



The 18th Century Crisis? - A case study of erstwhile Punjab

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This paper attempts to revisit the process of decline of the Mughal Empire, which took place during the first half of the 18th century in the context of a particular Suba - i- Punjab, which had its own economic trajectory drawing strength from overland trade and riverine commerce. On contrary to the traditional scholarship, which strived to draw a doom gloom picture of this period, this paper focuses light upon the 'response' of a region to this process through sound understanding of its peculiar dynamics and also captures its regional assertion in the wake of the 'afterlife' of a declining empire.

The political demise of the Mughal empire was the most important development of the first half of the 18th century, the period which became the bone of contention between the schools of history, for a group of historians branded crisis, chaos and anarchy as the factors behind the decline whereas others witnessed economic and social reconfigurations in the newly emergent political orders.¹ The early historiography of decline focused on the administrative and religious policies of individual rulers as Sir Jadunath Sarkar conceived religious bigotry and disastrous Deccan campaign of Aurangzeb as the causes behind the decline of Mughals.² Irfan Habib explained Mughal decline in fiscal terms and stated that high land revenue demand caused peasant migration and rebellion, which ultimately resulted into an agrarian crisis, which weakened the empire.³ Be-jagiri (absence of jagirs) was enumerated as the basic reason behind decline since infertile tracts of Deccan couldn't be issued as jagirs, however this position is contested by JF Richards, who argued that Deccan wasn't an infertile and deficit region.⁴ The theory of Jagirdari crisis, which was the result of shortage and infertility of jagirs and intricate flaws in this institution was propounded by Satish Chandra to substantiate this process of decline.⁵

Such Marxist interpretations of the decline largely focused upon the institutional framework and visualized empire as a monolithic and uniform 'entity' without taking into account, its regional diversities and peculiarities and presented 18th Century as the Dark Age since this period didn't fit into their suitable picture of an overarching centralized empire. On the other hand, revisionist studies altered this notion of Dark Age by bringing into center stage those economic realignments, which ensured the dissociation of the region from the imperial control and thus traces an afterlife of the empire.⁶ Opposed to the Marxist idea of 'frozen state', revisionists explored beyond the state by applying bottom up approach to accomplish decentering of history from state to the region and trace a range of 'continuities' between the empire and its successor states.⁷

Revisionist scholarship further attacked on Marxist conception dictating uniformity in the empire by arguing in the favor of different trajectories of Subas as Muzaffar Alam showed cash nexus and

¹ Seema Alavi, "The Eighteenth Century in India", pp. 1-2

² Sir Jadunath Sarkar, "Fall of the Mughal Empire", "History of Aurangzeb: Based on Original sources"

³ Irfan Habib, "The Eighteenth Century in Indian Economic History", pp. 60-61

⁴ M. Athar Ali, "The Mughal Nobility under Aurangzeb"; John F. Richards, "Mughal Administration in Golconda"

⁵ Satish Chandra, "Review of the Crisis of the Jagirdari System" in *Medieval India: Society*, pp. 61-75

⁶ Seema Alavi, p.11

⁷ PJ Marshall, "The Eighteenth Century in Indian History", pp. 3-18

economic prosperity in Awadh on contrary to the declining prospects of the empire.⁸ On similar grounds, Punjab was unique in its own sense as it meant the 'land of five rivers', which formed five doabs⁹ by bringing down great mass of alluvium to this region.¹⁰ Earlier historical traditions saw this province via the prism of its separate religious and national identity as depicted from Cunningham's 'A History of the Sikhs', where he explains the surge of Sikhs vis-à-vis imperial authority¹¹ and W H McLeod continued this study of religion rather than history¹².

Recent research of Chetan Singh brings economy of the region under academic plethora through the study of its agrarian and commercial dimensions. While observing its agrarian scenario, he noted that though Northern Punjab received abundant rainfall however other areas like Malwa suffered from water deficit, which was resolved by utilizing several irrigation mechanisms like Persian wheel and denkli¹³ and the construction of irrigation canals.¹⁴ Though main food crop of Punjab was wheat however various cash crops like cotton, Indigo, tobacco and sugarcane started being grown at a massive scale with the commercialization of agriculture, which incentivized peasants for profit motive by meeting foreign demands of such crops.¹⁵

The need of market for this agrarian surplus led to the emergence of towns in well cultivated areas, thus Northern Punjab became the center of urban development and Lahore was the chief urban center, being the administrative, commercial and manufacturing hub of the whole Suba.¹⁶ At this stage, 'rurban' economy¹⁷ was widely prevalent, where towns were supported by countryside artisans and it functioned through dadani or putting out system as evident from economic activities like carpet-weaving, shawl-weaving and ship-building in 17th Century Punjab.¹⁸

Punjab had rich tradition of trade routes as on one hand, there was wide networks of roads connecting major towns of the region, whereas riverine transportation was also highly efficient on the other hand. Riverine trade was very common in Punjab¹⁹ as even Manucci noted its immense significance, moreover; it ensured internal trade by connecting various land-locked regions to this Suba. Punjab had very intimate trading connections with foreign land also as evident from its external trade with Persia, Red Sea region²⁰ and Central Asia, trade route to which was developed by Afghans²¹.

