
The evolutionary empire: demystifying state formation in Mughal South Asia (1556–1707)

SAFYA MORSHED

*Economic History Department, London School of Economics and Political Science, London, UK,
s.morshed@lse.ac.uk*

This article summarizes my thesis, which studies the impact of conflicts on the Mughal South Asian state formation in the seventeenth century. This thesis examines the relationship between states, elites, and the peasantry in the face of changing conflict intensity. It uses newly collected conflict and state-personnel data to map the evolving structure of the state, arguing that the patterns indicate a localization of the state's administration. By comparing patterns to other large early modern land empires, the text reflects on our broader understanding of the way in which conflict affected changes in state institutions, and the evolving dynamics between core and periphery.

Since Charles Tilly's (Tilly 1990) groundbreaking work on the effect of war on state development, the literature on the relationship between conflict and state capacity has expanded considerably. Yet, despite being one of the most conflict affected regions in the early modern era (Dincecco et al. 2022), precolonial South Asia has remained relatively unexplored in comparative debates. Part of the reason for the lack of attention paid to the Mughal empire is perhaps that the state has remained an enigma to many economic historians, especially as historians in an older literature have vehemently disagreed about the nature of the state (Guha 2015). Where some economic historians have argued that the state was highly centralized and fiscally extractive, a more recent literature has taken issue with this interpretation through the examination of more local sources (Hasan 2004). Whilst it seems more and more certain that the Mughal state did not have the extractive capacity it was once believed to have, there is still difficulty in reconciling this interpretation with existing sources and the wider comparative state capacity debates.

My doctoral thesis aims to shed new light on this. My research studies how conflicts affected state formation in the Mughal empire, specifically looking at the impact of rebellions and the state's institutional responses to conflict change. It shows that the precarious relationship between the state and elites (*Mansabdars* and *Zamindars*) led the government to adopt policies which prioritized local governance and empowered the local elite. By examining state-periphery relationships and their evolution over time, the thesis offers explanations for the unusual patterns of state behaviour discovered in the data. By focusing on the seventeenth century, often considered to be the state's most centralized period, my findings have implications for wider debates on the great divergence (Broadberry et al. 2015), the prevalence of the seventeenth century crisis (Parker 2013), and the symbiotic relationship between the state and the economy.

Where recent literature on Mughal state has been more qualitative, I adopt a relatively more quantitative approach to measuring the effects of conflict on state development over time. By

building or making accessible new datasets of Mughal conflicts and government officials, I map the empire's institutional transformation and identify critical periods of structural change. The first of these new datasets constructed is the Mughal Conflict dataset derived from contemporary state histories. I differentiate this from other conflict datasets on the basis of its focus on conflicts from the state perspective, and for the amount of detail the source affords. The first chapter of my thesis describes this dataset and explains why this method was most suitable for studying conflicts in South Asia where shared sovereignty with local elites was common. The second dataset I use is Athar Ali's 'Apparatus of Empire', which provides details of 10,735 official appointments in the Mughal government (Ali 1985). This is a tremendous source for the study of the seventeenth century Indian state where data has otherwise been scarce. By digitizing and cleaning Ali's carefully compiled tables, I am able to analyse the state in more detail than past literature has allowed, consequently revealing previously unseen patterns.

The data reveal some fascinating insights. For example, the second chapter of my thesis explores the institutionalized practice of rebel forgiveness, where rebellious elites (and even the peasantry) were routinely reincorporated into the state with the return of their confiscated wealth and status. I show that 45 percent of a sample of 267 rebels were forgiven, despite these rebels often engaging in violence against the state (Morshed 2023). I argue that rebel forgiveness was not indicative of weakness within the state, but a strategy to reduce administrative costs by retaining skilled administrators. Rebels' local specific skillsets made them better able to administer their localities, yet their limited ambit of influence meant they often posed a low threat to the state even if they re-engaged in rebellion. Using logistic regressions, I show that rebels of ethnicities and religions more distant to that of the Mughals' were most likely to be forgiven, indicating that local and ethnic specific skillsets were key considerations in rebel forgiveness. I demonstrate this relationship further with the use of case-studies that explore the mechanisms involved and the reasoning of the state in their decisions. For example, one case study involves Sidi Yaqut, the Mughal admiral of African descent who was essential to the defeat of the East India Company during Child's War (1686). When the state considered replacing Sidi's men, the chronicler wrote: "The chief nobles, however, submitted that only the Abyssinians and particularly those trained by Sidi Yaqut, could administer those mountainous regions, command the fort of Rahiri and keep the sea passage to the House of Allah open" (Khan 1975). Thus, the passage highlights the state's prioritization of administrator's abilities in determining their position in government.

