

POLITICAL UNITY IN PRE COLONIAL INDIA: A STUDY OF AN ERA OF DARKNESS AND INDIA CONQUERED

Gayathri S., Research Scholar, Institute of English, University of Kerala

Abstract:

*Indian Colonial Historiography is an area of constant contention owing to the varying perspectives that emerged as a result of the works from imperialist, nationalist and postcolonial historians. In this paper, two works which were published in the year 2016, Shashi Tharoor's *An Era of Darkness: the British Empire in India* and Jon Wilson's *India Conquered: Britain's Raj and the Chaos of Empire* are studied in order to understand the way in which Indian colonial history is interpreted in the twenty first century. Jon Wilson, a British historian, analyses the socio-political conditions of India from the pre-colonial period to the post-independence period. Shashi Tharoor, an MP of Thiruvananthapuram and a well-versed author has amazed the world with his diplomatic political stances, eloquent speeches and powerful literary creations. Tharoor's *An Era of Darkness* is the consolidation of his arguments in a debate titled 'Britain Owes Reparations to Her Former Colonies' conducted by the Oxford Union Society on May 2015. The "viral speech," as the social media addresses it now, opened up new arenas of discussions with people joining sides asking Britain to be or not to be apologetic. Both these works argue that political unity, as claimed by the British apologists, was not a colonial gift by focusing on the socio-political situations of the pre-colonial India when Mughals and Marathas were the most important forces. The paper attempts to study how the concept of political unity in pre-colonial India is depicted in the works concerned.*

Keywords: Colonialism, Mughals, Marathas, political unity, historiography.

Indian colonial discourse is constituted by discordant ideas. It is through history that these ideas are propagated. As a result, in every age, 'British colonialism in India' acquires footing as an obvious choice of debate with the two sides enumerating the contributions and shortcomings of British rule in India. People belonging to both India and England voice their opinion in favour of British conquest or against it respectively, hinting at the unpredictable way in which history is interpreted and perceived over centuries. Thus British historian Jon Wilson in spite of sharing his nationality with England severely criticises the British policy in Indian subcontinent in his work *India Conquered: Britain's Raj and the Chaos of Empire* (2016). Later, Shashi Tharoor, famous for his oratory skills, in a debate held by Oxford Union Society, slammed British colonisation of India by listing facts and figures. The claims of the Raj apologists were severely criticised by Tharoor, which was later published as *An Era of Darkness: The British Empire in India* (2016).

The narratives, considered for the study, address various postulates of the apologists in justifying the Empire like the British gifting democracy, parliamentary system, railway system, English education and missionaries in India. The 'civilising mission' of the British and the claim that British gave India political unity are also discussed elaborately in the books. For instance, Tharoor defends the British claim of introducing "rule of law" in India by stating that the rules thus imported were partial in their working. He says that the British ideas of freedom of expression and trial by jury "are incontestable legal values, except in their actual manner of working, for in its application during the colonial era, the rule of law was not exactly impartial" (Tharoor 106). Here, he gives factual evidences of racist ideology acting on court

verdicts resulting in the death of many natives for the crimes that they never committed. When a British man was accused of kicking an Indian servant, what he received was only a small imprisonment or fine, while the servant developed an enlarged spleen and died (Tharoor 107). Throughout the work, Tharoor discredits the presumed benevolence of the British by giving valid evidences of British brutality in this manner.

Similarly, in Jon Wilson's narrative, many arguments proposed by the imperialists are scrutinised by providing verifiable facts. He observes, "the first, often the only, purpose of British power in India was to defend the fact of Britain's presence on Indian ground" (Wilson 6). According to Wilson, British legacies like railways and telegraphs were means of exerting control over nature. He says, "The British tried to assert their power on the surface of the earth, in roads, telegraphs, railway lines, survey boundary markers. In each case they used their capacity to re-engineer the physical fabric of India as a surrogate for their failure to create an ordered imperial society" (Wilson 5). This depicts the British as a malign force whose only aim was to establish dominance over another country.

