

CHAPTER 17

Economic Implications of Political Disintegration

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I

The disintegration of the Delhi Sultanate and the rise of regional states in the fifteenth century began in the closing years of Muḥammad Tughluq's reign (1324–51). The earliest signs of this process were the setting up of the Bahmani dynasty at Daulatabad (1347) and the rise of the Sultanate of Madurai,¹ accompanied by the rise of Vijayanagara and the reversion to independence of some other older principalities in south India.²

This process appears to have gained further momentum during Firoz Tughluq's long reign (1351–88). Not only did Bengal and Sind become independent, despite Firoz Tughluq's military expeditions against them,³ but the high degree of centralization of the Sultanate achieved under 'Alāu'ddin Khalji (1296–1316) and Muḥammad Tughluq began to loosen, and the nobles came to acquire practically untrammelled control over the incomes of their revenue assignments, which were now often allowed to be inherited by their descendants.⁴ This situation was further compounded by Firoz Tughluq's policy of employing slaves in his administration as well as in the army on an unprecedented scale. The slaves embroiled themselves in palace intrigues and created obstructions to the smooth running of administration.⁵

After Firoz Tughluq's death (1388), Khwāja Jahān, the *wazir* of the empire, practically assumed independence at Jaunpur, eventually leading to the emergence of the Sharqī Kingdom, which controlled much of the mid-Gangetic basin down to 1478.⁶ Following Timūr's invasion (1398), Malwa, Khandesh and Gujarat also became independent sultanates, founded by erstwhile Tughluq governors.⁷ In 1413, the Tughluq dynasty was replaced at Delhi by the Saiyids, whose writ in the end extended only to the immediate vicinity of the imperial capital; the rest of north-western India passed under the control of Turkish and Afghan military commanders, who turned into local potentates, and of resurgent Rajput chieftains of Rajasthan, central India and Orissa.⁸

The regimes that came to be established in the core territory of the Delhi Sultanate (Bayana, Kalpi, Badaun, etc.) as well those of the larger seceding provinces (Jaunpur, Bengal, Malwa, Khandesh, Gujarat and Deccan) were varied in character. Some of them developed

a tendency towards establishing centralized military and bureaucratic structures patterned after that of the Delhi Sultanate in its prime. This was the case, for example, with the sultanate of Gujarat, and perhaps, to a lesser extent, with the Bahmani Kingdom. Roughly from the middle of the fifteenth century, both these kingdoms possessed gunpowder artillery of a primitive type, which seems to have enabled the ruler in each of them to exercise comparatively greater control over the nobles as well as hereditary chiefs.⁹ There were others, like the Sharqi¹⁰ and Malwa sultanates,¹¹ which depended, in considerable measure, for their stability and military clout on the support of the local chiefs within the territory they laid formal claims to.

The element of religious divide in inter-state conflicts of the fifteenth century was often a matter only on the surface. How complex the situation was is shown by the claim for Rana Kumbha of Mewar made in an inscription stating that he was a Hindu sultan (*Hindu suratana*), and by his putting the name of Allah in Arabic characters on the top layers of his Victory Tower.¹² The Vijayanagara rulers also for long used the title 'sultan over Hindu rāys' (*Hindu raya suratana*) and kept in their employ a large contingent of Muslim horsemen, who were provided all facilities to perform their religious rites.¹³

The impact of these developments on the economy of the subcontinent as a whole, as well as of particular regions, is still to be studied in a systematic manner. Some features of agricultural economy as well as the pattern of internal and overseas trade of the fifteenth century are, however, discernible, at a more general plane, from Irfan Habib and Simon Digby's contributions to *The Cambridge Economic History of India*, Volume I (1982). There are also a few studies of particular regions with a focus on the fifteenth century, such as M.N. Pearson's *Merchants and Rulers of Gujarat* and M.R. Tarafdar's *Husain Shahi Bengal*. In the ensuing part of this chapter, an attempt is made to examine these features and address certain questions that arise from them regarding the economic history of the fifteenth century.

