URBANISATION AND THE MUGHAL MILITARY CULTURE

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ABSTRACT

The paper tends to explore the process of urbanization in Mughal India but going beyond the conventional stereotypes of state agents serving as catalytic factors in this process. This paper looks at forces beyond state purview, like the communities of ascetics and peasant soldiers under jobber commanders and examines their role in the vital process of urban development. This paper also tries to revise the manner in which even state agents like Mansabdars have been historically perceived, not as actors detached from the local society but as characters organically linked to social forces and urbanization then stemming as a natural extension of this integration of these Mansabdars to their surroundings.

KEYWORDS: mansabdars, masculinity, peasant-soldier, urbanization, warrior-ascetic

URBANISATION IN MUGHAL INDIA AND THE MUGHAL MILITARY CULTURE

The hallmark of the Mughal state in India was its rich urban culture. The various forces involved in the growth of urban centres has been a topic of great interest in academic circles over many decades. The process of urbanisation in Mughal India itself has been examined from different perspectives, there has been academic discourses over the various communities which constitute this urban space, on the gender relations within the urban framework, while recent researches focus on the issue of crime and violence within this urban scenario of Mughal North India. In this essay, an attempt will be made to focus on the vibrant military culture that was present in Mughal India and the way this culture with its various components shaping this process of urbanisation throughout Mughal India.

The noted historian Athar Ali, while discussing the Mughal military never used the word ‘culture’ for military, rather for him the military was a structure defined by institutions like the Mansabdari system with its primary agent, being the Mansabdar who served mainly as an arm of the state aimed at reinforcing the centralised state structure. According to Athar Ali, this Mansabdari system which constituted the military structure was an extremely

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impersonal institution, totally delinked and detached from the social forces. Such an explanation was derived from a Webberian typology where institutions were seen as professional and impersonal, but the fault lies in using a 19th century notion in trying to understand formations of the 16th-17th centuries, but, despite such limitations this was the manner in which the military system was perceived in the early Mughal historiography.

Athar Ali argued that the institutional agents of this military structure of the Mughas, namely the Mansabdars were mostly urban based. According to him, in the initial period of the Mughal rule, almost 57% of the Mansabdars recruited were Iranians or Turanis who had come along with the Mughal ruling house to the subcontinent from regions with well developed urban settings and hence their entire socio-cultural orientation was urban based. Their military techniques and skills were also town centric. As a result, the whole arrangement of the Mansabdari system was geared to allow these Mansabdars to reside in towns while they also invested their money to pull up their jagirs or estates atleast to the level of semi-urban structures. A consequence of which was that the jagirs of many influential Mansabdars transformed into ‘qasbahs’ with steady market links and diverse urban components. This was a very neat argument where the military structure rested on the institutions of Mansabdari system which helped in stimulating urbanisation through the agency of the mansabdars.

The thrust of the aforementioned argument is that the presence of a military structure defined by the Mansabdari system was an extremely impersonal one, imposed from above. The impersonal nature is re-enforced through the recordings of the frequent transfers of Mansabdars. Despite the informal nature of this system, the Mansabdars were still seen as contributing towards the process of urbanisation partly explained through their own urban roots. It is in this manner that a correlation was established between the military structure and the process of urbanisation. However, in this explanation than the Mansabdar was seen as all powerful and responsible for urbanisation and no other agents are identified as triggering the kind of urbanisation attributed to the Mansabdars.

New works on Mughal history such as Seema Alavi’s ‘Sepoy and the Company’ which revise older interpretations and stress upon the need to see the military in terms of a culture

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4 For detailed statistical list see Ali, Athar, Apparatus of Empire: Awards of Ranks, Offices and Titles to Mughal Nobility, OUP, Delhi, 1985, pp xxvii-xxxviii. Also see Ziauddin, Muhammad, Role of Persians in the Mughal Court, University of Balochistan, ph.d dissertation, 2005, pp 65-102.
rather than as a structure defined by a static impersonal institutions, delinked from society. The identification of a military culture, made it easier to locate within it other enabling actors who could also stimulate urbanisation but existed beyond the Mansabdrars. These enabling actors were thus not necessarily a part of the Mughal official hierarchy like the Mansabdrars, but served as equally Important components of the military culture and facilitated urbanisation within Mughal India and hence will be termed as non-state actors in the course of this paper. More importantly, an assessment of the military as a culture helps re-examine the Mansabdrari system as one embedded within the social matrix, influenced by social forces and constantly interacting with the society and in this process triggering a kind of urbanisation.

