REVIEW ARTICLE / C. SRINIVASA REDDY*

Approaches to the Mughal State

Doughlas E. Streusand, *The Formation of the Mughal Empire*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 1989, pp. 206+x, Rs. 175.

The study of the Indian state in the pre-modern period and the question of how political power had been used in achieving certain social and economic goals in the historical past is the main concern of historiography on India. Some of the imperialist theorists projected pre-British India to be a static entity and it is only with the coming of the British that India witnessed a dynamic buoyancy in the socio-economic and political spheres. This Eurocentric theory however, declined in the post-independence period. In fact, the scientific study of Mughal history as a reaction to the concept of Pax Britannica. This included the nationalists, both Hindu and Muslim, and the more recent economic oriented studies of Aligarh University.[1] The Aligarh historians informed by the Marxist theory exerted considerable influence in rewriting Mughal history and brought in a new trend in historiography; they introduced secular categories for the interpretation of Mughal history. In Aligarh's historical writings, the Mughal state is perceived as a centralised, sovereign, unitary state governed by 'one elaborate highly unified and systematic bureaucracy under the exclusive control of the sovereign'.[2] The state system primarily rested on revenue and was sustained, according to these historians, by its ability to appropriate a large portion of the economic surplus generated within its frontiers. The system is supposed to have depended on the revenues extracted by the empire-created prebendaries (also seen as bureaucratic elements). The revenue itself was collected to meet the military and political exigencies on which the system rested; this categorises the Mughal state as a 'conquest state'. The state, in order to appropriate the maximum social surplus, sacrificed some of its fiscal rights to the landed assignees and hence the existence of jagirdars and mansabdars. Central as it was, the state, however, saw to it that these elements were controlled by a system of 'checks and balances' by regular transfer of these prebendaries. For

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them the jagirdars and mansabdars formed the vital link between the state and the economy. The Aligarh historians also believed in the existence of a powerful and coercive centre at its apex with substantial revenue/fiscal flows from the periphery and hence the capacity of the centre to penetrate to all levels of society. This approach can be broadly termed as the 'centre-oriented approach'[3] which is different from the 'bureaucratic-despotism', 'patrimonial-bureaucratic' and the 'gun powder' theories. In our review we are not concerned with these theories as they do not fit into the medieval Indian reality. For example, the patrimonial state (of the Weberian model) restricts Mughal history to mere palace politics (see the introduction of the book under review). Nevertheless both the Aligarh framework and the other approaches apparently seem to meet on various grounds. For they believed in the bureaucratic formation of the empire and the overreaching role of the centre over the periphery.

The 1970s saw the influence of the American sociologists' segmentary state approach (transposed African model) in the study of the Indian state.[4] Their approach is very different from the centre-oriented approach in the sense that they rejected state-induced penetration into the periphery. They argued that the relationship between the centre and the periphery is not political but a ritual one. With the increasing distance between the centre and the periphery the role of the centre decreased. However the relationship between the two now got legitimised only by the ritual obligation of the periphery to the centre.[5] According to the segmentary state approach, society is segmented into village, locality, supra-locality and finally the kingdom. In this pyaramidical structure each segment is in opposition to the other.[6] So far this approach has been restricted to the analysis of South Indian history, with the possible exception of the book under review. It is in this background we propose to locate the work of Streusand.

Douglas E. Streusand's book, *The Formation of the Mughal Empire* is focussed on the nature and development of the Mughal polity between 1556 and 1582. The precedents of the empire, both Islamic and Indian, the mechanisms of expansion and therefore the formation of the empire, the incorporation of various heterogenous groups into the military and fiscal hierarchy of the empire and the nature of sovereignty forms the crux of his book. More importantly the author questions the very central character of the Mughal empire and its crisis and also the compromises during the reign of Akbar.