II

There is some basis for imagining that the fifteenth century witnessed the extension of cultivation in different parts of India in a significant measure. Such extension was possibly quite marked in the north-west, where the Persian wheel appears to have first emerged in the late fourteenth century and then spread by early fifteenth century all over Punjab and Sind. Colonization of fresh lands in Punjab, north-western Rajasthan and the western parts of the Gangetic Doāb by the migrating Jatt communities during the same period was, perhaps, another indication of the same phenomenon.¹⁴ Canals cut by Firoz Tughluq from the Yamuna and Sutlej would have made a similar, though more limited, impact in the region to the north-west of Delhi.¹⁵ The practice of the early Sultans of Gujarat of assigning unsettled territories to their nobles probably also contributed, at least in a limited way, to the extension of cultivation in that region during the fifteenth century.¹⁶ An extant inscription dated 21 May 1452 from a village near Ahmadabad suggests that in the Gujarat kingdom, nobles were encouraged to have wells dug within their charges.¹⁷ Again, the rule that the land grants would carry uncultivated land to the extent of half the total area granted, which possibly evolved under the Lodī sultans (1451–1526), points to a similar effort to aid the extension of cultivation in the Gangetic plain.¹⁸ An anecdote narrated by Mushtāqī suggests that under Sikandar Lodī (1489–1517), income from a *pargana* could increase radically year after year, and this could

have been made possible only by growth in cultivation.¹⁹ In the Bahmani Kingdom too, sometimes military commanders controlling particular territories were asked to bring fallow land under cultivation.²⁰ This in turn seems to agree with Fukazawa's conjecture that the expansion of *patilki* and *desai watans* or *vartans* in fifteenth-century Deccan was part of the process of an expansion of cultivation.²¹

The rise of a class of rural intermediaries, referred to in the Persian writings of the Mughal period as *zamīndārs*, was yet another important development pertaining to agrarian economy in a major part of the Indian subcontinent. These were hereditary chiefs, *rāys* and *rānas* controlling large tracts as well as village headmen identified as *khots* and *muqaddams*, who were originally accommodated within the power structure of the Delhi Sultanate during the fourteenth century. There was also created a new layer of rural intermediaries identified by Ibn Baṭṭūṭa (1333–34) as *chaudhurīs*; each one of these *chaudhurīs*, according to him, exercised jurisdiction over a nominal group of '100 villages' which was, possibly, the same as the administrative and fiscal sub-division called *pargana* in the Delhi Sultanate during the fifteenth century.²² In addition to their hereditary claims on the produce of the land, the chiefs were sometimes remunerated for services rendered through revenue-free (*in'ām*) grants.²³ On the whole, this arrangement, in one form or the other, continued to be a part of the fiscal administration in many parts of north India as well as the Deccan down to Mughal times.²⁴

Following the collapse of the central authority in the Delhi Sultanate after Firoz Tughluq's death (1388), the arrangement involving the hereditary chiefs evolved in the first half of the fourteenth century was no doubt seriously disturbed, and much instability probably prevailed for about half a century.²⁵ Ultimately, agrarian relationships seem to have returned to a pattern somewhat resembling the situation in the fourteenth century under Sikandar Lodi (1489–1517).²⁶

In the first half of the fifteenth century, a large number of chiefs designated variously as *rāy*, *zābit* and *muquddam* came to control large tracts previously administered by the officers of the Delhi sultans. Many strongholds in the Ganga-Yamuna Doāb like Kol, Etawa, Jalesar, Bhogaon, Patyali, Kampil, Khor (Shamsabad), as well as territories attached to them, came to be controlled by the chiefs. A similar situation appears to have prevailed in parts of the Punjab, the Meo territory south-west of Delhi, as also in Katehr, Awadh and districts further east. One knows from the account of Yahyā Sirhindī that these chiefs controlling *vilāyats* (regions) and *parganas* in central Doāb were coerced year after year to pay land revenue (*māl*) and some kind of additional tribute termed *khidmatī*.²⁷ In the absence of any estimates, it is difficult to speculate about the magnitude of the latter payment. One may, however, imagine that this was perhaps meant to compensate for the service the chiefs were required to render in return for *in'ām* grants held by them.