The third chapter maps the phenomenal change in the intensity of conflicts the state faced, where the data from the Mughal Conflict Dataset indicate that wars and rebellions became more frequent but also larger in terms of the number of soldiers engaged in them. We can also see a transformation in the nature of conflicts, where the state increasingly faced rebellions from more localized elites and peasantry over time. By looking at the correlation of the timing of and frequency of famines and very large peasant conflicts, my thesis proposes the shift in conflict intensity can be explained by exogenous factors related climate as opposed to endogenous factors related to the state's extraction of peasant resources, which was an explanation previously proposed in older literature (Raychaudhuri 1982). The analysis shows that turbulence of peasant migration and desperation at the local level explains a dynamic shift between state and elite relations, where the influx of peasants on to *Zamindar* lands empowered local intermediaries fiscally and militarily.

The fourth chapter uses Ali's dataset on official appointments to look at how state expenditure on officials changed between 1570 and 1658. State expenditure on *Mansabdars* is a good proxy for understanding state capacity, where it has been estimated that in 1595 around

80 percent of state expenditure was spent on the *jagirdars*, who were the administrative and military backbone of the empire (Moosvi 2015). The results are again surprising. As expected, we see in the data an extraordinary increase in the total number of officials over time (even relative to population), yet after 1630 total expenditure on salaries practically flattens and average salaries fall significantly. I argue this pattern exhibits a localization of the Mughal state's structure in the face of greater internal conflict. The state was hiring more localized officials to increase its administrative capacity and to develop better information channels between centre and locality. Drawing on Ottoman state literature (Koh 2021), I discuss an alternative interpretation of the state's structure and take the view that larger conflicts incentivized the state to increase the number of administrators in the empire. By reducing the ambit of officials' jurisdictions of governance, the state's reach was increasingly targeted and present on the local level, allowing for more flexibility in administration.

In the last chapter, I explore the impact rebellions had on state formation in large agrarian empires by comparing the Mughal Indian experience to that of Qing China (1644–1911). The chapter highlights that despite both empires facing large internal rebellions, the institutional response to these conflicts by each state seems to have been very different, where state fiscal expansion stagnated in China in the face of peasant rebellions (Chan 2008). I suggest a possible explanation for these differences is the degree of ethnic and religious diversity in India compared to China, where because the information costs of administering diverse groups was higher in India, the Mughal empire was more dependent on the influence of intermediaries. However, this mechanism is far from proven.

The fascinating case of the Mughal state formation process bares important lessons for our understanding of centre–periphery relationships. My thesis demonstrates that in the face of increased agricultural disturbance, the empire's institutions adapted further to local conditions and environments. There was a significant expansion in the total number of government officials, but these officials were overwhelmingly from more local communities, resulting in a shift of the locus of the empire to the local level. I argue the increased incorporation of localized elite should not be considered a sign of weakness of the state, but rather as a process of consolidation. These officials became part and parcel of the state's apparatus, where their connections to local communities made them important resources for an empire increasingly grappling with internal unrest. Parcelling of control was therefore an effective tool for the government in increasing its capacity. Yet, in doing so, the state took into their employ officials with independent minds and objectives, as well as any grievances between the locals and these elites. The state apparatus thus exhibited a duality, becoming more pervasive on the local level, yet more vulnerable to loss of central control. The findings bear lessons in institutional adaption in the face of conflicts, and implications of understanding 'what' the state truly was in early modern history.

Data availability

There is no new data analysis in this article that is not already available online. Data used in my research is discussed in detail in my thesis which is available online in the LSE dissertations archive, accessible via this link: <http://etheses.lse.ac.uk/4505/>. Statistics provided have references in my published article (Morshed 2023).

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