Seema Alavi in her ‘Sepoy and the Company’ talks of Mughal Mansabdar, not just as a Mansabdar but as a gentleman trooper embedded in the socio-political culture of the period. Being a gentlemanly trooper, the Mansabdar reflected gentlemanliness in early modern times, a gentleman not just by being linked to the court but as one having professional training in wrestling, sword-fighting and archery. He was a gentleman by virtue of being all this and at the same time being literate in worldly affairs and possessing ‘encyclopaedic’ knowledge, going beyond scholarly knowledge. Most Mansabdrars were required to have contingency of horses so they had to interact with horse-traders from central Asia and in the process gained knowledge of various trading networks and routes and thus was well connected to the world outside. Similarly, he learnt horse-riding and archery from experts most of whom came from outside the sub-continent in the process integrating this Mansabdar with the world outside.

Similarly, a large number of texts were written on military arts and how one should conduct oneself during military arts, an example of such a text being ‘Adab-ul-Harb’. The gentleman trooper had to be in touch with these texts and its writers and develop close ties with the literate communities which produced such works. Many of the Mansabdrars were actually good poets themselves and many established religious seminaries. Thus, the Mansabdar was not just part of a military institution, but as per Alavi, was someone with a command over diverse fields from sword-fighting to trade circuits to the knowledge system of the world outside and by virtue of possessing these qualities, the Mansabdar combined many roles in

themselves and thus represented an ethos of gentlemanliness in the early modern period and were categorised as a gentleman-trooper\textsuperscript{6}.

Mullah Qutubuddin was a Mughal Mansabdar sent by Aurangzeb to fight Deccani campaigns and for his services he was given land in Bahraich and an old house in Lucknow, which he converted into a religious seminary for Islamic jurisprudence. He taught here, which reflected his own skill in the complex field of Islamic theology in addition to his own warrior qualities. Thus, Mullah Qutubuddin was a perfect epitome of a Alavian Gentleman trooper. His institute came to be known as ‘Firangi Mahal’ where religious scholars from various parts of the world gathered making it a leading centre of Sunni Islamic jurisprudence in Lucknow. The ‘Firangi Mahal’ also attracted many students from the region, who were taught by Mullah Qutubuddin himself among others\textsuperscript{7}. This example of Mullah Qutubuddin and the popularity of his ‘Firangi Mahal’ shows the embeddedness of the Mughal Mansabdar in the local society and his involvement with the various social forces and the earlier theorisation of a Mansabdar detached from social forces seems incipient.

According to Shireen Moosvi, 63\% of the savings of a Mansabdar was utilised in the service sector\textsuperscript{8}. Promoting urbanisation does not only mean the popping up of ‘Qasbahs’ but also involves a kind of interaction with the service gentry. The statistical evidence above documents that a majority of the investments of the Mughal Mansabdars allowing the urban service sector and its associated classes to flourish, prosper, proliferate, thereby promoting urbanisation. This revealed the embeddedness of the Mughal Mansabdar in the local society without which he would not have been concerned with the development of the urban service sector and invest in them. Thus, the new studies relocated the Mansabdar as a gentleman-trooper integrally entrenched within society, constantly shaped by social forces and through this complex interplay with society promoting urbanisation in the manner as mentioned above.

We just noticed how the Mughal Mansabdar promoted urbanisation but while being deeply embedded within the society. The Mughal Mansabdar was a part of the official ruling classes and an important component within the military culture but as already said, there were other

\textsuperscript{6} Alavi, Seema, Sepoy and the Company, pp 34-41.
\textsuperscript{7} Sikand, Yoginder, Bastions and Believers; Madrasa and Islamic Education in India, Penguin, New Delhi, 2005, pp 40-47.
components within the military culture as well, who were not a part of the official circle. These were the non state actors who stimulated urbanisation. Two most important of whom were the warrior-ascetics and the peasant soldiers under the aegis of independent military warlords.

