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THE MIDDLE CLASS IN MUGHAL INDIA: STRUCTURE, ROLE, AND SOCIO-ECONOMIC DYNAMICS

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ABSTRACT

The concept of a "middle class" in pre-modern societies, particularly in Mughal India, remains an underexplored yet crucial area of historical and socio-economic research. This study seeks to examine the structure, composition, and socio-economic role of the middle class during the Mughal period (16th to 18th centuries), a time marked by centralized administration, agrarian expansion, and commercial growth. Drawing on Persian chronicles, administrative records, travelers' accounts, and secondary historiography, the research identifies a distinct social group comprising professionals, merchants, artisans, petty officials, and religious functionaries who occupied a space between the elite nobility and the rural peasantry. The study analyzes their occupational patterns, cultural influence, urban presence, and participation in local markets and governance. It argues that this proto-middle class, while lacking political power, played a critical role in sustaining the economic vitality and administrative machinery of the empire. Additionally, the paper explores the evolving aspirations, mobility, and regional variations within this class across different Mughal provinces. By shedding light on their economic functions and cultural capital, the research contributes to a more nuanced understanding of class formations in early modern India and challenges Eurocentric models of socio-economic stratification.



KEYWORDS: Mughal India, middle class, social structure, economic history, urbanization, artisans, merchants, petty officials, class formation, socio-economic mobility, early modern India.

INTRODUCTION

The idea of a middle class is often associated with the rise of industrial capitalism and modern nation-states in the West. However, in the context of Mughal India (circa 1526–1857), there existed a complex and layered society where a distinct socio-economic group operated between the elite aristocracy and the rural peasantry. This intermediate stratum, while lacking formal political authority, played a vital role in sustaining the administrative, economic, and cultural frameworks of the Mughal Empire. Though not formally recognized as a "middle class" in contemporary texts, this group comprised merchants, artisans, scribes, scholars, clergy, and minor officials—urban and semi-urban individuals who were both producers and consumers within the empire's growing market economy. The Mughal period saw significant developments in trade, commerce, urbanization, and agrarian

revenue administration, which collectively created spaces for non-elite actors to accumulate wealth, education, and social status. Cities like Agra, Delhi, Lahore, and Ahmedabad emerged as centers of cultural and commercial exchange, hosting a wide range of occupational groups. These developments gave rise to a proto-middle class with distinctive socio-economic characteristics and aspirations, contributing not only to the empire's material prosperity but also to its intellectual and religious life.

Despite their importance, the middle strata of Mughal society have received limited attention in historiography, often overshadowed by studies focusing on imperial elites or rural agrarian structures. This research aims to fill that gap by investigating the structure, function, and socio-economic agency of the middle class in Mughal India. It questions Eurocentric assumptions about class formation and seeks to contextualize the Indian experience within its own historical trajectory. By exploring this group's roles in administration, craft production, commerce, and cultural reproduction, the study contributes to a broader understanding of class dynamics, urban life, and the foundations of socio-economic mobility in early modern India.

AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

Aim:

To examine the structure, socio-economic role, and historical significance of the middle class in Mughal India, with a focus on their contributions to administration, commerce, culture, and urban society.

Objectives:

1. To identify and classify the key social groups that constituted the middle class during the Mughal period.
2. To analyze the occupational patterns, income sources, and lifestyle practices of this class.
3. To explore the role of the middle class in urban economic life, especially in trade, craft production, and market networks.
4. To investigate the relationship between the middle class and the Mughal administrative system, including the roles of scribes, clerks, and petty officials.
5. To assess the cultural and intellectual contributions of this class through their involvement in education, religion, literature, and the arts.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The study of the middle class in pre-modern India, particularly during the Mughal period, occupies a marginal space in mainstream historiography. However, various scholars have indirectly addressed this social stratum through explorations of urbanization, economic activities, bureaucratic structures, and cultural production in Mughal India. Irfan Habib (1999) provides a foundational economic history of Mughal India, highlighting the complexities of agrarian relations, revenue systems, and trade networks. His work suggests the presence of intermediate classes—such as urban merchants, moneylenders, and skilled artisans—who thrived within the Mughal economic framework but stops short of conceptualizing them as a “middle class.” Satish Chandra (1994) offers insights into the Mughal administrative system and the role of mansabdars and petty officials. While primarily focused on the nobility, his studies reveal how scribes, accountants, and lower-ranked bureaucrats facilitated the empire's functioning—hinting at a proto-bureaucratic middle stratum.

