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State and Economy: Punjab in the First half of 18th Century

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Abstract

The Mughal centric Scholars believed that with the decline of Mughal Empire, there led to an overall decline and decay. The revisionist scholars who believed that the decline of Mughal Empire did not lead overall decay and decline questioned this. There was successful change of regime in Bengal, Awadh and Hyderabad with the establishment of successor state in these regions. On the other hand Punjab could not achieve political stability because of internal disturbances which was caused by conflict between Mughal Jagirdars and local chieftains. One of the important factor, which also disturbed the successful transfer of power to the local agents, was external invasions caused by Ahmad Shah Abdali. Punjab witnessed a series of external invasions by the Afghan forces in the period between 1701 and 1761. Muzaffar Alam says that the possibility of successor state was present both in Punjab and Awadh, but in the case of Awadh it was successful and in the case of Punjab it was unsuccessful.

Keywords: Decline, overland trade, Diaspora, Merchant community

Objectives:

- This paper will examine the impact of Mughal Decline on Punjab
- This paper will also try to analyze the extent of trade and commerce in Punjab after the decline of erstwhile Mughal commercial Centres.
- It will try to look into the factors which hindered in successful political transformation in Punjab.
- It will examine nature of trade diaspora and the economy associated with them during these phase of turbulence.

Methodology

The methodology followed is deductive and analytic. The data collected from different repositories have been analyzed with the help of the field work. The research would be based upon both primary as well as secondary sources. The Primary sources would include mainly archival sources, travelogue, Persian translated works, English Factory Records. The secondary sources would include Monographs, articles, journals and books written by contemporary scholars who have done extensive research in related field of the proposed study. The sources have been collected chiefly from university library along with the Ratan Tata library, National archive New Delhi, VidhyaJyoti library.



Introduction

The eighteenth century in Indian history is one of the most debated issues among the scholars. The Mughal empire, after the death of Aurangzeb in 1707, disintegrated rapidly. This decline according to Mughal centric scholars led to overall instability, chaos and anarchy. The decline in Mughal power and authority paved way for the emergence of regional states such as Bengal, Hyderabad and Awadh. Muzaffar Alam has rightly pointed out that the 18th century in Indian history particularly its first half was unfortunate that it was sandwiched between the political glory of the great Mughals and the humiliation of colonial rule¹.

In this background, this paper tries to look into issues of economic and political decentralization and emergence of regional identities often in a state of flux. The present paper aims at documenting developments in province of 18th century Punjab to draw a sketch of changes and the continuities it has undergone. The attempt is to unravel the province from the debris of economic decline by tracing its overland commercial growth and ascertain the nature along impact of the trade on the province and areas beyond it. The paper is divided into three sections: The political economy of Punjab, the overland trade and the trade diaspora. The final section endeavors to bridge a major research gap on the topic with exemplary works of Stephen Dale who has exposed us to the magnitude and influence of the Indian diaspora which has remained virtually unknown in modern historical scholarship because of well entrenched Eurocentric biases and the nature of sources within our ambit has discouraged research on this topic. Scott Levi's work further has encouraged the scholars to reconsider global history themes in a less Eurocentric perspective and debunk the notion of Central Asian isolation after the periods of great prosperity under the Mongol and Timurid Empires. The alleged isolation has generally been attributed to the Europeans' monopolization of the transcontinental movement of commodities between Asia and Europe in our period of study.

The Political Economy of Punjab

The nature of political transition in the region is often the most sought after question among scholars but the answer to it remains very obscure. The province was definitely struggling politically and economically amidst decaying edifice of imperial Mughal authority, the growing dynamics of Sikh Movement and certain developments from outside the North western frontiers influencing the region too but was it all or there is more to that meets the eye.

In the late 17th century Guru Gobind Singh (1666-1708) had transformed the character of Sikh religion by converting it into a military organization named as Khalsa symbolic of armed resistance against tyranny. Since in this period, Mughal state was source of all tyranny not only enjoying largest share in social surplus but enforcing the hitherto local power structure, the sikh struggle was aimed against the state and its intermediary agents like the hill chiefs and the bigger zamindars of Punjab.

