

SOCIAL, ECONOMIC AND CULTURAL HISTORY OF THE MEDIEVAL AGE**Y.Noor Basha**

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Abstract

History of the people, their social, economic and cultural life is certainly of great interest to the students of history than the political events or the military campaigns of any period. This is particularly true of the medieval period of Indian history. The real history of Mughal India consists in the socio-economic cultural condition of the people of the period. During the Mughal period, particularly under Akbar's rule India had as many as 120 cities and 3,200 towns. These cities and towns differed in origin and history of their growth as well as in character from those of the Western world. While the towns and cities in the West grew centering round industry and commerce those in India, except, the port towns, most of the cities and towns grew on rural bases, that is, rural areas gradually developed into towns or cities due to residence of rulers, governors or high officials or because due to garrisoning of soldiers or encampment of royal army for long at times of expeditions.

Some towns, as has been mentioned above grew in port areas because of the growth of warehouses and influx of indigenous and foreign merchants. Some towns also originated as business marts. What distinguished the Indian towns and cities was that the bases of these towns and cities were rural and not only the foodstuff but also all other consumer goods would come into the towns and cities from the rural areas.

There were a few Karkhanas in the capital cities in which articles specially needed by the kings and Emperors, nobles and high officials, such as dresses, used to be manufactured. With the change of time, however, and in particular with the advent of the European merchants Indian towns and cities also gradually began to assume industrial and commercial character.

Keywords; Medieval Age ,History of the people, their social, economic and cultural life

Introduction

The interesting observations of Ralph Fitch about the plenty and prosperity in the major Indian cities of India during the Mughal period (1585). He observes "Agra and Fatehpore are two very great cities, either of them much greater than London and very populous. Between Agra and Fatehpore are twelve miles, and all the way is a market of victual and other things, as full as though a man were in a market."

Main Characteristics of Medieval India age:

- The period between ancient and modern ages is generally called medieval India period.

- In the Medieval Period, the growth of Human development was pushed up to a great extent.
- The authority of Pope and Church Increased.
- The Religious Teaching was blindly followed. There was no importance to reasoning in comparison to blind faith.
- Independent thinking was suppressed.
- The Religious wars between Christians and Muslims Called Crusades changed the course of European History.
- The Contact with the Arabs and the Influence of Islam resulted in changes in Literature and science.
- There was no strong centralized political authority in Europe.
- On account of the invasion of barbaric tribes, anarchy spread over Europe.
- Later, Renaissance was started in Europe

The ancient capitals like Kanauj, Vijayanagar, etc. where in a state of decay and the modern cities like Calcutta, Bombay and Madras had not come up. The more flourishing towns and cities besides the ones already referred to above were Delhi, Allahabad, Benares, Multan, Ajmer, Patna, Ujjain, Rajmahal, Dacca, Burdwan, Hughli, Chittagong, etc.

Different parts of the country and important towns and cities were connected by roads which were Kacha, i.e. not metalled. Roads were shaded by trees on both sides and dotted with Sarais for the merchants and the travellers. The city of Agra which was capital of the Mughals for a long time was connected with the rest of the empire by a network of roads. The Grand Trunk Road ran from Dacca in the east to Kabul in the north-west passing through Patna, Allahabad, Benares, Agra, Mathura, Lahore, Attock.

Another important road ran from Agra to Asirgarh in the south and a third from Agra to Ahmadabad. Apart from the roads, rivers afforded excellent means of communication both for human and mercantile traffic. The Ganga, Jamuna, Ghagra, Indus, the rivers of the south and of Bengal were navigable and frequently used for the transport of commercial goods and troops.

Society in the Medieval Age:

India of those days as even of today lived in villages and the society was broadly divided into Hindus and Muslims. The Hindus needless to say formed the great majority of the population;

they included the Jains, the Buddhists and the Sikhs among them. The upper classes of the Hindu society mostly belonged to the Brahman, Kayastha, Rajput and Vaishya castes and did neither inter-dine nor inter-marry between them.

There were many other mixed classes in the society. The Baidyas were a mixed class next to the Brahmanas. These apart there were various other castes and sub-castes which grew up as a result of social mixture i.e. intermarriage between castes. There was much conservatism among the Hindus of upper classes.

The Muslims were divided into two major sections, viz:

- (a) Those who came with the conquerors or for trade and commerce or employment from countries like Arabia, Persia, Afghanistan, Abyssinia etc. and
- (b) The converts from the indigenous Hindu population and their descendants.

