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Commentary and Critique

P. HARDY

At first sight, the last fifteen years has been the most creative—as certainly it has been the most productive—period in the history of the study of why the Mughal empire in India declined. The succession of magisterial publications from the Department of History at the University of Aligarh—Satish Chandra's *Parties and Politics at the Mughal Court 1707–1740* (1959), Irfan Habib's *The Agrarian System of the Mughal Empire (1556–1707)* (1963), M. Athar Ali's *The Mughal Nobility under Aurangzeb* (1966), and Noman Ahmad Siddiqi's *Land Revenue Administration under the Mughals (1700–1750)* (1970)—have, taken together, offered formulae for the understanding of the growing weakness of the empire from the later seventeenth century almost Newtonian in their force and simplicity.

From these works it is possible to draw a diagram of tensions between monarch (*padshah*), military or service noble (*mansabdar*), landholder (*zamindar*), and peasant (*ra'iyat*) which, when maintained in equilibrium, were creative of order and stability, but which if allowed to pull free were creative of disorder and impotence. Such a free pull occurred when the Marathas as *zamindars* forcibly jerked against the bit of Mughal control and resisted domestication within the Mughal system. The efforts of the Mughals to muster the resources in revenue and men to overcome the Marathas led to strains within the nobility, and insupportable pressures upon both *zaminder* and peasant who—if they did not revolt actively—at least resisted the Mughal revenue collector passively. A combination of over-lavish appointments by the emperor and the military successes of the Marathas created a shortage of assignments (*jagirs*) of areas of land productive of income for the nobles. Thus, resources wherewith to support the military contingents, which were the condition of receiving appointments, were rendered inadequate. Consequently, the number and effectiveness of the Mughal forces fell off; and the Mughal military machine (which was essentially an instrument for the internal military occupation of India) became progressively incapable of controlling the autochthonous military and rural aristocracy (the *zamindars* of various degrees) of the sub-continent.

The writers of the two papers under review accept the diagram of tensions sketched out by the Aligarh historians as defining the plane of their own thinking; but they propose important modifications to the lines of direction of, and to the reading of the strength of, the tensions at work. They also suggest, explicitly or implicitly, that important modifications are necessary in the time-scale to be set for the decline of the Mughal empire. It seems best first to summarize the main arguments of the papers, taking them in chronological order of the writer's period of concern, that is taking first Pearson's, then Richards'.

Pearson agrees with the Aligarh historians (and with his fellow paper-writer) that the Mughal empire was in trouble late in Aurangzib's reign, and that the seat of the trouble was in the Deccan whither Aurangzib himself had moved in 1681 with the

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intention of overcoming the Marathas and annexing the Muslim sultanates of Bijapur and Golkonda. Pearson aims to show that the move south was itself a symptom of a central weakness in the Mughal empire. Because of the centrality of military concerns in the upper levels of the state, there was no alternative but to respond aggressively to a military challenge. The move south was thus a final desperate attempt to crush a formidable enemy which had already inflicted humiliating defeats on the empire. The move was not expansionist; it was entirely defensive, a product of desperation, not of free "Mughal choice."

Pearson argues that the only tie between the Emperor (any Mughal emperor) and the 8,000 *mansabdars* who, he holds, "were the empire" was the tie of a patronage and loyalty, respectively dependent for its efficacy and strength upon continued military success. "Neither religion nor racial origin provided any reason for loyalty." The rise of Shivaji to a status beyond that of a rebel or a recalcitrant *zamindar* to that of headship of a rival state—a rise charted by such humiliations to the Mughals as the discomfiture of Shayista Khan in 1663, the sack of Surat in 1664, and Shivaji's escape from Agra in 1666—left the Mughals with "no alternative but to respond massively by a move south to Shivaji's homeland. The decline followed from this."

Pearson fills in the situation at Agra in 1666 when Shivaji might have been persuaded to accept the status of a Mughal dignitary, and shows the pressures on Aurangzib not to grant Shivaji that status—higher than that of less troublesome grandees—which might have won him over. In Pearson's view, we may find in Aurangzib's failure of 1666 the entrance to the circle of failure and decline from which the Mughal empire was never to escape. Shivaji's campaigns of the 1670s revealed the awful consequences of the lost opportunity of either conciliating or confining (and killing) Shivaji in 1666.

