

Historical fallacies: Shah Jahan’s Reign: period of golden Age

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Abstract

Shah Jahan’s period (1627-1666 A.D) is known as the golden age of the medieval Indian history. All historian of modern age dedicated their energies to prove this fact that Shah Jahan was the master of the wealthiest Empire of the world. As far as the matter of wealth and territorial boundaries are concerned this is a fact that he ruled on the largest Empire of the world in Middle Ages. This Empire was the legacy of his father in which he did not contribute even a single inch. The wealth he had used for his personal aspirations must have been used for the welfare of the people. These questions are generally avoided by the historians. *TajMahal*, the seventh wonder of the world made the life of common people miserable because they had to pay many taxes for the satisfaction of architectural sense of Shah Jahan. This paper attempts to find out those realities which may challenge this myth.

KeyWords

Yoga, Satya, Treta, Dwapara, Kali, Vedic, Arya, Brahamo, Sarais, Parghana, Farman, Rauza-i-Manwarwa, Amirs, Jagirs

Introduction

“Men neither brought nor sold; there was no poor and no rich; there was no need to labor, because all the men required were obtained by the power of will-----
-----this yoga was without disease, there was no lessening with the years, there was no hatred or vanity or evil thoughts, no fear, no sorrows. All mankind could attain to supreme blessedness”.
(Hopkins.1902:75)

The term golden age comes from Greek mythology and refers to the first in the sequence of four or five ages of mankind. It was explained by the Greek poet Hesiod in his poem “*Works and Days*” around 8th century. Golden age is the first age followed by silver, bronze, iron and then the present one. Golden age refers as the period of peace, harmony; stability and prosperity. In Indian context these ages of mankind are as under.

SatyaYoga-----Golden age,

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TretaYoga-----Silver age,
Dwapara-----Bronze age,
KaliYoga-----Iron age and
Vedic-----Cyclical age.

The *Satyayoga* (golden age) was also described in *Mahabharata* (Hindu religious Epic) as mentioned above. In the age of Empire the term golden age was for the first time used for Gupta Empire. The period of Guptas spread over a century and a quarter (330-455). The earliest Chinese traveler Fa-Hien described that the period of Guptas no doubt was very well governed; the authorities interfered as little as possible in the matters of their dominions and left them free to prosper and grow rich in their own way. This age was signified due to the evolution of the Indian language, literature, science, art and architecture but the most important aspect was the prosperity of the subjects as indicated earlier (Smith, 2001:172). But the term of golden age is not used by the contemporary historians and travelers. Actually it was first time highlighted in the hey days of 19th century when the sway of reform movements disturbed every aspect of Hindu and Muslim life in sub-continent. Hindus were trying to glorify their past with the enthusiastic activities of *Arya* and *Brahmo Samaj*. *Aligarh* and *Deoband* were performing this duty from the side of Muslims. The outcome of these movements was, age of Gupta Empire considered a golden age for Hindus and the reign of Shah Jahan became golden age for Muslims. (Kumar, 2004:73). Shah Jahan has received a huge applause even from the modern historians like M.S Elphinstone and B.P Saksena. However their treatment is unduly favorable. The magnificent court, the vast empire, its wealth and prosperity, the peace which was maintained during his reign and the architectural masterpiece *TajMahal* exaggerated about those qualities Shah Jahan had never possessed.

Shah Jahan was the 5th ruler of Mughal dynasty in Hindustan. Shah Jahan who ruled over the largest and wealthiest Empire of the world ascended to the throne in Feb. 1627. All male competitors were killed by Prince Khurram (Shah Jahan) one way or the other. No doubt exists as the wholesale character of execution which was carried out pitilessly. Tavernier a French traveler commented, "have much tarnished the memory of Shah Jahan, who does not deserve pity on account of fate which overtook him with tardy steps. (Eraly, 1997:300)

Shah Jahan's arrival as an emperor was not smooth. Although he had no male rival but his insecurities always made him conscious. His reign captured many natural catastrophes as well as rebellions. In the fourth and fifth years of his reign, famines were struck to Mughal states of *Deccan* and *Gujarat*. Abdul Hamid Lahori described the horrors of this terrible calamity in these words,