Some of the newly risen chiefs of the fifteenth century began to claim for themselves a Rajput identity.²⁸ This is, for example, suggested by the clan traditions of Ujjainias of Jagdishpur, who gained ascendancy in the tract between the Ganga and Son during Lodi rule. These traditions show that Ujjainias' claim of a Rajput origin and superior rights developed in the course of their migration in search of patronage and more productive and fertile lands, where they would try to establish their sway after ousting the existing chiefs.²⁹

In Bengal, the settlement of land revenue having been made with the chiefs controlling different tracts naturally provided them with considerable influence in the independent sultanate, established towards the middle of the fourteenth century.³⁰ The presence of a large

body of the *pāiks*, or Hindu foot-soldiers, recruited possibly through the agency of chiefs as royal bodyguards, was also a contributory factor in this.³¹ The ascent of Rāja Ganesh to the throne in 1409 was an indication of the influence that some of the chiefs of Bengal had come to wield by now.³² The exclusion of the *pāiks* from active duty by ‘Alāu’ddin Ḥusain Shāh (1493–1519) could have been aimed at curtailing the clout that the chiefs had come to wield in the Bengal Sultanate by now.³³

Sometimes, the *zamīndārī* rights were created by the sultans or their nobles as a part of their settlement with the hereditary chiefs. This was, for example, the case when Maḥmūd Begarha forced the lesser chiefs of Gujarat to accept the condition of military service in return for *bānṭh*, that is, a fourth share of the revenues of their original territories, while *talpad* that is, three-fourths of the revenues, were taken over by the state.³⁴ The rise of *zamīndār* clans appears to have had particular significance for the Sharqī Kingdom of Jaunpur. As shown by D.N.A. Kolff, the Sharqī Kingdom rested in a large measure on the support of the *zamīndār* clans of Awadh,³⁵ many of whom possibly owed their emergence as local magnates to the help and encouragement extended by the Sharqī rulers. This may be illustrated by the Sharqīs’ support to the Bachgoti Rajputs in their drive to establish themselves in Sultanpur and Rudauli *parganas* of Awadh after expelling the Lodi officials from there.³⁶

III

The disappearance or decline of the slave market was an important development of the fifteenth century that possibly reflected the changing organization and pattern of handicraft production. It is well-known that there existed a large slave market in the Delhi Sultanate, which originated mainly from the policy of successive Sultans of enslaving large numbers of ordinary men and women taken prisoner during military campaigns. As suggested by Irfan Habib, a large body of this enslaved labour power was engaged in expanding handicraft production, partly based on new skills introduced from West Asia during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries.³⁷ That this situation started changing slowly roughly from the latter half of Muḥammad Tughluq’s reign (1324–51) is suggested by the way Baranī reports his campaign in the unsettled tracts of ‘Hindustan’ (1334). It would appear that in this campaign, emphasis was laid on terrorizing the rural rebels and forcing them to part with the meagre surplus produce they could obtain rather than enslaving them. Thus there is no mention of prisoners being taken for enslavement,³⁸ which is in sharp contrast with Baranī’s own account of campaigns conducted by Balban in the same region.³⁹ Similarly, Yahyā Sirhindī also does not report large-scale enslavement during successive military campaigns undertaken by the sultans’ officers against defiant chiefs during the first half of the fifteenth century.⁴⁰

One is tempted to imagine that, for reasons yet to be explained fully, already by the end of the fourteenth century large-scale enslavement was no longer a lucrative enterprise for the sultans. The systematization of land-revenue collection over a large tract under ‘Alāu’ddin Khaljī (1296–1316) could have created the awareness in the ruling establishment that continuing enslavement of disaffected peasants could cause much loss to the state in the long run.⁴¹ Muḥammad Tughluq’s attitude of terrorizing the defiant villagers, on the other hand, was primarily aimed at forcing them to continue to work on the land and pay revenue at enhanced rates; he evidently did not see much gain in enslaving the rebels captured during his campaigns.

