SPECIAL ESSAY

Celebrating a Study of India's Agrarian History

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Abstract: The year 2013 marks the fiftieth anniversary of the publication of Irfan Habib's *The Agrarian System of Mughal India*. The book was a revised and enlarged version of a D. Phil. thesis submitted in 1958 at the University of Oxford, where the author had gone on a Government of India scholarship from 1955 to 1958. This Special Essay reviews and analyses the main features of a book that remains a landmark, and which, upon publication, struck even its critics as being singular in a seemingly well-worn field.

The year 2013 marks the fiftieth anniversary of the publication of Irfan Habib's *The Agrarian System of Mughal India (1556–1707)* (Habib 1963; henceforth *ASMI*). The book was a revised and enlarged version of a D. Phil. thesis submitted in 1958 at the University of Oxford, where the author had gone on a Government of India scholarship from 1955 to 1958. The subject was ambitious, not only in the width of its scope, but also because W. H. Moreland had covered the field earlier in his *Agrarian System of Moslem India* (Moreland 1929) – and Moreland had also dealt with related economic aspects in his *India at the Death of Akbar* (Moreland 1920) and *From Akbar to Aurangzeb* (Moreland 1923). The general subject had been dealt with from a nationalist point of view by Radhakamal Mukerjee in *The Economic History of India, 1600–1800* (Mukerjee 1934).

The acclaim received by Irfan Habib's 454-page book, which was printed in the same uninviting format as other academic works printed at the highly reputed G. S. Press of Madras, needs to be explained. In an immediate but long response to the book in the journal *Enquiry*, the historian Tapan Raychaudhuri prefaced a critical review with the following words:

> Once in a very long while something happens to stir the turbid and yet extensive waters of Indian historiography. The publication of Irfan Habib's *The Agrarian System of Mughal India* is generally recognised – even in the most unlikely quarters – as one of these rare occasions. (Raychaudhuri 1965)

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The reference to "unlikely quarters" was apt. Percival Spear, on the other side of the historiographical spectrum, seems to have had no hesitation in describing the work as "a brilliant achievement in breadth and depth by a still young scholar" (Spear 1965, p. 261). There was a spate of reviews, almost all favourable, in historical journals in India and abroad.

It is necessary to understand the features of a book that struck even its critics as being singular in a seemingly well-worn field. The first was its extensive scope, its attempt to cover all aspects of agrarian life, production, consumption, trade, and famine, and to go on to such issues as the layers of agrarian rights of peasants and zamindars, and the state's taxation and administrative systems – all ending, finally, in an interpretation of the process of change within the agrarian order. An integrated study of all these phenomena and inter-relationships was absent from earlier work. Secondly, there was a fundamental extension of the source-base: Habib went to an impressive range of Persian manuscripts and archival documents, travellers' accounts and modern official literature, scouring them for all kinds of information. This enabled him to establish many points of detail and meanings of technical terms, besides clarifying various modes of administrative practices, which had remained obscure or even unknown to his predecessors. In the Appendices to his book, Habib established the values of units of measures, weights, and money, which are essential for any statistical work on Mughal India. The precise and clear style of writing also helped, although the lengthy footnotes were forbidding. Finally, an approach that an Italian reviewer recognised as "a quite definitely socialist standpoint" put the book at a distance from the kinds of controversies that had engaged the nationalists and their critics in the historical arena thus far (Pignatelli 1964–65).

As I have already suggested, acclaim was tempered by criticism in the scholarly responses to *ASMI*. There was a strong view, especially among Indian historians, that conditions in Mughal India had been described by the author in much harsher terms than was warranted by the evidence; that towns then did not entirely subsist on induced trade; that the autonomy of Indian manufacture and trade had not fully been taken into account; and that the oppressive nature of the Mughal state had been overstated. These points were made in Tapan Raychaudhuri's review in *Enquiry*, and Habib's own colleague, M. Athar Ali, took issue with him on the question of excessive exploitation and peasant revolts (Athar Ali 1966, pp. 89–92). As for his thesis of agrarian crisis, there was no direct critique of it immediately, and I was, perhaps, the first to seek some modifications in it (Moosvi 1985, pp. 45–55). J. F. Richards, in his New Cambridge History of India volume, *The Mughal Empire*, after fairly accurately describing Habib's argument, rejected it *in toto*, but more on the basis of statements made *ex cathedra* than by demonstration from contrary evidence (Richards 1993, pp. 291–92).