There is absolutely no doubt that Akbar introduced a set of new administrative institutions and practices, a new military system, norms of political behaviour, and a new conception of kingship. Streusand sees four levels of transformation: the increasing central power, acceptance of Akbar as sovereign and of the Mughal constitution, the development of the military-based mansabdari

system and the subsequent changes in the sovereignty cult (p. 14). The political precedents of Mughal kingship as developed by Akbar rested not merely on the Islamic-Iranian-Timurid conception of centralised bureaucratic administration and collective sovereignty, which of course changed into a single sovereign rule under Akbar in India and under the Ottomans elsewhere in the sixteenth century. The Indian precedents, though vaguely found in the Mughal polity, still played an important role in transforming the kingship. The concept of *Rajyabhisheka* and its similarities to the Islamic *divine mandate* made the Rajputs, for example, accept Mughal suzerainty. Also for instance the cosmic man of Indian kingship is transposed in a way to the perfect man of Akbar after he dispensed with Islam in public, abolished the *Jiziah* and more importantly introduced *Sulh-i Kull*. This helped in submission of officers and other heterogenous elites, notably Rajputs, to Akbar, ritually, which had larger political and administrative implications. While studying the political precedents of the Mughal empire the author brings up two important historiographical models of the centre-oriented theory and the segmentary theory. In a way he tries to integrate these approaches which are otherwise very different. In Chapter 2, titled 'In the Beginning', Streusand studies the Islamic precedents characterised as, highly bureaucratic system based on single sovereignty. The Indian precedents on the other hand are studied in a typically segmentary model. For example, the author talks of the 'passive aspect of Indian kingship' (p. 39). He integrates these two historiographical schools both at the level of the administrative set-up of the Mughals and in defining kingship. This is evident throughout the book. Administratively, for instance, he transposes the village and locality of Burton Stein's pyramidical structure onto the village and the 'zamindari' zones of the Mughal polity, while the parganas, sarkars and provinces are studied under the rubric of 'empire created' zones which accepted the central government totally. The local levels are thus independent of the empire created (by Akbar) jagirdari and mansabdari levels where central power is prominent and dominant.

This leads us to one major aspect of the ongoing historiographical debate, i.e., the links between the centre and the periphery or the relationship between the state and civil society. Recent studies on Mughal history reveal that the Mughal state failed to penetrate beyond the imperial jagirdari level. The individual peasant, village and even the zamindar remained relatively untouched by the Mughal empire. The presence of armed peasantry under the zamindars did not allow the penetration of imperial officers' power into the village level. The imperial officers often confronted the age-old traditional village elites who were members of established lineages (p. 48). The author thus sees two contradictory levels: the imperial zone in opposition to the traditional lineages at the village or the locality

power segments. The question then would be, what formed the link between the state and civil society? The centre-oriented approach believed in the capacity of the state to penetrate to all levels of the society through intermediaries. This approach does not envisage any active role to the periphery. The peasant, the artisan and the merchant, for example, remained totally dependent on the state or at best remained as passive entities. The periphery is seen here as a mere extension of the state's power structure primarily existing by and for the state, connected and sustained through fiscal links. As opposed to it the segmentary approach argued for the existence of autonomous segments, with no economic links between the centre and the periphery.[7] While the centre-oriented approach emphasises the meeting of the state and civil society on the initiative of the centre from above through economic intervention, the segmentary approach takes a contrary view. According to the latter, 'the autonomous segments remain unaffected and unchanged, even if the state penetration is granted, but only find (periphery) new ways of survival. In this view, no intervention can change the society.'[8] Thus, for both the schools, state and society remain unrelated aspects. Recently, Sanjay Subramanyam and C.A. Bayly explored a completely new zone of contact which they called, 'contact zone', 'middle area' or the 'grey area', forming an essential link between the state and civil society.[9] The contact zone, according to them, becomes an area not only 'of the initiatives from above (state penetration) but of engagements from below—an important ground for state penetration.'[10] According to C.A. Bayly, certain social groups whose power came from their military/fiscal engagements, articulated between the agrarian society and the state in the eighteenth century. In South India, Sanjay Subramanyam found the existence of 'revenue farmers' in the seventeenth century mediating the transformation of agrarian money to trade and other aspects of economic expansion.[11] These revenue farmers gained legitimacy from their judicious mixture of trade and politics; reaped the benefits (external threats were common to these South Indian states in the seventeenth century) from the revenue collections, while for the state a stable income was guaranteed. These 'portfolio capitalists' had notional interests and formed a vital link between the state and civil society. They were not created by the state as the mansabdars and jagirdars, or were not merely autonomous segments of the segmentary model, but were embedded within the system—a reflection of the political economy of the region. For Mughal history too, perhaps, we should focus our attention on this 'hazily painted and partially revealed intermediate zone' to understand the process of making of the Mughal empire, and this is precisely what the book under review fails to do.

