



Revisiting Medieval Indian History: A Perspective on Mughals and Marathas

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Introduction:

Chronology is an integral part of studying history, and periodization is a tool to segregate the historical past into several broad eras. Periodization, which categorizes the long journey of human existence on the planet and on a particular land mass, is based on several factors. Leaving the stone age, the eras of civilization are normally divided into ancient, medieval, and modern periods. And these categorizations are not universal but subjective to different regions.

Periodization of Indian history during the colonial era was undertaken by the colonialist historian James Mill in his three voluminous work 'The History of British India.' Instead of looking into natural indicators of the growth of human civilization, like the types of historical sources found in different eras, Mill categorized Indian history into three periods on the basis of the religion of the ruler - the Hindu period, the Muslim period, and the British period. This argument doesn't stand its own ground because, during the said period, the religion of the ruler was not homogeneous. The so-called 'Hindu period' had rulers from different religious backgrounds, like Buddhist Mauryan emperor, Ashoka. Further, with this argument the British period can be termed as Christian period, which Mill didn't categorize. Along with other colonial historians, Mill's idea of writing history was colonial historiography, with the aim of justifying colonial rule, the white man's burden theory, and pitting two major communities of India against each other, favoring the British Raj. Post Mill, historians replaced Hindu with ancient and Muslim with medieval, however the imagination remained the same, and this act only turned out to be a change of vocabulary. Since the time of Mill, periodization has evolved, however the memories among the masses remain the same. Muslim or Medieval period, the era of Turkish and Mughal invasion and rule in the second millennium AD is termed the Dark Age of Indian History. But the fact remains that the Indian subcontinent has been subject to numerous invasions before the Christian era, including Persian, Greek, and others, along with the highly debated Aryan invasion of around 1500 BC.

To reiterate, in the study of India's past and history, associating the medieval period primarily with Muslims constitutes the foremost and most significant form of historical stereotyping. It's not factually wrong that rulers of medieval North India,

in particular Delhi, Doab, Punjab, Bengal, and Central India, were largely Muslim by faith. However that doesn't define the era given that the subject was mainly non muslims including Hindus, Buddhists, Jains, Sikhs, and followers of different saints. The administration and the army were not solely run by Muslims and could not be, however effective rule was only possible by employing members of other communities. Even the ruling elite had two totally different categories called foreign Muslims and newly Indian converts, who were not equal. They further had sectarian differences, which were not much different from religious differences. Further, there were regions of Rajputana, extreme South and North East India, and Kashmir, which had most of the time non Muslim kings throughout the medieval period. With Akbar's rule, the Rajputs, the chivalry of India, became allies and an integral part of the ruling elite. They rose to the highest mansabs, and Rajput princesses married Mughal princes, assuming roles as queen mothers and consorts of the emperor. This stereotypical understanding of medieval history is also a product of an obsession with political history, ignoring the social and cultural history of medieval India and also the north-India-centric approach to Indian history.

The two medieval empires, Marathas and Mughals, thrived in the latter half of the second millennium AD, as revealed by historical sources. Oral, written, and archaeological sources constitute the historical sources of medieval India. The writing of history without corroboration from these sources is not an academic writing or historiography. Among these, written sources are trusted as the most authentic source, and oral sources are considered to be the least authentic. Historical tales, usually transmitted orally from generation to generation, are less authentic and more likely to be fabricated in order to shape individual and community identity

desirably. The phenomenon of ‘Chinese Whisper’ is important in comprehending this argument.

Written sources, which hold primary importance in historiography, also need to be treated carefully. Proficiency in the language of the source and familiarity with its contemporary version, along with contextualization and conceptual understanding of the era, are necessary requirements to engage with primary sources. Romila Thapar argues that even the primary sources, including court chronicles, cannot be taken at face value. And a historian needs to critically engage with the written work. Medieval writings mostly speak the language of their patron or the biases of the author. A despotic state will always interfere in court chronicles and other writings of its time. This encourages the critical analysis of textual content, reading between the lines, corroborating with other written sources and archaeological artifacts with the help of disciplines like epigraphy and numismatics, while also seeking support from archival science, genealogy, linguistics, manuscriptology, analysis of lettering styles, etc. Also, without a patron, it's a very economically expensive endeavor to complete a historical work. This also suggests authors are bound to appease the patron or face their displeasure. One fine example of this are the three works on Akbar by three different authors. The first two volumes of Akbarnama by Abul Fazal portrays Akbar as a divine figure, whereas ‘Muntakhab ul Tawarikh’ by Mulla Abdul Qadir Badauni is full of criticism and charges of heretics. Nizamuddin Ahmed’s Tabaqat-i-Akbari is the balance between the two other works. It is interesting to note that Badayuni's work was published posthumously. Additionally, the biographies of these authors justify their version of Akbar.

It is a good position to ask what is history? Is history synonymous with the past? No, it's not. History is not the past; it is an interpretation of the past. History is an attempt to reconstruct the past after engaging critically with the sources. The writing and understanding of history begin with the identification and acknowledgment of human biases. Several significant flaws in this undertaking involve engagement with history, not for the purpose of understanding the past but rather to pass judgment on historical figures and eras or to issue ‘character certificates.’ This is natural with history, given its sensitivity to individual and group identity. However, to make a better sense of the past, detachment with the historical figures and eras is a must, which enables one to become comprehensively familiar with the historical personalities, including their success and failures. Detachment with historical eras helps to acknowledge positives and negatives of a period. Treating historical figures as historical characters with the aim of rationalizing one's beliefs is the

foundation for accepting and writing history as it was rather than what we want it to be. History is complex, sensitive, and highly contested in comparison with other fields of study. This complexity in history arises from the fact that individuals, communities, and nations derive their sense of identity from historical narratives. While this relationship between history and identity is not inherently problematic, concerns arise when history is politicized by particular ideologies to legitimize their authority, propagate selective narratives, exert influence over identities and beliefs, and foster animosity between communities or nations.

