TWENTY

Assessment and Review

The thousand years from the beginning of the eighth century to the end of the seventeenth century saw important changes in the political, economic and cultural life of the country and also, to a smaller extent, in its social life.

In the field of social life, the caste system continued to dominate, despite the challenge posed to it by Islam and loss of political power by the Rajput rulers who were duty bound to protect *dharma* which implied, among other things, the upholding of the four-fold division of society (*varnashrama-dharma*). Although the Nath Panthi Jogis and the Bhakti saints vehemently criticised the caste system, they could hardly make a dent in it. A tacit agreement was arrived at in course of time. The criticism of the caste system by saints did not, with some notable exceptions, extend to day-to-day or secular life, while the Brahmans acquiesced in the advocacy of the path of devotion as the way for salvation for all castes, specially for the Shudras. Many women saints, such as Mira, and others such as Surdas opened the way of *bhakti* for women also, and their rising above the task of service and duty to a husband. However, the Brahmans continued to claim a privileged position for themselves, including the exclusive right to preach and educate.

Within the framework of caste, new subgroups arose, due in parts to the absorption of tribal groups into Hinduism, the growth of new professional groups, and also the local and regional feelings. At the same time, the *varna* status of castes rose or fell, according to the economic and political power of the groups concerned. Rajputs, Marathas and Khatris may be mentioned in this context.

The Bhakti and Sufi saints gradually brought about a better understanding of the fundamental tenets of Hinduism and Islam, underlining the fact that they had a great deal of similarity. This resulted in a greater spirit of mutual harmony and toleration, although forces advocating a narrow, intolerant approach continued to be

strongly entrenched and sometimes influenced state policies. But such occasions were, on the whole, limited.

The Bhakti and Sufi saints also brought about important changes in the approach to religion, laying greater emphasis on true faith than to the formal observances. They also contributed to the growth of regional languages and literature. But the excessive concern with religious and spiritual affairs resulted in a setback to the growth of rational sciences, especially to the cultivation of science and technology.

On balance, the position of women worsened. Seclusion of women or purdah became more widespread, while Hindu women were not able to claim the right of remarriage or a share in their father's property which Muslim women had. In fact, these rights tended to be denied more and more even to Muslim women.

In the political and economic fields, the most important development was the political and administrative integration of the country brought about by the Turks and later consolidated by the Mughals. Although the Turkish and Mughal system of administration remained largely confined to northern India, indirectly it affected other parts of India also. The institution of a well-minted currency based on silver, the development of roads and sarais and the preference for city life had a direct effect on the growth of trade and handicrafts which reached its climax during the seventeenth century. Under the Mughals, political integration was accompanied by a deliberate effort to create a unified ruling class consisting of Muslims and Hindus. However, the ruling class remained strongly aristocratic in character, with only limited opportunities of career being open to the people of talent from lower classes. It also remained largely northern in character. Aurangzeb did try to induct large numbers of Marathas and Deccani nobles into the services. The Deccanis were integrated, but not the Marathas. Perhaps, regional as well as religious and social prejudices played a role in this because, unlike the Rajputs in north India, the Maratha sardars were drawn from social sections which had never exercised political power, or been a ruling class. Nor were they considered Kshtriyas.

The Mughal nobility was organised as a bureaucracy dependent on the monarch. However, it derived its income mainly from lands cultivated by peasant proprietors. For the collection of land revenue from peasants, the nobility depended partly on its military following

and partly on the strength of the zamindars whose rights and privileges were defended and maintained by the state in return for their support. That is why many historians argue that the state in medieval India remained essentially feudal.

A significant contribution of the Turks was the defence of the country from Mongol onslaughts during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. Later, for 200 years, the Mughals were able to secure the northwest frontiers of India from foreign invasions. For this purpose, the defence of India was fixed on the Kabul-Ghazni line with the Hindukush mountains to the north. The politics of Central and West Asia were closely followed and sometimes an active part was taken.

India's reputation as a land of spices, and its position as the textile manufactory of the eastern world including East Africa, led the European nations to try to establish direct trade relations with India. The richness of the oriental trade further whetted the appetite of the European nations and quickened their economic and technological growth. Since they had hardly any commodities to offer which were in demand in the oriental world, except the silver and gold procured from Central and South America, the European traders, backed by their governments sought an entry into the internal trade of India and Asia. On a number of occasions, they desired to control Indian territories whose income could be used for the purchase of Indian goods, just like the Dutch who had been able to bring the East Indies (modern Indonesia) under their control. As long as the Mughal empire was strong, the European nations were not successful in this objective. The decline of the Mughal empire and important political events in India during the eighteenth century, such as the entry of Nadir Shah and later, the Afghans, as well as the rapid economic development of the European nations enabled them to establish their dominations in India as also in many other Asian countries.

