THE SOCIAL DYNAMICS OF THE MUGHAL EMPIRE: A BRIEF INTRODUCTION

BY

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Abstract

It is only recently that the study of Indian history since the Muslim conquest, especially the Mughal period (1526-1857), has seen a fundamental change. No longer is this period viewed in the static terms of 'oriental society,' the perennial 'village community' and the unchangeable rigidities of caste and community. Instead full attention is now given to the dynamics of Indian society. Dirk Kolff's work has significantly contributed to this change of perspective. Focussing attention on India's 'armed peasantry' in its various guises of both sedentary 'ryots' and itinerant warriors, Kolff brings out the flexibility and dynamics of the Mughal world that was known to its European contemporaries as the 'flourishing Indies.' Even though traces may still be found in modern India, the price of modernity has been the loss of the flexible dynamics of the *ancien régime*.

Ce n'est que récemment que l'étude de l'histoire de l'Inde depuis la conquête musulmane et particulièrement durant la période de l'empire moghol (1526-1857) a été essentiellement transformée. Au lieu d'utiliser des expressions qui suggèrent des conditions inchangées comme la "société orientale", la sempiternelle "communauté de village," et l'immuable "système des castes", la recherche examine actuellement les aspects dynamiques de la société indienne. A ce changement M. Dirk Kolff a de manière incisive contribué. Focalisant son attention sur la "paysannerie armée", il met en évidence le dynamisme de l'Inde moghole que les contemporains occidentaux appelaient "les Indes florissantes". On en trouve encore des traces dans l'Inde moderne, mais le prix de la modernité a été la perte irréparable de la dynamique flexible de l'*ancien régime*.

Keywords: Mughals, state-formation, social dynamics, armed peasantry, modernization

The choice of the above theme for the symposium in honour of Dirk Kolff on the occasion of his retirement from the Chair of Indian History appears to be perfectly appropriate. The world of India's Muslim rulers is closely related to his scholarly interests. Sharing this interest it was with the greatest pleasure that I accepted our convenor's, Jos Gommans, request briefly to introduce the theme.

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Until fairly recently it was customary to view Mughal India in the static terms of 'oriental society,' the perennial 'village community,' the rigidities of caste, in short as a pool of stagnation, smothering all innovative potential and waiting to be overthrown by a *mutatio rerum*, in casu the British Raj. In this view there is hardly any room for dynamics.

In so far as significant movement or development was noted, it was mostly seen in the metaphorical terms of youthful growth, mature florescence and inescapable decay. The logical end could only be a revolution, breaking away from the cyclic rise-and-decline pattern of the *ancien régime*. It is only then, under the British aegis, that things really start to move. A new and rational dispensation, the rectilinear progress of modernity, is brought about. In this perspective the historian has only to decide when and how the predestined phases succeed each other.

In the last two or three decades of the previous century, the historiographical pattern has fundamentally changed. Instead of the Mughal empire's rise, expansion and disintegration the focus of attention shifted to the working and enduring vitality of its dynamics. Gifted with a distinct sensitivity to the historical realities and wary of essentialist 'models,' Dirk Kolff belongs to the frontline of scholars who worked this change. His study of India's 'armed peasantry' impressively illustrates the empire's dynamics, its working, roots and consequences (Kolff 1990). Here the question arises concerning the nature of this dynamic, how it is structured and what its results are. It is tempting to expect Europe's intensively studied historical experience to provide us with reliable guidance.

European historiography is to a great extent determined by a preoccupation with the development of its national states. But how far can this be relevant for other parts of the world, in casu for India? Of course, some have attempted to view India in terms of European history and, consequently, focus on empires and state formation in India. Obviously, India has much to offer the student of the problems of state formation and empire building, but it is a different world. Let me quote a simple example. The sound and fury of nationalist rhetoric owed much to European nationalist thought, especially regarding German and Italian unification. India's actual historical experience, however, was of an entirely different nature. Thus, looking back at the end of his study of *The Emergence of Indian Nationalism*, Anil Seal felt compelled to liken the battles of the British Raj and the Indian National Congress, known as the 'struggle for freedom,' to "a Dasehra duel between two hollow statues, locked in motionless combat" (Seal 1968: 351). Tragically, only at the end, when the equally nationalistic Muslim League broke away from the Indian National Congress, that a real

ferocity appeared, but then it was between Indian and Indian, leading to the catastrophe of the Partition.[1] European history is not a roadmap followed by all and sundry, nor is Indian history, although the tragic sequel to the struggle for freedom may have something to contribute to the understanding of the history of European nationalisms.

