

BOOK REVIEWS

HISTORY OF INDIA 1600-1800: SELECTED ESSAYS DEBATES IN INDIAN HISTORY SERIES EDITED BY Nirmal Kumar Published by Research India Press, New Delhi (January 2014)

This book contains a mix of old and new writings that were thought to give a representative sampling of what has been written on the history of roughly 1500 to 1800 A.D., though there is no attempt to find a nomenclature for the centuries as that according to the author, would be self-defeating. The idea behind this book was to make it useful to students and that's why the author chose a mix of old and new articles relevant to graduate and post graduate students in history.

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The myriad essays in this book range from Akbar's religious policy to the use of technology in Medieval India to dynamics of Mughal Rajput matrimonial alliances to a discussion on gender discourses in Medieval Indian history too. However, the most interesting and unique flair about this book is that instead of using cliché terminology to describe and compartmentalize the periods on Indian History into ancient, medieval and modern by the author, he has titled his book corresponding to specific centuries. He is emphatic that due to changing perception of historians working on the period, the writing of Indian history in the Colleges and Universities across India, has to overcome the myth of periodization into three watertight compartments with no scope for intermediate and overlapping periods. The author in his book underscores and reiterates that addressing periods by centuries would have been lot better or even more justifiable would-be thematic history writing. To quote him, "History of India cannot be studied and researched and least of all taught in straitjacket of ancient mediaeval and modern. we need to rise to the truth that the social and cultural realities were always dynamic and had their own reasons and stages of development which may not fit into water tight compartments."

Another pertinent question arises, as to why the author chose to start this book with the coming of Mughals. The reasoning given is, that with the coming of Akbar administratively, structurally and even in the modes of revenue collection and dispensation of justice the entire political system underwent a metamorphosis from what it was for almost 300 years under the Delhi Sultanate. The powerful and widespread Bhakti and Sufi movements, moreover, changed the social outlook and the religious coexistence became the hallmark of social life for centuries to come. 16th Century, saw the emergence of powerful and expansive Ottoman Empire, Uzbek Empire and The Mughal Empire. Out of these three, it was only the Mughal which gave ample breeding space and even respected a variety of religious discourses from Kabir to Nanak to

Nizamuddin Auliya to Baba Farid, disregarding their low social origins.

On the economic front, the State no longer imposed taxes because of religious sanction or brute armed power but as Abul Fazl explained, State now collected taxes because it offered peace and order. To quote the author, "If there is anything in Akbar's age from what we may call medieval or pre-modern, then it is the free intellectual openness and free expression that was cultivated by Akbar ...this spirit of Akbar's India was leaps and bounds ahead of its previous times.

"This was definitely a new India far removed from arbitrary brute and militaristic Sultanate."

As far as the articles in the book are concerned, to start with Prof. Dilbagh Singh in his paper "Caste and Structure of Village society in Eastern Rajasthan during the Eighteenth Century", makes an attempt to decipher the landowning patterns in 18th century Rajasthan.

Rajat Dutta in his article, "Subsistence Crisis, Merchants and Markets in late 18th century Bengal" tries to find an answer to mass scale starvation in 18th century Bengal.

Urvashi Dalal, in her analytical paper has made an attempt to locate the 18th century in the dark age debate analyze the issues at stake in the best chronological manner. She insists there was no decline in 18th century and rather there was a local distribution and consumption of resources.

B.R. Grover in his pioneering article on "Land Rights in Mughal India" had placed the whole debate on land ownership in Mughal India in its context. Grover argues for a multi-layered and well-defined relative ownership of land which though partial was inalienable.

Shireen Moosvi in her essay has made significant additions to the corpus of studies on mansabdari system and after examining the existing literature, she has come to the conclusion that changes in mansabdari system were made gradually and much later that suggested by some early historians and bolsters the current position on Akbar that his administration had been evolving with time and was not a fluke of brilliance.

SP Verma in his article has shown that the paintings done under the Mughal patronage were ahead of its time. The crust of the article is that whatever the politics the cultural exchange, continued and all benefited from such a close cross-cultural encounter.

Irfan Habib has made a detailed evaluation of technology available in various fields of common and commercial importance and compared them with the European technology and has found a strange but omnipresent resistance to technology though in certain pockets, Indians did adopt and applied technology, but then stopped midway.

The author Nirmal Kumar, in his essay shows that crimes against women in early modern Rajasthan were not uncommon and such cases were reported from all classes and caste. Though the State was not so serious about them it did not brush them aside as well.

Chetan Singh in his article has evaluated Irfan Habib's now famous take, on Persian Wheel and its economic importance and social reach even going to the extent of arguing the sedentarization of the community of Jats due to it.

Sunita Zaidi has taken the case of Tribes of Sindh under the Mughals and has that the ferocious tribes were a sedentarized mix of military action, grant of land, jagirs and marriage alliances.

Ruby Lal in her fascinating paper has argued for many of the so-called unimportant sources that we tend to ignore. She has suggested that sources like Gulbadan Begum's *Ahval-i-Humayun*, has mines of information to write and corroborate the State sources like Abul Fazl's *Ain-i-Akbari* and has argued that all kinds of social and cultural history can be written if such lesser-known sources are tapped and that includes European sources as well.

A liberty which the author Nirmal Kumar has taken in his book is that the footnotes have been changed into endnotes but that is simply because this volume is meant for students and in his words, he did not want to burden them with too much referencing while enjoying the text, internalizing them.

Overall, it is a good collection of articles, capsulated in a book form, relevant and useful especially for students of graduation and post-graduation and strives to be non-judgmental on issues and periods, as the title itself displays.

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