The Mughal military nobility became progressively more demoralized by the military failure of the empire against the Marathas and were, Pearson holds, as early as the 1670s, beginning to despair—or at least to calculate the profit or loss to themselves of obedience to Aurangzib's orders. Since the fundamental ethos of the empire was military, and loyalty between ruler and servant personal rather than impersonal, the Mughal *mansabdars* could entertain the thought that, in Pearson's phrase, "it was not their empire that was failing; it was Aurangzib's." Some acted as if they realized that the longer the war against the Marathas lasted, the more possibilities of their own advancement; others in the belief that they had more to gain by accommodations than by encounters with the Marathas. An empire that lived on its ability to provide pickings for paladins could not cut its losses and retire to Hindustan; it should have evolved "to a more impersonal level where criteria other than personal military ones could be allowed to have more influence."

Richards, in his paper, offers a direct challenge to one of the principal positions of the Aligarh historians, namely that there was a shortage of resources for allocation to the nobility—mainly in the form of assignments (*jagirs*) of land, the revenue from which was to meet the cost of salaries and contingents. He also wishes to redistribute the stress laid on the importance of the *mansabdars'* and *jagirdars'* role so that it rests more on the role of the autochthonous aristocracy in the political economy of the empire. His findings are based on the detailed work he has done on Mughal rule in Golconda between 1687 and 1724.

Richards argues that the Mughal empire need not have collapsed for lack of funds and that "in theory, at least, the annexation of Bijapur and Golconda could have generated new revenues sufficient to offset the influx of new Deccani nobles into the

Mughal elite." That that annexation did not do so was Aurangzib's responsibility, the consequence of decisions he need not, Richards implies, have taken. "Had the Emperor successfully secured and stabilized his new southern frontiers, he could well have exploited the resources of Bijapur and Golconda to meet his additional costs."

To meet his strategic objectives in the south, Aurangzib set aside the choicest areas as crown lands (*khalisa*), as *jagirs* for members of the provincial cadres serving in the two new provinces, and as sources of funds to meet wage bills for his field armies operating in the Deccan against the Marathas. The remaining tracts placed in *paibaqi*, although large in total extent, comprised some of the most inaccessible and otherwise least-promising areas for the extraction of revenue. Thus the shortage of *jagirs* in the 1690s was partly artificial, the result of decisions made by the Emperor, rather than a condition caused by an absolute shortage of territory. Indeed, as the demand for *jagirs* grew in the 1690s, so Aurangzib in 1695 and 1697 transferred lands with potential revenues of 1.7 million rupees from *paibaqi* to *khalisa* status.

Richards' second main contention is that, intent on "further aggressive expansion," Aurangzib skimmed on the military and administrative manpower necessary to maintain political stability and public order in the newly annexed territories, and that he failed to give enough attention—or the right kind of attention—to establishing workable political links with the Marathas and other Hindu warrior elites dominant in areas beyond the zone of long-standing direct Muslim administration (i.e., those areas in the Deccan that had been only loosely connected in a tributary relationship to the sultanates of Bijapur and Golconda). Richards argues that the system of personal interviews, personal patronage, and personal creation of common values between Emperor and Muslim and Rajput nobles was not extended to embrace Maratha, Gond, Bedar, or Telugu chiefs. He describes the resultant activities of the Bedar political prospector, Padiyah Nayak, whose raids in Mughal territories had begun by 1702 to rival those of the Marathas in destructive power.

Richards also stresses that loyal service to, or at least the willing acquiescence in, the Mughal regime by groups other than chiefs and rajas was essential to its stability. "Outside the cities, Mughal officials relied upon the regional warrior aristocracies (i.e., *zamindars*) of the countryside for collection of taxes and maintenance of order. Within this group, the key figures were the *deshmukhs*—semi-hereditary, officially recognized, intermediary officers, who held dominant power and high status in each subdistrict (*pargana*). . . . Although they were autochthonous lords of the land, most of the *deshmukhs*, after generations of transmitted experience, seem to have viewed Muslim political dominance as legitimate and natural." Apparently they abided by their revenue engagements and performed their duties in the conquered sultanates at least until Aurangzib's death. But the virtual hiatus in Mughal administration in the Deccan during the war of succession of 1707–8 encouraged an increase in banditry—highlighted by the career of Pap Rai—forcing many *deshmukhs* and *zamindars* to reconsider their position. Many indeed joined up with or came to arrangements with bandits, in armed resistance to Mughal officers who—penniless and with their contingents in mutiny for pay—were powerless to control them.

