

Decline of the Mughal Empire: Theoretical Evidences of Collapse

OvaisQayoom*, Dr Savitri Singh Parihar**

*Research Scholar at Rabindranath Tagore University

** Faculty of Humanities and Languages, Rabindranath Tagore University

Abstract

The collapse of Mughal Empire has remained a widely debated issue amongst the historians. These debates arise mainly due to two reasons- differing opinions and the vantage point which a historian uses (e.g. peasants, jagirdars, zamindars, etc.). This paper will analyse the causes of the downfall of Mughal Empire and summarize different theories that have been put forward to explain the collapse. We start by answering whether the collapse of the Mughal Empire was a decline or a fall. Then we will look into the nature of the collapse.

Is it a Decline or a Fall?

Decline is the gradual or continuous loss of strength whereas fall is the sudden loss of power. Collapse of the Mughal Empire was precisely a decline because it was a gradual process. There are many factors responsible for the decline of the Mughal Empire. Some of them are inefficient administration, bad emperors, structural contradictions, etc. Of these, the main focus of this paper will be on the structural contradictions. Irfan Habib argues, “the fall of the Mughal Empire proceeded directly from certain basic structural, contradictions of the system on which it was based, and that all the factors that are generally brought forward in our

text-book had, if any, only a secondary role to play”. Decline here refers to the failure of the administrative setup that had sustained the growth of the Mughal Empire, in the years of its peak. As mentioned, historians differ amongst themselves on the cause that led to the decline of the Mughal aristocracy. Those causes will be analysed in the next section.

Explaining the Decline

Myriad books have been written on the topic- Decline of the Mughal Empire. Our main focus here is to present some of those theories. Also, as we go through each theory about the decline we can easily notice the

gradual emaciation of the Empire, which further strengthens our argument that the collapse of the Mughal Empire was indeed a decline. Aurangzeb was unable to identify the crisis and made some changes in administrative policies in order to attain a balanced budget (equating the imperial expenditures with the incomes). These policies deepened the conflict. At the same time, zamindars became economically powerful which created a structural contradiction in the Mughal rule. Chandra believes that the Jagirdari system could have worked, had the Mughals reconciled with the zamindars and come up with a settlement with Marathas. But by the time settlement was achieved, after Aurangzeb, Marathas had become powerful and the Mughal aristocracy had weakened. This further deepened the Jagirdari crisis which eventually led to the downfall of the Mughal Empire.

2. Irfan Habib- Irfan Habib focusses on the structural contradictions of the Mughal polity that eventually led to the decline of the Empire. The Mughals did not allow the Jagirdars to be at a same Jagir for a period of more than four years. This was a done in order to ensure that Jagirdars didn't become powerful in there jagirs. Even though this policy in some sense gave made the centralization of power possible in the Mughal regime, but at the same time this policy also made Jagirdars oppressive in demanding the revenues. They started demanding surplus taxes in places with fertile soil as they had no other reason to

think about the future implications of their act. As Irfan Habib points out, "A jagirdar who expected his jagir to be transferred any time, would have had the irresistible temptation to kill the goose; that laid the golden eggs: he could hardly have seen any reason in staying his band for the benefit of succeeding assignees." As a result the peasantry had to suffer a lot. The payment of taxes left the peasants impoverished. This oppression became the driving force for peasant revolts. Throughout the Mughal regime there were a large number of peasant revolts. In some cases Zamindars also joined, supported or started the revolts. These zamindars thought that the increased tax demands had left them in a worse condition as they were left with lesser amount of the collected revenue. These revolts eventually led to the collapse of the Mughal Empire especially the revolt of the Jats, Marathas and the Satnamis.

