



# 18<sup>th</sup> century in India: Rise of Peasants and New Political Culture

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The 18<sup>th</sup> century in India has been largely classified by historian as a phase of decline or phase of rearticulation of political culture. The historians such as Irfan Habib, J F Richards<sup>1</sup>, Satish Chandra etc have diagnosed the reason of downfall of state in the inefficiency of state machinery, jagirdari system, mansabdari system etc. On the other hand, historians such as Muzzafar Alam, Chetan Singh etc., have analysed 18<sup>th</sup> century as phase of change and rearticulation of political culture. Beyond these frame of understanding 18<sup>th</sup> century, the history of 18<sup>th</sup> century can also be understood from the perspective of impact of peasants on the culture of state. The peasants have been largely considered as a force who could be easily subdued by the might weapons of state or through alliances of various powers. Contrary to this perspective of victory or defeat, the peasants have continuously existed in the society always negotiating with the zamindars as well as with other segments of society. Kolff has argued that the one cannot imagine the medieval world without continuous presence of peasants. Infact, the continuous presence of peasants has been documented in various sources, but the history writing about peasants is largely concerned about revolts or resistance and role of state in suppressing revolts. The dominant aspect of history writing about peasants in this manner is largely situated in a framework conceptualising culture as a one way process from top to bottom. Contrary to this conceptualisation, Harbans Mukhia has argued that movement of culture from bottom to top has been visible in state under Mughals. He referred to case of Sahajahan and Jahan Ara where the latter performs an act considered as inviting power miracle. Mukhia says, “Manucci adds to the story the observation that ‘This custom is very common in Hindustan, and this superstition being very widespread, everyone distributes, according to his ability, alms of food and other things.’”<sup>2</sup> Still, this aspect of peasants shaping the political culture of state has largely remained outside history writing in India.

The political culture of State as outlined by Sultanate and under Mughals was a complex culture largely shaped and articulated around victory. It was a victory to be achieved at any cost, irrespective of identity of others. The invasion by Delhi Sultanate and State under Mughals in Deccan underlines conquest oriented world of state. The Delhi Sultanate under Aluadin khalji had started attacks aggressively on Deccan and resulted in taking away lots of golds, horses, elephants. The series of attacks initiated by Alauddin continued by Muhammad Bin Tughlaq and the culture has continued till 19<sup>th</sup> century. Richard Eaton says, “ So in 1321 Delhi’s new ruler , Sultan Ghiyath al-Din Tughlaq sent his son, Ulugh Khan, south to recover arrears.....Ulugh khan returned to Warangal with 63,000 mounted archers..”<sup>3</sup> After Muhammad Bin Tuglaq, the Deccan witnessed no powerful attack from the North till 1590s as the 16<sup>th</sup> century again witnessed continuous attacks from State under Mughals. It was again an attack for total conquest and continued till the reign of Aurangzeb. The emerging powers of Zamindars and peasants could not be contained for a long time under command of army, obviously,

<sup>1</sup> J.F.Richards, The Formulation of Imperial Authority under Akbar and Jahangir” In Book Muzaffar Alam and Sanjay Subrahmanyam, The Mughal State 1526-1750( Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998),P.126.

<sup>2</sup> Harbans Mukhia, The Mughals of India( Carlton: Blackwell Publishing, 2004),P. 160.

<sup>3</sup> Richard Eaton, A Social History of the Deccan 1300-1761( Delhi: Cambridge University Press, 2005),P. 20

the militarisation was not an exclusive right of the state, rather, and militarisation was a process continued with and without support of state. Jos Gommans<sup>4</sup> emphasize this aspect by arguing that the history of warfare cannot do without geography.

