



An Analysis of Socio-Economic Disparity Between Upper and Lower Classes in Mughal India

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ABSTRACT: While taking into account the condition of the people of any country broadly two classes - upper and lower are taken for assessment. Throughout the history we find a large range of gap in regard to social and economic condition of the two divergent communities of the Indian society. So, the case was that of Mughal India. This kind of assumption is fully supported from the contemporary Persian sources and especially from traveler's accounts who visited not only towns and cities but also held personal discourses with general masses at different places. The upper or privileged class mainly comprised the emperor, his family members, nobility, zamindars and many rich merchants who preferably lived in towns and cities. In opposite to this the lower class constituted majority of the population and consisted of peasants, artisans and labourers who lived in villages or rural areas.

KEYWORDS: Mansabdars, Jama, Karkhanas, Messenger, Harems.

INTRODUCTION

An attempt is made in this paper to share an idea about the huge difference in standard of living between the two distinct classes under discussion. A careful study of the sources of varied nature and the modern works also based on the available data in them clearly show that the upper class due to large economic resources at their disposal led a luxurious life while the lower class passed a miserable life due to burden of heavy taxation and exploitation during Mughal period.¹ To begin with Emperor Babur who in his memoir writing about Hindustan provides ample information regarding topography, fauna and flora, etc.² Together with he also speaks of the condition of general masses. He says that poor men hardly owned a candle or lamp but the great men had hundreds of it. Speaking further he says "peasants and people of low standing go about naked". They tie on a thing called lunguta.³ It is ironic to note that despite hot wind the general people failed to cover their full body with clothes.

Contrary to the miserable condition of the general masses, we may have an idea about the economic position and standard of living of the ruling class. The work of A.J. Qaiser not only testifies the above assumption but also shows how within an upper class (nobility) there was a wide degree of difference in the distribution of revenue resources in Mughals' time. A ready reference may be given for the 20th Regnal year of Shahjahan's reign. From A. J. Qaiser's description, we come to know that a mere 73 Princes and nobles who constituted only 0.9% of the total number of the mansabdars controlled 37.6% of the total jama or in other words more than one-third of the estimated revenue. On the other hand, 7555 mansabdars who constituted

94.4% of the total number of mansabdars claimed in the form of salaries 25% or at the most 30% of the total estimated revenue of the empire.⁴

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

For the study of this paper the sources like Persian chronicles, traveller's accounts, and modern works have been consulted. Since, the majority of the Persian sources of the Mughal period fail to provide a full description of the social and economic activities in their day to day lives. This kind of lacunae is to a large extent, fulfilled by the foreign traveller's accounts. They speak of diet, clothing or dress, houses of both the classes.

DISCUSSION

The upper class paid special attention to their health, because of this, the emperor and nobles' families maintained a well-organized kitchen. Normally twenty types of dishes at a time were served at the tables of the nobles.⁵ It is surprising that every day about one thousand rupees were spent for the expenses of the king's kitchen and the concerned officials were supposed to furnish there from all that was necessary. They had to serve the prince a fixed number of ragouts and different dishes in vessels of China porcelain which were placed on gold stands.⁶ The nobles usually tried to imitate the tastes and dishes of the royal kitchen. Pelsaert refers to different kinds of ingredient of food which consists of birinjeashalia, polleb (yellow, red, green or black) zueyla, dupiaza. Besides, roast meats and various other good courses were served on very large dishes which contain little butter but too much spice for making them much tasty.⁷

Contrary to the above, the dishes of common people were prepared without any variety. As they due to limited resources could not afford to spend on rich and dainty dishes. The normal food of them constituted rice, saag and some other vegetables with salt. Mostly people use to take khichari which was prepared in an ordinary way and was generally taken without ghee or butter.⁸ Khichari as the most popular dish of this class has been discussed by almost all European travellers.⁹ Pelsaert describes it as composed of green pulse mixed with rice and cooked with water over a little fire. Usually, a little butter and salt were added to it.¹⁰ Ordinary people used pattle (plate made with leaves of the big trees) in place of plates.¹¹ For the dinner they took only little salt and butter over which were poured rice boiled without salt, with some vegetables and curd.¹² After they had finished their dinner, these leaves were removed.¹³ In case of upper-class people, food was brought from the kitchen in bowls made of silver and gold. The people of lower strata cooked their food on the fire made of cow dung. Pelsaert writes that poor men burn cow dung mixed with straw and dried in the sun.¹⁴