"The inhabitants of these two countries were reduced to the direst extremity. Life was offered for a loaf, but none would buy; ranks were sold for a cake, but none cared for it; the ever bounteous hands were stretched out to beg for food and the feet which had always trodden the way of contentment walked about only in search of substance for a long time dog's flesh was sold for goat flesh and the

pounded bones of dead were mixed in flour and sold. When this was discovered, the seller was brought to the justice. Destitution at length reached such a pitch that men began to devour each other and the flesh of a son preferred to his love. The numbers of the dying caused obstructions in the roads. Every man whose dire sufferings did not terminate in death and who retained the power to move warned off to the towns and villages of the countries. Those lands which had been famous for fertility and plenty of resources retain no traces of production". (Lahori, 1868:235)

The detailed picture of famine was also portrayed by an English traveler, Peter Mundy who travelled from *Surat* to *Agra* and *Patna* for mercantile activities. At *Surat* the sickness was so deadly that out of twenty one English traders seventeen died. For a large part of the way between *Surat* and *Burhanpur*, the ground was so strewn that Peter Mundy could hardly find room to pitch a small tent. In towns the dead were dragged "out by heels, struck naked, of all ages and sexes, and there left so that the way was half barred up". Meantime the camp of Shah Jahan at *Burhanpur* was filled with the provisions of all kinds of luxurious life indicates the gulf between the life lifestyle of a common man and the king. (Mundy, 1936:34-35)

According to Adul Hamid Lahori the emperor opened up few soup kitchens and gave up half a lakh rupees in charity spread over a period of twenty weeks. Shah Jahan also remitted one eleventh of the assessment of land revenue. The remission made by the wise and generous emperor in the crown lands announced to seventy lakhs. The remaining amount of the land revenue could not be borne by a country in this direst extremity, as the soil retained no traces of productiveness. (Lahori, 1868:24) The English and Dutch travelers relate it with the long disturbances of trade and production of commercial crops caused by famine. They describe that revenue demands of government gravely hampered recovery. Shah Jahan's military ambitions were all resulted in failure. *Qandhar* had been a bone of contention between Iran and Hindustan for nearly hundred years. Shah Jahan wanted to capture it. He sent three military campaigns undertaken to recover this area but all in vain. This campaign cost not less than twelve *crores* of rupees. It was equal to more than half of the annual income of the state besides valuable lives of military men. (Saksena: 208)

The Central Asian adventure of Mughals also ended into disaster. According to Abdul Hamid Lahori, "The emperor's heart has been set upon the conquest of Balkh and *Babkshah*, which were the hereditary territories of his house and key to the acquisition of Samarqand, the home and the capital of his great ancestors of *Timur*. (Lahori, 1868:217)

The central Asian campaigns cost the Mughal Empire immense loss of men and money. As Jaddu Nath Sarkar remarked, "Thus ended Shah Jahan's fatuous war in Balkh -----a war in which the Indian treasury spent four *crores* of rupees in two years and realized from conquered country, a revenue of twenty two and half

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lakhs only. Not only an inch of territory was annexed, no dynasty change, no enemy replaced by an ally on the throne of Balkh-----five hundred soldiers fell in battle and ten time that number (including camp follower) were slain by cold and snow on the mountains. Such is terrible price that aggressive imperialism makes India pay for wars across the north western frontiers. (Sarkar, 1919:18-19)

Shah Jahan made a mistake as Muni Lal argued that Balkh expedition was a dishonesty which marked every phase of the operation, a large scale loss of lives and sources developed guilt till the last days of Shah Jahan's life. (Lal, 1986:253) During the time of thirty years (1628-1657) the authority of the emperor was unchallenged and the Mughals territories were never invaded by any foreign foe. Although the invasion of *Qandahar* and the failure of three attempts to retake it proved military inefficiency encouraged Persian pride. No doubt Shah Jahan was the powerful person of 17th century "in order to preserve with great security and the immense wealth which tribute and extortions argument every year he (Shah Jahan) ordered to be constructed, under his place of Delhi, two deep caves supported by vast marble pillars.

