



French writings on the downfall of the Mughal Empire: the writings of Law de Lauriston and Comte de Modave

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Abstract

The copious writings of the French adventurers active in north India in the 18th century in various pursuits not only widen our comprehension of the decline of the Mughal Empire but also provide fresh insights into the way this phase has been seen hitherto. The present article attempts to even out this lopsided existence of 18th-century Mughal history due to the French language constraints and overreliance on English sources. The article, therefore, looks at historical developments in the 18th century through Law de Lauriston and Comte de Modave's memoirs *Mémoire sur quelques affaires de l'Empire Mogol (1756-1761ⁱ)* and *Voyage en Inde du Comte de Modave 1773-1776ⁱⁱ* respectively. These French memoirs are seminal in scope and impact for being first-hand eyewitness accounts of the crisis of the Mughal Empire and also for their exceedingly limited use as historical sources.

Introduction

The un-translated French writings on 18th-century India not only complement and enhance our knowledge about the historical developments of the period but also provide fresh perspectives on it. These accounts may have some limitations; nonetheless, they do provide enough academic material to recrystallize our views on ever-growing slackening of the Mughal Empire. Various scholars of the past and contemporary times, namely, Jean Marie Lafont, Shelford Bidwell, H. G. Keene, C. Grey, Herbert Crompton, G.B. Malleson, S.P. Sen, Lester Hutchinson, Inayet Ali Zaidi, and Uma Shanker Pandeyⁱⁱⁱ, have examined French adventurers' presence in India from multiple perspectives.

The present study explores and analyses the Mughal Empire's decline through the eyes of French travellers Law de Lauriston (henceforth Lauriston) and Comte de Modave (henceforth Modave). Their writings, being the eye-witness accounts, delve deeply into the complexities of the crisis and account a wide range of factors responsible for it.

Lauriston, who was director of French trade at Kasimbazar from 1747 to 1757 had a significantly mobile life in India. The loss of Chandernagor and other French establishments to the English after the battle of Plassey, compelled Lauriston to travel into the interiors of India with a retinue of 175 Europeans and 100 Indian sepoy. In north India, he was soon employed by Shah Alam II, the Mughal Emperor, as *mir atish* of artillery. Before the western military science could be effectively implemented in Mughal army, Shah Alam II was overwhelmed by the English in 1761 resulting in the imprisonment of Lauriston. After myriad vicissitudes, Lauriston reached France, only to be resent as governor in 1764 with the aim of recapturing the lost French stations in India from the English.^{iv} Modave, on the other hand, had a military background before venturing out to India. He spent a total of nine years in India, from 1757 to 1759, 1761 to 1764, and 1773 to 1777. In 1757, he joined Lally-expeditionary Tollendal's army and set off for India. During the collapse of English fort Saint David and the capture of Madras, he showed himself to be a competent soldier. He was given the rank of Colonel. He was a multi-dimensional character with a career of a soldier, writer, historian, traveller and trader. In his last journey to India, he travelled from Chandernagore to Faizabad in the principality of Shuja-ud-Daulah, which was surrounded by many French adventurers most of whom were patronized by Colonel Gentil. He was employed by Shuja-ud-Daulat at a monthly salary of four thousand rupees. He helped in the militarization process of Awadh army with the support of other French adventurers called *partis français*. However, after the death of the Nawab, the English essentialized the expulsion of the French from Awadh. Modave, then, decided to travel to Delhi, and along the way, he encountered another French adventurer, Madec near Agra, who was the commander of the Mughal general Najaf Khan's irregular army. Modave arrived in Delhi in April 1775 and obtained a lucrative position in the Imperial service owing to high contacts of Madec. Modave was appointed at a monthly salary of 2,500 rupees in addition to 200 rupees for his writer and 248 rupees for his primary servant. Writing about the state of affairs in Mughal polity, Modave mentions that the authorities found it difficult even to pay declared emoluments to their foreign employees. Modave writes that he was never paid even half of what he was entitled to, and if he protested, he was instructed not to worry about little things that caused him pain. As a result, he joined Madec's service in Bari, where he would have been paid on the *jagir* granted to Madec by the Mughal general. It is only after utter disappointment that Modave decided to leave Hindustan and go to the Deccan. Modave travelled to Hyderabad in quest of employment after leaving Madec in July 1776. Modave attempted to accept Nizam Ali's service in Hyderabad and asked the governor of Pondicherry to support his plea. He was dismayed, however, when Nizam Ali was unable to engage him due to resistance from the Council of Madras. Finally, he arrived to the camp of Basalat Jang, who promised him a salary of 600 rupees. He intended to lure Nizam Ali by creating a small well-equipped military unit, but was unable to do so owing to lack of funds. He subsequently proceeded to Masulipatam, where he died of illness on December 24, 1777. Modave was a keen observer of things and a passionate learner. He specifically mentioned that he would not account for anything which was not integral to authenticity. Modave presented a poignant view of Mughal affairs when he wrote "on the debris of this vast empire rises a ghost without real power and without money which only sees around itself feigned respect and

ridiculous prostrations". It was clearly reflective of the general picture of the decadence of the Mughal power.