Furthermore, these narratives probe the decline of agriculture, shipping industry, cotton industry and traditional mill. This paper focuses on the idea of pre-colonial India as a politically unified country, as political unity is a highly relevant concept in the contemporary context. According to Tharoor and Wilson, Mughals and Marathas, who were the most powerful forces in pre-colonial India, tried to attain political unity in the country even before the British conquest of India. M. J. Akbar, a politician and scholar puts it in his famous work, *India: The Siege Within- Challenge to a Nation's Unity* that, "Some historians have felt obliged to sell the thesis that the concept of India as one nation is a gift of British imperial power" (Akbar 3). With such a view comes an obligation towards the British in commoner's psyche which historians like Tharoor and Wilson try to dismiss in their respective works. They direct the study of the history of Mughal and Maratha powers to defend their viewpoint that the country was always moving towards securing unity. Thus the socio-political condition of India before the imperial invasion, that is, during Mughal and Maratha reign, is studied in detail in this paper to get an idea of political unity and administrative system in India as proposed by the narratives concerned. The study also reveals how these narratives subvert the claims of the Raj apologists of giving political unity to India.

Tharoor begins his chapter, "Did the British give India political unity?" by stating that "the British like to point out, in moments of self-justifying exculpation, that they deserve credit for the political unity of India- that the very idea of 'India' as one entity (now three, but one during the British Raj) instead of multiple warring principalities and statelets, is the unchallengeable contribution of British imperial rule" (Tharoor 44). Tharoor provides the sociopolitical history of Mughals and Marathas and argue that an impulsion for unity has always been there in the Indian subcontinent. According to him, India could have achieved political unity under their reign had the British not interfered in India. He blames the British for interrupting the "natural evolution" of attaining political unity in India. He says, "The process would not have been painless; there may well have been revolutions and military struggles; there would have been disruption and conflict; but India's resources would have stayed in India and its future would have been resolved by its own people" (Tharoor 46). Tharoor's revulsion towards the draining of wealth by British which curtailed the emergence of India as a self sustaining nation is explicit in these words.

Another major criticism against the British is that the colonial masters implemented common laws in order to unify the country, without acknowledging the social structures and cultural exclusivities of India. Tharoor's words echo the well-known Indian Mughal historian J. N. Sarkar's view on political unity. He says:

Mere autocratic diction, the mere drawing of the administrative road roller over the rough surface of the people's head, cannot grind them into uniformity; at least such uniformity is not natural and does not last long. Historical unity comes best from the people themselves working the same type of administration and sharing the success and failure of it because it

is the product of their own efforts. (qtd. in Banerjee 14)

Thus, the unity attained by the British is ineffective on the practical grounds and the laws introduced by them ultimately prove to be a failure. In addition, the imperialists introduced several customs that existed in England analogous to the traditional practices in the colony and consequently dismantled the indigenous customs of India. Tharoor writes, “The English tried to find similar structures in the traditional societies of their colonies, and when they could not, they invented an approximation of them” (Tharoor 50). Thus the British advocated what is 'good' for the colonial populace by assuming themselves to be the selected masters to do so. The claim of giving unity to India can be considered only as a pretension of this assumed benevolence of the British.

In *India Conquered*, Jon Wilson gives a detailed account of the Indian political scenario before colonisation with respect to the Mughal and Maratha regime. He depicts Mughals as rulers who had accepted the diversity of India, in spite of themselves being foreign invaders. He also describes the various methods adopted by the Mughals to ensure political unity and their lasting governance in India. His claim that the Mughal dynasty in India was not based on violence, offers a counter narrative to the portrayal of Mughals as cruel despots by the early British historians like James Mill and James Wheeler. Marathas, on the other hand, are portrayed as fierce warriors who had authority in both land and sea. By citing instances of the key figures in Maratha regime, Wilson suggests that the Marathas were powerful leaders and had the potential to rule the whole country during the eighteenth century (Wilson 56-81).

