

New Orientations and Terminological Interpretations of Medieval Indian Economic Historiography



Preeti Singh

Assistant Professor,
Department of History,
Sri Guru Nanak Dev Khalsa
College,
University of Delhi,
Delhi

Abstract

Before the interest of modern historians in rehashing medieval Indian economic history gained centrality and importance, history writing mostly comprised of accounts of wars, royal legends, panegyrics and power struggles which were the so called 'externals of history'. The pioneer in this transition in historical research and interpretation of India's economic history was William Harrison Moreland, who emphasized on the primacy of economic forces in history. This paper deals with the way writings of this stalwart evoked a sharp reaction from contemporary writers who promptly started a study of the pre British Indian economy, launched a new hunt for revenue records and 'farmans' and engaged in disputations adding new dimensions to research. This also involved a keen study of the Persian economic terminology in use during the Mughal rule. Later historians brought about fundamental changes in the perception of the past, often rehashing the conclusions drawn by Moreland, especially highlighting how some important terms had been misinterpreted by him. However, while doing so, they all agreed that Moreland's pioneering works were the baseline on which the edifice of this new school of historical research was built. Other novel facets of economic history of India are also seen in the emergence of the Nationalist school of Indian Political Economy under the scholarly philosophy and research of M.G. Ranade and R.C. Dutt. After India gained independence, a Marxian school of interpretation of Indian history gained importance, signifying a further transition in historical research.

Keywords: Lexicon, Terminology, Cataloguing, Historiography, Interpretation.

Introduction

Moreland explained the agrarian system of Medieval India with special emphasis on Mughal period, in the background of the ancient and early medieval periods of Indian history so as to give a coordinated picture of the agrarian features through the ages. His experience in the revenue department, first as Settlement officer in the United Provinces in 1889, right up to the time when he steadily rose to the position of Director of Land Records and Agriculture in 1899, helped Moreland to develop an in-depth and thorough understanding of the subject. His immense aptitude and interest in studying land records and settlement reports as well as tapping English, Dutch and Persian sources of Mughal economy, made his vision remarkably penetrating and acute. This was very inspiring for contemporary writers like Jadunath Sarkar, K.R. Qanungo, Robert Maclagan and Baden Powell, and later for Irfan Habib, Shireen Moosvi and a host of other historians.

Another important transition for Indian history writing was the shifting of the focus of the study. Modern historians have realized that Moreland's study of the common peasant's life in India in the past centuries is also very relevant in the present times. He was the first historian to shift the cynosure from kings and nobles to the ordinary peasant. The theme of all his major works and articles was India and 'the people'. By people, he understood 'the peasant'. It was a kind of regicide in modern Indian historiography. Tables were never so drastically turned. These novel ideas of interacting with history brought about a new awakening among all progressive minded scholars and gave history writing a new direction altogether.

Aim of the Study

This paper aims at studying the major transitions in the analysis of Indian history in the last hundred years, with special emphasis on how Persian terms and lexicons related to medieval Indian economy have been interpreted and translated by different scholars and historians. These path-breaking changes in history writing have opened up new areas of inquiry and expanded the horizons of Indian Historiography. The main emphasis of this study is scrutinizing the earliest and most significant series of historical research, which triggered off a phenomenal quest in unraveling the precise and accurate meaning of Persian words describing economic activities and products in the 16th-17th century.

Methodology

The methodology adopted in writing of this paper consisted of application of certain procedures that helped to identify, select and analyze the available source material for providing a broad coverage of the economic analysis to historical episodes. For this purpose the following steps were taken: defining and outlining the topic under study, identifying its salient issues, finding and generating relevant information, evaluating its reliability and validity, weighing up the evidence on all sides of a debate, arriving at a well-argued conclusion and organizing the results critically, cogently and coherently before presenting the same. Since the subject of inquiry spread over the entire period of Medieval Indian history, a plethora of translated original works of the Delhi Sultanate and Mughal period were selected as some of the most reliable original source materials. However, the focus being identifying and interpreting the transitions in writing of Indian history mainly in the last hundred years, original works of scholars and historians who spearheaded the changes or took the cue from them during this time period, served as important primary sources. Collection of these sources involved cataloguing, scrutinizing, and verifying the procured information through multiple methods. Not only were the works of medieval and modern Indian history scholars and writers studied thoroughly but accounts of foreign authors were also referred to. The types of literary sources used were original works (translated into English) biographies, manuscripts, chronicles, manuals, diaries, correspondence, memoirs, census records, 'farmans', Survey Reports, Settlement records, statistical data and charts. These primary sources were supplemented by informative secondary sources like peer reviewed essays and articles in Journals, periodicals and bibliographies.