By the middle of 17th century the Jats had begun to displace the Khatri from the leadership of the Sikh religion² who began directing their struggle against the beneficiaries of existing social structure obvious because of its relatively low place in society. Under Banda Bahadur, the formidable Sikh leader of 18th century enjoying massive popularity among Jatzamindars and peasants, nondescript communities, the Sikh movement signified a protest against these beneficiaries, often violent in nature. The atrocities were perpetrated on the Muslims scholars, gentry, their mosques, mansions



and mausoleums were destroyed³ to the extent Qazi of Sirhind was killed.(*ibid.*, J S p.282). Non JatZamindars and ri'aya were no less victims of Sikh Raids⁴.This resulted in extension of support from the Muslim madad-i-ma'ash holders, theologians to imperial army in their bid to suppress the Sikhs⁵. The consequence of this development was Mughals were able to mobilize various communities in their attempt to suppress the Sikh Movement threatening Mughal authority in the Punjab. MuzaffarAlam has brought forward some inherent weaknesses of the movement under Banda, which caused its failure by 1715 in his work. The principal support from the Jat Sikh zamindars led to alienation of non-Sikh, non jatZamindars,ri'aya ,key urban communities like Khatris from the movement. Further Banda could not coordinate and assimilate other anti-Mughal uprisings like Gujar uprisings in Sarkar Saharanpur instead zamindars of Saharanpur supported the Mughals in latter's bid to drive the Sikhs out of the region along Rajputs and Afghans alike.⁶

Alam has explored multiple layers to the complex relationship of khatris and Sikhs of Banda in his pioneering work. The abolition of institution of Masands(regional agents of the Guru) which was under control of khatris largely possibly created disaffection among these early followers of Guru Gobind Singh who were not pleased by increasing dominance of jat culture on Sikhism⁷.The meek submission of Khatris to imperial order to shave off their beards was one such incident highlighting khatri's desire to continue vivid association with Mughals.Alam has further brought to surface that the divergent political and economic interests of Khatris was the factor behind the breach.Khatris was a merchant community whose fortunes were directly linked with political stability which was being compromised because of disturbances being caused by Sikh Uprisings on the trade routes passing through the province.This resented the textile traders and weavers alike which forced these Hindu merchants to collude with Mughals to get rid of Sikhs & finance efforts of Saiyyids.Besidesmuslim traders like Lakhkhis were making generous donations to Mughal army⁸. As a result, merchants had begun establishing close relations with Mughul provincial officials in the Panjab especially the Khatris.Dale has suggested this helped in extension of their commercial operations to Iran and Turan almost as easily as non-Muslim merchants.⁹

The period following Banda Bahadur was complex and much more unknown.Alam calls this period between 1715 and formation of 12 misls in mid 18th century most confused chapter in Sikh history.It is possibly there seemed to be no end to plundering and banditry disturbing trade routes across the province¹⁰. The foreign invasions like of Nadir Shah created more confusion in the province making the state helpless but giving advantageous position to Sikhs who undertook the administration of Bari Doab under leadership of Bhag Singh Ahluwalia.Post death of Zakariya khan amidst situation of civil war a DUL KHALSA GEE , army of state was formed by sick chiefs¹¹.The DAL KHALSA organization had transformed the nature of Sikh Resistance by mobilizing mass of plunderers into rude cavalry regiments.The administrative failure after Zakariya khan's death was a reality in terms of civil war draining Mughals against Sikhs and back hand reconciliation between Mughal officials and Sikhs like Adina Beg, faujdar of Doab.

There was immense change in nature of Sikh Movement as we progressed from 17th and early 18th century to 18th century in terms now the movement wasn't about raising the strong peasantry socially but about survival of the impoverished zamindars and peasants struggling to maintain hitherto positions.According to Alam, the history of economy of the region holds the reasons to it.