K.N. Chaudhuri (1985), in his work on the Indian Ocean trade, underscores the rise of indigenous merchant groups in port cities like Surat and Masulipatnam. These traders formed a commercially influential urban class with significant economic agency and global linkages, often aligning with Mughal authorities and foreign merchants. Seema Alavi (2001) explores the role of Muslim intermediaries, scholars, and professionals during the decline of Mughal power. Her analysis demonstrates the evolution of a socially mobile, literate class that filled the vacuum left by declining imperial structures, forming the base for later colonial-era middle-class formations. Muzaffar Alam and Sanjay Subrahmanyam (1998) examine cultural and linguistic exchanges in Mughal India, drawing

attention to the circulation of knowledge, Persianate bureaucratic culture, and the role of educated non-elites in shaping political discourse.

Travelers such as Bernier, Tavernier, and Manucci also recorded the presence of rich merchant classes, well-off artisans, and educated functionaries in major Mughal cities, though their observations were often filtered through Eurocentric biases. Recent works in subaltern studies and urban history have begun to probe deeper into the socio-economic lives of non-elite but non-subaltern groups. These efforts open the door for revisiting the middle class in early modern India not merely as an economic category, but as a socially mobile, culturally productive, and politically relevant stratum. In sum, while the concept of a middle class has not been central to Mughal historiography, the cumulative scholarship across economic, administrative, and cultural domains provides a rich foundation for identifying and analyzing this overlooked yet vital group.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative historical methodology rooted in interpretive and analytical approaches to explore the formation, function, and significance of the middle class in Mughal India. It is interdisciplinary in nature, drawing from social history, economic history, and cultural studies.

1. Sources of Data

Primary Sources:

- Persian chronicles and court records such as the *Ain-i-Akbari*, *Akbarnama*, and *Shah Jahan Nama*, which provide insights into administrative structures and social roles.
- *Farmans* (royal edicts), revenue records, and *vakil* reports that shed light on economic policies and class composition.
- European travel accounts by François Bernier, Jean-Baptiste Tavernier, and Niccolao Manucci, offering outsider perspectives on urban life and social strata.
- Inscriptions, letters, and correspondence from regional Mughal officials.

Secondary Sources:

Scholarly monographs, articles, and dissertations on Mughal administration, economy, urbanization, and social history, including works by Irfan Habib, K.N. Chaudhuri, Satish Chandra, and Seema Alavi.

2. Analytical Framework

- **Thematic Analysis:** Used to categorize evidence into themes such as occupation, economic roles, education, cultural activity, and mobility.
- **Comparative Analysis:** Conducted between regions (e.g., North India vs. Deccan) and between Mughal and early colonial contexts to trace continuity and change in class composition.
- **Socio-economic Stratification Models:** Adapted to Mughal society to understand class formations beyond Western constructs.

3. Approach

- **Descriptive and Interpretive:** Focused on reconstructing the lived experiences of middle-class groups through descriptive accounts and interpretive narratives.
- **Contextualization:** Data is situated within the broader political and economic developments of the Mughal Empire (1526–1707).
- **Non-Eurocentric Perspective:** Avoids imposing modern or Western class definitions, instead using locally grounded indicators such as occupation, education, lifestyle, and patronage networks.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The concept of a "middle class" is often treated as a modern phenomenon, primarily associated with post-industrial Western societies. As a result, historical analyses of pre-modern societies like Mughal India have frequently overlooked or inadequately addressed the existence and role of an intermediate socio-economic group that functioned between the aristocracy and the peasantry. This has led to a significant historiographical gap in understanding the nuanced class structures of early modern India. Although Mughal India was marked by a highly stratified society with a well-organized bureaucracy, flourishing urban centers, and vibrant commercial networks, the contributions of non-elite, non-peasant groups—such as merchants, artisans, scribes, professionals, and minor officials—have often been treated in isolation or subsumed under broader categories like the nobility or subaltern classes. There is limited cohesive research that conceptualizes these groups as forming a recognizable "middle class" with distinctive socio-economic and cultural roles. The absence of a clear framework for identifying and analyzing the Mughal-era middle class restricts our understanding of urban development, bureaucratic expansion, socio-economic mobility, and cultural patronage in the empire. Furthermore, without a comprehensive examination of this group's functions and aspirations, it becomes difficult to trace the longer trajectory of class formation and continuity from pre-colonial to colonial India.