The Mughal portrayal by imperialist historians like James Mill and Vincent Smith showed that Indian society during their reign was chaotic and thereby glorified the British as saviours of India. The British occupation of India was defended by highlighting the evil practices that existed in ancient Indian society and the cruelties inflicted by Mughal rulers. It can be observed that Wilson uses the same method of describing pre-colonial India under the Mughals in order to subvert the British claims of establishing good governance in India. That is, Mughal period is portrayed in a good light in order to undermine the British rule. An instance of this change in narration is seen in Wilson's treatment of violence in Mughal period.

According to Jon Wilson, Mughal conquests were not based on violence (Wilson 16). He says that the expansion took place as a result of coaxing the local leaders to recognise the sovereignty of the Mughals. Mughal political order was primarily based on submission to the personal authority of the emperor and then on establishing harmony between different groups in India (Wilson 17). Once the people submitted themselves to the ruler, Mughals in turn ensured protection and enhancement of livelihood of the people. Thus there existed a balanced relationship between the rulers and the ruled. However, Wilson acknowledges the fact that there were instances in history when the Mughals had used force to intimidate the natives. “Force was needed to demonstrate the potency of Mughal authority, but it was followed by affection,” adds Wilson (Wilson 16).

Both the Mughals and British were foreign invaders to India but their role in Indian history and approach towards Indian natives showed stark contrasts. Mughals lived for generations in India, established a community and an effective administrative system. On the other hand, British looted the country, manipulated the people into trusting the civilising mission of the masters, exploited the natural resources, partitioned the land and left a huge scar in the hearts of the natives. For the British, “Indians were always subjects, never citizens,” says Tharoor (Tharoor 121). Both Tharoor and Wilson agree that the Mughals were benevolent to India even though they were outsiders as opposed to the tyrannical imperialist rulers. Wilson describes Mughals as foreigners “living from generation to generation on Indian soil” (Wilson 17). According to Tharoor, “Mughals may have arrived from abroad... but they settled in India and retained no extraterritorial allegiance. They married women from India and diluted their foreign blood to the point that in a few generations no trace remained of their foreign ethnicity” (Tharoor 269). Consequently, Mughals established a lasting and powerful Empire in India with an efficient system of administration. The administrative system of Mughals as it is evident from the selected narratives shall be

examined in detail.

In the Mughal administrative system, the Emperor occupied the central position. A number of officers were appointed in various governmental departments and they enjoyed privileges like the Emperor. A provincial administrative system which occupied the next level attended to local issues. Local administrative system was established at the village level and this is a distinguishing feature of the Mughal system. Mughal politics was centered on the concept of local autonomy according to which the local leaders were directly involved in decision making (Wilson 18). This system of governance withstood the test of time, that is, it remained constant during various conquests of India. Tharoor writes, "Reports written by observers of the Company described the village communities as self-governing republics and functioning economic units, linked to the wider precolonial global market, that had governed themselves even as powers at the centre came and went" (Tharoor 49). These villages did not function in "some kind of rustic agrarian isolation but were active and functioning political and economic units..." (Tharoor 49). During the Mughal period, they submitted themselves to the Emperor and in turn procured autonomous status in taking political decisions.

According to Wilson, "the scope for local autonomy meant politics in Mughal India was a talkative, argumentative, often rebellious enterprise" (Wilson 18). There were many public spaces in villages and towns where the people could express their opinions and dissatisfactions. Since the local people were given power to resist, they revolted against all the injustices of the central power. This depicts Mughals as tolerant rulers in whose reign people had a strong voice. To validate this argument, Wilson cites certain instances of the local people revolting against the central power. In the late 1600s, in Allahabad, officers were routinely pelted with stones when they tried to increase price (Wilson 18). In Surat, Mughal Empire's biggest port, traders often closed the shops and refused to do business unless the government met their requests. This resulted in the town's governor being replaced by a more sympathetic leader, hinting at the influence local people had over central decisions. Wilson adds that "another tactic was for crowd to halt prayers being said in mosques. The emperor's name was read out at each sermon, so preventing prayers was a way of challenging the empire's legitimacy" (Wilson 18). These accounts given by Wilson bring to light the extent of authority local people had in the matters of state during the Mughal period.