While scholars have tried to explain the causes of the decline and downfall of the Mughal empire, the reasons why India, like many other Asian nations, could not develop as rapidly as the European nations in the economic and scientific fields, needs further detailed study and research. The Mughal ruling classes had no traditions of connection with the sea. While the Mughal rulers were quick to recognize the importance of foreign trade, and for that reason gave patronage and support to the European trading companies, they had

little understanding of the importance of naval power in the economic development of a nation.

India's lagging behind in the field of naval power was a part of its growing backwardness in the field of science and technology. Even the mechanical clock which brought together all the European inventions in the field of dynamics was not produced in India during the seventeenth century. The superiority of the Europeans in the field of artillery was freely acknowledged. Even where Indian craftsmen were able to copy European developments—as for example in the field of ship-building—little ability to innovate was displayed. Apart from the attitude of the ruling class to which we have referred, the social structure, historical traditions and the outlook of various sections are important in this context. There was too much emphasis on past learning, and of showing deference to those who were supposed to be the repositories of this knowledge—the Brahmans and the mullahs. Akbar's efforts to modernize the syllabus by introducing more science subjects of secular interest were defeated due to the pressure of these elements. The very skill of the Indian artisans and their availability in large number inhibited the efforts to develop and apply machine power to productive enterprises. The effect of the caste system in breeding an attitude of insularity and conservatism is, however, a matter of discussion.

Thus, India lagged behind the world in the field of science and technology and the Mughal ruling class remained singularly blind to this development. Like all ruling classes on their way out, the Mughal ruling class was more concerned with matters of immediate concern, including its creature comforts, than matters which would shape the future.

Despite this, the developments in various fields in India during the period should not be lost sight of. The growth of political integration was paralleled by cultural integration. Indian society was one of the few societies in the world which was able to develop a more or less unified culture despite differences in race, religion and language. This unified culture was reflected in an outburst of creative activity which makes the seventeenth century a second classical age. In the south, the traditions of the Cholas were continued by the Vijayanagara kingdom. The Bahmani kingdom and its successor states also contributed to cultural developments in various fields. The rich

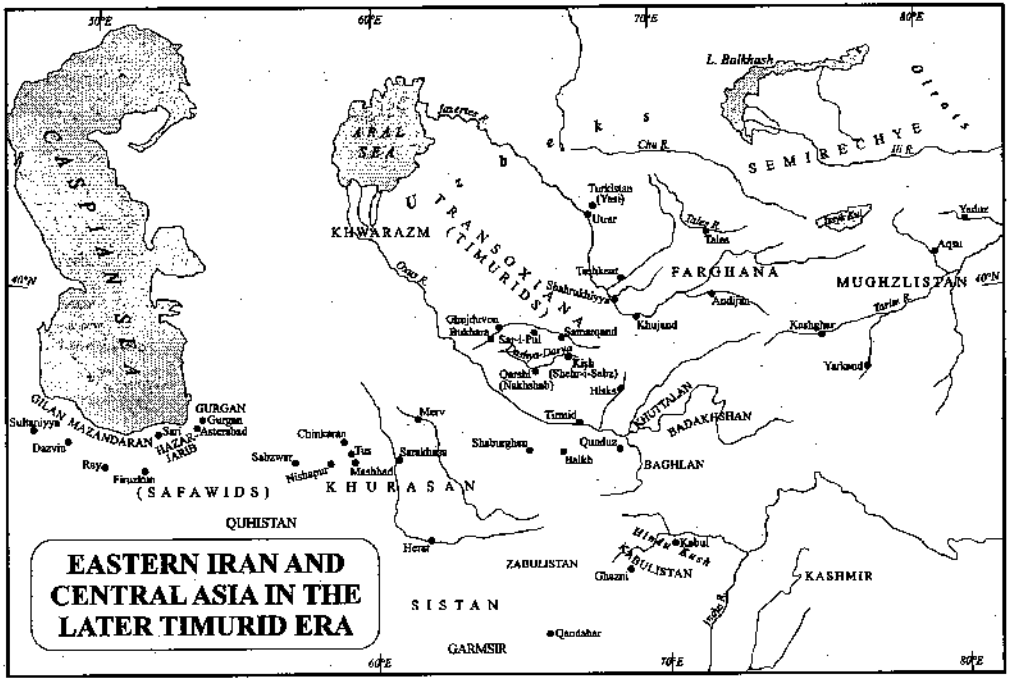
cultural developments in the various regional kingdoms during the fifteenth century were, to some extent, integrated in the new cultural forms developed by the Mughals. However, this integrated culture came under pressure from the religious dogmatists of the two faiths, as well as from the competing and conflicting interests of various sections in the ruling classes. But that it survived, on the whole, till the middle of the nineteenth century is no mean tribute to all those saints, scholars and enlightened rulers who had helped to build it.

