

ZAMINDARS, TRIBALS AND THE MUGHAL STATE IN SEVENTEENTH CENTURY GUJARAT, INDIA

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ABSTRACT

The Mughal Empire as it consolidated itself over most of the subcontinent in the course of the 16th and 17th centuries came into contact and in conflict with a wide range of political formations and regional power groupings. The most prominent amongst them were the Rajputs, who were assimilated within the Mughal political edifice by the end of the sixteenth century. Similarly, the Deccanis and the Marathas emerged as important groups through the course of the seventeenth century. The success of the Mughal system depended primarily on their success in carefully balancing the ambitions of Mughal nobles and imperial mansabdars on one hand, and the interests of various regional and local magnets on the other. Thus, certain levels of administrative systematization went along with creating a new theoretical basis of sovereignty. The present study at one level aims to focus on the interface between the local zamindars in the region of Gujarat and the tribal inhabitants in the region. Their combined attempt to resist and then find avenues of assimilation within the Mughal system is the area which this paper also attempts to survey

KEYWORDS: Mughals, Zamindars, Gujarat, Tribes, Kolis, Kathis

INTRODUCTION

The two centuries of Mughal rule, however, in the regions is a constant attempt to forge such a balance in political, administrative and social sphere. In Gujarat, this is exemplified by narratives of struggle which the Imperial officers waged against the local zamindars and rajas backed by the tribes of kathis and kolis. An Imperial farman to Mirza Aziz Koka, the subadar of Gujarat, noted:

“Habits of rebelliousness, brigandage, theft and riot are kneaded in the malignant nature of these classes (Rajputs, Kolis and Muslims). They created disturbances always when they noticed a slight weakness in the control of the nazim. Most of the nazims therefore have built strong forts in ancient times in most of the places and established parties of sepoy befiting every place known as thanas. (Khan, 1965, Vol. 1, p. 150)

Ovington, made an interesting observation regarding the frequent revolts in India and their impact on the countryside and the local inhabitants. The inhabitants according to him suffered from the dual exaction of the Mughals and the local rajas and zamindars, who in order to raise money to oppose the Mughals in hope of retrieving their lost kingdom and privileges often resort to looting and illegal exactions:

“The frequent revolts in India render those parts very miserable and reduce the inhabitants to a very distressed state for hoping to retrieve their liberty and regain the kingdom they have lost, they often declare for rajah, which is native Indian prince, and stand by him till the Moguls overpowers their forces, defeats rebellion, stints their progress, and reduce

them to tame obedience again. So that one while the Mogul comes upon a city, and demands the contribution of so many thousand moors (mohur) or else he threatens raising its foundations, pillaging the houses, and converting them into smoke and flames. When he is retreated, the rajah's army flies upon them with fury and hunger, and storm their towns, and threaten them with fire and sword as their inevitable fate, if they offer to delay the payment of so many thousand gold ropies more. or if these formidable threats were not listened to, they take that by rapine which was civilly demanded, ravage the country and load them with plunder and spoil." (Ovington, 1994, p. 114)

Such ravaging activities by the Mughal armies, officials and those of the local rajas often resulted in fear, distress, poverty, and famine like conditions among the population of the region. In similar vein, Francois Martin records that many rajas and minor Hindu potentates descend from the security of their home bases to scourge the countryside. (Varadarajan, 1983, Vol. 2, part 1, p. 863)

THE ZAMINDARS AND RAJAHS

The zamindars of the region were powerful and resourceful enough can be made out from their respective strength which A'in gives, while detailing the suba of Gujarat. Thus, Abu'l Fazl while describing the Sarkar of Sorath mentions that it was an independent territory, having a force of 50,000 cavalry and 100,000 infantry, and ruled by Gehlot tribe of Rajputs. At the time of compiling the A'in-I Akbari, their influence was in the district of New Sorath and Pattan, with their force containing of 1000 horse and 2000 foot in New Sorath and 1000 horse and 3000 foot in that of Pattan. (Fazl, Akbarnama, 1989, Vol. 2, pp. 250-253) Similarly, in the region around Palitana to the south east of the peninsula, the zamindar was of Gohel tribe and possess 2000 horses and 4000 foot. The Mirat-i Ahmadi also makes a note of the habitation of the region of Sorath by various tribes of Rajputs and Kolis and says that 'they are armed horsemen and lances who seize opportunities on their lightening movement horses and run away. Brigandage is inborn in them. They do not pay land revenue without leading an army.' (Khan, 1965, Vol. 1, p. 153)