Shashi Tharoor argues that British destroyed the political system that existed during the Mughal regime in India and replaced it with indirect rule (Tharoor 50). He observes that the British centralized judicial and executive powers which earlier belonged to the domain of village communities (Tharoor 49). Tharoor rightly points out that the new form of governmental authority "represented a tiny educated elite, had no accountability to the masses, passed no meaningful legislation, exercised no real power and satisfied themselves they had been consulted by the government even if they took no actual decision" (Tharoor 49). This was due to the fact that the British did not understand Indian social structures. They merely extended the feudal system practised in Britain to the colony without learning the Indian ways of administration. They introduced 'rule of law' and parliamentary system so that it would be convenient for them to rule the whole country. According to the imperialists, by these measures, they could establish India as a unified country with a common law. When the Raj apologists claim that the British had given India political unity, they refer to this new form of governance based on hierarchy and standardisation conveniently ignoring what was good for the people. Mughal political leaders recognized India as a "society of societies" (Wilson 17). They respected the diversity of the country and thus framed their policies by incorporating all the communities in order to govern the country. The most important argument that Wilson puts forward here is that there existed no Mughal nationalism in pre-colonial India (Wilson 17). It implies that people had the freedom to lead a life, free from the fear of being tagged as anti-national. Wilson asserts the fact that even under the regime of Emperor Alamgir, popularly known as Aurangzeb who is regarded as a despot by British and Indian historians, Mughals were sympathetic to Indians and their customs. Wilson says, "the Mughal elite's intention was not to impose the will of a centralized state

through every part of Indian society” (Wilson 17). While the Mughals were trying to accommodate differences, the British were plotting plans to perpetuate them. This policy is elaborated by Tharoor as the “Divide and Rule” policy, which became the motto of British rule in India.

Shashi Tharoor argues that the British system of governance was based on the policy of “divide and rule” (Tharoor 48). According to him, the “divide and rule” policy that “instigated Indians against Indians” did more damage than any other colonial projects (Tharoor 48). This tactic divided the Indian society on the basis of differences and forced the masses to identify themselves with these differences. The society which once promoted fluid relations was changed to rigid compartments resulting in many disastrous consequences. It is ironical that Britain, which separated India, is credited as giving political unity to India in later narratives. T. K. Oommen, an Indian sociologist, comments that the “twentieth-century Indian society has been conceptualized in different ways. But the central tendency has been to characterize it as a society having unity-in-diversity and a composite culture” (Oommen14). Wilson's and Tharoor's narratives argue that it was Mughals who accepted the diversity of India. The British government established political unity in India by forcefully integrating the different communities into a homogenous group with an alien set of rules to govern them. The rules were in written form and this marked another significant shift from the Mughal ways of maintaining law.

Jon Wilson remarks that “the most pervasive legacy of empire is the imperial system of record keeping” (Wilson 3). The colonists were firm in maintaining written documents. The Company officials had to keep an account of every minute detail of events that occurred in the Indian society. This comprehensive system of recording was implemented so that the Company could keep the British parliament updated with the events of the colony. Mughals, on the other hand, did not resort to writing as “a way of recording the complex details of local circumstances, not assimilating them to a single set of rules” (Wilson 19). They maintained law and order through direct negotiations.

Mughals preferred face-to-face negotiations to written documents. Mughal power is characterised by direct contact between the ruler and the natives, and disputes were mostly settled through conversations. Also, solidarity to crown was extended verbally in a Mughal regime. The exchange of gifts between rulers and subjects ensured a mutual trust and this cemented the relationship between the ruler and the ruled. When the British tried to introduce written rules in trade relations, the system of oral nature of social relations was challenged. There were many conflicts between the British and the Mughals because of this system of record keeping. Wilson narrates one such instance in the text.