The study of medieval state administration and its political and social implications is one of the vexed subjects of historians of empires

in general and the Mughals in particular. There is no doubt that Akbar integrated various disparate grounds (political social elites) into the imperial mould. This was made possible firstly by the introduction of various administrative reforms and secondly by making them accept the 'Akbari Constitution' (see Chapter 6). Was it a smooth transformation for Akbar to incorporate, say the Chagatays, the Indo-Muslims and the Rajputs in the imperial mould, or was the very notion of imperial integration a myth? The incorporation of the heterogenous groups historically led to many complexities in the making of the Mughal empire. By placing these elements in the mansabdari or jagirdari system within the rubric of the unitary, central and bureaucratic rule of the Mughals, the centre-oriented historians complicated the study of pre-colonial state formation. Akbar, over a period of time, brought these elements well into the imperial mould. For example, the Chagatays, who were always very close to the imperial centre, had to be displaced to eastern India, while the Rajputs were deliberately given an upper hand within the imperial hierarchy. This led to numerous revolts against imperial Delhi, the most important being the Uzbeg revolt (p. 108). Even within the mansabdari system the strict imposition of the *Dagh* system and other fiscal rules on the mansabdars led to devastating results. Akbar, many a time, had to do away with the stricter imposition of imperial rules. For example, the *Dagh* system witnessed laxity and he was forced to allow the mansabdars to retain relative autonomy (p. 171).[12] For Streusand, therefore, it was not the administrative regulations of Akbar which made the mansabdari system work, but the *darbari* rituals such as *nazr* and *pishkash* which signified their subordination to the political superior, Akbar (pp. 138–40). In conclusion, he says that Akbar had far greater control over the imperial segments and to a degree over the indigenous segments as well, but the empire was not free from 'crisis and compromise'. Historically, almost all the Islamic polities 'faced the difficulty of combining the administrative centralisation which they desired with the decentralisation which the level of economic development and sophistication required'. The crux of the problem thus lay in the disjuncture between the administration and the financial realities. The agrarian surplus in the form of revenue ideally should have been collected by the secular bureaucratised systems, instead these states adopted a system of creating intermediaries who collected revenue for the state to start with, but started appropriating, over a period of time, a larg part of it for themselves.

Though the author is critical of both the centre-oriented studies and the segmentary model, he fails to develop any alternative model for the study of Mughal history. Instead, a new rhetoric is used—'the hybrid Islamic administration' imposed from above at one level

(empire-created zones) and the continuation of Indian segments (indigenously produced, provincial level) at another level (p. 181).