Francois Bernier French physician and traveler stated about the wealth of Shah Jahan,

"Piles of gold were stored in one and silver in other and to render more difficult any attempt to carry away his treasure, it consisted of both metals, pieces to be made of so prodigious size as to render them useless for the purpose of commerce". (Bernier, 1986:165)

Shah Jahan's annual revenue in 1647 was 220 million rupees, of the income of the crown lands was thirty million rupees". (Thomas, 1871:29).According to Sir Jaddu Nath Sarkar," Shah Jahan had jewelry worth fifty million rupees, one of his rosaries was valued 800,000 million rupees and the aigrette he wore on his turban on the anniversary of his coronation cost 1.24 million rupees. He further reckons that shah Jahan gave away the gifts of ninety five million rupees in the first twenty years of his reign. The amount of 6.5 million rupees was spent on the construction of a new city of Shah jahanabad including the cost of fortifying Peacock throne, "it was the richest and most superb throne which has ever been seen in the world. (Blake, 1991:106)

Tavernier stated, this throne was completed in the course of seven years at the cost of hundred lakh rupees (ten million).The mighty *Taj* which over shadowed every building in Mughal architecture completed with the cost of four *crores* rupees. There is a long list of his expenditures of Shah Jahan. There was, off course a price to be paid for such extravagances. Shah Jahan spent all the money on the non-developed areas e.g. construction of buildings, whereas Sher Shah Suri spent most of the State revenue on development of different areas, useful for the people e.g. construction of seventeen hundred *sarais*(each *sarai* was used as an inn, health and educational center). He had constructed five major roads including Grand Trunk Road.(Khan, 1976:331)

Although, all lands in Mughal Empire were the properties of the king. He was the sole owner of all income of the state. At one side country was suffering from famines and droughts and the King opened a few kitchens of soup and minimized the land revenue of these affected states and on the other side he was spending millions on the architectural projects, stipends of royal family and his personal use. These were the parameters upon which all historians erected the concept of golden age. This heavy price of extravagance was paid by the common people, whose poverty and wretchedness contrasts dismally with the opulence of the Mughal ruling class. There was a substantial increase in the revenue of the empire but this was achieved by the tighter squeezing of people then through economic progress. According to RiaBharaMal, “*theparghana*, which income was three lakhs of rupees in the reign of Akbar-----yielded in the happy reign, a revenue of ten lakhs (one million) of rupees”. (Mal, 1918:169)

There was threefold increase in the revenue that was nullified by fourfold increase in the expenditures in every facet of Mughal life. Bernier spoke of the actual state of the country at the splendid of the Mughal rule. At that time the Mughal dynasty was fully established, rich beyond comparison and undisturbed by foreign aggression. The image of this period was reflected through the tyranny of local governors, “Often so excessive as to deprive the peasant and artisan of the necessities of life, and leave them to die of misery and exhaustion—a tranny owing to which those wretched people either have no children at all, or have them only to endure the agonies of starvation, and to die at tender age—a tranny that drives cultivators of the soil from his wretched home to some neighboring states, in hope of finding some milder treatment. In army where become the servants of some troopers. As the ground is seldom tilled otherwise then by compulsion and as no person is found willing to repair the ditches and canals for the conveyance of water, it happens that the whole country is badly cultivated and a great part rendered unproductive from the want of irrigation. The houses are left in dilapidated condition. There were only a few people who can either build a new one or repair those which were tumbling down”. (Bernier.1986:226)

The country was ruined by the necessity of defraying the enormous charges required to maintain the splendor of a numerous courts and to pay a large army maintain for purpose of keeping the people in subjection. No adequate idea can be conveyed of suffering of that people. The cudgel and the whip compel them to incessant labor for the benefit of the others; driven them to despair by every kind of cruel treatment. In short these governors were absolute lords, the assessor and receiver of the king, s taxes. (Bernier,1986 :230)

“A Persian, in speaking of these greedy governors, timariots and farmers of revenue aptly described them as man who extract oil from the sand no income appears adequate to maintain them with their crowds of harpies, women, children and slaves.”(Bernier, 1986:236)