These two papers leave this commentator with two principal impressions: first, that, for all the doom-laden tolling by Pearson, the death of Bahadur Shah in 1712 occurred at the eleventh and not at the twelfth hour for the Mughal imperial system; and second, that there must for the future be greater attempts at a re-integration of ideological with other, economic and institutional, considerations, but not in the old simplistic terms of

Aurangzib's bigotry and of his deliberate undoing of—in Sir Jadunath Sarkar's words (*History of Aurangzib*, vol. V, London, 1924, p. 495)—“the beginnings of such a national and rational policy which Akbar had set on foot.”

Both paper-writers have raised questions of ideology: Pearson's whole argument is directed towards the conclusion that it was ethos that killed the cat; Richards stresses the “snobbism” of the older Muslim and Rajput elite when faced with the prospect of having to serve alongside a “pot black” member of a tribe of “indiscriminate carrion eaters,” and the “increasing weight given Islamic legitimation for Mughal rule” by Aurangzib and the latter's pressure for conversion to Islam. I am not sure whether Richards questions the assumption, made by the Aligarh historians, of the paramount importance of economic concerns for the Mughal nobility; it would be possible to phrase this assumption in a more acceptable form: that wealth was important to the Mughal noble because it bought him both comfort *and* prestige. There is a definition implicit in the two papers: namely, the progressive inability of the dynasty to assure its agents a competence—if not wealth—to control the terms of service by those agents and to control the manner in which the elite extracted the resources of the empire from the producer, so that in the end the dynasty was unable to withstand the Marathas, Nadir Shah, and Ahmad Shah 'Abdali.

The few criticisms I have of the contents of the papers are directed at Pearson's. He has accepted that, by the end of Aurangzib's reign, the Mughal empire had entered a “vicious” circle or spiral of decline; he is concerned to establish the time at which the empire entered the circle or spiral. It is not proven to me however that, entry having been made, it was thereafter impossible to apply the brakes or even to reverse up the decline. In 1689, Mughal forces captured and executed Shambhaji; by 1695, Mughal territory extended into the Carnatic; it was after 1695 that Maratha resistance revived. Are we to believe that the “military ethos” of the empire prevented Aurangzib from making reasonable and acceptable overtures to the Marathas from his position of strength in the half-decade after Shambhaji's execution—or indeed that that ethos foredoomed the peace feelers of 1695, 1698, 1700, 1703 and 1706? Do ghosts in military machines have powers that render them immune from Professor Ryle's laying of other ghosts in machines? (Gilbert Ryle, *The Concept of Mind*, London, 1958, reprint, pp. 15ff.)

Nor do I find Pearson's final proposition acceptable in an historian: “Thus at a more abstract—and perhaps tautological—level, the empire declined because it failed to evolve to a more impersonal level, where criteria other than personal military ones could be allowed to have more influence. Had such an evolution occurred, it is at least arguable that the empire would have been able to cut its losses in the mid-1660s or a little later and retire to Hindustan.”

A historian has no need of speculation: the facts may not be immediately before him, but they are there to be discovered; they have happened and cannot be wished away. For many centuries before the Mughal empire, Indian society had been composed of many strata of invaders and migrants separated by mutual reserve, if not distaste. Such a society had, as a matter of historical fact, been gathered into large political units—usually by military men (some invaders, some not) united by ties of personal military loyalty. This has been the idiom of Indian empire-building until quite late in the modern period too; and it is hardly to be expected that the Mughal military elite should, of all India's military elites in history, have been able to jump out of their skins and into those of the servants of that “Weberian bureaucracy” which Pearson implies (footnote 58) might have served the Mughal empire better. I appeal from Pearson the speculator to Pearson

the historian. He has provided us with an excellent account of all the pressures and considerations that, at the time, made it difficult for Aurangzib to come to an accommodation with Shivaji, or to kill him, when the latter was at Agra in 1666. Let him now examine all the pressures and considerations that rendered abortive all later attempts at accommodation between Mughal and Maratha.