The period was also marked by economic development and growth. Trade and manufactures expanded and there was expansion and improvement of cultivation also. However, the growth was uneven in different areas and during different phases. Apart from the Ganga valley where the Mughals spent a substantial part of the revenue resources of the empire, the areas which developed rapidly during the seventeenth century were Gujarat, the Coromandel coast and Bengal. Perhaps, it is no accident that these have been the areas in the forefront of economic development of India in the modern period, particularly in the post-independence era.

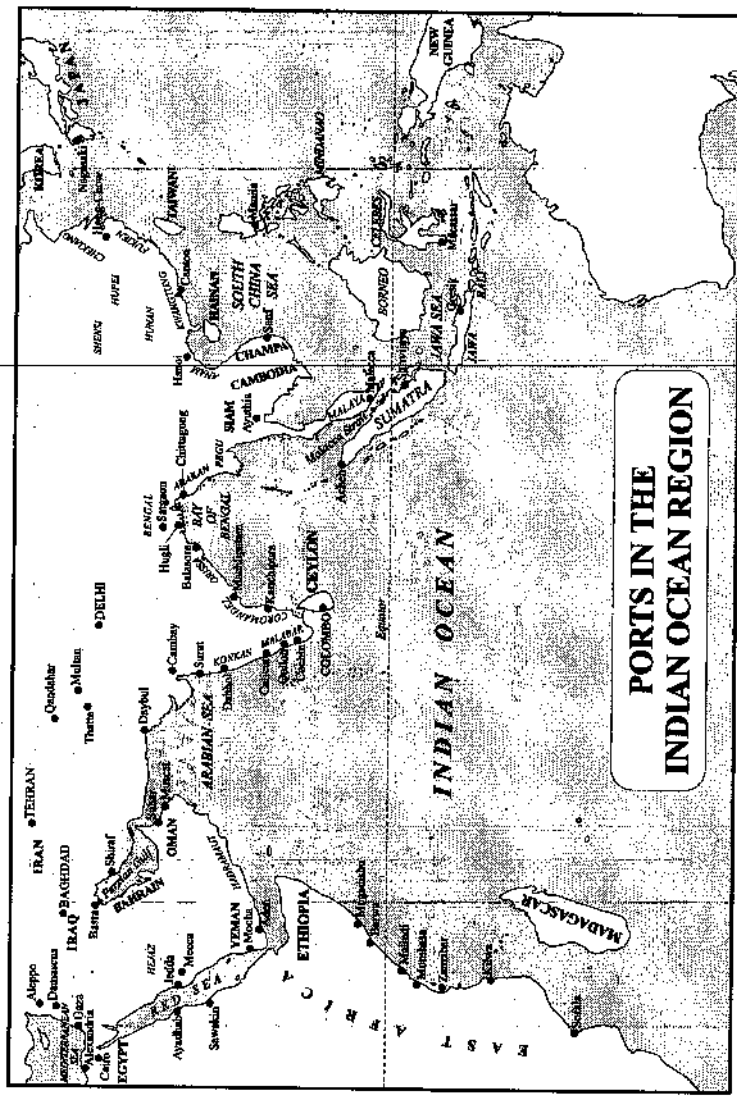
Would India have continued to progress economically and even attained an industrial revolution of its own, if the Mughal empire had continued? While trade and manufactures continued to expand during the eighteenth century, despite the downfall of the Mughal empire, it remained backward compared to Europe, not only in the field of science and technology, but in other fields as well. Thus, most of the manufactures remained small in scale, with hardly any machinery, with the workers using the simplest tools. In consequence, howsoever skilful a craftsman might be, his productivity and efficiency remained low. Nor could the artisans develop into traders and entrepreneurs as in the West, both because of caste and because most artisans had little by way of capital. This was a reflection of the extremely uneven distribution of money and resulted in the domestic market being limited. During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, there was a growth of the putting out (*dadni*) system. This increased production, but made the artisans more and more dependent on the merchants, Indian or foreign.

It was in these circumstances that the British were able to conquer India and convert it into a colony, supplying raw materials in place of being the manufactory of the east as it was earlier. It is this ebb and flow which makes the study of history both interesting and rewarding.

Appendix



MAP A. Eastern Iran and Central Asia in the later Timurid era



MAP B. Ports in the Indian Ocean

Books for Further Reading (Select List)

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Index

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Professor Satish Chandra has been the Chairman, University Grants Commission and Professor, Medieval Indian History, and Dean, School of Social Sciences, Jawaharlal Nehru University. He is currently Secretary of the Twelve-volume Comprehensive History of India Scheme of the Indian History Congress, being implemented by the Comprehensive History of India Society. He is also the Vice Chairman of the Society for Indian Ocean Studies. His work has been extensively published in books and journals, in India and abroad.

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