The first group to concentrate upon are the ‘Warrior-ascetics’. They were not a part of the official ruling elite but another component in the military culture. Their identity as a warrior was not because they served the Mughals or any other power, but their identity was based on the fact that these men were supposed to have turned their backs on the material world and the warrior identity stemmed from their bravado acquired from their prowess on having cheated death, which also supposedly vested them with supernatural powers. Initially, for a long period, these groups were left out of any Mughal narrative on the military culture. But stories of such warrior-ascetics flock all major chronicles of the Mughal period and a closer examination of such stories help us in understanding the process of Mughal state formation and urbanisation better.

William Pinch, in his book gives an account which has also been found in many major Mughal chronicles like Ain-i-Akbari. The account is of an incident in Thaneswar. In this, Akbar was returning from a hunting trip and stopped at a place called, ‘Thanesar’. There was a holy water tank here and a shrine which attracted a considerable number of pilgrims. Akbar, while resting discovered that two distinct camps of warrior-ascetics had gathered around the shrine and on closer examination found the two groups to be that of Saivite sanyasis and Yogis with the former outnumbering the latter. They were fighting over the distribution of gold and silver coins thrown on the shrine by pilgrims. Both the groups claimed Thanesar to be theirs from time immemorial and used this as a premise to stake a claim over the money as well. By the time of Akbar’s appearance, an armed conflict had ensued and he first watched the conflict like a show, but soon intervened on behalf of the ‘Yogis’ helping them to victory⁹.

This incident showed warrior ascetics to be very visible in Mughal society and tensions and differences also seem common within this community. The tensions also seem to be on matters regarding distribution of wealth, showing these warrior-ascetics to be embedded

within the material economy of a region. ‘Thanesar’ was a pilgrim center and numerous pilgrims flocked there and it seems that these non-state warrior-ascetics conducted the trade and exchange which operated within these pilgrim centers. These warrior-ascetics were connected to such pilgrim centres, their sustenance crucially linked to the money being distributed by the pilgrims within these centres and hence, these warrior-ascetics took it upon themselves to maintain these pilgrim centers as well as taking care of the pilgrims who visited this centre, all of which was with the primary aim of attracting people to this shrine. None of this was done by the state, rather carried on by the warrior-ascetics. All these activities of the warrior-ascetics provided a base for the Mughals which they later used to develop these pilgrim centres into important cities and towns. This urbanisation was only possible because of the pre-existent links and economic networks built around these shrines by the warrior-ascetics. Hence, the process of urbanisation seen later around such centres was primarily built upon the initial activities of non-state actors and this is how they abetted process of urbanisation.

Another group of non-state actors within the Mughal military culture were the armed peasants. Dirk Kolffe, in his ‘Naukar, Rajput and Sepoy’ argued that in India the agricultural cycle was such that there were long stretches in a year when the people associated with agriculture had nothing to do and they had to resort to alternative means of livelihood for sustenance, which for many meant making themselves available as warriors to whomsoever was willing to recruit them. They constituted the military labour market. Rosalin o Hanlon argues, for the peasants who saw themselves as warriors, this question of being a warrior was also linked to the question of masculinity. In Sufi discourse, manliness was linked to the ability of an individual to suffer pain and renounce the material world to achieve spiritual illumination where he was one with reality without interlocuters. Similarly in the Indo-Persian court culture permeating north India, masculinity was based on the outward display of power of the male body. Hence, the peasants to become warriors underwent rigorous

training in military sports like archery and wrestling to display their physical valour and prowess. In the Mughal period manliness was intrinsically connected to imperial service\textsuperscript{13}.

Mohammed Baqir al-saini was a noble of high standing in the Mughal court and had come to India after migrating from Persia. Here he wrote, ‘Muawaia-i-Jahangiri’ and in this text he clearly stated that an ideal man was one who was employed in the service of kings and through this employment not only attained success and a high social rank but also came to epitomise aristocratic virtues of good speech, good manners and a fortitude becoming a true man. As a result, the peasants also realised to become ideal masculine warriors, it was imperative for them to take up imperial service, and the Mughal court became for them the sole agent for letting them become valourous male warriors. Since imperial service was seen as necessary for being a male warrior, it allowed the Mughal state to easily recruit from the ranks of these warrior-peasants, soldiers for their army which was crucial for the Mughals for establishing their paramount authority\textsuperscript{14}.