While describing the garments of people belonging to upper and middle classes Thevenot provides very interesting and useful information. From his account we came to know that their coats were open from top to bottom.¹⁵ To protect the body from the cold waves in winter they wore over their shirt's airlocks called bundhi stuffed with cotton. The outer clothes either made of silk or cotton had cheeks or flower design. A vest called qaba was sometimes put on as an upper garment. It was woven with golden thread and other rich stuff. They also used to cover their shoulders with clothes prepared with very fine woollen fabric which had several handsome colours.¹⁶ He further says that it was a fashion to tie the waist with a scarf which was sometimes made of beautiful and costly multi-coloured stuff.¹⁷

Dress of common people differed from the upper class in term of quality. Another traveller De Laet states that clothes both of men and women were made of cotton having various patterns or designs. They also used light tunic with a belt round the waist, which came down to the knees. Under this were breeches which come down to the ankles. Their feats were bare except for open sandals, which can be easily taken off when they entered a house for their floors.¹⁸

Almost all travellers of the Mughal period had similar kind of information that common people wore dress which tied round the waist and reaching down low their knees.¹⁹ The poor men and women did not wear heavy and luxurious dresses due to poor economic condition like rich people those who used to wear varieties of shoe, gloves and other stockings.²⁰ Even the poor women dressed themselves only with a piece of cloth called sari which wrapped round the middle parts of their body.²¹ The one edge of the sari usually striped in two colours which was drawn to cover the head.²² Manucci says that ordinary people wear two or three forms of garments and the weight of which did not exceed one ounce.²³ Poor women moved generally bare footed.²⁴

Higher class people irrespective of sex both men and women loved to wear ornaments. Usually, ornaments were made with gold and silver but those who could not afford these contented themselves with less costly metals or substances. The rural people satisfied themselves with necklaces made of cloves and of brass metals.²⁵ Similarly, the houses of upper-class people differed totally from the lower class. The former lived in spacious house, royal palaces with numerous apartments containing drawing rooms, dressing rooms, bathrooms, female apartments decorated with different precious stones and fine paintings. Bernier describes about royal palace at Delhi as "The citadel, which contains the Mehalle or Seraglio and the other royal apartment, is round or rather semi-circle."²⁶ Thevenot's description of the royal palace of Agra as follows "The king's palace is in the castle. It contains three court adorned all round with porches and galleries that are painted and cut, nay there are some places covered with plates of gold".²⁷ Like imperial palace, nobles' buildings were also big and spacious and had numerous apartments and amenities', e.g. drawing rooms, guest room, female's quarters, bathrooms, water tank, spacious courtyards and handsome subterraneous rooms furnished with big fans which served as suitable place for taking rest during the summer. A good house also had a terrace on which the family might sleep during the night. Their houses were decorated with different kind of furniture, ornaments, cots and bed sheets, cushions, mattress.²⁸ Houses of upper class were generally built of bricks and stone and sometimes clay and straw attached to them.²⁹

In contrast to the above the houses of common people generally were made with mud and straw and they as usually lived in closed houses. According to Terry, the houses of meaner sorts were very poor and base set up close together. No house stood single and alone. They had earthen walls mingled with straw. The heights of roofs were very low and flat. They were setup with sticks in places of timber, so that if they caught fire, they could be rebuilt quickly.³⁰ Referring to their houses, Pelsaert writes that they were built of mud with thatched roof. There was little or none except some earthenware pots to hold water and for cooking. Their bed and clothes were scanty and they hardly possessed one or two bed sheets. Although this was sufficient in the hot weather but not enough for bitter cold nights. They tried to keep themselves warm over little with cow dung fires which were lit outside the doors.³¹ Bernier also refers to the thatched and mud-built houses of Delhi which fell prey to frequent conflagrations.³² Manucci describes that such houses of the common people had little or no furniture.³³