As the country was open to foreign traders and travellers, there were also people of various nationalities from Europe, such as the Portuguese, English, Parsis, Chinese etc. The history of the medieval period of India like that of the Middle Ages of the European history is largely occupied by the story of warfare of the kings and emperors. The common people and their condition were by and large beyond the attention of the historians except insofar as they hurt themselves, into history by their activities in relation to the kings or emperors.

The society during the Mughal period was feudal in nature. Nobility and the officials of the state were entitled to high esteem in the society. Their standard of living was very high. Luxury, debauchery, drinking etc. were their special characteristics. Apart from the kings and emperors the nobles also had their harem. From Abul Fazl it is known that the imperial harem had five thousand women. The nobility was characterised by mutual jealousy, conspiracy and recrimination.

Below the nobility, we find the existence of the middle class whose number was comparatively small. Their standard of living was moderate and far below that of the nobles and state officials. Middle class was above the contemporary vices of dinking, debauchery and lavity. But the merchants of the west-coast of India were fabulously rich and their standard of living was also very high.

The condition of the common people, compared to the nobility and the middle class was miserable. They had not the wherewithal to purchased warm clothes, shoes etc. which were luxury items to them. Francisco Paelsart remarked that in normal years although they would have no difficulty in maintaining themselves, in times of natural calamities like flood, drought and famine their condition would beggar description.

About the social habits and practices Edward Terry remarks that “None of the people there at any time seen drunk (though they might find liquor enough to do it but the very offal and dregs of

that people, and these rarely or very seldom.” In the diet and food habits the Indians were temperate; and they were polite to the strangers. The prominent social practices of the time among the Hindus were Suttee, Kulinism etc. and among the Hindus and the Muslims, child-marriage and dowry-system.

Akbar sought to check the evil practices of Suttee and child-marriage. From the writings of Bolt, Scrafton and Crauford we come to know that social evils increased in Bengal during the eighteenth century. In Maharashtra dowry-system was discouraged. Widow re-marriage was prevalent in certain parts of India.

Among the various types of deterioration in the social life in the eighteenth century, one redeeming feature was the continuity of Hindu-Muslim re-approachment and growth of understanding and amiability between the two great Indian communities. The reign of Akbar was remarkably important in this regard, even under Aurangzeb a Muhammadan poet Alwal wrote many Hindi poems and translated Padmavat into Bengali. While the Hindus showed reverence to Muslim Pirs (saints), the Muslims did likewise to the Hindu Yogis (Saints).

One of the demoralizing institutions of the society was slavery and there was a regular slave trade. Likewise eunuchs were bought and sold. Akbar’s attempt to prohibit it did not succeed. The upper classes dressed themselves in a long coat and light trousers and turbans. Many wore a .silk or cotton scarf round the waist and slung down the ends of the scarf down the leg. Poor Hindus wore dhotis one end of which was tied round the waist. Poor Muslims put on pyjama and long shirt.

Perfumes and oils were used by men and women, both Hindu and Muslim. Pan served as a sort of lip stick. Hindu women wore saris while the Muslims women wore pyjamas or ghagras. Soap made of pulses or soap berry was used. Muslim men and women used collyrium in their eyes and women coloured their palms and feet with Mehdi.

Among the indoor games chess, cards, games of guites, satranj and among outdoor games hunting, polo (Chaugan) etc. were popular with the high ranking people. Wrestling, juggler’s feats, magic shows etc. were enjoyed by all. Games like tiger hunting, elephant snaring were the privileges of the Emperor. Music both in the court and in private residences fairs and festivals, specially those sponsored by the state, for example Nauroj were occasions for enjoyment by all people.

Hindu festivals like Dasserah, Vasant, Dipavali (prohibited during Aurangzeb’s reign) and Muslim festivals of two Ids, Shab-i-barat etc. were festivals of great enjoyment by the respective communities. Occasional fairs were held at Hardwar, Prayag, Mathura, Kurukshetra and many other places of Hindu pilgrimages and also in places of Muslim Pilgrimages like Ajmer, Panipat,” Sirhind etc.

The position of women under the Mughals marked a definite deterioration. Purdah system of the Muslim women and the growing conservatism in the Hindu family life precluding Hindu women except of the low castes from coming out of their houses made the life of the women rather un-enjoyable.

Polygamy was permitted by the Quranic law and a Muslim could take four wives at a time. A Shiah Muslim has no restriction as to the number of wives. While the Hindu ruling class indulged in polygamy the Muslims almost as a rule would have more than one wife. The Emperors and nobles maintained harem i.e. a number of women not formally married.