It is no doubt true that one of Timūr's aims in despoiling Delhi and other towns in north-western India (1398) was to capture slaves. But from Yazdī's account of the sack of Delhi, it is obvious that Timūr was mainly interested in capturing skilled personnel.⁴² That he had little use for ordinary men and women captured during the campaign in India is borne by the systematic massacre of about 100,000 of them outside Delhi on the flimsy supposition that unarmed captives could join the fighting on the side of the Delhi army.⁴³

In any case, the institution of slavery in India appears to have completely changed by the beginning of the sixteenth century. It is borne out by Bābur's account of Indian handicrafts. He speaks of large numbers of artisans organized in hereditary castes, but omits any reference to any enslaved artisan labour. Similarly, the absence of any notice of slave markets in the account of European travellers in Mughal India is indicative of the fact that the extent of slavery had undergone drastic contraction since the fourteenth century. Slave labour was no longer employed in handicraft production on a large scale. This change, which appears to have occurred during the fifteenth century, is yet to be explained adequately. Irfan Habib offers a plausible hypothesis when he suggests that it resulted from enslaved artisans gradually earning freedom to constitute new communities identified with particular professions, or, alternatively, from an increased supply of free skilled labour that led to enslaved labour (lacking the necessary incentive to produce) to be dispensed with.⁴⁴

IV

Another development of the fifteenth century, purportedly a period of political disintegration, was the apparent weakening of the money economy in the Lodi Empire. This is suggested by a shift in the collection of land revenue from cash to kind, by the prevailing low prices and wages, as well as by the debasement of the currency. J.F. Richards' explanation of this entire situation as being a consequence of the Lodi sultans' policy of weakening the position of their nobles by depriving them of hard cash is not very convincing.⁴⁵ That the decline of money economy in the Lodi Empire had something to do with the worldwide scarcity of silver is a more persuasive explanation.⁴⁶ But the question remains as to why the scarcity of silver should so directly affect the mode of revenue assessment and realization only under Ibrahim Lodi (1517–26). As indicated by the revenue list of *sarkārs* of Sikandar Lodi's reign (1479–1517), the debased Lodi currency continued to serve as the medium of revenue collection down to Ibrahim Lodi's accession (1517).⁴⁷ A more plausible explanation of Ibrahim Lodi's extraordinary order, that revenue be collected only in kind, could have been that, in view of the prevailing glut of agricultural produce, he was trying to protect the cultivators from financial loss. Such an order would have been in conformity with the spirit of *taccavi* (*taqāwī*), a loan advanced to peasants for sustaining cultivation; even a harsh ruler like Muḥammad Tughluq (1325–51) is reported to have advanced *sondhār* or *taqāwī* during and after the famine of 1334–40.⁴⁸

The pattern of India's overseas trade during the fifteenth century, when viewed from the perspective of Gujarat and Bengal, does not indicate that it was necessarily disturbed by the fragmentation of the Delhi Sultanate. As brought out by the Broach hoard, trade through Gujarat ports with West Asia as well as South-east Asia was an important source of specie coming to India, despite a worldwide scarcity of precious metals, particularly silver.⁴⁹ With silver earned through the overseas trade, the sultans of Gujarat were able to maintain a debased

but stable silver currency throughout the fifteenth century.⁵⁰ The stability of the Gujarat monetary system seems to have aroused the envy of some of the landlocked states. It is reflected in the oft-quoted remark attributed to Sultan Sikandar Lodi (1479-1517): 'While the kings of Delhi had their income from wheat and barley, the rulers of Gujarat prospered on coral and pearls imported through the eighty-four ports controlled by them.'⁵¹

A significant development of the fifteenth century with respect to the Asian maritime trade was the withdrawal of the Chinese ocean-going 'junks' from the seas west of Malacca. The vacuum thus created was apparently filled by ships owned by Gujarati merchants. They now came to play a crucial role in linking the ports in the Gulf of Cambay with the Persian Gulf and the Red Sea. From the Gujarat ports the trade in goods coming from the west as well as in those originating locally was carried to Malacca mostly in Gujarati ships.⁵² This, on the face of it, would point to a considerable expansion of Gujarat's overseas trade during the fifteenth century. The references to Gujarat's overseas trade in Portuguese accounts also show that towards the end of the fifteenth century, it was still extensive and fairly profitable. Its prosperity was to be greatly affected, however, by the Portuguese intrusion in the early part of the sixteenth century.