But it is time to return to our question regarding the social dynamics of Mughal India. It will be clear by now that we should be wary of the pre-occupation with state and state formation. So when we discuss Mughal India's social dynamics, we should be aware that the Mughal state—or for that matter its predecessors—was not the single or even the most important source of social dynamism. It is at this point that Dirk Kolff's view claims our attention. In the centre he places the itinerant peasant warrior looking for a patron he will faithfully follow as his *naukar*. The *naukar* is not essentially different from the Rajput, literally 'raja's son,' seeking a father's patronage.

I should caution against thinking that we have here the nucleus of another 'model' or 'grand theory,' in casu Homo Hierarchicus (Dumont 1966).[2] For all the respect and admiration that is rightly due to the regretted Louis Dumont, the notion of hierarchy cannot explain the figure of the *naukar* or the Rajput. Instead it should be noted that the *naukar* does not primarily refer to a hierarchical relationship with his patron. Nor does caste have a place here. The true *naukar* is a companion, rightfully sharing in the success and wealth of his patron, a co-sharer in the realm and in the fortune of his patron.

There is, moreover, another more important point. One that makes the itinerant peasant warrior an unlikely candidate for the role of the central pillar in the construction of a hard and fast 'model' for explaining the social dynamism of pre-modern India. The paraphrase 'itinerant peasant warrior' deftly conveys a basic instability, an unresolved antithesis. On the one hand, we have the settled peasant, caught up in an intricate web of relationships of rights and duties, connected with the exploitation of the soil, in other words the typical 'ryot,' ide-

[1] Seal (1968) explains the initially surprising tepidity of the struggle by referring to the uncertainties on both sides regarding their own 'troops in the frontline,' while at the same time the aims of the two parties had much in common. Put briefly, they were both on the same side. The militant rhetoric and the European-based political thought behind it did not fit into the Indian situation, as the actual problems and conflicts were violently felt.

[2] Remarkably, in the beginning of the nineteenth century one could still speak of the 'modern' doctrine of caste (Kolff 1990: 181ff.). In ancien régime India caste hierarchy, as Kolff shows, did not—or not yet—have the overall importance ascribed to it. "Peasant society was governed by different maxims." The adoption of caste notions may have had to do, at least in Northern India, with sepoy officers wishing to restrict recruitment to their own local communities (Kolff 1990: 186ff.).

ally peaceful and tax-paying. On the other hand, we see this otherwise domesticated creature breaking away to lead the wandering life of a warrior who has his being in the uncultivated wilds, prying on the wealth of the settled zones and the trade routes—a life that is closely akin to that of the itinerant *sādhu* and the fighting ascetic. Ambitious rulers, large and small, eagerly sought after their warbands. But there always remained the hope of peacefully settling down again to enjoy the gathered booty. It is, in fact, an old pattern with a respectable pedigree, reaching back into Vedic times (Heesterman 1995: 641-4).

What it comes down to is an expansive and unstable pattern of two opposite but complementary spheres, the cultivated areas as against the uncultivated wilds, each with its own way of social organization—based on kinship and marriage as against the freely recruiting warband. It is here, in the unresolved tension between these two spheres that we may find the source of the social dynamics that vitalized Mughal India. By managing this tension, the Mughals achieved their impressive success, which was not only their unprecedented but ephemeral territorial expansion but also the more durable expansion of the cultivated area. Both are, in principle, implied in the dialectic of labouring on the land and soldiering far away from home. But it does require a shrewd and utterly flexible balancing of powers.