Economy: Agriculture in the Medieval Period:

The most remarkable feature of the economic system of the Mughals was the gap that kept the producers and the consumers far asunder. The producers were agriculturists, workers in the cottage industries, artisans, producers of consumer's goods like oil, cloth, sugar etc. workers in the Karkhanas.

The consumers were the rulers, nobles, officers both civil and military, professional and religious classes, slaves, servants and other sundry people. The result was, particularly in view of lack of every transport, that the producers received only marginal profits whereas the middlemen and traders got the lion's share of the profit. This is largely true even today.

Another important feature of the Mughal economic system was the unnecessary burden that the state economy was made to bear due to the huge number of servants and slaves retained by the emperor, nobles and high officials, who practically served more as decoration rather than actual service-hands. This was a great waste of the state income.

The riotous living by the nobles and the officials, their costly jewels, dresses, lavish expenses during the marriage of their children, maintenance of horses, elephants and retainers needed enough money which compelled them to extort the same from the peasants.

Under Aurangzeb agriculture, industry, trade and commerce were very adversely affected by his incessant wars and slack administration. "Thus ensued the great economic impoverishment of India, not only a decrease of the national stock, but also a rapid lowering of mechanical skill and standard of civilisation, a disappearance of art and culture over wide tract of the country" (Sir J. N. Sarkar).

Agriculture depended on rainfall and naturally failure of seasonal rain fall of heavy down pour resulting in flood would result in failure in agricultural crops which meant famine. There were frequent outbreaks of famine in Mughal India during which the sufferings of the peasants and common people would know no bounds.

Lack of any systematic effort to provide relief to the famine stricken people or to allow remission of revenue collection from the peasants made the condition of the people, the peasants in particular, indescribably miserable. Famine was followed by pestilence which was an additional scourge of the people. During 1556-57 a terrible famine broke out in the north-western India followed by pestilence which took a heavy toll of life.

Badauni who saw the famine-stricken people with his own eyes remarks that “men ate their own kind and the appearance of the famished sufferers was so hideous that one could scarcely look upon them.... The whole country was a desert and no husbandman remained to till the ground.” During 1573-74 Gujarat suffered from similar famine and pestilence and still another in Kashmir in 1595-96.

Bengal was visited by famine in 1575 and the Deccan and Gujarat during 1630-32. A number of famines broke out during the reign of Aurangzeb. From Akbar downwards, the Mughal emperors tried to relieve the distress of the people, but as there was no systematic effort, nor any famine policy nor any easy means of transport the relief measures were inadequate.

Industries and Trade in Medieval Age:

During the Mughal period the most important economic activity besides, agriculture was the varied industrial production by the people of India. The industrial products could not only meet the internal needs of the country but also supply the demands of the European merchants as well as merchants from different parts of Asia. Manufacture of cotton cloth was the most important industry during the period under discussion. The principal centres of cotton manufacture were distributed all over the country, for instance, the coromandel coast, Patan in Gujarat, Khandesh, Burhampur, Jaunpur, Benares, Patna, some other places in United Provinces, Bihar, many centres in Orissa and Bengal.

“The whole country from Orissa to East Bengal looked like a big cotton factory, and Dacca district was especially famous for finest cotton fabrics called muslin—the best, the finest cloth made of cotton.” According Paelsant, in Chabaspur and Sonargaon in East Bengal”, all lived by weaving industry and the produce has the highest reputation and quality.

“Bernier called Bengal store-house of cotton and silk not only of Hindustan but also of Europe. Edward Terry refers to the flourishing condition of dyeing industry of Bengal. Dyeing and printing were of such high quality that these would not be washed out.”

Silk industry, however, was limited in scope compared to the cotton industry. Abul Fazl tells us that silk industry was patronised by Akbar. Bengal was the most important centre of silk production and silk manufacture. Other centres of silk manufacture were Lahore, Fathepur Sikri, Agra, Gujarat, Benares, Bhagalpur, Kashmir etc. From Tavernier we know that Bengal produced

silk and silk goods worth two and half million pounds. Three-fourth million pounds worth raw silk used to be exported to foreign countries by the Dutch.

Woolen goods such as blankets, shawl, carpets etc. were woven at Kashmir, Lahore, Alwar, Jaunpur and Agra. The shawl industry flourished due to the patronage of Akbar. The state encouraged manufacture of various articles particularly for the use of the Emperors, nobles and the state officials in Karkhanas to which many skilled workers were engaged.