M.N. Pearson holds that the sultans of Gujarat were not interested in promoting overseas trade, since there was little interaction between the rulers and the merchant communities. This indifference of the rulers towards merchants, it is implicitly suggested, resulted from the fact that overseas trade was not directly important in the revenues of Gujarat, since the custom duties provided just 6 per cent of the total revenues.⁵³ From the perspective of the vigorous expansion of Gujarati overseas trade during the fifteenth century prior to the Portuguese intrusion, this proposition needs to be examined carefully. One immediately asks whether the figure, 6 per cent of the total revenues for custom duties worked out by Pearson, faithfully represents all the different kinds of gains and incomes accruing to the sultans and their nobles from the various channels of trade. If the sultans and their nobles were really so indifferent towards the merchants, how could one explain literary evidence suggesting that Sultan Mahmūd Begarha had a very protective attitude towards traders in general? He is reported to have undertaken an expedition in 1472 against the pirates of Dwarka to punish them for plundering a merchant. He went out of his way in 1487 to compensate merchants plundered by the Raja of Sirohi, and again took punitive measures in 1490 against Bahādur Gilāni, a Bahmani noble, for his harassment of the Gujarati merchant ships sailing along the coast.⁵⁴ Then there were Bahādur Shāh's energetic measures against the Portuguese, noticed by Pearson himself. It is therefore difficult to agree with his suggestion that Bahādur Shāh, who died at the hands of the Portuguese in 1537, did not attach importance to the task of protecting the mercantile interests of Gujarat.⁵⁵

V

The impact of the disintegration of the Delhi Sultanate on the economy of Bengal is again a theme that has not yet been systematically addressed. The contributions of Simon Digby in *The Cambridge Economic History of India* do carry some significant insights on this subject, but these need to be further pursued. It is, for example, important to explain what

the factors promoting the ship-building industry or the introduction of sericulture in Bengal during the fifteenth century were. The expansion of cotton textile production and emergence of several other crafts indicated by Ma Huan's list of items exported from Bengal to China need to be studied. This apparent vibrancy of Bengal economy at the beginning of the fifteenth century may possibly be connected with the stoppage of the earlier outflow of wealth to Delhi in the form of regular tribute paid by the provincial authorities.

Ma Huan's (1433) reference to the flourishing ship-building industry tends to suggest that the Bengal sea-going trade was by no means negligible, even before the great change that came in the pattern of oceanic trade following the withdrawal of Chinese shipping from Indian waters in the mid-fifteenth century. The testimony of early European travellers such as Ludovico di Varthema (1503-08), Duarte Barbosa (1518) and Tom Pires attest to the presence of a large number of Bengali merchants at Malacca, some of whom, being very rich, even owned ships. Who were these merchants and what was their role in the Bengal Sultanate are questions that remain to be answered satisfactorily. As Aniruddha Ray points out, the existence of this class of merchants is not attested to in pre-Mughal Bengali literary texts.⁵⁶

Bengal's source of silver supply during the fifteenth century is yet another aspect that needs to be investigated. Simon Digby's inference that silver might have come from China is quite plausible.⁵⁷ In this context, one should also refer to the views of M.R. Tarafdar who, basing himself on a statement of Minhaj Sirāj, assumes that metallic currency was totally absent in Bengal down to the middle of the thirteenth century and that it was, perhaps, under the sultans that coins came to circulate in Bengal as a medium of exchange.⁵⁸ But this throws up the question as to what the nature and quantum of Bengal's overseas trade was. Were Bengal's exports, particularly to China, large enough to explain the inflow of Chinese silver in substantial quantities? One can have a firm opinion in this respect only after these questions are investigated.

VI

From the broad view of the fifteenth century that the varied glimpses of the economies of the various regions allow us to form, it may be concluded that the political disintegration witnessed in the period had significant socio-economic implications, largely to the extent of making the hereditary rural potentates more influential within the existing political systems. The rise of the *zamīndār* class in a major part of the subcontinent was one important manifestation of this development. As part, or consequence, of this process, there seems to have developed a greater participation of the Hindu hereditary chiefs in the affairs of the sultanates still dominated by predominantly Muslim nobles of diverse ethnic and cultural origins.

So far as the trade and crafts are concerned, there is no firm indication that the disintegration of the Delhi Sultanate affected them in any significant way. There did take place a noticeable decline in the slave element within the workforce during the fifteenth century, but this change does not seem to have been linked to the process of political disintegration. Both in Bengal and in Gujarat, trade and commerce as well as handicrafts appear to have experienced buoyancy during the fifteenth century, when these regions were controlled by regional Sultanates.