



PERCEPTION OF THE STATE IN CONNECTION WITH NATURE IN PRE-COLONIAL INDIA: RECENT TRENDS OF ENVIRONMENTAL HISTORY WRITINGS IN MUGHAL INDIA

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Abstract

From the dawn of our civilization human beings are related with the nature from each and every aspect of their livelihood. But after the emergence of industrial revolution in Western Europe, degradation of environment, climate and nature occurred drastically. Recent project mainly focused on the pre-colonial India especially in Mughal period and tries to understand the state-nature relationship during this time. Also a recent historiography discussed elaborately in this article.

Keywords: *Mughal State, Environment, Climate, Forest*

“And Takshaka? Why did he bite my father?”

Astika responded with another tale. ‘Long ago, Arjuna your great grandfather, set aflame a forest called khandava –prastha to clear land for the city of Indra-prastha. The forest was the home of many nagas. Its burning left Takshaka and many like him homeless and orphaned’. Takshaka swore to make Arjuna, or one of his descendents, pay. The killing of your father was his revenge.

I

Above mentioned conversation was taken place between the two characters of the great epic of India, *Mahabharata*. One of them is *Janamejaya*, “son of the king *Parikshit*, who is questioning another person, *Astika*, nephew of *Vasuki*, king of *nagas*. Basically in one important part of the *Mahabhaat* we find that the king *parikshit* had been died by a snake bite (*takshaka*) for some cursed by a *rishi*. After that the son of *Parikshit*, named *Janmajaya* performed the *sarpa sattra*, a sacrificial ritual with the power to destroy all the snakes on earth. And then the king of the *nagas*, *Astika*, raised the question against the king of the state that what are you doing? Stop, king! This is *adharm*. Now the king asked the question, why did the snake bites my father? And the reply of the naga king is the key themes of my project which will be continue with the several aspects of the relation between the state and the nature from the ancient time to the present society and basically focused on the pre colonial India.¹

The history of India without its nature and environment is incomplete. Nature and environment is a recent trend in the discipline of history writings in entire world. The domination and the discourse of the civilized society over the nature and environment, is creating an irregular, unsynchronised climatic condition all over the world in Twenty-First Century. Human beings of civilized society more or less

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reluctant to accept that all the creatures situated in planet are close and intricately related with each other in some ways. Especially after the industrial revolution, monopoly of human being over the planet progressed remarkably.

But the thing is not like that; rather we can see it as a reciprocal relationship between the man and tree, state and nature. For example, from the very beginning of civilization, the state building mechanism and the role of the environment, and their reciprocal relationship have a great significance. For instance, in India from the Mayurans empire to the Sultanate and the Mughal period elephants had a great role to understand the relationship between the state and nature. In the last two centuries, the number of wild elephants in the world and also mostly in India has been crashed and their very survival is a cause for concern.² civilized society and the civilized human being used the animals and other crucial components of nature in their own way of intention and they don't show any morality. Both of the state and its citizen are now sitting on a self making chair and think that we are the masters of this planet.

II

The beginning of the study of environmental history in India is not more than 50 years. Scholars like Richard groove, Madhav Gadgil, Ramchandra Guha , Ranjan Chakrabarty, Mahesh Rangarajan, all of them are very much common in name in the historiography of environmental history in India and have a great significance in that field to making the connection between the nature and the nation building of modern India. But more or less all of them focused mainly on the post colonial period of Indian history. But recent project tries to follow the root of the environmental history in India and how it was developing in the pre colonial period mostly on the heyday of the Mughal Empire. In this spectrum of history writing of pre colonial India recent author focuses on the scholars like Chetan Singh, Dirk H.A. Kolff, Mahesh Rangarajan, Thomas R. Trautmann, and others.

Contemporary environmental historians have revisited the debate about the relationship between ecological changes and colonialism. But to understand the relationship between the state and the colonizer with the environment, we have to trace it from the pre-colonial Mughal period. The root of the environmental degradation and deforestation and also the domination of the state over the natural products was started from the very beginning and had a good example in that pre- colonial India.³

The old school historians of the Mughul history writing, scholars like Md. Habib, Satish Chandra, Irfan Habib and others more or less they try to understand the Mughal history in political approaches. Besides that, the greater part of the work of scholars such as Iqtidar Alam Khan and Athar Ali was either profoundly traditional in nature, or perfectly comprehensible within the older liberal-secular frame of history, with no particular relationship to the doxa on peasant hyper exploitation that had been filtered through Moreland. Further, if the Aligarh school gained adherents outside Aligarh, such as to an extent Tapan Raychaudhuri, it also had a polarizing effect within Aligarh, particularly with regard to scholars such as Khaliq Ahmed Nizami and Saiyid Athar Abbas Rizvi, who continued to express and develop a deep interest in religious questions.⁴ so the direct relationship between the state formation and the role of the environment had not been emphasised by the old school Aligarh scholars. Basically the important of the nature and environment was taken as a part of the mainstream Mughal history writing.