The decline in jama figures in 41st year of Aurangzeb¹² followed by nominal and steady increase indicates dislocation of economy in the region. Riverine trade was affected in the region due to silting of Indus but the land routes linking Mughal Empire with the Safavids and Central Asian Khanates presumably seemed to have made up for the disturbances in riverine trade. In 18th century, the Ghilzia Uprisings under Mir Wais in Qandahar in 1709 blockaded the land routes and connection with Persia followed by disturbances from Nadir Shah's invasion. The Sikh movement was thriving on the pauperized sections who were worst sufferers of economic decline, thus the Sikh menace wasn't resolved by Mughal State because the solution wasn't rooted in political factors or policies under their control. Amidst the phase of decline, merchants and traders got stuck to state for it could only ensure the political stability a requisite for their economic activities to be conducted safely¹³

Overland trade

In the early 17th century territory of Afghanistan was under control of the Mughal State and the Safavids but by end of 18th century it became an autonomous Kingdom and was addressed as Kabul Empire or Kandahar Kingdom or Afghan Empire extending from Sirhind and Delhi one hand to Caspian sea on the other. For our study Afghanistan is a key region because it was well connected by Kashmir, Lahore, Multan, Makran, Balkh, Kandahar, Sindh and Oxus Region. Other leading region for our study is Central Asia lying between Grassland of Steppes in the northern region, Himalayas and the Hindukush in the southern region, Caspian Sea in the eastern side and Gobi desert on the western side. The Central Asians had active trading linkages with Russia, Iran and India. Though these two regions were geographically adverse but still attracted overland and caravan trade because Persia was a prominent commercial centre in our period of study and the most important trade routes towards it were passing through the rough terrains of Afghanistan and Central Asia.

The commercial relationship between India and central Asia can be traced back to 16th century. Babur has recorded that Kabul was an important centre for easy availability of products from Persia, China and other central provinces were easily available and for caravans from Bukhara, Badakhshan, Samarkand, Balkh, Kashgar and many other places. Caravans as large as 20,000 came here from India each year. The traders and merchants could earn profit as high as 300 to 400 % and it was a natural affair and not something unusual.¹⁴ The central Asian traders apart from buying goods from Kabul also travelled to India and in particular North India, Deccan and Gujarat to buy important commodities¹⁵. Central Asia was ancestral homeland of the Mughals and also key commercial centre resulting in proactive response of Mughal rulers to establish the interaction and contact with their Central Asian counterparts.

Lahore witnessed the arrival of Uzbeks, Persian and Armenian Merchants on the regular intervals¹⁶. Lahore was strategically very important as it served the gateway to central Asian cities of Tatta, Bhakar, Balochistan, Persia, Tartary (or Central Asia), Balkh, Kabul. Attock was the halting point of caravan coming from Persia and Central Asia carrying different commodities. 1,50,000 was the estimated load annually crossing Attock.¹⁷ Kabul was a meeting point of Caravans coming from India, Persia and Central Asia.¹⁸ Uzbek merchants used to arrive in Delhi on regular intervals¹⁹. Indian merchants also frequented Bukhara for various types of commodities²⁰.



In the 17th century Punjab was the most prosperous and rich territories of Mughal Empire²¹. Lahore was regarded “as the greatest city of the east, surpassing even Constantinople.²²”. There were other towns and sikh settlements flourishing as well like Jahangirabad, Wazirabad, Ibrahimabad, Phillaur, Anandpur, Kartarpur, Hoshiarpur, Amritsar, Hargobindpur²³ though the growth wasn't completely smooth because fluctuations in economy of Sindh had affects on economy of Punjab²⁴. The explanation behind the prosperity of the region in 17th century is reflected in the revenues which had a bearing on the growth of trade of and through the region.²⁵

The 18th century witnessed the continued commercial interactions. Merchants from Bukhara used to come to Kabul for buying textiles and indigo. The cloth and sugar were imported to Kabul from Peshawar. Kandahar was the significant market for various commodities from different countries and a major destination for the caravans coming from Persia and going to India and vice versa.²⁶ Kabul merchants used to come to India with the commodities like pears, apples, raisins, dry fruits enjoying exclusive demands in markets of Lucknow, Agra and Delhi.

18th century witnessed rise of successor states like Awadh, Rohillas and Sikh War Bands creating massive demand for horses for military purposes which was matched by supplies from central Asian and Persian traders. The caravans during this period were active agents of horse trade responsible for transportation of horses to markets in Lahore, Delhi and other Indian cities. The good breed horses were priced between Rs. 300 to 400.²⁷ The Afghani merchants procured horses from Oxus region and took them to Kabul where they were fed properly and after that these horses were transported to India²⁸. Manucci records Annually 1 lakh horses were transported from Persia and Central Asia whereas Gommans says that around 4,00,000 – 5,00,000 horses were imported to India annually during mid 18th cent bcs the climatic conditions in India weren't favourable for high quality breed of horses. The total value of trade was 20 million rupees²⁹. 18th century had witnessed lively horse trade and it was only in 19th cent when Indian principalities fell into complete hands of Britishers that demand for horses declined³⁰.

