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Final Paper

Thursday, 28 May, 2015

An Entropic Consideration of 18th Century India

"Was the 18th century a period of decline in India? Did the "fall" of the Mughal Empire hurl India into a period of political, economic, or cultural chaos? Or, are there alternative ways of regarding Indian conditions during this period?

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? The century was marked by significant crises, but it is hard to describe the subcontinent as being in an all out state of chaos in any sense. 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.

I do not wish to launch into a lengthy discussion of semantics, or 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. By considering 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 assessment of disarray.

At the turn of the 18th century, much of the subcontinent was still under Mughal rule, though during the 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]](#footnote-1) The prized assets that the Mughals had fought so hard to acquire became liabilities as the ends of the empire began to fray among resistance from Hindu warriors and peasants displeased with the revenue collection of the Mughals. The diffuseness of the empire had spread its 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 even more. Of course, where the central powers had weakened, the vacuum was filled by local rajas, etc.

The canonical example of this phenomenon is the rise of the Nawabs of Awadh. In the years leading up to the official power changing hands around the early 1720s, Delhi had an unsure foothold in Awadh. John F. Richards notes that between 1707 and 1720 “Awadh … had a total of fifteen governors, some completely absentee.”[[2]](#footnote-2) This would eventually lead to the establishment of a more 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. 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 distributed system that went before had proven to be quite ineffective under stress.

While Awadh found itself relatively isolated from Europeans and Hindu warriors, the coastal regions were much more turbulent. 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. Maratha forces surged northward through Bengal and Orissa in a series of campaigns, and the EIC began their conquest of the region. After the British landed the decisive victory 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 puppet Nawab, and the dependence on British military protection that led to the EIC ruling outright by the mid 1760s. Through all of the large-scale geopolitical jockeying, a different game played out at the district level, where the practical matters of revenue and trade were more vital on the day-to-day timescale, as opposed to those who nominally managed affairs at the top. Zamindars and other officials took advantage of the circumstances to consolidate their power and build revenue streams of their own.

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 to begin with, but the scale at which both internal and European trade expanded during the 18th century upended some aspects of politics, 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 a difficult one to manage on both sides of the table. Bayly notes that “Commercial men, scribal families and local gentry consolidated their power at the expense of the centre.”[[3]](#footnote-3) The EIC in particular sought to cut out expensive administrative dealings largely through direct conquest; still, the Europeans depended on the support of commercial classes in their efforts to expand.

Geographically, 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. Credit and capital now flowed toward the center of India, the region that was once flush with reserves of

The sustained attack on, and further weakening of the once consolidated Mughal Empire: Marathas, Afghans, and Britons, oh my! (section each for these)

The western regions, Bombay, Surat, and the growing trading classes

Britain, Bengal, Plassey, and the expanding governmental role of the East India Company

First, we should consider the numerous factors that led to the ultimate demise of Mughal influence in the 1700s. The most obvious of these was the weakening influence of the Mughal military interests in the Empire's territories. Strained by the continuing conflicts in both the east and west ends of its empire, The Mughals were somewhat exhausted by the continuing assaults by British, Maratha, and Afghan forces. This is fairly clear historically, but the side effects of this were a draining of financial resources, and a focusing of troops and ordinance to the detriment of other regions. Of course, the detriment in this case is Delhi's, as the relative absence of the central authority combined with a newfound economic prosperity allowed some regions to at least nominally break from Mughal administration.

1. Bayly, Indian Society and the Making of the British Empire, Chapter 1, p7 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Richards, The Mughal Empire, Chapter 12, p275 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Bayly, 4 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)