

# Negotiating the state in Mughal India

Hasan, Farhat. 2004. *State and Locality in Mughal India: Power Relations in Western India, c. 1572-1730*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 144 pages, ISBN 0 521 84119 4

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**S**tate and Locality in Mughal India attempts to study the nature of power in early modern South Asia and the relationship between imperial sovereignty and local networks of power. The initial overview of the historiography of the Mughal state outlines the 'structural-functionalist state' model of the so-called Aligarh School and the 'patrimonial-bureaucratic state' as well as the 'processual' models as the major approaches to date. The present book is a critique of these models since, in the author's view, they 'isolate the state from social forces and overlook the extent of interconnectedness'. The author engages with various theoretical frameworks in which power has been conceptualised (by Foucault and many other social theorists) to locate accommodation of local interests within the system of rule to illuminate the actual functioning of the Mughal state. Culling information from extant Persian documents pertaining to two important commercial towns of Gujarat, Surat and Cambay, the author tries integrating the contestations from the weaker sections of society to emphasise that imperial power was constantly in a state of negotiation.

Hasan argues that negotiations, forging alliances and winning allegiance were more important factors in Mughal political success than military fastidiousness. Through these processes, the local power holders could be incorporated within the imperial structure of rule and won over by the state as necessary adjuncts and co-sharers of power in mutually reinforcing relationships. They shared honours and perquisites, but without actually appropriating the rituals and symbols of imperial sovereignty. All of this led to a widening of the base of Mughal rule in Gujarat. The devolution of imperial power was not confined to local elites but permeated down to the common people as well. This aspect of interconnectedness is already relatively well accepted in the historiography of the Mughal state, but Hasan's analysis of the attitudes and responses of subordinated social groups to the state, through the examples of different socially disadvantaged groups, represents a crucial departure from the conventional history.

## Subaltern contestation

The system of rule based on alliance with the local intermediaries was contested by subordinate sections of the society. To the latter, this 'compact of rule' was an undifferentiated oppressive system and popular resistance was in fact articulated against this. Resistance in any form, the author suggests, was a political means by which the common people interacted with the state and participated in the system of rule. Through social protests, they could make those in power aware of the limits to their authority. Yet by constantly drawing this to their attention, through symbolic protests and other forms of resistance, subordinate groups were in fact

themselves reinforcing and perpetuating the system of rule. Hasan calls this process the 'ritualised participation' of subaltern society in the political system. Other forms of resistance included violent actions (as in the *khutba* episode, which appears to have challenged the legitimacy of imperial sovereignty) and social crimes and banditry, which were acts of popular retribution for infringements of the shared normative system, namely the *sharia*. The mode of resistance employed by merchants, analysed here in detail, differed from other forms since the presence of corporate merchant bodies made it easier for both merchants and the state to contain areas of potential conflict within the existing political framework.

The normative system assumes central importance in Hasan's analysis of resistance since all contestations necessarily took place within this framework. He notes that people would often appropriate the *sharia* in articulating resistance, irrespective of their religious affiliations, and reiterates the subalterns' use of ambiguities present in the *sharia* to their advantage. In order to stress the 'plasticity of *sharia*' he shows how one subordinated group, women, manipulated it. Using local Persian documents concerning marriage transactions and property transference, Hasan demonstrates that women were able to defend their symbolic and material interests. For example, ordinary women quite often exploited the *sharia's* ambiguities to get certain terms and conditions included in their marriage contracts.

## Property and revenue

That the imperial system was at times vulnerable and that it co-opted pre-existing beliefs is again shown through an analysis of documents relating to the sale and purchase of property. The buyers and sellers and the process of approval and confirmation of the important residents, who stood as surety to the property transactions, signified a perpetual control of community and social units of residence which the author calls the 'community-*muhalla* compact. The complex power relations involved in property transactions and the fusing of the domestic sphere with the larger system of rule is illustrated by an analysis of how the office of the *qazi* (an official appointee to settle disputes and punish offenders) functioned in close collusion with local structures of power. This office, which was rooted in local power relations, could be appropriated by social actors to preserve their interests. An understanding of the *qazi's* role in property transactions sheds further light on the participatory, shared nature of the Mughal state.

The imperial fiscal system is yet another sphere that was regularly modified and reshaped by local power holders, merchant bodies, and subordinate groups. In addition to this system, there were local customary levies which, though officially illegal, nevertheless had to be co-opted into the system of rule. The imperial system of revenue realisation



Mumtaz Mahal, second wife of Mughal emperor Shah Jahan I. Her name means 'beloved ornament of the palace'.

in the town was integrated with the local system of power, functioning through networks of alliances with local power holders (such as merchants). The consolidation of sovereignty in the towns thus entailed a growing and more rooted redistribution of the state's resources.

Hasan's study brings to light various ways through which the local power holders and their customary practices impacted upon imperial sovereignty, showing the negotiated character of Mughal rule and its empowering of the

local gentry and merchant classes. The reorganisation of fiscal administration by integrating local structure of levies within imperial system further augmented the perquisites and privileges of the local power holders. Thus in a bid to wrest cooperation from local social and political elites, the state created its own circuits which checked or curtailed powers of the state.

This book is a solid piece of research and the author has culled information from hitherto neglected Persian sources. The dynamics of local-imperial inter-

action are examined through the lens of the locality. Local evidence pertaining to marriages, property transactions, and resistance is analysed and interpreted in such a way that the notion of a contested yet shared sovereignty stands justified. The book's underlying assumption that the state and the locality represented two distinct political entities, however, belies the fact that the state itself was fluid. Like the normative system, the Mughal state was not a rigid and fixed edifice. Depending upon circumstances, it adopted different approaches towards accommodation or exclusion at different times and places. In the same way, the locality was quite fragmented in its articulation of power and influence. The state did not approve of acts of transgression and was quick to act to maintain its system of rule. Contestation or resistance thus took place within the framework of the state, not outside it. Whatever reservations one might have about the author's theoretical approach, the book is a brilliant attempt toward an understanding of the nature of the Mughal state as it functioned in certain localities of Gujarat. ◀

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