William Hedges, chief officer of the English East India Company's operation in Bengal, was well received in Dhaka by Shaista Khan, the Mughal military leader. He had come to the Mughal court to acquire a guarantee that the Company should be allowed to do trade without having to pay customs duties. In addition to this, he requested that the monopoly of the Company should be recognized by the Mughal government. Hedges also demanded that English merchants like Thomas Pitt, who were considered as illegal traders, should not get the privileges which used to be received by the Company. The Mughals were neutral brokers who supported all their subjects without any bias and this demand was rejected immediately. Conflict arose between Hedges and Shaista Khan because Hedges demanded the rights to trade to be guaranteed in writing. Mughal politics favored face-to-face negotiations and neglected written form. According to Wilson, “Hedges and the East India Company tried to assert a form of power that subverted the way the Mughal empire worked” (Wilson 29). This resulted in rivalry between the British and the Mughals which eventually paved way for the domination of British in India.

In *An Era of Darkness* and *India Conquered*, Mughals are portrayed as benevolent rulers who accepted the diversity of India. Their administration was based on the negotiation between the Mughals and local self governments. As Wilson says, “authority in Mughal India was based on the balance between trusting personal relationships and violence” (Wilson 19). Tharoor further mentions the Mughal contributions in making India a rich country during the period. He says, “they ploughed the resources of

India into the development of India, establishing and patronizing its industries and handicrafts; they brought painters, sculptors and architects from foreign lands, but they absorbed them at their courts and encouraged them to adorn the artistic and cultural heritage of their new land” (Tharoor 269).

The Mughal political world was fluid and argumentative in nature because of which rebellion was ever-present in the empire. The system was maintained by “continual favours and constant conversation” (Wilson 20). Marathas, the force from the hilly regions of western Maharashtra, were the greatest challenge to Mughal power. They were military contractors who guarded the trade routes that transported cotton, between Deccan plain and the coast. According to Tharoor, the Marathas were a powerful political force as they tried to extend their control all over India by masking their power under a Mughal emperor (Tharoor 46). He says that a Mughal administrative system, modified by the Marathas, could have ensured political unity in India prior to British conquest (Tharoor 47). Initially, the Marathas had an amiable relationship with the Mughals. Later the two forces became rivals and Marathas became prominent power in India.

Shivaji, considered as the founder of Maratha polity, is depicted in British documents as a resistance to Muslim domination. *Bakhars*, eulogies written in Marathi by Brahmins are the main source of Maratha historiography and Shivaji is treated as a divine figure who is regularly inspired by goddess Bhavani in these documents (Gordon 1). Shivaji asked Aurangzeb, the then Mughal emperor, to acknowledge his authority over Marathas' lands in return for sending around five hundred soldiers to Mughal army. Shivaji also sought a large share of land taxes from the neighbours for not inflicting harm to their areas. To negotiate these demands, Aurangzeb sent Shaista Khan to Shivaji and this turned out to be disastrous. Later, Shivaji visited the Mughal court but received no honour or respect and was treated as a mere landlord. Angered by this insult, Shivaji assumed himself as an independent Hindu king which Wilson describes as “an audacious act for a man who did not belong to the kingly Kshatriya caste” (Wilson 21). After Shivaji's death, there was a civil war in Maratha regime between people who supported Mughal empire and those who opposed them. These opposite factions were led by Tarabai, the widow of one of Shivaji's sons who opposed Mughal rule and her nephew Shahu who favoured cooperation with the Mughals.