Apart from using information collected by the above-mentioned methodology, historical data was verified through internet-based material from websites like www.Historicalstatistics.org, and links to historical economic statistics for India. For the purpose of gathering more statistical data that could refute or corroborate the conclusions of historians in the past decades, external links like Penn World Tables also came in handy, especially while assessing population,

GDP, price levels in the 20th century and comparing them to those of 16th and 17th century.

Discussion

A paradigm shift in historiography was brought about when William Harrison Moreland focused on economic aspects of Medieval Indian history. However, he has himself admitted that his version must not be considered final, calling his own work far from complete or definitive. He says, "It is a sketch rather than a furnished picture. There is room for more intensive study and reasonable prospect of the discovery of additional facts among sources to which I have not present access". Moreland had practically no archival revenue source material of the 17th century and despite his perseverance in the field, he still could not completely overcome the language barrier, especially while interpreting the Persian terms in use. The next transition, at least in technique, if not in content, started when P. Saran launched further investigation of economic history of India, writing a decade after Moreland's last major work was published. He has made efforts to give his own interpretations of the Persian terms like Nasq, Zamindar and Shiqdar, and also disagreed with Moreland regarding the latter's account of natural calamities during the Mughal period, calling them exaggerated. After him the wheel of change did not stop.

Irfan Habib is correctly considered the rightful heir to Moreland in the study of agrarian economy of Medieval India. He has examined numerous additional regional records, land grants and foreign depositories to which Moreland could not have access. His 'Agrarian system of Mughal India', is an eloquent tribute to Moreland. But together with the exposition of Mughal agrarian system, his research has extended to the problems of Marxist historiography, the development and growth of technology and changes resulting from it. He has inherited Moreland's 'definite tendency' to understand the common man, specially the peasant. Apart from this he has made his area of study wider than that of Moreland, by taking into account forces like caste, landedness, social habit and absence of trading habit, religion, despotism and British impact on society.

Irfan Habib has corrected his predecessor on many issues, one of the most important being that Akbar's assessment was neither uniform nor one-third as Moreland believed. Revenue was fixed in cash, not kind, says Habib. It is unlikely that the prices or the quotation of prices that formed the basis for commuting the demand into cash were identical to those at which the peasant parted with his crop. He also amended Moreland's belief that Aurangzeb increased the land revenue demand from one-third to one-half on the basis of the 'Shariat,' and that it was collected by using force. Habib says that there is no evidence that Aurangzeb set about reformulating the 'zabt' revenue rates on the basis of half of the crop rate. Yet again, Habib finds himself clarifying the concept of 'Jama-i-Dahsala', a task for which he has directly referred to Abul Fazl's notings, saying that this innovation was concerned with ascertaining 'ten

years' state of every Pargana, and tenth part of the produce was fixed as annual revenue. The word 'Zamindar' was misinterpreted as vassal chiefs by Moreland and many of the modern historians till 1950s. Habib says that Zamindars existed in the regularly administered territories and were by no means confined to tributary states. He says that this term was officially used from Akbar's time for any person with hereditary claim to a direct share in the peasant's produce. Habib says that 'Nasq' was not simply farming of a village or group assessment, as Moreland seems to think. He says, 'Nasq' was a previously worked out or determined assessment that was acceptable. Habib has refuted Moreland's claim on eradication of the threat of famines in British India. In 1943-44, nearly three and a half million people died of starvation in Bengal and all the medieval horrors were re-enacted.

Making further departure from Moreland, Habib has claimed that crop sharing or differential sharing practiced under Aurangzeb's viceroyalty in the Deccan, did not originate from tenets of Persian administration. Habib also finds the British author's interpretation of the position and functions of the 'Qanungo' and 'Choudhuri,' not entirely correct. Also, while discussing the 'Price Revolution' in India, during the 17th century, Habib stated that Moreland has not made accurate observations regarding the changes in the gold-silver ratio in the 17th century, nor has he taken into account the impact of the price resolution in Europe during the same period. In his later works, Habib again points out an error in Moreland's use of the 'arazi' statistics (i.e. the area measured for revenue purposes) to estimate the total population of India in 1600, saying that the total population estimate for the year was approximately 50 million more than what Moreland believed.

However, Habib has also quoted Moreland on a number of occasions in order to justify his own conclusions. He has in his discussion on trade in agricultural produce, stated that the peasants 'anticipated the markets' or 'followed the market', as Moreland remarked. Irfan Habib has also adopted Moreland's interpretation of 'Jagir', as being an 'Assignment' and not 'fief'. He also found Moreland's understanding of the Mansabdari system quite impressive, and agrees with him on the difficulties in ascertaining the amount that can be regarded as net income of officers holding any particular rank.