Cotton-textiles comprising of even Calicos from Calcutta, Indigo, produced from all over the subcontinent²² and sugar; despite being heavyweight which was transported via overland route²³ were the major items of export from Punjab.²⁴ Though imports were limited by diminished purchasing

⁸ Muzaffar Alam, "The Crisis of Empire in Mughal North India: Awadh and the Punjab", pp.105-07

⁹ A highly fertile area irrigated by nearby rivers

¹⁰ Chetan Singh, "Region and Empire: Punjab in the Seventeenth Century", pp. 11-15

¹¹ J D Cunningham, "A History of the Sikhs: From the Origins of the Nations to the Battles of the Sutlej", p. 80

¹² WH McLeod, "Guru Nanak and the Sikh Religion"

¹³ Apparatus used to raise water to the surface, see Irfan Habib "Agrarian System of Mughal India", p.27

¹⁴ Chetan Singh, pp. 94-102

¹⁵ Ibid, pp. 103-110

¹⁶ Ibid, pp. 173-177

¹⁷ Frank Perlin, "The Problem of the Eighteenth Century" in the book 'Eighteenth Century in Indian History', p.54; rurban is the mixture of rural and urban

¹⁸ Chetan Singh, 180-82

¹⁹ Ernest Trump, "The Adi Granth", pp. 614, 642,645

²⁰ Chetan Singh, p.213

²¹ PJ Marshall, p.17

²² See WH Mooreland, "From Akbar to Aurangzeb", p.109

²³ RW Ferrier, "An English View of the Persian Trade in 1618", p.204

²⁴ Chetan Singh, pp. 216-19

power of the Indian consumers²⁵ still silk from Persia, woolen-cloth from Europe and tobacco; despite being prohibited by Jahangir²⁶ were imported to the Suba.²⁷ A comprehensive analysis of the transportation costs in Punjab by Henry Bornford shows that river transport was comparatively cheaper, which was buttressed by the advantageous location of waterways in this region.²⁸

Thus, Mughal province of Punjab in the 17th century was among the most prosperous regions which is reflected through its increased revenue and this agrarian surplus further boosted commercial operations.²⁹ This unprecedented growth of Punjab economy witnessed a free-fall beginning from the death of Aurangzeb and went through this plunge across the whole 18th Century.³⁰ This riverine commerce was largely based upon the boat navigation, which turned into a turbulent affair due to widespread silting in the river Indus, since it was getting nearly impossible to sail upon the shallow waters.³¹ Testimonies of Thevenot and Tavernier stated that silting of the river Indus, adversely affected trading operations of Punjab³² and was responsible for the economic decline of the cities like Multan. As a result, by the late 18th Century, transportation of merchandise through riverine routes had completely disappeared from Punjab, which inflicted a deadly blow on the Punjab economy.³³

Revisionist scholarship always connects local developments with the global phenomena, thus fluctuation in the demand for Indian goods in Persian and Middle Eastern markets, political disturbances in Turkey and Yusufzai uprisings, which led to large-scale plunder, were the external factors responsible for the decline of Punjab.³⁴ William Franklin observed that trade of Punjab with other parts of Hindustan had long ceased³⁵ and there was an Eastward shift of trade and commerce towards Bengal and Bihar. This decline is evident in a sharp decline of jama and hasil figures in Punjab during the course of the 18th Century and poor peasants were the worst sufferers out of this economic dislocation.³⁶

Apart from this economic turnaround, Punjab was also marred by political instability, social churning and an emergent insurgency revolving around a peasant leader named Banda Bahadur. In the context of dissipation of a strong imperial authority, Subedars had started the process of negotiation with the court to amass more power and privilege, which had led to the emergence of 'New Subedari' in some of the provinces.³⁷ This caused the friction between the emperor and the governor as the former was reluctant to allow the latter to emerge as a new center of power, which is clearly visible from dismissal of associates of Asad Khan, Punjab governor, from the provincial offices.³⁸

Later failure of newly appointed governor Abd us Samad Khan in his attempt to establish greater control, led to the breakdown of the pre-existing center-province relations as the governor gave lukewarm response to the imperial Farmans and at times even expressed inability to attend the royal court since his prime motive was to ensure a certain degree of Independence.³⁹ Moreover, factional

²⁵ W H Mooreland, p. 53

²⁶ Satish Chandra, "Some Aspects of the Growth of Money Economy" in Medieval India, p.159

²⁷ Chetan Singh, pp.219-23

²⁸ Ibid, pp. 225-27

²⁹ Muzaffar Alam, pp. 144-45

³⁰ Ibid, p. 183

³¹ Chetan Singh, pp. 229-32

³² Surendranath Sen, "Travels of Thevenot" p.77; Tavernier, "Travels in India", pp. 73-74