However from the late 17\textsuperscript{th} century, the Mughal body politic shows signs of weakening and a kind of atomisation takes place of various facets in the Mughal body politic, as a consequence of which the armed peasants begin to feel they too can be the ideal male warriors without being linked to the imperial court. Thus, a gradual delinking of the notion of ‘warrior-male’ from the imperial structure begins to take place where these armed peasants who earlier felt imperial service was crucial for becoming ideal male warriors and attaining high status and rank now began looking at other forces in the market to achieve the same goal. Thus, a commodification of masculinity is seen. This makes it easier for the different military warlords to tap into the military potential of these armed peasants and create huge retinues by recruiting large segments of these peasant-warriors, who were equally willing to join these independent jobber commanders to achieve rank, status and honour.

The question we can ask now is who were these military warlords? The military labour market also saw various independent elements, not part of the ruling structure who could be representatives of the Indian gentry class like the Zamindars. They recruited retainers for themselves from among the armed peasants and became military warlords possessing large armies and played an increasingly important role in the fragmented polity of the late 17\textsuperscript{th}

\textsuperscript{13} For military training and physical exercises under Mughals, see Phul, Rajkumar, Armies of the Great Mughals, Oriental Publishers, Delhi, 1978, pp 49-55.

\textsuperscript{14} O Hanlon, Rosalind, Manliness and Imperial Service in Mughal North India, pp 62-65.
century. The increasing power of these military commanders due to the large section of armed-peasants they could now recruit in the late 17th century because of the delink of imperial service with notions of ideal male warriorhood saw them becoming important agents of urbanisation, clearly documented by the example of Diler Khan.

Diler Khan was an urban-free booter who had recruited a huge army by the process mentioned above. He brought to an end the Rajput menace and the later Mughals gave him land in Uttar Pradesh. Though he himself was an Afghan, his army comprised of both Afghan tribesmen as well as other Indian elements, especially a large section of warrior-peasants. According to Dirk Kolff, soldiering was an ‘open ended status group’ and anyone could become a soldier irrespective of one’s primordial identities of caste, religion or ethnicity. Hence non-Afghan soldiers could serve Afghan masters and Afghan soldiers could serve Rajput masters. The common identity for all was that of a soldier, which served as a caste in itself and according to Kolff, it was a much more lucrative identity to have as it promised opportunities of socio-economic mobility. In the territory given to Diler Singh, which he named ‘Shahjahanpur’, he divided it into 52 mohallas as per the 52 different Afghan tribes which were part of his contingent. There were also non-Afghan soldiers who resided in that territory. The demands of these different groups attracted traders, artisanal craftsmen, mercantile groups to settle in this territory leading to the growth of markets and other urban communities. Also the warlord established mosques, ‘sarais’, ‘madrasas’ etc and the result of this was the growth of an urban center in Shahjahanpur. Though this was just one example, there were several such cities in Uttar Pradesh which were established as a result of the initiative of these military entrepreneurs and to meet the requirements of the war-bands of these warlords gathered from the peasant-warriors who had alienated themselves from imperial service. Urbanisation in this case emerged from these non-state actors (the warlords, the armed peasants) and not due to mughal largesse.

In conclusion, the Mughal military culture comprised of state and non state actors. The state actors like the Mansabdars were embedded in the society, and promoted urbanisation while engaging with various social forces and were not promoting urbanisation mechanically as postulated earlier, by remaining detached from society. Similarly, there were other non-state actors within the military culture who also in many ways as described above facilitated

15 Kolff, Dirk, Sanyasi Trader- Soldiers, IESHR, 8, pp 213-220.
16 Kazim, Muhammad, Alamgir-nama, edited by Khadim Hussain and Abdul Haq, Calcutta, 1868, pp 169
urbanisation, so urbanisation cannot be seen from the narrow Marxist lens as being motivated only by state actors within the military like Mansabdars; it becomes important to consider the role played by non-state actors within the dynamic Mughal military culture like the armed peasants under freebooting military warlords and warrior ascetic communities in this process of urbanisation as well.