Therefore, it is evident that Habib picked up from where Moreland had left and made suitable corrections. B.R. Grover, whose most important work is on the land rights in the Mughal period, tried to explain the theoretical and legal version about land ownership—a controversy into which Moreland refused to be drawn.

With Shireen Moosvi, a new contribution was made in historical research of the Mughal rule in India. The shift from mere presumptions or personal opinions to scientifically applied statistical analysis of Indian economy was a major transition in Indian historiography. Whether it be the size of agricultural production, the distribution of surplus among various

classes, the total value of external trade, price and wage structure and the size of population in India in the 17th century, all have been dealt under the preview of statistical material, available from original sources like the 'Ain-i-Akbari'.

Moosvi has concluded after studying the 'Raqababandi' documents from Eastern Rajasthan, that the total 'Kharif' and 'Rabi' cropped area is 65 percent of the total area, a fact that was also stated by Moreland and some later historians.

Moosvi made a thorough study of Todarmal's memorandum on revenue administration, compiled in March 1552, and went on to make a more detailed analysis of the twelve recommendations which were used as a standard model for Mughal administration even after Akbar. She has corrected Moreland regarding the prices mentioned in the 'Ain' as retail prices and not wholesale prices and also rehashed his article, 'The prices and wages under Akbar,' by using accurate statistical data and details.

While tracing the new orientations and transitions in Indian economic history writing, it is also important to take into account another facet of economic study of India's past, called the 'Nationalist school of political economy' the foundation of which was laid by M.G. Ranade, the father of Indian Nationalist economics. He brought forth the significance of studying Indian economy from the Indian perspective and insisted that ethnical, social, cultural, juristic, ethical and environmental differences should also be taken into account while exploring the truths of economic science. After him, a similar strain of thought was continued by R.C. Dutt, who wrote with impressive clarity, about the 'crushing of India's manufacturing power due to British policies'. B. Nataraja Pillai, P.J. Thomas (Mercantilism and the East India Trade), Radhakamal Mukerjee (The Economic history of India: 1600-1800), D.R. Gadgil (The Industrial Evolution of India in recent times) are some other examples of further commitment to Indian political economy.

After Indian independence, a Marxian interpretation of history of India emerged as the central theme of study. This was a paradigm shift, and for a large number of historians, starting from D. D. Kosambi, made socio-economic history and its cultural dimensions as the focus of historical inquiry, thus providing a new integrative framework. Kosambi's concept of Feudalism also influenced the understanding of Medieval Indian history, sparking new and vigorous set of theories on the subject. R.S. Sharma and Harbans Mukhia's theories on feudalism were among the most important landmarks of study of the economy of Mughal India. Irfan Habib, whose views have been discussed in this paper earlier, created a major impact in history circles. A new set of issues that included banking, currency, demography, trade and national income, gained centrality and significance due to the contribution of modern historians.

Another trendsetter in Indian economic history writing was Amiya Bagchi, who expertly combined historical themes with research on

contemporary topics. He studied manufacturing employment in the 19th Central Bihar, and also Industrialization in 20th century India. Bagchi's contribution has spanned economics of industrialization and developmental studies and he has specialized in history of Indian banking and finance.

Conclusion

Like any literary pursuit, history writing too is an ever evolving and expanding arena of intellectual exercise. Indian history writing and research flowered and matured when, breaking the rut, William Harrison Moreland ventured on a path never treaded before and took up serious study of the economic history of India. Though many of his conclusions on various aspects of economic Indian history of the medieval period, remain unassailed, he started a new trend of dealing with a subject armed with a fresh approach. Each writer who subsequently chose to study economic aspects of India's past, just preceding the centuries before the British Rule in India, has made his own unique and special contribution in the analysis of various aspects of study in this sphere.

Thus, the theme of transitions in Indian historical research encapsulates a broad framework for future studies that are transformative and systematic and have significant ramifications on how history shall be viewed in future. The framework of transitions explores new historical aspects, like the economic aspect that was picked up as his staple for research by Moreland. He and other scholars after him continued to raise fresh questions that set the wheel of further change rolling.

History is a multiple set of stories, and the need to define and enlarge a liberal academic space has always been extremely important. What Moreland started was a major transition in historiography, and he himself encouraged subsequent writers to improve upon his conclusions. With each new study, conducted by historians in the last one hundred years there is a new orientation and fresh approach to how Indian medieval economic history should be understood.

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