The book is a refreshing intervention for two reasons. Firstly, an attempt is made to study medieval North India with a segmentary approach which becomes an interesting beginning for future historical debates. Secondly, the book comes out of the typically decline-oriented studies of Irfan Habib, N.A. Siddiqi and Satish Chandra.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Irfan Habib's *The Agrarian System of Mughal India, 1556-1707* (Bombay, 1963) pioneered this school. This was followed by a host of other historians. See Athar Ali, *The Mughal Nobility Under Aurangazeb* (Bombay, 1966); N.A. Siddiqi, *Land Revenue Administration Under the Mughals, 1700-1750* (Bombay, 1970); Shireen Moosvi, *The Economy of the Mughal empire c. 1795* (Delhi, 1988); and Z.U. Malik, 'Core and Periphery: A Contribution to the Debate on the Eighteenth Century', in *Social Scientist*, Vol. 18, Nos. 11-12, November-December 1990.
2. Z.U. Malik, ibid., p. 6.
3. This stereotyped state penetrative approach is common to almost all the Aligarh historians, despite the nature of historical tools used. The protagonists of the centre-oriented approach borrowed most of these 'Mughal' concepts and applied them to other regions as well. These historians gave almost the same picture of a powerful centre, landed fiscal elites, bureaucratic administration, etc. See K. A. Nilakanta Shastri, *A History of South India from the Pre-historic Times to the Vijayanagara Empire* (Delhi, 1982), and J.F. Richards, *Mughal Administration in Golconda* (Delhi, 1975).
4. Burton Stein, *Peasant State and Society in Medieval South India* (Delhi, 1980); 'State Formation and Economy Reconsidered', in *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol. 19, No. 131, 1985, pp. 387-413; 'Politics, Peasants and De-construction of Feudalism in Medieval India', in J.J. Byres and Harbans Mukhia (eds.), *Feudalism and Non-European Societies* (London, 1985), pp. 55-86.
5. Burton Stein, *Peasant State and Society*, p. 269.
6. Ibid., pp. 264-65.
7. For Burton Stein, until the time of Tipu Sultan, no military regime, Hindu or Muslim, was able to shift most of its income from tribute to revenue directly collected by the state officials. Thus for Stein, the political entities in South India were tributary based till the eighteenth century. It was only in the eighteenth century that the state faced military constraints which made them look for regular income. See Burton Stein, 'State Formation', pp. 392-93.
8. R. Champakalakshmi, 'The State in Medieval South India: Emerging Perspectives', Presidential Address, Historiography Section, *Andhra Pradesh History Congress*, Srisailam, 1989, p. 266.
9. Sanjay Subramanyam, 'Aspects of State Formation in South India and South East Asia, 1500-1650', in *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, Vol. 23, No. 4, October-December 1986, pp. 357-77; 'Persians, Pilgrims and Portuguese: The Travails of Masulipatnam Shipping in the Western Indian Ocean, 1590-1665', in *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol. XXII (3), 1988, pp. 503-30; *The Political Economy of Commerce: Southern India 1500-1700* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1990); and also his article with C.A. Bayly, 'Portfolio Capitalists and the Political Economy in Early Modern India', in *Merchants, Markets and the State in Early Modern India* (Delhi, 1990) pp. 242-65.

10. See Sanjay Subramanyam, 'Aspects of State Formation', p. 366.
11. For the North Indian Mughal historians, revenue farming is an after-effect of the decline of the Mughal empire. But in South India, according to Sanjay Subramanyam, 'revenue farming represents an attempt by the state or revenue assignment holders to stabilise income—a response to crisis'. Ibid., p. 371.
12. It is here that one can question the notion of the system of 'checks and balances' of the Mughals. The Mughals are supposed to have checked the autonomy firstly by shifting the burden of collection of land revenue to their servants. As their salaries were tied with the state revenue, as it is shown in some of the studies, over a period of time they tended to appropriate more as their salaries, often cutting into the state share of the social surplus. And secondly, even the method of checking the officials through regular transfers was not effective. Recently a study of the seventeenth century Punjab subah questions the legitimacy of the working of these transfers. It is found that often officials at provincial levels stayed longer in the same place than the stipulated duration of time. See Chetan Singh, 'Centre and Periphery in the Mughal State: The Case of the Seventeenth Century Panjab', in *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol. 22, No. 12, 1988, p. 306.