There was another aspect to the response following the publication of *ASMI*: its impact on Marxist historiography. Habib was already a Communist when he went

to England in 1955, and it is likely that his choice of subject for his doctoral thesis was influenced by his personal espousal of Marxism. The thesis itself, however, is an attempt to describe the agrarian situation in Mughal times with a view to finding out how and where it would fit in a Marxist framework, rather than a direct application of the conventional Marxist framework to the historical situation. This is evident by its abjuring such hallowed terms of the Marxist lexicon as "feudalism" or the "Asiatic mode of production," though a concern with the class order and inter-class conflicts is omnipresent. Habib's own position was that the latter were at the base of the real historical issues, and finding a niche for a particular social order in the standard Marxist scheme of modes of production was, for him, a secondary issue. This was brought out sharply in an article he wrote in 1969, titled "Problems of Marxist Historical Analysis" (Habib 1969a). An international debate on the potentialities of capitalism in pre-modern non-European societies had given him the opportunity to examine a range of issues concerning the Indian economy in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, from forms of labour in agriculture and manufacture to systems of banking, credit, and insurance, much of the material being based on his own researches. His conclusion was that the economy had a large sector of commodity production and a high degree of monetisation, yet without any noticeable potentiality of capitalist development (Habib 1969b and 1971). Looking at his later work, one wonders why, in this seminal article, Habib overlooked the absence of "primitive accumulation" as a major argument in favour of his thesis. He did consider whether the "price revolution," an idea first raised in current Indian historiography by *ASMI* (Habib 1963, pp. 392–94), could have brought about a shift of wealth into the hands of Indian "proto-capitalists," and his conclusion, though rather summarily given, was in the negative. Subsequently, he greatly modified his estimates of the rise in prices as given in *ASMI* – especially in a paper titled "A System of Trimetallism in the Age of the Price Revolution," published in *The Imperial Monetary System of Mughal India*, edited by J. F. Richards (Richards [ed.] 1987, pp. 137–70).

Habib's continual study of Karl Marx's numerous, though scattered, comments on India, and his essay on "Marx's Perception of India," published in the first issue of *The Marxist*, the theoretical organ of the Communist Party of India (Marxist), showed the importance he attached to Marx's thought (despite caveats with regard to details and even some reinterpretations) as the key to an understanding of Indian history (Habib 1983). On the other hand, the picture he drew of Mughal or pre-British India from his study of Marx's comments, notably from the seminal passage in *Capital*, Volume I (Marx 1887, p. 351), was quite different from those drawn of "Oriental despotism" or the "Asiatic mode" by Karl Wittfogel (1957) and Eric Hobsbawm (1964). One can argue that Habib is now, in effect, close to accepting a (or, rather, his!) modified version of the Asiatic mode as applicable to the Mughal Indian economy (see Moosvi 1995, pp. 62–67).

It was a matter of surprise to many that Irfan Habib did not let *ASMI* be reprinted or issued in a revised edition for as many as 36 years, so that the original edition of

1963 soon became a rarity. It is possible that partly this had to do with complications that arose in the business of the original publishers, Asia Publishing House of Bombay, and the unwillingness of the original sponsors, the Department of History of Aligarh Muslim University, to finance a second edition. The real reason, however, I suspect, was that the author had begun to accumulate a large amount of additional material, an unending process to which he refers in his preface to the second edition. Other academic commitments played their part in the delay as well. These included co-editorship of *The Cambridge Economic History of India*, Volume I (Raychaudhuri and Habib [eds.] 1982); preparation of *An Atlas of the Mughal Empire* (Habib 1982), a work that involved enormous industry; controversies over neo-colonial interpretations of modern Indian economic history, which led to three major essays, published in 1975, 1984, and 1988 (reprinted in Habib 1995a, pp. 258–366); and the work begun in the 1980s, jointly with his son Faiz Habib, on ancient Indian geography. Alongside all this there was also continuous trade union work (among low-paid employees) and a largely self-imposed burden of teaching work. The peremptory removal of Habib, in 1996, from all (honorary since 1994) association with the Department of History of Aligarh Muslim University, freed him from the latter burden. This surely proved to be an unintended boon to medieval Indian studies, since it enabled him to devote himself to the finishing touches to the second edition of *ASMI*, which Oxford University Press (India) published in 1999.

The 548-page reincarnation of *ASMI* is nearly 100 pages longer than the original edition. A very large amount of information has been added from a huge mass of new evidence, and practically all the evidence used earlier has been critically re-examined, and large portions of the text extensively rewritten. The main structure of the original edition has been retained, except for Chapter IV ("Village Community"), which has been entirely recast and greatly enlarged. Such an enormous effort at updating the work merits due appreciation; in addition, there are new ideas and important modifications of the older interpretation that need to be noted. Some of these are identified in what follows, not necessarily in the order of their importance.

The discerning reader will notice that, in Chapter 1, "Agricultural Production," the information on agricultural technology is much richer and more surely handled than in the first edition. Much of this is due to the attention Habib has paid since the late 1960s to the history of technology, ancient and medieval.

In his preface to the second edition, Habib writes that in view of "the additional information" he has collected (notably, it would appear, from the rich collection of documents from Vrindavan), "my views on the nature of the village community have changed substantially." This can be seen best by juxtaposing the two passages quoted below, one from the first edition and the other, which has replaced the earlier version, from the second edition.