3. C.A. Bayly- Bayly, taking a different stand, argues that after the death of Aurangzeb and the rise of local or small scale rulers in the subcontinent, a new form of class started to develop. These were rich Zamindars and rich peasants that had become powerful due to the collapse of the pyramid of the Mughal aristocracy. Many of them started indulging in non-farming activities such as production of textiles, etc. This growing middle class group benefitted from the increased economic trade. Bayly argues that the rich peasants and Zamindars along with the small scale rulers led to the downfall of the Mughal Empire.

4. Rohan D'Souza- Questioning the arguments of Bayly and revisiting the structural contradictions argument, D'Souza looks at the decline of Mughal Empire from the viewpoint of the weakening military affairs. He asserts to the fact that Mughal administration functioned smoothly as long as equilibrium was maintained in the administrative structure. The Mughal conquests in the Deccan during Aurangzeb's reign had an inauspicious impact on this equilibrium. The wars with the Marathas not only increased the expenditure of the Mughal administration for holding on to the Deccan but also disgraced the Mughal military expertise. The increased cost of military expansion further deepened the jagirdari crisis that already had germinated in the Mughal Empire.

Causes for the Decline

The Nature and Policies of Aurangzeb

Aurangzeb was once partially accountable for the decline of the Mughal Empire. The suspicious nature of Aurangzeb which did not allow both any of his nobles or sons to grow to be capable; his spiritual bigotry which lost him the fidelity of the majority of his topics and resulted in the revolts of the Satnamis, the Jats and the Sikhs; the Rajput coverage which resulted in a war against the states of Marwar and Mewar; and, his Deccan coverage which resulted in a long-drawn war towards the Marathas introduced adversity to the Mughal Empire. His policies depleted the economic and army

resources of the Empire and the entire administration eventually broke down.

The Incapability of the Later Mughals

The successors of Aurangzeb proved degenerate and incapable which sealed the destiny of the Empire. After Aurangzeb, no other Mughal emperor rightly deserved to be an emperor. Most of them have been addicted to women and wine. Therefore, all proved inconsequential rulers. No Empire should exist under the rule of such rulers. It is rather shocking how the fragment of the Empire was persevered until 1857.

The Corruption of the Nobility

The Mughal blue blood followed in the footsteps of their dissipated emperors. There was once complete absence of successful nobles throughout the rule of the later Mughals. Most of the nobles have been incapable and if every one of them was once capable, he was now not loyal to his Empire and sculptured out an unbiased kingdom for himself. That led to the degeneration and breakup of the Empire.

Military Weakness

The corporation of the Mughal military alongside feudal lines, the exercise of taking wives, slave-girls and concubines on the war field and the failure of the Emperors to improve armaments and struggle strategies demoralized and weakened the Mughal army. It no longer remained a positive war force. Emperor Aurangzeb suffered on these counts when he fought in opposition to the

Marathas. During the rule of the later Mughals, the preconditions grew to become worse. No Empire may want to exist in the absence of military strength.

Economic Bankruptcy

The reign of Shah Jahan marked the onset of the deterioration of the economy of the Empire. The revolts and the wars in the Deccan, put an extra burden on the resources of the Empire. Then finally, the disolute lifestyles of the Later Mughals, breakdown of the administration, and the loot of Nadir Shah and Ahmad Shah Abdali broke the backbone of the economic system of the Empire. It truly contributed to the decline of the Empire.

The Wars of Succession

In absence of a fixed rule of succession, the loss of life of every emperor led to a conflict of among the residing sons of the Emperor. It resulted in the loss of existence and property, destruction of the administrative fabric of the Empire, and loss of status of the Emperor and the empire. It additionally stimulated effective nobles to assert their independence or take undue gain from succeeding emperors.

Group Rivalry at the Court

The weak point of the Later Mughals led to treason, treachery and group politics at the Mughal court. The nobles divided themselves mainly in two rival businesses. Each of these companies tried to capture the power of the kingdom for itself and, having

failed to settle the affair amongst themselves, sought help from other powers. The Indian Muslims took the help of the Marathas while as the overseas Muslims sought the help of Ahmad Shah Abdali, the ruler of Afghanistan. It resulted in repeated invasions of the Marathas and Ahmad Shah Abdali in Delhi which led to the devastation of Imperial power and dignity.