Recent scholars like Mujaffar Alam, Sanjay Subrahmanyam, Rajat Dutta, Laxmi Subrahmanyam and others have a revisionist approach towards the writing of the pre-colonial Mughal history. More or less they have focused on the sources like the indo Persian travelogue, oral sources from different parts of the empire, and the history of gender studies, art and architectures, rural economy and market have a dominant position rather than the history of the environment and the nation building in pre-colonial Mughal India.

A group of military historian have dealt with some part of environmental histories of the pre-colonial India in their work, but these studies of the nature and environment just take as a part of the mainstream

Mughal political history. Scholars like Dirk Kolff, Jos Gommans, William Irvine and others, who have a lot of work on the ground of military history of the Mughal India in details. They are trying to make a relationship between the state formation with the help of the manpower and the effect of these activities on the environment. Themes of their works are mainly focused on the perspective of the military history. Second part of the recent project will give a brief account of these scholars in what way they approached to the themes of the history of nature of the Mughal India, with the perspective of the military history. In another point of view, we see that the expansion of the agrarian frontiers, the founding of new settlements including cities and forts, and the extension of trade networks into jungle to procure commodities was a global phenomenon after about 1500. As elsewhere, people and large wilds animal were often in conflict for the areas cleared for paddy fields were excellent tiger habitant.

Modern scholars like Archana Prasad, who thinks that the pre- colonial Indian society was more stable and there was a closed self sufficient system. The socio-economic systems were backward in character. In this way, they privileged the traditional resources in their own way of life which is ecologically superior to modern capitalist systems of resources use and management.⁵ when we study the writings of the above mention scholars; we find a different approach of the state in their writings. In what way the state of the pre-colonial India used the natural products of the environment to build a wealthy nation in their own way, which will be the next part of my project.

III

In the pre-colonial period, basically on the Mughal era, we know very little about the range of several animals and birds, their distribution, relations, and representation in different time of that period. Mughal paintings have a potentiality to inform but in the absence of collaborations between the art historians, cartographers, naturalists, zoologists, even available sources have only begun to be tapped. Mughal portraits show savannahs with a host of antelope and deer species, carnivores large and small, and a range of human actions that mediate with natural systems in diverse ways. Several literary sources and the court works of authors like Abul Fazal and the autobiographies of the several Mughal emperor have a great role to know about the importance of the wild animals and the trees in that period. In the work, “Forests, Pastoralists and Agrarian society” Chetan Singh shows the role of the nature in Mughal state formation very well. From the early days of the emperor Babur to the age of Akbar and Jahangir, Singh emphasis on the transition of the natural products like the lands to made the state formation gradually. In the region of Chanderi, for instance, Babur’s artillery was preceded by active overseers and a mass of spades men to level the road and cut the jungles down. During the time of Akbar, the campaign against raja Madhukar found the Mughals advancing towards orchha in a similar fashion. We are told this about the surrounding territories, ‘the country was forest, and the marching of the army was difficult, they cut down the trees one day and marched the next. Even during subsequent reigns the military campaigns in this region were conducted in this manner. In many parts of Bihar, too, a similar problem was encountered by the Mughal armies. Shabbaz Khan, who was assigned the task of suppressing the rebellion of gajapati, a zaminder of jagdishpur in Bihar, had to spend nearly two months engaged in cutting down the trees around the fort before he could capture it, so the domination of the state over the entire territory is reflected the motivation of the ruler very well here and there is several example like this in the Mughal history. Akbar recounted amongst his major achievements his advance into Kashmir, during which thousands of men were employed in removing rocks, and in cutting down forests and making roads.⁷

Like the Mughal Empire, however, most of the autonomous chief which interacted with it were reasonably developed state formations. This enabled the Mughals to establish an acceptable political relationship, the principles of which were in fact formulated as early as the reign of Akbar. Amongst these were also to be found tribal chieftaincies that had accepted Mughal suzerainty, or even been incorporated into its military structure. Yet in many parts of Mughal India there existed several tribes which could not be made to conform consistently even to a loosely defined political relationship. It was these more fiercely autarchic tribes which probably lay even further from the Mughal system as it has come to be understood by scholars.⁸ Many such tribes were, from time to time, to be found in conflict with Mughal

authority and had established a reputation as thieves and plunderers of the king's territories. The discriminations also took place in that era, if the emperor and his army plundering in a particular region that was not a degradation of the forest but in the time of any tribal people it was taken as a punishable offence. Actually in the pre-colonial Mughal India, there was a dual role played by the state. In some cases emperor did not think twice to destroy the forests and the trees and in another point the state also depended on the products of the forest for their advantages.