> Commodity production, or production for the market, led to economic stratification within the peasantry. As the distinction between the richer peasants and the rest grew . . . the richer peasants would begin to dominate over others within the Community. . . . After a time in some cases the survivals of the Community might fade away altogether. (Habib 1963, pp. 128–29)

> The community, by sustaining village sufficiency, enlarged the surplus, and made its realisation easier; the [village] oligarchs as controllers of the community mechanism became petty sharers in the surplus; but it was the Mughal ruling class, to which the major share of the surplus went in the form of tax, that was the ultimate beneficiary. All the three elements formed in normal times a cohesive exploitative whole. (Habib 1999, pp. 159–60)

In a footnote (Habib 1999, p. 160, fn 64), the author makes it clear that he is no longer arguing that "the growth of differentiation and the existence of an internal oligarchy were signs of the disruption and decline of the community." Surprisingly, no one seems to have noticed that this understanding is not only contrary to what Habib had earlier held but in contradiction with practically every other theory of the village community, with the possible exception of Marx's, which did see the community as a supporter of "despotism" (based on the tax–rent equivalence) and itself tarnished by inequality.

In Chapter 7 ("Revenue Assignments") of the second edition, Habib is able to establish the practice of *jagir* transfers by means of references not only to general statements in texts, but also to records relating to as many as four localities in different regions of the Mughal empire (Habib 1999, pp. 301–02). These data also show that there was no difference in such matters between the centre and the periphery of the empire.

What Habib evidently regards as his core thesis, "The Agrarian Crisis of the Mughal Empire," which forms Chapter 9 of the book, has largely remained the same, with information added to make it that much richer. The same argument is again put forward, with quotations from successive writers, that things were getting worse as compared to previous times (*ibid.*, pp. 371–73). But a caveat is now inserted: "One has to take into account the universal propensity to contrast the grim present with a rosier past" (*ibid.*, p. 371). More importantly, there is now an explicit recognition of the ideological backwardness of the rebelling peasants. In a paragraph inserted near the end of the chapter, we are told:

> If peasant distress was at the root of these rebellions that shook the Mughal Empire to its foundations, the rebellions themselves represent a historical paradox in that the alleviation of such distress nowhere forms part of the rebels' proclaimed objectives or of their actual deeds and measures. . . . The weakness of the Indian peasants' consciousness, an elementary failure on their part to recognise a peasant brotherhood, out of a welter of castes and religious sects, calls for reflection. (*Ibid.*, pp. 404–05)

Despite this newly inserted and sombre thought, Habib ends with a passage from Mao Zedong on peasant revolts and a verse from Saʿdi on the oppression of the peasantry, retained in their entirety from the first edition. The spirit is still unbent, the faith in class struggle still unshaken.

Since the second edition carries the same title as the first, and "revised" is not a sufficient indication of the enlargement and changes carried out, it has not had the impact that one might have expected. Very few journals in India, and none abroad, have cared to review it. The important new interpretation of the village community has gone largely unnoticed, not to speak of the numerous refinements introduced in the formulations of the first edition. The fact, however, that the publishers issued a paperback edition the very next year of its publication, and that there have been at least eight reprints since then, suggests that the book has an increasing number of readers (despite the lack of translation of the revised edition into any of the Indian languages) and is bound to make its influence felt on Indian historiography.

To ask whether more could have been expected from the second edition may seem to be an ungracious question, but is surely an appropriate one in any academic discourse. One aspect in which the second edition of *ASMI* offers no improvement on the first edition is on the question of gender. It continues with the unspoken assumption that one can ignore the treatment meted out to women as being outside the scope of agrarian history. This is all the more surprising since Habib himself wrote a pioneering essay, "Exploring Medieval Gender History," for the Indian History Congress in 2000, just a year after the appearance of the second edition of *ASMI*. He made two important points in the essay: first, the exploitation of women in medieval India often took the form of assigning them some of the hardest forms of manual labour, such as flour-milling, carrying bricks, and spinning (which causes great strain to the fingers); secondly, the sub-exploitation of women by men of the exploited classes was a major ideological means of binding the men to the existing social order. Neither of these two points is touched upon in the second edition of *ASMI*.

Another grouse one could have is related to Habib's avoidance of any direct debate with his critics. While he is punctilious in acknowledging any contribution to the subject under consideration, in however minor a detail (for example, see the note on *mawas*; Habib 1999, p. 379), this courtesy is not always extended to scholars who tend to disagree with him on major issues. In his preface he explains that this is due to limitations of space; he has offered his evidence, so let the reader decide between him and his critics (whom, in most cases, the reader is left to trace for himself). A rare exception is a reference to Sanjay Subrahmanyam in a footnote (*ibid.*, p. 448) to a discussion of the "price revolution." The points raised by Tapan Raychaudhuri in his long critique, published in *Enquiry* (Raychaudhuri 1965), are not directly addressed, and his paper does not appear in the book's Bibliography. Other critics, like M. Athar Ali and J. F. Richards, do appear in the Bibliography, but their views, as well as mine, on the agrarian crisis have not been deemed worthy of explicit notice in the book.

At the end of the day, however, these are trivial complaints compared with what has been achieved. To borrow a phrase from a review of the first edition of *ASMI* by Habib's supervisor at Oxford, Colin C. Davies (Davies 1965), "a colossal task" has been done, now twice over -- and this can only be celebrated.

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