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State and Locality in Mughal India

Attempts to study the nature of power in early modern South Asia and the relationship between imperial sovereignty and local networks of power. The initial overview of the historiography of the Mughal state outlines the ‘structural-functionalist state’ model of the so-called Aligarh School and the ‘patrimonial-bureaucratic’ state as well as the ‘processual’ models as the major approaches to date. The present book is a critique of these models since, in the author’s view, they ‘isolate the state from social forces and overlook the extent of interconnectedness’. The author engages with various theoretical frameworks in which power has been conceptualised (by Foucault and many other social theorists) to locate accommodation of local interests within the state rule to illustrate functioning of the Mughal state. Collecting information from extant Persian documents pertaining to two important commercial towns of Gujarat, Surat and Cambay, the author tries integrating the contestations from the weaker sections of society to emphasise that imperial power was constantly in a state of negotiation.

Hasan argues that negotiations, forging alliances and winning allegiance were more important factors in Mughal political success than military fastidiousness. Through these processes, the local power holders could be incorporated within the imperial structure of rule and won over by the state as necessary adjuncts and co-sharers of power in mutually reinforcing relationships. They shared honours and perquisites, but without actually appropriating the symbols of imperial sovereignty. All of this led to a widening of the base of Mughal rule in Gujarat. The devolution of imperial power was not confined to local elites but permeated down to the common people as well. This aspect of interconnectedness is already relatively well accepted in the historiography of the Mughal state, but Hasan’s analysis of the attitudes and responses of subordinate social groups to the state, through the examples of different socially disadvantaged groups, represents a crucial departure from the conventional history.

Subaltern contestation

The system of rule based on alliance with the local intermediaries was contested by subordinate sections of the society. To the latter, ‘compact of rule’ was an undifferentiated oppressive system and popular resistance was in fact articulated against this. Resistance in any form, the author suggests, was a political means by which the common people interacted with the state and participated in the system of rule. Through social protests, they could make their presence known and pressure the state to live up to its promises. Yet by constantly drawing in power aware of the limits to their social protests, they could make those anticipated in the system of rule. Through intermediaries was constantly in a state of negotiation.

The normative system assumes central importance in Hasan’s analysis of resistance since all contestations necessarily took place within this framework. He notes that people would often appropriate the sharia in articulating resistance, irrespective of their religious affiliations, and reiterates the subalterns’ use of ambiguities present in the sharia to their advantage. In order to stress the ‘plasticity of sharia’ he shows how one subordinated group, women, manipulated it. Using local Persian documents concerning marriage transactions and property transfers, Hasan demonstrates that women were able to defend their symbolic and material interests. For example, ordinary women quite often exploited the sharia’s ambiguities to get certain terms and conditions included in their marriage contracts.

Property and revenue

That the imperial system was at times vulnerable and that it co-opted pre-existing beliefs is again shown through an analysis of documents relating to the sale and purchase of property. The buyers and sellers and the process of approval and confirmation of the important residents, who stood as surety to the property transactions, signified a perpetual control of community and social units of residence which the author calls the ‘community-mukhalla compact’. The complex power relations involved in property transactions and the fusing of the domestic sphere with the larger system of rule is illustrated by an analysis of how the office of the qazi (an official appointee to settle disputes and punish offenders) functioned in close collusion with local structures of power. This office, which was rooted in local power relations, could be appropriated by social actors to preserve their interests. An understanding of the qazi’s role in property transactions sheds further light on the participatory, shared nature of the Mughal state.

The imperial fiscal system is yet another sphere that was regularly modified and reshaped by local power holders, merchant bodies, and subordinate groups. In addition to this system, there were local customary levies which, though officially illegal, nevertheless had to be co-opted into the system of rule. The imperial system of revenue realisation is examined through the lens of the locality. Local evidence pertaining to marriages, property transactions, and resistance is analysed and interpreted in such a way that the notion of a contested yet shared sovereignty stands justified. The book’s underlying assumption that the state and the locality represented two distinct political entities, however, belies the fact that the state itself was fluid. Like the normative system, the Mughal state was not a rigid and fixed edifice. Depending upon circumstances, it adopted different approaches towards accommodation or exclusion at different times and places. In the same way, the locality was quite fragmented in its articulation of power and influence. The state did not approve of acts of transgression and was quick to act to maintain its system of rule. Contestation or resistance thus took place within the framework of the state, not outside it. Whatever reservations one might have about the author’s theoretical approach, the book is a brilliant attempt toward an understanding of the nature of the Mughal state as it functioned in certain localities of Gujarat.

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Negotiating the state in Mughal India


Mumtaz Mahal, second wife of Mughal emperor Shah Jahan I. Her name means ‘beloved ornament of the palace’.