Griffin Dennis

Department of South Asian Languages and Civilizations

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– An Entropic Consideration of Change in 18th Century India –

The 18th century was a period of great political turmoil in the Indian subcontinent. It saw the fall of the once mighty Mughal Empire and the rise of a diverse array of military and political players as the century wore on. Though the fall of the Mughals was relatively swift, it is hard to point to one decisive event that caused the decline. No one military force or decisive victory brought the whole empire crashing down. Instead, a continued assault from all sides wore down the once seemingly centralized administration in Delhi. In the wake of economic and military troubles in the early 18th century, regional powers began to gain more influence. Though there was certainly a large measure of upheaval during this period, there still remain historiographic questions as to the nature of the changes that occurred. Did the fall of the Mughal Empire necessarily cause a period of political, economic or cultural chaos? Was the 18th century a period of decline? The century was marked by significant crises, but it is hard to describe the subcontinent as being in an all out state of chaos or decline. A more nuanced approach would be to discuss the Indian subcontinent as being in an overall state of increasing political, economic, and cultural *entropy* during the 18th century. That is, examine the expansion, disintegration, consolidation, etc. of different forces and powers. From this, we can show that the overextension of resources on the part of the Mughal Empire, and the new trading interests from abroad created a turbulent environment that would ultimately set the stage for another large consolidation of power by the British in the 19th century.

I do not wish to go into lengthy discussion of semantics (or, god forbid, thermodynamics) but I should distinguish 'entropy' in contrast to 'chaos'. Entropy is a quantity describing the degree of disorder within a system. More practically, it describes how thermodynamic systems interact with one another with regards to diffusion, expansion, contraction, etc. Though it may draw the ire of scholars of both physics and history, we can use the term analogously in geopolitical matters to discuss consolidation or diffusion of power, effects of outside actors, and the fact that the subcontinent is by no means a closed system. The key difference between entropy and chaos within the context of this paper is that an increase in entropy need not describe destruction or absolute disorder in the way that chaos often does. Entropic factors are often the only reason certain synthetic reactions occur. So it goes with disorder, dissolution, and the creation of new states. By considering (without figuratively mechanizing) the Indian subcontinent as a collection of interacting and overlapping states and political systems, we get a more accurate picture of how and why the region changed, as opposed to a broad dichotomy of order or disarray.

At the turn of the 18th century, much of the subcontinent was still under Mughal rule, though during the roughly half-century long rule of Aurangzeb, the once certain power had begun to fade with various wars draining resources from Delhi. As Christopher Bayly notes: "By the time of Aurangzeb's death, imperial finances were already in disarray, strained to the breaking point by the need to maintain constant campaigns through the whole subcontinent."[1] The empire that was quite diffuse to begin with was showing its cracks. The prized land assets that the Mughals had fought to control some centuries earlier became liabilities as the outskirts of the empire began to fray among resistance from Hindu warriors and those displeased with revenue collection and other matters of Mughal administration. Conflicts with Maratha, Afghan, and other military forces had spread its

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1 Bayly, Indian Society and the Making of the British Empire, Chapter 1, p7

resources thin, and different regional authorities began to take advantage of this. The resulting decrease in revenue contributed to a negative feedback loop that attenuated the central authority in Delhi. Where the central powers had weakened, the resulting power vacuum was filled by local rulers, some who sought out a working relationship with Delhi, and others who stood in staunch opposition.

A canonical example of this is the rise of the Nawabs of Awadh. In the years leading up to the official power changing hands around the early 1720s, Delhi's foothold in Awadh became increasingly tenuous. John F. Richards notes that between 1707 and 1720 "Awadh … had a total of fifteen governors, some completely absentee."[2] The need a more reliable government would eventually lead to the establishment of an independent Awadh that would remain in place more or less until the exile of Wajid Ali Shah by the East India Company (hereafter abbreviated EIC) in 1856. Beyond the purely political aspect of the transition, Awadh's agricultural prosperity allowed it to break free from the increasingly disorganized central authority in Delhi. In spite of the relatively turbulent beginning of the century, the region regained some degree of stability outside of the Mughal sphere. The consolidation allowed a more effective rule over the region, whereas the far-flung system that went before had proven to be quite ineffective under stress of war and economic hardship.