³³ E D MacLagan, "Travels of Manrique", p.261

³⁴ Chetan Singh, p. 232-34

³⁵ William Franklin, "Sikhs and their country"

³⁶ Muzaffar Alam, p.185

³⁷ Ibid, pp. 65-74

³⁸ Ibid, p.78

³⁹ Ibid, pp. 84-89

strife of the Mughal court severely affected Punjab polity since Wazir had vested interests in this whole North-Western region comprising of Multan, Punjab and Kashmir, which could only be served by cowing down the authority of governor and emperor was no more the adjudicator, but just a part of one of these court factions.⁴⁰ This can be exemplified from the royal decree ordering transfer of Abd us Samad Khan to Kabul, when he had tried to bring Kashmir under his immediate control.⁴¹ All this resulted in into a political instability in Punjab since both the parties- Subedar and Wazir were indulged in political maneuverings and one-upmanship to hegemonize their authority over this region. According to Alam, Awadh governor had been able to use regional aspirations to consolidate his position by allying with the local dominant castes, however his counterpart in Punjab failed to do so and the province fell into the rebellious peasantry leadership of Banda, who declared himself as the 'arbiter' with the state and champion of the causes of the locals.⁴² Economic and social dynamics of Punjab actively contributed to the rise of an "insurgent" leader Banda, who aspired autonomy⁴³ to certain degree and negotiability with the imperial regime. Traditionally, Punjab was occupied by various tribal and pastoral communities such as Jats, Bhattis, Ghakkars, Gujjars etc. and an imperceptible process towards sedentisation and social stratification among these communities was the predominant development of the 17th century⁴⁴, amongst them, Lohanis had even resorted to commercial operations⁴⁵.

This social restructuring was further buoyed by commercial expansion and commercialization of agriculture as these newly sedentised communities were being employed in these sectors, however when this economic euphoria began to die out with declining trade and lesser demands, it sowed the seeds of social unrest and it was pragmatically utilized by Banda since, his principal support base came from discontented lower class populace.⁴⁶ The active participation of Jats in this movement alienated urban communities such as Khattris, whose official positions in Mughal court and mercantile interests were being jeopardized by it; Zamindars and chieftains whose interests were being served by Mughals and Hindus, since some of the principles of Sikhism were antithetical to the interests of Brahmanism⁴⁷ Though a long belt of territory along the Shivaliks, from Jamuna to the Ravi had come under his influence⁴⁸ however, due to lack of comprehensive support he was caught and executed 1715⁴⁹.

In post-1715 scenario, there was no eminent leader among Sikhs and Mughals had been able to create dissension between Banda's followers and the family of Guru Govind Singh⁵⁰, however now this struggle against the Mughals became a people's war and Ramdasapur (modern day Amritsar) became the rallying center of Sikhs.⁵¹ The Dal Khalsa organization changed the character of this movement by mobilizing plunderers into cavalry regiments and gradually established their control over twelve misls in 18th century.⁵² Indu Banga discusses the nature and development of several Sikh institutions after 1715 such as Rakhi, Misl, Gurmata and Dal Khalsa and also traces their continuities from their Mughal antecedents.⁵³ In the wake of this decline of 18th Century, high culture of Persian language

⁴⁰ Ibid, pp. 91, 291

⁴¹ Ibid, p.292

⁴² Ibid, pp. 305-18

⁴³ Since he called himself as the Saccha Badshah and issued orders & coins, appointed his own Amils & Thanedars and conquered territories, see Muzaffar Alam, p.148

⁴⁴ Chetan Singh, pp. 263-69; Ain I Akbari

⁴⁵ Baburnama, p. 235

⁴⁶ Chetan Singh, pp. 270-74

⁴⁷ Muzaffar Alam, pp. 150-55

⁴⁸ J S Grewal, "The Sikhs of Punjab", p. 83

⁴⁹ Muzaffar Alam, p. 177

⁵⁰ JS Grewal, p. 88; Muzaffar Alam, p. 177

⁵¹ J S Grewal, p. 88

⁵² Muzaffar Alam, p. 181

⁵³ Indu Banga, "Agrarian System of Sikhs", pp. 188-93

went through a process of dilution and vernacularisation as lots of indigenous lexicons and proverbs came to be incorporated into its corpus⁵⁴. This initiated the percolation and dissemination of this language to the lower echelons of society, thus Persian, which was earlier the prerogative of only elites, now became accessible to the commoners.

Thus, all these developments point towards the fact that Mughal empire was not at all uniform even during its heydays since every region was under its own time zone of social harmony and economic prosperity, thus to anticipate a comprehensive decline and degeneration of the whole Mughal empire at once would be called nothing but a 'historical fallacy', which can only be corrected via tracing regional developments separately and noting their assertions under the guidance of revisionist school of history.

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⁵⁴ Muzaffar Alam, "The languages of Political Islam in India", pp. 123-140