Interestingly, the classical Indian master of political thought, Kautilya, offers an intricate analysis of this balancing game. In his scheme there are twelve royal players, divided into four 'circles,' respectively of the conqueror, his enemy, the neutral and the remote outsider, each having his ally and ally's ally (Kautilya 1963: 6.2.24-28). The scheme does not reflect a configuration of static identities. Depending on one's point of view and the changing situation, each of the twelve actors assumes a different identity, be it conqueror, ally, enemy, neutral or outsider. So they continually interchange their identities. In other words, there is no end to the game. There is only the everlasting play of ambivalences and uncertainties. The players, therefore, are engaged in a perpetual game of conflict and alliance that might have gone on forever. Thus, we may understand that India's eighteenth century, usually viewed as an age of decline with the Mughal empire tottering into chaos and dissolution, also showed another face. European travellers of the period reported enthusiastically about '*les Indes florissantes*'—as the title of an anthology of their observations describes it (Deleury 1991). What happened, though, was that the Mughal empire succumbed under the weight of its own success. Agrarian expansion together with the growth of artisanal production and internal trade, fuelled by the well-managed influx of bullion, resulted in a measure of integration on a sub-continental level. But at the same time, this meant the economic growth

and, thereby, independence from the centre of the regions that became the successor states.

One may view the rise of the successor states in terms of region-based community identities, as Sanjay Subrahmanyam and Muzaffar Alam do, who therefore speak of 'ethnic' rather than regional states (Alam and Subrahmanyam 1998: 64). They do, however, clearly recognize the composite, not to say artificial, character of these identities, made up of "a complex mix of local patriotism, religious rhetoric and invented genealogies," promoted by the regional dynasts. The interesting point, however, is that these identities "depended on the Mughals and, at the same time sought to define a distance from the Mughals," as Subrahmanyam and Alam put it. In other words, we see here again the old pattern of the ruler, the Mughal, and his truthful *naukar*s, the co-sharers in the realm. The old game subtly analysed by Kautilya still went on, only more vigorously than before. But, then, the prizes in the arena had risen spectacularly. Even if one should want to view the rise of regional identities as the resurgence of age-old local traditions, they still owed their vigour to the social dynamics of Mughal India.

What put an end to the ancien régime was the take-over in Bengal by the British. That they were first and last traders was not so unusual. So had the Mughal elite in Bengal also been, except that socially and financially they were far greater people in whose eyes the Company servants were rather despicable small fry. What made the difference was that the East India Company regime, although starting as an admittedly somewhat odd successor state—still minting its coins in the name of the Mughal *pādshāh*—was turned into a European type government in accordance with what then was 'modern.' Originally it fitted fairly well into the context of the Mughal empire and benefited not so much from the empire's weaknesses as from its social dynamics. In fact, without these dynamics the British Raj could hardly have emerged. The problem was the studied modernity of the British regime, deviating from the customary Mughal type of governance. Unlike the latter, the British regime was impersonal, bound by impersonal rules and generally wary of all ambivalence that was the life-blood of the ancien régime. The peasant had to be just that and not also a warrior. The soldier had to be a strictly disciplined sepoy and not a freebooting warrior. And the zamīndār had to be only an economic and juridical owner of land and no longer a co-sharer in the realm. In the end, the peasantry was disarmed, the countryside demilitarised, and the leaders depoliticised.

This process took a long time. But its impact weighed heavily. It destroyed the source of the social dynamics that, apart from considerable turmoil, had also produced *les Indes florissantes*. Yet, it would seem that the ancien régime did

leave some unsuspected traces. For instance, the ambivalence of the battle between the Raj and the Congress that we saw likened to Dasehra statues locked in motionless combat recalls the ancient pattern analysed by Kautilya. Similarly, the ruling Congress in the first decades after gaining independence resembled in many respects a Kautilyan arena rather than a political party. But if so, the difference was the irretrievable loss of the ancien régime's vital flexibility. The price of this loss was the uncontrollable ferocity of its sequel, the catastrophe of the Partition. But by now I am vastly exceeding my brief of simply introducing the theme of the social dynamics of India's ancien régime. Instead I am entangling myself in the muddles of models and grand theory. So let me return to Dirk Kolff's wise counsel, warning against such a deceptive enterprise and leave the rostrum to those more qualified to speak on the theme.

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