While Awadh found itself relatively isolated from European colonizers and Hindu warriors for some time, the coastal regions were a more difficult crossroads. The region that most exemplifies this is Bengal. Bengal saw a transition, similar to that of Awadh, to a more consolidated rule under the Nawabs of Bengal. While this provided some degree of independence, Bengal soon found itself in the center of conflict without the means for effective self-defense. Maratha forces surged

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2 Richards, The Mughal Empire, Chapter 12, p275

northward through Bengal and Orissa in a series of campaigns throughout the 1740s, and the EIC had begun their conquest of the region. After the British landed the decisive victory over the Nawab at Plassey in 1757, there was not an immediate takeover of government, but a years-long subsuming of authority in Bengal. In *Bengal: The British Bridgehead,* P.J Marshal discusses the heavy taxes levied on the Nawab's government, which had lost all but nominal legitimacy[3]. The state's dependence on British military protection led to the EIC ruling outright by the mid 1760s. The sequence of breaking from the Mughal Empire, consolidation of power under new rulers and/or ruling classes, and subsequent subjugation by British forces would play out quite a few more times into the late 18th and 19th centuries.

Through all of the large-scale geopolitical jockeying, a different sort of development played out at the district and town level. With ruling powers in a constant state of flux, the practical matters of revenue and trade were more vital on the day-to-day timescale. Zamindars and other officials took advantage of the circumstances to consolidate their power and build revenue streams of their own. As they EIC made their way further into the subcontinent, they largely sought to re-consolidate this power for themselves in the interest of their own bottom line and control on supply.

With a firm foothold in Bengal by mid-century, and the Mughal Empire essentially reduced to a puppet state, the EIC set its sights further afield on southern and western territories. The EIC had become a political and military force to be reckoned with, though many of the ascendant kingdoms like Mysore and the Marathas remained strong during the 18th century. The splintered states of the once vast Mughal Empire organized and consolidated. In some cases this was by choice, in others it was by force. At the same time, the economy of the subcontinent was undergoing massive changes due to the rapid expansion of international trade.

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3 Marshal, 80-90

It is difficult to overstate the role of trade in India during the 18th century. The struggle for control of the subcontinent was never a zero-sum affair, but the scale at which trade expanded during the 18th century upended systems of rule and culture that had stood for centuries before. The circumstances created by emergent colonial powers reinforced the negative feedback loop that wore away at the once far-reaching authority of the Mughals. The lucrative market for textiles, spices and other goods led many in commercial classes to collaborate with colonial powers, though the relationship between colonizer and these individuals proved to be fraught with complications. Bayly notes: "Commercial men, scribal families and local gentry consolidated their power at the expense of the centre."[4] In the long run, the EIC in particular sought to cut out expensive administrative dealings largely through direct conquest; still, the Europeans depended on the support of local commerce in their efforts to expand. Meanwhile, many in the commercial classes saw relative stability and profit in the emerging enterprises, at least for the time being.

The expansion of Calcutta, Surat, Bombay, and others as ports of trade and centers of wealth constituted to some extent an inversion in the economic fortunes of India with regard to geography. Credit and capital now flowed toward the center of India, the region that was once itself flush. Money lending and changing expanded as trade grew, and the independent regions of the late Mughal period required new methods of doing business. In many ways the dissolution of the Mughal Empire yielded an array of intermediate states and systems of governance that iterated in response to new economic and military pressures. This is one reason why it is important not to conflate the decline of the Mughal empire with a decline of India in general.

One matter which creates some dissonance in this regard was the continued strength of Mughal culture even as its borders receded. Urdu, the state language born from Persian and local

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4 Bayly, 4

languages, still played a vital role in administration of former territories, as well as in the medium of poetry. Judicial systems still drew authority from Delhi, with the Emperor adjudicating on matters of Islamic law[5] Though military prowess and resources had waned, many former territories (save, perhaps, the Marathas) were still very much within the old Mughal framework. Some emergent states were reluctant even to assume authority on par with that of the Mughals.

This is where the upcoming Hindu elites and merchant classes come into play, especially with regard to the EIC. Bayly writes: "The eighteenth century saw not so much the decline of the Mughal ruling élite, but its transformation and the ascent of inferior social groups to overt political power."[6] Out of the relative disorder of the former Mughal Empire arose a new order which based itself around new opportunities that arose from trade and other enterprises. Though the influence of Mughal culture was no doubt lasting, those powers that adhered to it found themselves swept up in the current of change as the British extended their conquest further inland toward the end of the century. Ultimately, what played out on the larger scale was a gradual overturning of power through sustained crises. Disorder may have flourished in the 18th century, but the degree to which it hurled India into chaos or even decline is perhaps not as great as some claim.

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5 Bayly, 14-15
6 Bayly, 9

Bibliography

1. Christopher A. Bayly, *Indian Society and the Making of the British Empire,* Cambridge University Press, 1988
2. John F. Richards, *The Mughal Empire,* Cambridge University Press, 1995
3. P.J. Marshall, *Bengal: The British Bridgehead,* Cambridge University Press, 1987