The Mughal empire failed in India on its own terms, long before the East India Company began—however gradually—to introduce into India new terms for success and failure. We cannot know too much of the Mughal failure. Certainly the military ethos of the empire is relevant to that failure; perhaps it might help to explain the working of one of the “real” options open to the emperors (“real” because it was followed by Akbar for a time), that of paying most salaries in cash by extending the area of the *khalisa*. Perhaps in Akbar’s reign, a Weberian bureaucracy had—for a moment—been glimpsed in the future; and an elite preferring the outdoor pastime of exploiting the possibilities of *jagirdari* had shown, in its behavior during the period of rebellion and unrest between 1580 and 1583, that it was determined to look the other way. Nevertheless, as Richards has shown in his paper, the possibility of extending the role of direct administration and of cash salaries still beckoned in Aurangzib’s reign.

But the decision to pay in cash or by *jagir* may have been a finely balanced one, and one in which any emperor could err. In 1694, Aurangzib is reported to have ordered that only those officers who served in the Deccan should be assigned *jagirs* there (M. Athar Ali, *The Mughal Nobility*, p. 78). This was, Athar Ali implies, in accordance with the custom of often, if not usually, assigning *jagirs* to *mansabdars* in the province to which they were posted. But Aurangzib may have issued the order advisedly in 1694 in the hope that the knowledge that payment of salaries depended on the establishment of Mughal control of the *jagirdari* areas would spur *mansabdars* to greater military zeal. The award of assignments in the Deccan established a more direct relationship between effort on campaign and reward than was likely to have been established by instituting direct royal revenue collections by officials closely controlled by imperial regulations in areas that Mughal *faujdar*s and their contingents would then be expected impersonally to police. Was it too, in terms of the ethos of the nobility, more prestigious to be paid by *jagir* than by cash?

There are a number of questions which a reading of these papers, against the background of the writings of the Aligarh historians, provokes. At what point, and in precisely which areas did the widening gap between the *jama*’ and the *basil* of the land revenue become significant for the military strength of the empire vis-à-vis the *zamindar*? Richards implies that in Golconda the critical point was reached in 1711–2. No doubt his future researches on the province of Khandesh will enable us to see whether the Marathas probed forward in regions where they knew Mughal local control to be weakening. Taking into consideration the differences in productiveness and in degree of order of different regions, it is obvious indeed that the timing of any such weakening may have varied greatly. It should be borne in mind that there was apparently no standard contract between *mansabdar* and trooper (M. Athar Ali, *The Mughal Nobility*, pp. 164–5), and price levels even for the goods that troops required probably varied greatly from place to place, so that the troops of two different commanders serving at the same salary in different places might not necessarily feel the pinch of a similarly falling *basil* at the same time. Furthermore, *mansabdari* contingents more closely linked to their commander by ties of kin, clan, or tribe might be more willing to tolerate deficiencies in pay than others not so closely linked.

Then again, complaints in the sources for Aurangzib's reign, and later, that *mansabdars* did not maintain their full contingents (indeed, had they ever done so?) are at present treated as reliable evidence of the importance of this factor in explaining the decline of the empire. But is it proven that the contingents sanctioned were nicely proportioned to some clear and accurate assessment of the military needs of the dynasty at particular times and in particular places? Was *suwar* rank perhaps made proportionate to the dignity that was sought to be conferred rather than to the strength of the military challenge from the Marathas? How far were the complaints which we have made not by "serving soldiers" but by men of the pen, perhaps envious of the members of another cadre of the imperial service? To put it crudely, there does not seem to have been a shortage of men to fight wars of succession. We need more facts.

Without some examination of the military history of the period, it will indeed be difficult to be sure that deficiency in mere numbers of cavalry contingents was, against the Marathas, of the decisive importance that appears to be assumed. Was the possibility considered (and indeed, in the promotion of Marathas to *mansabs* acted upon) that more lightly armed and accoutred cavalry would be of greater value against the Marathas than the traditional Mughal heavy cavalry? Was the apparent preference for the use of heavy cavalry attributable more to social than to military conservatism—to a feeling that service in the Mughal dragoons was the only fit form of military service for a gentleman?

It is a principal contention by Athar Ali and Satish Chandra that the Mughal nobility, under increasing economic pressure, were becoming more and more riven by faction during the final decade of Aurangzib's reign. (The authors of the papers under consideration write more of a progressive demoralization.) But if factionalism there was, the relationship of this phenomenon to the behavior of *mansabdars* engaged in the wars of succession after Aurangzib's death needs yet more investigation than even Professor Satish Chandra has been able to give it. The latter's account of the war of succession of 1707–8 suggests that Shah 'Alam (Bahadur Shah I) drew his support from *mansabdars* in the north whose incomes may not have been affected by the Deccan situation, and that *mansabdars* whose incomes were presumably more precarious because they were drawn from the Deccan showed themselves in fact reluctant to support Prince A'zam, although presumably they would have had much to gain by way of assignments in north India if A'zam had become emperor. Just how important were the *mansabdars* in "policy formation" by the various princely contenders for the throne? And was rank and size of sanctioned contingents of *mansabdars* in any way proportionate to political influence? One final request for more information: when Ma'muri and Khafi Khan complain of old retainers (*khanazads*) losing out to the new appointees from the Deccan in the allocation of *jagirs*, are they referring to the allocation of *jagirs* in the Deccan only or are their complaints also to be taken to refer to allocations in north India (Hindustan) also?