The picture of an excessive state demand is largely borne out by the early *Farman*s (orders) of Aurangzeb which were translated by Sir Jaddu Nath Sarkar in his book "*Studies in Mughal India*." Similar ruin and disaster had been the fate of Deccan during the years from 1644-1653 in an interval between the first and second viceroyalty of Aurangzeb, when the pitiless governors Khan-i-Dauran died. His death was hailed as a day of divine deliverance. (Sarkar, 1919:173)

Shah Jahan received appreciation from many modern historians. The magnificent court of Shah Jahan the wealth of his Empire, peace and harmony of the age, the unique beauty of architectural master pieces, the Taj, the Peacock throne and many mosques combined to dazzle the vision of modern biographer. They have nothing to say about negativity which Shah Jahan possessed. He crushed Portuguese at Hugli and destruction of Hindu temples shows that he was not a liberal ruler like his grandfather. (Smith, 1981:398)

Such sort of exaggeration should be seen through historical facts. Prince khurram, king Shah Jahan possessed those virtues which could not be neglected by the contemporary historians. As son of Mughal king Jahangir, raised rebellion against his father. He executed all his collateral male relations beginning with his elder brother khusrav. As a father his display of undue partiality for his son Dara which instigated deprived Aurangzeb to repeat the history of war of succession. The most highlighted feature of Shah Jahan, s personality was his immense love for his wife Mumtaz Mahal who bore fourteen children for his emperor and eventually died during the birth of a child. Shah Jahan ordered to construct a *Rauza-i-Manwara*(The illuminated tomb,*TajMahal*) as this was her last wish.(Khan,1990:152)This building added nothing in the comfort and contentment of that lady. A woman who suffered from the difficulties of pregnancy after every nine months due to the insecurity of a polygamous master, she had nothing to do with this love which came after her death in the form of *Tajmahal*.

The Indo-Persian architecture reached its climax in the period of Shah Jahan. The king of golden age spend millions on the elegance of edifices and buildings but he never thought to utilize this public money on the welfare of the people. In the phases of famines .the Mughal emperor undertook the relief measures- public kitchens were opened ,taxes remitted and money was allotted for," gratuitous relief." During the of 1630-1632, Shah Jahan distributed five thousand rupees a week, for five months among the poor, giving away an amount of hundred thousand rupees; taxes remissions of nearly seven million rupees were granted by imperial revenue officers and similar reliefs by *Amirs* in the *Jagirs*. These were only random measures, at best palliatives. The amounts spent on famine reliefs were trivial as compared to the extravagant personal expenses of the emperor and the *Amirs* ---for instance hundred thousand rupees distributed by Shah Jahan for famine relief was merely the one tenth of the annual pin money of his wife Mumtaz Mahal.(Eraly,1997:685)

Human misery was seen differently by this Mughal ruler (Shah Jahan). Even the emperor wished to help the people, but he could not do much for the people. He had the administrative capability for the welfare activities of the state, having sufficient sources in the center but could not supply necessities to the distant areas of the empire due to high cost of transportation. He could have spent that amount

to develop the infrastructure of transportation which he spent on the architectural edifices of the empire. Famine relief was a sort of charity and not obligatory. His primary concern was to preserve and extend his power. He did not even suspend military operations in the time of crisis. The Mughal army invading *Bijapur* in 1636 was ordered by Shah Jahan "to ravage the country from end to end." They accomplished this task as consummately as Inayat Khan stated; "there was no scarcely a vestige of cultivation left in the part of this country." (Khan, 1990:252) Bernier remarked, "this country is ruined by the necessity of defraying the numerous charges required to maintain the splendor of courts and to pay a large army maintain for the purpose of keeping people in subjection." (Bernier, 1986:230) The period of Shah Jahan was a rule like other monarchs of Mughal dynasty. This term golden age may reflect Thomas Moore's concept of "Utopia", a perfect state of religion, social and political customs is not possible in this world. A perfect society and its concept of welfare living is ultimately unreachable". (Moore, 1983)

Conclusion

In the reign of Shah Jahan 36.5 % of the entire assessed revenue of the empire was assigned to sixty eight princes and *Amirs*, further 25% to the 587 officers, 62% of the total revenue of 220 million rupees of the empire was arrogated by 665 individuals. So, this period was a golden age for king, princes or individuals. The subjects of the Hindustan, the real custodian of this state were deprived off even from a piece of loaf.

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