the mint.

Some have argued that the growing importance of Jagat Seth was because the nawabs did not want to collect the revenue through normal channels but preferred to depend on intermediary agents, bankers etc. But this has been proved incorrect, in the sense that at least till the time of Murshid Quli Khan a large number of Qanungos were responsible for revenue collection.

The first half of the 18th century was one of economic growth and prosperity in Bengal. Bengal also witnessed a new wave of urbanization, amply illustrated by the position of Murshidabad as one of the leading cities. Lord Clive who came there in 1764 was amazed to see this city which had a population greater than that of London. He was similarly impressed by the huge treasury at Murshidabad. However, all this vanished in another 50 years.

Successor State-Awadh

Another Mughal province that became autonomous in the course of the 18th century was Awadh. Sadat Khan was

appointed the Mughal governor of Awadh in 1722. In appreciation of his success in subduing rebellions by the local rajas and chiefs, the Mughal Emperor Bahadur Shah conferred the title of Burhan-ul-Mulk on him. He started a new dynasty himself and established a semi-independent state, while keeping the communication channels with the imperial court open. The Jagirdari system was reformed, with jagirs being granted to the local gentry, while a rich flow of trade kept the province affluent.

Safdar Jung who succeeded Sadat-Khan generally followed in the footsteps of the latter, and Awadh witnessed considerable agricultural growth. Muzaffar Alam has corroborated this by comparing the production figures of 1595-96 furnished in the Ain-i-Akbari with the late 18th century figures. However, as there is a lack of documents regarding prices of agricultural commodities, it is not possible to remark on whether the peasants were overburdened.

Nawab Shuja-ud-Daulah of Awadh entered into a treaty with the Mughal ruler Shah Alam-II and Mir Qasim, the Nawab of Bengal against the English. However, their combined armies were defeated by the English forces at Buxar in 1764. This

sounded the death knell for the independent state of Awadh which was turned into an English dependency.

Successor State-Jaipur

Ever since Man Singh was appointed mansabdar by Akbar, Jaipur remained as one of the Mughal vassals. Sawai Jai Singh of Amber was one of the most powerful Rajput chiefs who ruled in Jaipur from 1699 to 1743 and played a significant role in Mughal politics. But gradually from the 18th century Jaipur stopped payment of revenue or peshkash to the Mughal Government. In the meantime the situation of the Mughal rulers had deteriorated to such an extent that it was remarked that the Mughal sway extended only from Delhi to Palam. Throughout the 18th century Jaipur constantly tried to become independent of the Mughal System, paying revenue off and on and that too only under pressure. On the whole, while keeping on with their efforts to become independent, they still maintained some contact with the Mughals.

States which were anti-Mughal

Anti-Mughal state – Maharashtra

Among the states that emerged in 18th century India were those founded by rebels against the Mughals of which

Maharashtra was the most powerful. It was perhaps the only indigenous state that had the potential to develop into a Pan-Indian empire replacing the Mughals, but that potential was never fully realised because of the nature of the Maratha polity itself. Local revenue officers or deshmukhs and zamindars took advantage of the dynastic factionalism that followed the death of Shivaji in 1680, by sometimes joining hands with the Marathas and sometimes aligning with the Mughals. The loyalty of the Maratha Sardars and Deshmukhs shifted constantly between Shahu (Shivaji's grandson) and Shivaji II (Rajaram's son) in the civil war going on. Shahu ultimately emerged victorious. But the control of the state gradually passed on from the line of Shivaji to that of the Peshwas, who rapidly became the fountain head of Maratha authority.

By 1740 the Maratha state had acquired control over large territories of the Mughal Empire. Their other major adversary was the Nizam of Hyderabad, as both powers vied for control over Karnataka, Khandesh and Gujarat. Maratha forces regularly raided the Nizam's territories and in the face of an Afghan invasion even brought the Mughal emperor under their protection by a treaty in 1752. Following the defeat at

the third battle of Panipat the decline of Maratha power started. The Maratha state thus could not become an alternative to the Mughal Empire because of the nature of its structure which consisted of power being shared among chiefs, sardars and deshmukhs. In the meantime the English had emerged as a new contender for power in the turbulent politics of 18th century India. The increasing power of the English in the Deccan dealt the fatal blow to Maratha Power.

The principal revenue of Maharashtra came from internal taxation. But the system was a complicated one. There was the existence of heritable Vatan rights like those of the village headman, mirasdars and deshmukhs which could not be taken away by kings. There also existed peasants who did not have hereditary lands but had to pay taxes. One of the duties of the Peshwas was to help such peasants and demand less revenue from them.

The Marathas had their own system of jagirs known as Saranjam. Different areas of the Maratha Empire were handed over to sardars who were almost independent administrators there, and had the right to collect chauth and

sardesmukhi. There also existed the system of mulkgiri, which denoted expansion and plunder in the areas outside.

The Maratha state had contradictory functions – on the one hand they tried to help the peasants who did not have land and on the other they were trying to expand their empire and plunder areas . The Maratha state did not transfer jagirs which invariably led to creation of rival power centres.

After the debacle at the Third Battle of Panipat (1761), the Marathas were able to regain some of their power, under the able guidance and support of Mahadji Sindia the general of Peshwa Madhav Rao II. He adopted two policies to ensure Maratha domination in North Indian politics. On the one hand he established close contact with the Mughal Emperor Shah Alam who in turn made him the commander-in-chief of the Mughal army and then went on to appoint him as the regent of the Mughals or Wakil-i-Mubalik; on the other hand he decided to modernize the Maratha army. It was in pursuance of the latter policy that Mahadji Sindia appointed De Boigne and Peron, two French experts to supervise and execute this task.

Mahadji Scindia did attain some initial military success, but with the departure of De Boigne the English started attacking the Marathas with renewed vigour and ultimately after defeating them in the Second and Third Anglo Maratha Wars (1804, 1818), the Peshwa had to relinquish his post and live on the pension provided by the English. Thus the Marathas who had once supported the English in killing Tipu Sultan were now vanquished by the English themselves. The vision of the Maratha empire in the North was not sustainable, mainly due to financial factors. The revenue was never sufficient enough to finance the maintenance of the army. Again so far as Maharashtra itself was concerned the Peshwa had to depend to a large extent on loans from bankers mahajans and others which jeopardised their position. With such financial and organizational problems, the Marathas just could not cope with the strength, cohesion and military skill of English military power. C.A. Bayle sums up the situation saying that "the Marathas could not fragment and split the British commanders and residents in the same way that they had once played on the rivalries between the Mughals generals."