The Maratha Strike in the North

Peshwa Baji Rao followed the policy of conquering territories in the North. Gradually, the Marathas occupied giant territories in the North and grew to be the strongest power in India. But the Marathas did not change Mughals and did no longer count on the authority of Imperial power. Their things to do remained restricted both to increasing or plundering their sphere of influence. That affected adversely the fortunes of the Mughal Empire.

Conclusion

The collapse of the Mughal Empire was a gradual and steady process, and therefore decline, which occurred mainly due to the structural contradictions and the inability of the Emperors to maintain the equilibrium within the power structure of the imperial administration.

References

Bayly, C.A., 'State and Economy in India over Seven Hundred Years', in *The Economic History Review*, New Series, Nov 1985, 38 (4), pp. 585-596, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2597191>

Chandra, Satish, 1982, 'Jagirdari Crisis- A Fresh look', in Meena Bhargava (ed.), 2014, *The Decline of the Mughal Empire*, Oxford University Press: New Delhi, pp. 13-22.

D'Souza, Rohan, 'Crisis Before the Fall: Speculations on the Decline of the Ottomans, Safavids, and Mughals', in *Social Scientist*, Sep-Oct, 2002, 30 (9/10), pp.

30, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3517956>

Habib, Irfan, 1959, 'The Agrarian Causes of the Fall of the Mughal Empire', in Meena Bhargava (ed.), 2014, *The Decline of the Mughal Empire*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, pp. 22-52.

Metcalf, Thomas R., 'Review', in *The American Historical Review*, April, 1984, 89(10), pp. 504-505, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1862695>

Abu'lFazl. *Ain-i-Akbari*. Translated by H. Blochmann and H.S. Jarrett. 3 vols. Calcutta:

Asiatic Society of Bengal, 1873-1907.

Akbarnama. Reprint. Translated by H. Beveridge. Vols. 1-3. Calcutta: Asiatic

Society of Bengal, 1897-1939.p

Mukatabat-i-Allami (Insha'IAbu'lFazl) *Daftar I*. Edited by Mansura Haider. New

Delhi: Indian Council of Historical Research, 1998.

Ahmad, KhwajaNizammuddin. *Tabaqat-I Akabri: A History of India from the Early*

Musalman Invasions to the Thirty-eighth year of the Reign of Akbar.

Translated by Brajendranath De. Vol. 2. Calcutta: Royal Asiatic Society of Bengal, 1936.

Anglo-Hindoostanee Handbook; or Stranger's Self-Interpreter and Guide to Colloquial

And General Intercourse with the Natives of India. Calcutta: W.Thacker and Co., St. Andrews Library, 1850.

Badauni, Abdul Qadir. *Muntakhab-ut-Tawarikh*. Translated by A.H Lowe. 2 vols. Delhi: Atlantic Publishers, 1990.

Barros, João de. *Da Ásia*. Vol. 4. Lisboa: Na Regina OfficinaTypografica, 1777-1788.

Begam, Gulbadan. *Humayun-Nama*. Translated by Annette S. Beveridge. London: Royal Asiatic Society, 1920.

Bernier, Francois. *Travels in the Mogol Empire*. Translated by Archibald Constable. London: Oxford University Press, 1916.

Beveridge, H. "Notes on Father Monserrate's *MongolicaeLegationisComme ntarius*." *Journal of Asiatic Society of Bengal* 11, no. 7 (1915): 187-204.

“The Memoirs of BayazidBiyat.” Journal of Asiatic Society of Bengal 68 (1898): 296-316.

Biker, Julio FirminoJudice. Colleção de tratados e consertos de pazesque o Estado da ÍndiaPortuguesa fez com os reis e senhoresquemteverelaçõesnaspartes da