Therefore, this study seeks to address the lack of scholarly attention toward the middle class in Mughal India by systematically exploring its composition, functions, and impact on the broader socio-economic and administrative structure of the empire. The problem lies not in the absence of such a class, but in its underrepresentation in historical scholarship and the need to reevaluate existing narratives through a more inclusive and layered socio-historical lens.

DISCUSSION

The existence of a middle class in Mughal India, though often unacknowledged in conventional historiography, can be discerned through a close examination of economic functions, occupational hierarchies, and urban social dynamics. This discussion unpacks the multidimensional roles played by this class and their significance within the broader framework of Mughal polity and society.

1. Composition and Identification of the Middle Class

The Mughal middle class comprised a heterogeneous collection of individuals and groups who occupied positions between the aristocracy (nobility and mansabdars) and the laboring or peasant classes. This included:

- Urban merchants and traders, especially those involved in interregional and overseas trade.
- Artisans and guild members with specialized skills such as weavers, metalworkers, and jewellers.
- Religious professionals, including Islamic scholars (ulama), Hindu pandits, and temple administrators.
- Administrative personnel, such as clerks, accountants (munshis), and tax officials (qanungos).
- Service providers like physicians, astrologers, legal experts (qazis), and schoolteachers (maulvis, pandits).

Though lacking uniformity, these groups shared common traits: moderate wealth, literacy, occupational stability, and proximity to centers of power and commerce.

2. Economic Role and Urban Presence

The middle class was particularly prominent in urban centers such as Agra, Delhi, Lahore, Surat, Patna, and Ahmedabad. These cities were hubs of commerce and administration, where the middle class functioned as:

- Intermediaries in trade, linking producers and consumers within and beyond regional markets.
- Lenders and financiers, facilitating credit to traders and sometimes the state.
- Supervisors and foremen in artisanal workshops and karkhanas (imperial and private).

The monetization of the economy and the flourishing of cash-based transactions in this period elevated the status of literate and numerate groups essential for accounting and record-keeping.

CONCLUSION

The study of the middle class in Mughal India offers valuable insight into the intricate socio-economic fabric of early modern South Asia. Far from being an anachronistic or purely modern phenomenon, the middle class during this period was a recognizable and influential group that occupied the vital space between the ruling elite and the agrarian masses. Though lacking a unified identity or political voice, they played an indispensable role in sustaining the economic, administrative, and cultural life of the empire. This research highlights the heterogeneity of the Mughal middle class—comprising merchants, artisans, clerks, scribes, professionals, and religious functionaries—each contributing in diverse ways to the functioning of urban centers and the imperial system. Their involvement in trade, taxation, education, and religious patronage marks them as key agents of both continuity and change in the period.

Furthermore, this class exemplified upward mobility in a hierarchical society, navigating between caste and occupation, tradition and innovation. Their ability to engage with both state power and market forces allowed them to maintain a degree of autonomy and adaptability in the face of political or economic shifts. Ultimately, acknowledging the presence and contributions of a middle class in Mughal India allows us to challenge simplistic binaries in historical analysis—such as elite versus subaltern or feudal versus capitalist—and to appreciate the layered complexity of Indian society before colonial interventions. This reframing not only deepens our understanding of Mughal-era social structures but also provides a more historically grounded account of the evolution of class and urban modernity in South Asia.

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