For exam, according to Niccolo Manucci, the whole world of the merchandise which is exported from the Mughal kingdom, comes from four kinds of plants- that is to say, the shrub that produces the cottons from which a large quantity of cloth, coarse and fine, is made. The second is the plant which produces indigo. The third is the one from which comes opium, of which a large amount is used on the java coast. The fourth is the mulberry tree, on which their silk worms are fed, and, as it may be said, that commodity is grown on these trees. This reference provided a partial explanation for the pronounced interest of the Mughals in foresting agriculture and championing the cause of the peasantry against more mobile social groups.

To controlling the mass people of the Indian subcontinent and to use them as a military background of the state the Mughal rulers faced the same problems like the colonizers who faced the problem in the late 18th and early 19th century. In the book of Dirk Kolff "*Military Labour Market in Hindustan, 1450-1850*" he shows it in a different way. According to him, more fundamental to the state was the problem of how to deal with the peasantry at large, how to subject to some manner of control and collect revenue from these almost ungovernable tens of millions of people protected by mud forts, jungles and ravines all over the plains of Hindustan and above all by the weapons they were so familiar with. It is clear that the Indian process of state formation and the state itself cannot adequately be described with the help of models inspired by the phenomenon of the early modern European state if these presuppose the achievements of a central monopoly, or something nearly approaching it, on the use of arms.⁹ in that condition, the Mughal administrative system broke a normal system of the natural relationship to make a self sufficient state formation. The most radical measures that were taken amounted to a virtual uprooting of peasant society as such. There is irrefutable evidence for the enslavement and deportation of thousands and thousands of peasants by the Mughal aristocracy. It was also deemed expedient to kill many of them straight away. Clearly, an important reason for the limited achievement of Mughal state formation in the early modern European sense was that the state was faced not with individual zaminders or rebels, but with parties of armed peasants who represented the backbone of the society and who could not be destroyed without dire consequences to the agrarian productivity on which the regime depended for its survival.¹⁰

Recent scholar like Jos Gommans has a work on the Mughal military system where he brings the several issues of the environmental history. He tries to definite the Mughal military themes with the approaches or in the perspective of the environment. The agrarian systems, the way of monsoon, arid zones and several issues of the environment have a great significance in his writing through which he try to clarify the state mechanism and the army systems of the Mughal India. The wild jungles of the dry lands stand in sharp contrast to this. These jungles mostly consisted of open savannahs providing extensive pasture for large herds of camels, horses, bullocks, goats or sheep. Apart from sheer space, its nutritious natural grasses and fodder crops made the Arid Zone more suitable for stock-breeding. Apart from its grasses and forest scrub, cottonseed or the stalk and leaf of dry millet, two of the major dry crops, served as excellent supplementary fodder. Although the best warhorses came from West and Central Asia, India's dry lands could produce excellent horses, in particular when provided with streams as well as with good long-distance connections to the major breeding centres of the northwest. Hence, the dry valleys of the Sutlej and Bhima rivers grew into healthy breeding grounds for horses. For the present argument, it will suffice to conclude that, for the supply of their warhorses, the Mughals crucially depended on the pastoral economy of the Arid Zone. In addition, the same dry marches not only produced horses but also excellent breeds of dromedaries, which, like horses and elephants, were used as military instruments but which, more significantly, also served extremely well as beasts of burden. Because the radius of action of the

dromedary was limited to India's sandy dry lands, the bullock served better to supply armies in the more humid and marshy parts of the subcontinent. Although excellent breeds of the latter were bred all over India, the large herds of thousands of bullocks supplying the marshy army en route across the country clearly operated best on the open pastures of the Punjab, the Deccan and the Carnatic. Indeed, more generally speaking, an enormous Mughal army, consisting of thousands of mounted warriors supplied by at least an equal number of dromedaries and bullocks, needed wide, open space,¹¹ so the role of the nature for making the Mughal state had been postulated by Gommans very well.

IV

Without the support of nature, the state is nothing. In every aspects of the state, the administrators have to depend on the natural products, resources. From the early age of the Indian state building to the pre-colonial Mughal period and also in the time of the colonial and post colonial period we have seen it very well. In recent trends of the history writing, the focuses on the environmental history is common and several new zones in that arena are opening by the young scholars. In the light of the political and social history writing the environmental history is taken as a part of it but in my project i want to focus on that part of the environmental history as a mainstream history writing in relation with the military historical approaches, both of which is taken as a part of the mainstream history. With the relationship between the formation of the Mughal army and its dependence with the natural product we have seen a clear view of the agrarian society of the pre colonial India as well as the socio economic history of the Mughal world. So through the study of the environment history we can catch the several aspects of the society. In the several recent works of the modern scholars open up the path of the study of environmental history widely. Recent work dealt with more than five to six monographs which are published not more than ten years ago and major part remains open for the new generation historians to work on the state-environment relationship in Mughal India.

Notes:

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