Many of the zamindars in the region had acquired zamindari rights during the rule of the sultans of Gujarat, and thus many of these such as Jam of Nawanager, although had never been under their direct control, did backed the sultans and their descendants against the Mughal occupation forces till the starting years of 17th century. Abu'l Fazl makes constant reference to the support received by Muzaffar III, the last sultan of Gujarat during his years of rebellion, against the Mughal occupation, by the zamindars of Sorath, Nawanager, and Kutch;

"Jam, the best zamindar of Saurath always waited for an opportunity in an ambush of revolt and war. He brought out Muzaffar. This time also, from the corner of oblivion and devoted himself to collection of war seeking vagabonds and care for him. Daulat Khan, son of Amin Khan Ghori, ruler of Saurath and Raja Khingar, zamindar of Kutch also accorded with him."(Fazl, Ain-i Akbari, 1988, Vol. 1, p. 151) Of the principal zamindars and Raja of Gujarat may be listed the zamindars of Junagarh, Navanagar, Idar, and Baglana. Of these the Mughal forces conquered Junagarh in 1592. The zamindar of Nawanager, also called Jam, made submission to the Mughal emperor Jahangir during the latter's visit to the province in 1617, near Dohad. (ibid) However, the zamindars of the region continued to defy the imperial standards at the slightest pretext, and engaged in such activities as issuing coinage from his mint in the name of Gujarat sultans, and creating trouble for the Mughal officials in the region. (ibid, pp. 188-189)

The zamindari of Nawanagar was finally conquered during the reign of Aurangzeb, who named the city of Nawanagar as Islamnagar in 1661, and attached it to the crown territory. (ibid, p. 236) The raja of Baglana was said to possess a cavalry of 3000 and an infantry of 10,000 and in possession of seven remarkable features, of them principal being Muller and Salher. (ibid, Vol. 2, p. 277)

THE KATHIS, KOLIS AND OTHER LOCALIZED GROUPS UNDER THE MUGHALS

The region of Gujarat was also home to a large tribal population engaged primarily in activities related with cultivation and fishing, and sea faring. They have been variously styled as Bhils, Kathis, Kolis, and Grasias in the contemporary sources.

They owed their allegiance primarily to the local zamindars and rajas or had their own chiefs to supervise them. The Mughal chronicles however reflects that the officials of the region were normally apprehensive of their activities and regarded them as thieves and trouble makers for the administration as well as the local people engaged in trade and related activities.

Their involvement in highway thefts and robbery had been noted in details in the chronicles of the European companies, the travelers in the region, and also in the Mughal official correspondences. Thevenot in his travels calls them the turbulent people of hill, committing robbery. Regarding their profession and caste he adds:

“A people of a caste or tribe of gentiles, who have no fixed habitation, but wander from village to village, and carry all they have about them. Their chief business is to pick and clean cotton and when they have no more to do in one village, they go to another...” (Sen, 1949, p. 10)

The oppression of the Mughal officials and the growing revenue demand of the administration on the peasantry often result in large scale migration amongst peasantry; or results more often than not in a revolt or rebellion against the Mughal officials: ‘...a tyranny often so excessive as to deprive the peasantry and artisans of the necessities of life and leave them to die of mercy and exhaustion.’ (Bernier, 1891, p. 226)

The European sources with regard to the local population of the region were of the opinion that most of them employed themselves in looting on the highways and were for the most part robbers. Francois Martin puts forward the opinion that most of the peasants inhabiting the region engaged themselves in looting on the highways.