Saltpetre was manufactured in Bihar and was exported by the European traders to their countries. It was used for the manufacture of gun-powder. Copper mines existed in Central India and Rajasthan. Iron was found in many parts of India. Red stone quarries were there in Rajasthan and Fathepur. Marble came from Rajasthan. Opium, an agricultural produce, was exported after meeting internal consumption. Gold mines were found in Kumayun and in the hills and rivers of the Punjab.

From Abul Fazl and other contemporary writers, we learn that prices of articles such as rice, oil, ghee, spices, vegetables, milk, meat, live-stock were very low. Terry remarks that there was “plenty of provisions” and people “eat bread without scarceness.” From what we know from the foreign travellers and the contemporary writers, we may observe that the people did not grovel in misery since the prices were low, although in times of natural calamities they had to suffer.

Distress of the Peasant: Peasants’ Revolt:

The Mughal revenue system according to Prof. Habib suffered from two infirmities. First, the revenue was set at the highest in order that the military contingents to be supplied by the mansabdars could be met out of the revenue collection of the jagir. Secondly, the revenue was fixed at so high a level that it left only the marginal surplus, that is enough margin for the survival of the peasants, which was the barest minimum needed for his subsistence.

This meant while the appropriation of the surplus produce constituted the great wealth and the wherewithal of the Mughal imperial government to maintain its pomp and splendour as also its military strength, it left the actual producers of the wealth in a state of utter poverty.

As Paelsart observed, the contrast between the rich and the common people was so great that “the rich in their great superfluity and the utter subjection and poverty of the common people” was the economic picture of the Mughal times. But this was not a static situation, with the passage of time there was a progressive increase in the revenue demand with the rise in prices. Bernier gives us a reasonable explanation of this situation. According to him, “The country is ruined by the necessity of defraying the enormous charges required to maintain the splendour of a numerous court and to pay a large army maintained for keeping the people in subjection. No adequate idea can be conveyed of the sufferings of the people. The cudgel and the whip compel them to incessant labour for the benefit of others.”

A jagirdar who was liable to be transferred from his jagir at any moment or after three or four years was not likely to follow a far- sighted policy of development of the condition of the peasants under him, rather he would allow oppression on the peasants for his personal benefit even if it would ruin the peasantry or destroy the revenue yielding capacity of the land for all time in future.

This narrow selfish outlook of the jagirdars has been nicely described by Bernier in the following lines: “Why the neglected state of this land creates uneasiness in our minds? And why should we expand our money and time to render it fruitful? We may be deprived of it in a single moment and our exertions would benefit neither ourselves nor our children. Let us draw from the soil all the money we can though the peasant should starve or abscond and we should leave it. When commanded to quit, a dreary wilderness.”

Similar observations are to be found also in the writings of Xavier, Hawkins, and Manrique. Indian writer Bhimsen observes that unpredictable and constant transfer of Jagirdars made the agents of the jagirdars to help the rayotwari or istiqal arrangements. The amils of the jagirdars were also not sure of the tenure of service and as such were unrelenting and tyrannical in revenue collection. What was even worse, the jagirdars even resorted to farming out revenue instead of appointing their own agents for tax collection.

Zamindars: Their Evolution in the Medieval Age, Categories: Their Revolts:

The term zamindar connotes holders of certain rights based on revenue collection and there are degrees of zamindars from those who have rights over to small portions of a village upwards to the ruler of a kingdom. The zamindars have certain features in common. The rights of zamindars did not originate from imperial grants although there were some exceptions to this. Zamindars were commanders of retainers under them and often they were leaders of caste groups.

Literally the term zamindar means ‘holder’ of land. According to Moreland in North India, it meant “a chief, that is a landholder with title or claim antecedent to Moslem rule, commonly a Raja Rao, or some other Hindu king or ex-king, who had become tributary to the Moslem state.” But as there were zamindars in other areas directly administered by the Muslim Emperors which were not within tributary states, the definition of Moreland is not wholly correct. In Bengal, the term zamindar had a wider meaning.

Culture Development in Medieval India:

- The Sanskrit Language was perfected
 - Shad Darshanas were compiled.
 - The Sanskrit Books like Ramayana, Mahabharata, and Panchatantra were translated into many languages during Akbar’s reign.
 - Quran was translated into Persian Language.
 - Kings Encouraged Music and So Instrumental Music was also developed.
 - Amir Khusrau, Baz Bahadur, and his wife Rupamathi were famous Musicians.
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- A new art Known as Indo-Islamic art was born.
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There were landholders the Rajas, whose title to land was antecedent to Moslem rule' and there were other great landholders not holders of so large estates as those of the Rajas, who traced their origin to fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Even under Murshid Quli Khan a number of zamindari families had originated.

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