The route through Punjab was avoided by merchants due to political instability and to reach Kabul, the route through Rohilkhand and Jammu was preferred.³¹ The political menace disrupting the trade in the region is testified by James Brown too, an European traveler³². William Francklin observed that the trading operations with Punjab had ceased but various merchants were getting permissions from their respective chiefs for trade and commerce in the region³³. It is mentioned that merchants and traders who provided goods for the local consumption were given protection by the Sikh chief but others like foreign travelers and merchants were looted³⁴.

Punjab was beneficiary of demand in cotton textiles when the linkages with central Asia and Persia got smoothen and political conditions became favourable resulting in push for cultivation of cotton and growth of trade & towns in the region. Samana, Sirhind, Multan and Lahore got a major fillip due to this development. Lahore emerged as a major centre of for textile productions³⁵. But in 17th century the situation became different as Pelseart mentioned that trade at Lahore became dead. Lahore lost all its trade because the profits couldn't stand greater costs of overland transit compared to those of our sea carriage³⁶.



Trade Diaspora

The discussion would be incomplete without paying heed over the economic significance of the wide-spread dispersal of Indian merchants in Iran ,Turan and later Russia. George forster has recorded presence of Khatri merchants at Kandahar, Herat and Baku³⁷ , shikarpuri merchants in in towns like turshish. According to Dale thousands and perhaps tens of thousands of Indian businessmen lived and worked in Iran in the seventeenth and early eighteenth century as moneychangers or moneylenders, as retail and wholesale merchants ,commodity brokers and financiers. Mehdi Keyvani has remarked that the presence and proliferation of Indian “moneychangers” in several major Iranian cities during the later Safavid period is “an astonishing and unexplained episode of Iranian economic history.”³⁸. The diaspora manifested in the persons of these merchants the Mughul empire’s stature as a regionally dominant economic power or , in Fernand Braudel’s phrase , a regional “world economy.”³⁹ In view of European scholars Indian and other Asian merchants were archaic commercial artifacts of the early modern world often described with the term ‘peddler’ which implicitly denigrated the economic effectiveness of Asian merchants in this period and represented a kind of economic orientalism in which Asian merchants are viewed as a quaint and ineffective commercial “other.” Unlike the records of the Dutch and English East India companies , which contain only limited data on Asian traders ,the Russian sources ie. Astrakhan documents obtained by Edmund Herzig has made it clear that Indian merchants closely resembled their well-known European contemporaries-particularly those in Genoa ,Florence and Siena if not the Dutch and British.Indo-Muslim merchants were given free space to travel and conduct business very comfortably in Iran and Turan as they could have in the Mughulempire.Levi has brought in our notice that the diaspora merchants did not limit their commercial activities to the import-export trade rather remained in distant locations for extended period of time, usually several years deliberately engaged their capital in a variety of interest-oriented moneylending ventures. There are evidences of various hindu merchants community inhabiting caravanserais in Bukhara⁴⁰.The affiliations with the great family firms as agents allowed the indian merchants to leave their homeland for years and participate in diaspora commerce.The family firms were established throughout north India and operated as heavily capitalized commercial institutions that maintained diverse portfolios of trade and moneylending investments which during the very period of European expansion in the Indian Ocean commercial arena began to diversify their portfolios geographically by sending its agents to distant markets in port cities, villages, and major and minor urban centers as far away as Moscow and St. Petersburg.



Conclusion

Undoubtedly the 18th century in india , Persian and central asia did bring political instability hampering the trade but only for a brief period which was revived soon enough. Contemporary travelers and scholars have documented the extent of overland trade between these three different geographical spheres in quite descriptive manner. The overland route between india and central asia and onwards to Persia was mainly through three passes ie. bolan,sanghar,ghumal pass & Khyber in 18thcenturies.My focus was primarily on works of George foster and William foster as of now though many other primary sources remain to be engaged with.

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