While describing the country between Surat and Baroda he wrote that the inhabitants were “inveterate thieves, who in absence of any other victim would fall on each other for the sake of booty it is said that peasants right upto Agra have the same characteristic.” (Varadarajan, 1983, Vol. 2, Part 1, p. 861)

Thevenot details an encounter with a robber, who he says belonged to the caste of Gratiates, who lived in the village of Biplar (Biplad), while on his way back to Surat from Cambay. He describes the members of the tribe as for most part robbers and details the robber he encountered as a “fellow in very bad clothes, and carrying a sword upon his shoulders who did not gave way unless satisfied with a pecha.” (Sen, 1949, p. 10)

On modus operandi of these robbers he commented that they move about in whole groups, and one of, them being satisfied, others come after upon the same road, who must also be contended with, and in case of any violence being done to any one of them others come over to assist. (ibid)

F. Martin records the deeds of a tribe called *grasias*, who have been identified with Kolis by Lotika Varadarajan:

The *grasias*, a tribe centred around Diu, came right up to the gates of Ahmadabad, forcing contribution from all the territories through which they passed. If they encountered refusal, they brought back the leading members of the village as prisoners. (Varadarajan, 1983, Vol. 2, Part 1, p. 863)

He records his experience with them and says that:

These robbers operated in numbers, even at a distance of a league from Ahmadabad, and were armed with lances and sabres. Right through the night they moved about the house and the garden but did not attack us fearing guns with which we were well armed. They withdrew at dawn. (ibid, pp. 863-864)

At another place in his memoirs Martin notes the pillage of merchant goods and destruction of countryside between Suwali and Surat by the people called *Grasias*:

The passage between Surat and Suwali had become unsafe because of the incursion of the *grasias* around the region of Suwali...since a long time, villages and settlements in the region had agreed to pay them contributions. When *mukkadams* wished to stop paying this contribution, the *grasias* swept down in droves. Some of the *mukkadams* were captured and taken away, while others who tried to resist were killed. Villages were looted and the inhabitants to protect themselves were forced to resume payments of these contribution. (ibid, p. 907)

Hamilton, almost about a century and a half later notes that the *grasias* were the numerous class of landlords claiming and possessing a certain degree of feudal authority over the portions of villages and countryside. However, he also states that the basis of the claim could not be traced and it was only during the reign of Farrukh Siyar (1713-1719), that the nawab of Surat, troubled by their activities entered into agreement with them and ceded certain portions of land in each village to them.(Hamilton, 1820, Vol. 1, p. 647)

MUGHAL STATE AND ENGAGEMENTS

Most of the zamindars of the region relied on their numbers and strength and the allegiance of these locals and tribals to their cause, in their struggle and fight against the Mughal occupation and we come across numerous references to the clashes between the Mughals and these tribals, sometimes with violent effect. One of the earliest experiences which the Mughal forces had of the strength of the tribals was during Humayun's Gujarat campaign, when during his stay at Cambay; his camp was attacked and destroyed by the Gujarati officials loyal to sultans of Gujarat, backed by Kathi tribesmen of the region:

When his majesty Jahanbani was encamped at Cambay with a small force, Malik Ahmad Lad and Rukn Daud who were officers of Sultan Bahadur, and leading men in Koliwara, arranged with the kolis and gawars of that country as there are few men with his majesty Jahanbani there was a suitable opportunity of making a night attack...near dawn 5 or 6000 Bhils and Gawars fell upon the royal enclosure. (Fazl, Akbarnama, 1989, Vol. 1, p. 309)

The kathi tribesmen of Kathiawar peninsula also continued to support the actions of Sultan Muzaffar III against

the Mughal occupation, and his capture of Ahmadabad in 1583, was backed by Loma Khuman, a Kathi chief in village of Kherdi near Rajkot in Kathiwar. (Commissariat, 1957, Vol. 2, p. 11)

Mughal governors to the province spent considerable amount of time and resources on the chastisement of the tribals, and the laxity on part of the administration gave opportunity for tribals and local zamindars to create disturbances in the region. Shihabuddin Khan (1578-83) unhappy with the terms of his removal from the office, recalled his men from as many as 80 thanas and garhis which he had erected, giving space for the turbulent kathis and others to engage in marauding activities and capture these establishments: “the moment his men left thanas the Kolis and Girasias laid most of the forts waste and raised heads in revolt.” (Khan, 1965, Vol. 1, p. 124)