Other biases include a failure to consider shifts in the value system over time, an approach to history that lacks contextual depth, and a failure to acknowledge the removal from the past. There is also a tendency to view historical events through a contemporary lens, leading to the imposition of present-day thoughts, beliefs, and values in the understanding of the past. Moreover, considering that history involves the interpretation of the past, there can be multiple perspectives on historical events. The interpretation closest to reality and to be accepted is typically one that aligns with authentic sources and demonstrates consensus within the existing body of literature. To establish the credibility of a narrative, particularly in cases involving myths, it is essential to scrutinize it through critical engagement and support it with verifiable sources. While it would be inaccurate to outrightly dismiss information lacking authentic sources as historically untrue, the discipline of history leans towards preserving its integrity by generally being cautious and circumspect about accepting such uncorroborated data.

After establishing the above argument, the Marathas and Mughals appear as ruling powers mainly focused on the establishment, expansion, and consolidation of their rule. This reflects political pragmatism, akin to the strategies employed by astute politicians. This directs attention away from an excessive focus on the ruler's religious beliefs, emphasizing instead the visibility of political tensions during that historical period.

Examining the reign of Akbar provides a compelling case study. In contrast to previous Turkish and Afghan rulers of Delhi, Akbar made deliberate efforts to ensure the acceptance of his foreign race and identity by the Indian subjects, deepening the roots of his dynasty in Indian soil. A careful analysis of Akbar's rule demonstrates his inclusivity—he formed alliances with the Rajputs, provided space for Sunni and Shia Muslims, included Indian Muslims in his administration, and practiced a high degree of religious tolerance to incorporate various sections of Indian society into his rule. Consequently, the Mughal rule under Akbar became a period of cultural integration in India.

Supporting this, Farhat Nasreen asserts that Bahadur Shah Zafar was chosen by the populace as the leader of the 1857 revolt, despite the decline of the Mughals, indicating the enduring impact of Mughal influence on Indian sentiments.

Similarly, the establishment of the Maratha Empire in this context emerged from a desire for self-rule and resistance by the natives against foreign powers. Shivaji Maharaj's strategic alliances with the Deccani Sultanates, notably Golconda, despite religious differences, exemplified political pragmatism with the primary goal of forming an independent kingship, where religion played a secondary role. This perspective is consistently evident throughout the entire biography of Shivaji Maharaj and, later, the Maratha Confederacy under Peshwas. Additionally, recent research has revealed a significant presence of Muslim groups in crucial positions within the Maratha rule. Additionally, Rajputs held the highest mansabdari positions in the Mughal administration. This pattern reflects the functioning of the medieval Indian past and this does not negate instances of religiously fanatic rulers throughout various periods of Indian history.

Further, it is also useful to discuss religious fanaticism and temple desecration here. While religious fanaticism and temple desecration may sound synonymous, they are not the same. Firstly, history has witnessed religiously fanatical rulers, and it is not unnatural to have them. Also, this cannot be associated with one single religion, and historically, it is not the truth.

Temple desecration is popularly associated in India with Muslim rulers, but Romila Thapar's work highlights that before the arrival of Turks or Muslim rule, there was existing hostility within the Indian community between Hindus, Buddhists, Jains, and other sects of these religious communities that destroyed each other's places of worship. The multiple destruction of the Bodhi tree is an important instance. Similar instances occurred during the medieval period where temples were desecrated about which Richard Eaton, in his work, 'Temple Desecration and Muslim States in Medieval India' mentions that the act of temple desecrations were mostly of a political nature. It was the association of temples with the ruling authority that made places of worship a target during conquest and as punishment for rebellion, and idols were treated as war trophies. This is persuasive because a significant number of medieval temples persists, challenging the notion of a despotic and religiously fanatic state often associated with medieval India.

Conclusion:

In conclusion, understanding history is a challenging endeavor given its separation from our present. This necessitates meticulous reconstruction through contextualization, engagement with

authentic sources, and acknowledgment of biases in interpreting both the past and historical figures. Recognizing the sensitivity of history, particularly its connections to identity, further underscores the complexity inherent in this field of study.

The Mughals, who ruled from the 16th to the 19th century, played a crucial role in medieval India. It is reasonable to assert that the Mughals, particularly under Akbar, contributed to cultural integration in the Indian subcontinent. This integration persisted until the consolidation of British rule in the post-1857 period. The populace's choice of Bahadur Shah as the leader of the 1857 rebellion is an indicator of cultural integration in Mughal India.

Turning to the Marathas, they emerged as a regional power founded under Shivaji Maharaj in the second half of the 17th century and gained significance under the Peshwas in 18th-century India with the decline of the Mughal Empire post-Aurangzeb. The notable contest between the Mughals and the Marathas was primarily political—a struggle for land, territory, and native rule against foreign rule in India, adhering to medieval norms.

The onset of British rule and its subsequent consolidation, justified through rewriting history in a practice known as colonial historiography, created a new understanding of the past. This reshaping emphasized hostility between the two major communities in India, Hindus and Muslims, while portraying the British as rightful rulers. This sowed seeds of hatred and communalism, ultimately leading to partition and impacting inter-communal relations in modern India. This partition not only separated land and people but also divided the shared past, its personalities and cultures including language.

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