Kolff and Jos Gommans has redefined the idea of warrior in India by arguing that the warrior was a cultural term and anybody who could mobilise or got mobilising by raising arms and ammunitions along with horses could emerge as warrior or could fight as warrior in the army of zamindars etc. The acquiring of sign and symbols of warrior was a cultural process. Referring to the case of people participating from below into warfare where the mainstream society could deny accessibility and also could not find space in existing armies, there are examples demonstrating that people from below could emerge as social bandit on the basis of arms and ammunition. The case study of Papadu provides us crystal clear case of militarisation without state and against the state. Papdu belonged to a family of liquor seller and rejected the traditional work and assumed the work of a social bandit. Not only that on analysing the close group of Papadu, it becomes clear that the 12 member<sup>5</sup> close group of Papadu represented people belonging to different communities, meaning thereby that militarisation based work was acceptable as occupation for survival and this militarisation operated beyond the frame of region, religion and caste. The 12 member close group of Papadu consisted of “Hasan, Husain, Turka Himam, Dudekula Pir( Cotton carder), Kotwal Mir Sahib, Hanumanthu, Cakali Sarvana( washerman), Mangali Mananna( Barber), Kummari Govindu( Potter), Medari Yenkantha( Basket weaver), Cittel( a Yerikala), Perumallu( a Jakkula), and Pasel( A Yendai). In terms of their cultural backgrounds, the first five are names of muslims, second five are those of caste Hindus, and the last three are the names of Tribal groups”.<sup>6</sup>

Similarly, how shall we understand the revolts of peasant's community under the leadership of Gokala near Doab area? Was it only a revolt of Jats? How do we analyse the revolts of Satnamis? The revolts of Satnamis in area of Narnaul in 1672? Wilfred Cantwell Smith<sup>7</sup> says that Musta'idd Khan stated that the Satnamis included “goldsmiths, carpenters, sweepers, tanners, and other ignoble beings.” Similarly, How do we analyse the stiff and successful resistance offered by Gurus from Punjab? Historically, how shall we situate the struggles suppressed easily in 16<sup>th</sup> century, but could not be stopped in 18<sup>th</sup> century? What was ethos of these struggles led by peasants with zamindars? The Aims of these struggles was clear that the struggling groups were fighting for the ethos nurtured over a period of time and these ethos were different not only from each other, but radically different from the ethos of state and nobility. At the same time, there were similarity with reference to ethos of peasants. This was ethos of sacrifice, as the life of peasants evolves around the agriculture, and culture emerged from agriculture is more empathy oriented and less conquest oriented. This culture emphasize celebration of co-existence.

The celebration of co-existence clearly visible in the tradition of sacrifice emerged under the guidance of Gurus from Punjab. The Gurus sacrificed life for the values cherished and transmitted to the masses. The Gurus emerged as sign and symbol to stand for words and honour. It was a world of sacrifice opposed to accumulation of resources or victory. The Culture of self-respect and respect of panth, Guru and family to be protected at all cost, including at the cost of life, was diffused across the Indian Subcontinent over a period. Beyond the frame of Religion, the Gurus of Punjab are widely accepted people from across the religion as sign and symbol for truth and struggle for truth. Muzaffar Alam says about Banda Bahadur. He argues that the social composition of Sikhs gradually dominated by peasantry. He says, “The Sikh faith had gradually been losing appeal for the trading communities and the Sikh uprisings had largely assumed the character of a peasant movement that exposed and further accentuated the basic conflict between the peasantry and the Mughal ruling class.”<sup>8</sup> Infact, the State under Mughals could not understand the changing nature of warriors and emergence of new ethos of warriorship. On the other hand, peasants from North West India to various parts of Indian subcontinent had

<sup>4</sup> Jos Gommans, *Mughal Warfare: Indian Frontier and High Roads to Empire 1500-1700* (London: Routledge, 2002), P. 7

<sup>5</sup> Richard Eaton, *Op.Cit.*, P. 171.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, P.171.

<sup>7</sup> Wilfred Cantwell Smith, “Lower Class Uprisings in Mughal Empire” in Muzaffar Alam and Sanjay Subrahmanyam, *op.cit.*, P. 333.

<sup>8</sup> Muzaffar Alam, *Sikh Uprisings under Banda Bahadur, 1708-1715*, *Proceedings of Indian History Congress*, Vol.39, Volume 1 (1978), P.519.

replaced conquest oriented culture by co-existence culture in society. Thus, the role of peasants was to fight back with state and force the state to get changed its opinion and similarly, state also fought with the peasants assuming the conquest of 16<sup>th</sup> century would be repeated in 18<sup>th</sup> century. The 18<sup>th</sup> century was century of peasants and emergence of peasant political culture shaping the politics of state.