This commentary began with the words "At first sight, the last fifteen years has been the most creative . . . period in the history of the study of why the Mughal empire in India declined." The qualification was used deliberately. For there is one striking feature of the interpretations offered by the "Aligarh school"—and by Pearson and Richards in that they accept the diagram of tensions within the Mughal empire offered by the Aligarh school—and this is that they are of the same thought dimension as those interpretations already offered by historians and memoirists writing between the 1660s and the 1720s. It is as though modern historians have been trying to piece together a jigsaw puzzle, the pieces of which were sawn out by François Bernier, Nicolao Manucci, Abu'l Fazl Ma'muri, Bhim Sen, and Khafi Khan, from a total picture drawn by some master spirit of the age.

Thus from Bernier we have very early intimations of the sense of menace from Shivaji and the Marathas (*Travels in the Mogul Empire*, Westminster, 1891, pp. 187–91, 197–8). To Manucci, we owe some acute perceptions of the idiom of Mughal political life: its disorder (*Storia do Mogor*, trans. William Irvine, Vol. II, London, 1907, p. 382); the importance of armed *zamindars* and chiefs (*ibid.*, p. 444); the fact of ever-present rebellion (*ibid.*, p. 462); and the willingness of Mughal officers to play their own hands at the expense of the dynasty (*ibid.*, p. 445). In Ma'muri and Khafi Khan we find the suggestion of a shortage of land for assignment (see references given in M. Athar Ali, *The Mughal Nobility*, pp. 92–3); while to Bhim Sen we owe dramatic intimations of a sense of the desolation being caused by war in the Deccan, the deterioration of the Mughal military machine and of the morale of the *mansabdars*, and the latter's failure to keep up the sanctioned strength of their contingents (see references cited in M. Athar Ali, pp. 107, 169, 163).

Now historians cannot put into an age something, whether supposed fact or explanatory hypothesis, for which there is no evidence in support of its reality or relevance. In this sense, everything in the past is already "there" and is neither to be added to nor subtracted from. But neither can historians be satisfied with the view of their own age taken by the people of that age, still less with their explanations of what is happening to and around them; their views are necessarily partial in scope, limited in range, and bounded in dimension by the mind at work. A mere rearrangement, in some pattern or diagram, of such views—the method of writing history from sources—will not do. This can be seen in the context of the history of the later Mughal period not to do, for otherwise historians today would not need to ask such questions as whether if there was—as Bhim Sen suggests—a falling-off in the strength of *mansabdari* contingents through lack of income (and this falling-off significantly reduced Mughal military effectiveness), why did Aurangzib not touch Shah Jahan's stored treasure at Agra? Or, if the Maratha light cavalry was the principal, threat—in tactical terms—to the Mughal armies, what measures were tried to combat that threat? Should we not consider the state of musket technology in Mughal times, not for the sake of beating about in the vague hope of finding something but because it is known that in the eighteenth century the Mughals had fallen behind the Persians in this sphere? As far as I am aware, the sorts of contemporary or near-contemporary Mughal history-writers whose works have testified to, in so many words, the elements of so much of the body of interpretation of the decline of the Mughal empire that has grown in the last fifteen years, are unlikely to have testified in the same way to the state of military technology.

Generalizations about the social and political cohesion—as well as the disintegration—of the Mughal empire will be achieved by the methods that are used with such success and profit in these papers, namely by telling more and more of the story at greater depth as well as in greater detail. The Aligarh historians would, for example, be the first to agree that more economic data—including the state of local price levels—interpreted by more sophisticated techniques, is a current desideratum. I myself believe that a historian of military technology might add new layers of comprehension. A gerontologist might provide new insights into Aurangzib's behavior as he entered extreme old age. In the struggle to understand the past, there are no holds barred.