Generally, the condition of peasants during the Mughal period was not good. They were economically unable to fulfil their basic needs. As discussed in the beginning the burden of revenue on the peasants sometimes led them to starvation leading to abscond or sell their wives and children to pay off the revenue.³⁴ The poor peasants were so much under the burden of heavy revenue that even dry bread became scarce to them.³⁵ According to Manrique, peasants were carried off attached to heavy iron chains to various markets and fairs (to be sold) with their poor unhappy wives behind them carrying their small children in their arms all crying and lamenting their evil plight.³⁶ Manucci also speaks about the tyrannies inflicted by the tax collectors and other officials who could make the helpless peasants stand in water for hours

together or seating two or three men on the victim shoulders. Sometimes the victim was tortured by exposing him to fire or making him tread on red hot iron bar. They also subjected the poor peasants with ropes so tightly or thrown on naked spines that blood would ooze out.³⁷ Pelsaert says that poverty was great that the life of the people can be depicted or accurately described only as the home of stark want and dwelling place of bitter woe.³⁸ Still the people endured their entire sufferings 'patiently' believing that they deserved nothing better. The governors and state official tyrannized them to the maximum level. Those who were not able to pay the stipulated amount of revenue were severely punished and their wives and children were sold. To keep themselves alive they left their villages and usually joined the rebels.³⁹

The social position and economic condition of artisans and working class was not much distinct from the peasantry. Under this category came mainly the painters, tailors, gold smith, black smiths, copper smiths, carpet makers, embroiders, cotton or silk weavers, stone cutters and builders. The artisans occupied an important place in the lower strata of society. They may be broadly divided into two categories, skilled and unskilled. A large number of skilled one were employed in the royal Karkhanas.⁴⁰ According to Bernier they also led a miserable life and were quite after victims of oppression of their master.⁴¹ Their whole day's work fetch them only five to six tacks, that four to five strives.⁴² They were oppressed by the official class constituting the governors, the diwans, the bakhshis, the kotwals and lastly the nobles.⁴³ He further goes to say that whether skilled or unskilled when the omrah or the mansabdars required the services of an employing force, if necessary, forced the poor men to work and after the task was over, they did not pay not according to the value of labour.⁴⁴ This is known in the history as forced labour or beggar (bishti). Consequent upon refusal they were beaten. At the end of the day, they hardly paid even half of their due wages. The artisans felt pride and to congratulate himself if the 'Korah' (whip) had not been given in part payment.⁴⁵

The domestic servants and labourers occupied the lowest position in Mughal India. They were usually employed by nobles and upper-class people. This class was very faithful to their masters. According to Terry, they were very diligent also and kept themselves within the call of their masters and would not depart without their prior permission. They could be hired in the bazar. Their wages were not more than five shilling per man.⁴⁶ Regarding the labourers Della Valle inform us that they were available everyway at cheaper rate. Only three rupees a month was the regular rate of wages in the best families. Some labourers were even ready to serve their master in lieu of food.⁴⁷ Pelsaert confirm that they were paid very low wages and got only 5 to 6 takas that is 4 or 5 strives. He has categorically mentioned the name of servants with their duties. In this category the silahdar, attended the horse, the farrash looked after the tents on the move and spread the carpets on the march as well as in the houses. Themashalchi (torch-bearer) looked after the torch and light lamps and candles in the evening. The sarban (camel driver) was associated with a camel. The mahawat, attended the elephants. Bailwancared for the cart and oxen. The tsantelsor messenger ran very fast from one place to others with ringing the bell.⁴⁸ Peons were treated as ordinary servants. Due to abundance of labour even for small domestic services the Portuguese employed a number of slaves who were roughly treated by their masters.⁴⁹ Besides, slave girls were employed for serving the royal ladies in the harems.⁵⁰

CONCLUSION

The above study on two major classes of the people of the Mughal India clearly testifies that there had been a great inequality in social and economic condition. It is surprising to notice that even after a long period of about more than two centuries no drastic change is experienced in the position of these two classes.

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