In the works selected for the study, Marathas are portrayed as great warriors who intended to unify the country. The description of Maratha leaders and episodes from their heroic battle are provided in Wilson's work to hint at the power they possessed in pre-colonial India (Wilson 56-81). Balaji Viswanathan, who received the Persian title Peshwa or leader, was the most important bureaucrat in Shahu's regime. Earlier, the Mughal leader gave Shahu the authority to lead the Marathas. Instead of seeking the support of old Maratha leaders, Shahu established alliance with a new class of Brahmin administrators to form his regime since the Brahmin administrators were good warriors and had skills in management and accountancy. Balaji Viswanathan was one among them and Wilson describes him as a leader who had good negotiating skills and the capacity to lead men in battle (Wilson 59). It was a significant event in history when Balaji Viswanathan was leading an army to meet Kanhoji Angre.

Kanhoji Angre, the leader of the Maratha regime's sea force, was one of the most powerful figures in western Indian politics.

The English considered him a pirate, in doing so castigating him as a force of illegitimate violence and chaos in contrast to the disciplined regularity they claim to represent. The use of the word pirate was part of the East India Company's rhetoric in Britain; Britons were more likely to support retaliation against piracy than a war against a regular, legitimate state. In fact, Angre saw himself as a loyal servant of a legal power, an administrator imposing the authority of the Maratha state over sea lanes that were rightly his to control. (Wilson 57)

He is known for capturing the ship of Katherine Cooke, the widow of an English officer, for not possessing

proper documents and he marked the emergence of a new political order. The news of Balaji Viswanathan's army marching down to meet him made Angre anxious. He was not ready to face retaliations from both Shahu's army and East India Company. So Angre extended hands of friendship to the Company by freeing Katherine Cooke. However, he soon realized that the intention of the Maratha force was to persuade him to fight for the "Mughal-sponsored Maratha regime" (Wilson 59). Balaji Viswanathan's idea was to appeal to Angre's Maratha patriotism. Soon Kanhoji Angre switched sides and became "British India's greatest foe" (Wilson 60). The reconfiguration of Maratha power under Shahu, Balaji Viswanathan and Kanhoji Angre resulted in the fragmentation of Mughal power as the governmental authority slowly shifted to regional states.

Balaji Viswanathan after convincing Angre to join the Maratha forces further proceeded to negotiate with the Mughals. He wanted to ensure a stable relationship between the Mughals and Marathas. As a result, it was agreed that the Marathas would provide both money and troops to the Mughal army and in return should receive absolute control over the land in which the former ruled. This deal made the Marathas very powerful among regional leaders. Shahu's regime consolidated power in the same way as Mughals did, that is, by resorting to the local leaders. However, "the difference was that the Marathas tried to assert dominion over the sea as well as the land... they... claimed to be lords of the sea" (Wilson 66). Marathas used techniques that they learnt from Portuguese in order to control all the ships that crossed their area of authority.

The relationship of the East India Company with the western coast, where Marathas ruled, was always in a state of tension. It led to constant wars with Maratha sea forces led by Kanhoji Angre. Wilson says that these were "forgotten wars" as the historians today suggest that the 'first Anglo-Maratha War' began in 1775 (Wilson 65). British felt humiliated in the hands of Angre. At that time, "the Company failed to inflict a single defeat on the Marathas on land or sea" (Wilson 65). By portraying Marathas as victors against the British, the writer hints at the power Marathas had over the imperialists. Shashi Tharoor, on the other hand, explicitly argues that the Maratha Confederacy had the potential to bring political unity to India if the British had not interfered (Wilson 44). By giving accounts of the socio-political conditions of pre-colonial India, Wilson and Tharoor, subvert the British notion that India achieved its political unity with colonial invasion.

To conclude, analysis of the idea of India during the pre-colonial period reveals new insights about the working of the country. There has always been an effort to attain unity in India as narrated by Tharoor and Wilson. More importantly, the idea of India as a potential self government is emphasised in their narratives. In the period prior to British conquest, the administrative system was formed by rulers and local people. Also, the unique system of settling disputes and conducting face-to-face meetings ensured that the people from all over the country stayed connected to the central power. Thus, the works of Tharoor and Wilson assert the idea that India could have achieved political unity without British intervention since the country and the people have always been self dependent.

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