That these tribals were powerful enough and were steadfast in loyalty towards their local chiefs and zamindars is evident from the incidence noted in Mirat, when in order to avenge the defeat of their zamindars by royal forces, the Kathis defeated the Mughal army near Baroda. (ibid, p. 163) Similarly Azam Khan, spent considerable part of his viceroyalty in chastisement of the tribes and zamindars in the region. The Mirat-i Ahmadi notes:

That at the beginning of his subadari, as the Suba of Gujarat is a mine of mischievous persons of distracted heads and an abode of disturbing rebels, Azam Khan devoted himself without entering Ahmadabad, to destroy the malevolent Kathis and Kolis, who through misguidance and stupidity caused harm to the ryots always by robbery and theft and made efforts to ruin and lay waste the province as well as to chastise other refractory elements of the region especially in the parganas of Bhil near Mandu inhabited mostly by Kolis. (ibid, p. 184)

Mughal officials took several steps to encounter the marauding activities of these local tribals, and to protect the highways in the region, such as constructing thanas and garhis at places, and keeping them with armed guards to protect the travelers and locals of the areas against these marauders. An English record of the year 1647, notes the measures taken by Mughal officials in safeguarding the road near Broach:

As soon as he (governor) hears of the approach of a caravan from Ahmadabad he will send soldiers to meet it on this side of Baroda, because the ways are very dangerous there being caphila some three days since being robbed a mile from hence. Last night the governor’s soldiers went to the rouges town, but they all fled, and left only there cattle which were this day sold in bazaar...the faujdar has now promised to order some of his soldiers at Sambod thana to go and meet caravans and these with few peons Walwyn (English Factor) is about to send from this place, will secure it from danger. (Foster, 1914, p. 129)

The activities of these tribes and people makes it imperative for the travelers and merchants to hire armed escorts or make their way under the care of local officials or nobles. These attacks on the caravans destined for ports or coming from them had an adverse impact on the commerce of the region, often resulting in loss of goods and precious commodities, sometimes in loss of life also. The hiring of armed escorts resulted in increase in the already high cost of transportation. Most of the travelers noted the necessity of travelling with proper goods and safety. Thevenot gave interesting description of the people called charans, who acted as guards to the travelers:

They belonged to a caste which was highly esteemed amongst the Hindu population of the region. Thus, killing them or causing injury to them was considered an act beyond any redemption. Making use of this status in society, they provided security to the travelers, by threatening to harm themselves in cases of emergency, for which the entire blame would be on the robber. (Sen, 1949, p. 153)

However, he also hints at a compliance or an association which had developed between the members of the aforesaid tribe and the robbers in the region:

Heretofore some Tcherons, both men and women have killed themselves upon such occasions, but that has not been seen for a long time, and at present they say, they compound with the robber for certain sum, which the traveler gives them, and that many times is divided between them. The banians make use of these people and I was told that if I would employ them, I would be served for 2 rupees a day. (ibid)

However, even when traveling under the security of Mughal officials, the travelers and their goods at times faced danger of being looted. Mandelslo on his way back to Surat had a fierce encounter with a band of Rajputs who attempted to loot the caravan. (Commissariat, 1931, pp. 51-52) Similarly Peter Mundy, on his way from Surat to Burhanpur, notes his encounter with the roaming bands of Rajputs who were always on a look out for opportunity to loot the caphilas passing through the region. (Temple, 1914, p. 45)

CONCLUSIONS

By the latter half of the seventeenth century, the effectiveness of the Mughal administrative institutions began to be undermined by local zamindars and also by the Mughal officials posted in the region. Thus, we come across numerous instances of local officials and nobles posted in the province acting contrary to the orders and advice from the imperial center. The phenomenon gained strength towards the end of the seventeenth century. With the power of the Mughal Imperial court waning considerably post death of Aurangzeb in 1707, due to the factional infighting the chaos in the province increased further, and paved way for the Maratha incursions and ascendancy in the region in the early decades of the 18th century.

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