Assessment of Mughal Downfall

State of Mughal Court

Another French adventurer, Boigne presented a contrasting view of 18th-century Mughals to that given by Bernier of the seventeenth century. Lauriston and Gentil also described the grandeur and glorification of Mughal court, but they also described its deteriorating changes after Aurangzeb's death. Modave sheds light on the declining state of monarchy when he says, "the Court does not have magnificence any more. The spectacle pomp of the audiences of Aurengzeb that Bernier describes us with such an amount of pleasure and exactitude was replaced by the strangest parsimony which is born from a real misery and not of a weakening in the taste of external pomp". The carriers of the supply of money had yielded the place to "a hundred or so of beggars armed with large sticks" and "this throne of solid gold and studded by heaps of precious stones of a priceless price is replaced by a gilded wooden armchair which must constantly remind to this inactive prince who fills it with the visit that Nadir Shah made into Delhi. The Court is a manifestation of indigence and lowness which was earlier so impressive and opulent. I can only let myself admire the astonishing contrast of pride and misery that it presents at the first aspect". Modave then detailed the miserable condition of the emperor, who received only five rupees per day for his subsistence. Even his birthday and melon festival were not celebrated with any grandeur. Thereafter, the adventure described the misery of *shahzadas*, princes of royal blood, who were locked up in a district of the citadel and used to get a pitiful irregular pension. These men in the moment of financial and food shortage died literally of hunger and revolted in vain.

Reflecting on the nature of Mughal polity, Lauriston postulated that the Mughal government was despotic and military by its constitution, which was nearly the same in all the Oriental countries. The law was made by the whims and fancies of the Emperor and who gave orders to the army of the state to act, the Vizir, *Mir Bakshi* or general of the armies, *Mir Atish* or head of the artillery, the prince of the blood having the big provinces or viceroy, under them were the governors, commanders and the ministers humbly subjugated to the order flow out from the channel of the Vizir. This spirit was maintained to follow the emperor's orders, and sometimes the precautions were taken to make the orders followed in the vast empire. All the fortresses in some provinces were dependent only on the emperor who placed there a *qiladar* with some troops independently of those of *faujdar*. The family of *qiladar* resided in Delhi, Agra or other places close to the court, does not have any order to receive from the viceroy of the province and watch only the safety of the place. Lauriston also tried to show the high-handedness in the administration of the Mughals and the methods which were used to control the Rajas of the provinces. According to him, the over-centralization or absolution could lead to the downfall of any empire. The French adventurers highlighted some changes in the judicial system in India in this period, pointing out that due to weak governance, it always lacked efficiency. Lauriston mentioned that the *mullahs* had the right to inspect the religious affairs: "*Cady* (Qazi) had the civil cases, *Quatwal* had

the criminal cases and all three show up to the Daroga of Adalat or superintendent of the justice who resided near the Subahdar, but on which the Viceroy do not have the authority. The emperor had himself the authority to examine the conduct of Daroga of Adalat and was also given the account by the commissioner that he made to pass from time to time in each soubah". Lauriston raised a question of how the people in this state of government could be happier for long as this state of happiness was for a brief period because the government was bound to change. According to him, there was no court of justice in the country and the one who was powerful to protect the weak was the repository of the law. He also stated that the anarchy which prevailed after the death of Aurangzeb led to the decline of judicial system. Lauriston claimed to have seen a book of civil rules and maxims of the Jats, written in their language and thought that the Marathas, the Rajputs and other Hindus had the same rules, but he was not sure if these rules carried the force of law. Modave underscored the corruption which had permeated judiciary in the said period. He wrote, "the administration of justice is all the more simplified that the lawsuits are very rare in a country where there is not, strictly speaking, any propriety. One finds in the big cities one or more judges who settle all the disputes summarily. Each pleads to oneself his cause and provides his witnesses and his other means of defense. It is true that mutilation is not rare there. One sees many people without a nose, ears and wrists. They are public robbers who passed under the sword of justice". Modave further wrote, "The weakness of the government in Hindustan is so large that those whom law cannot protect make justice themselves with whatever little means and authority they muster. This adventurer further mentioned that capital punishment was rare, but mutilations were rather frequent in the villages. The abuses were common and the people of cities could hardly hope to receive the protection of the police force. Punishments were constantly sought to be made less severe and sometimes, the culprits remained unpunished. Such signs of weakness in the judicial administration became quite pronounced in the 18th century.

Declining Commercial Situation

The commercial importance of Delhi declined after the fall of Mughal Empire which was reflected in the adventurer's records of the 18th century. Madec said that Delhi was more beautiful and rich of the Hindustan. But he noted that Delhi is in a more bad state than Agra, it had only some mausoleums that remained in their entirety but which fell into ruins for want of maintenance. The emperor's palace is in the fort and is in a bad state. Modave said regarding Delhi that "Formerly when Delhi was the seat of splendid and opulent Court, the trade succeeded in this city as at its centre. It was the principal place of the pay from abroad. One transported there from all parts a multitude of food products or goods of which debit was always assured. It enters yet well for his portion the general trade of Hindustan, but the consumption which made is decreased considerably there, by a necessary continuation of the decline of the empire. Delhi drew from Gujrat and Surat all kinds of fabrics where gold and silver are employed, as well as clothes and other goods of Europe and of Arabia. The caravans carried several times each year from Surat to Delhi. They employed 46 days in their journey and their effects were being charged on carts and camels. Delhi drew, in addition to the goods of Europe and the productions of this rich country, silk trade of China, grocers of Molucques, the cinnamon of Ceylon and fabrics of Orissa and

Coromandel which it needed". This grand trade declined after Aurangzeb due to the assaults of the anarchy and foreign attacks followed by Anglo-French rivalry, which was disastrous for this region.

French Adventurers perceptions of Mughal decline

Modave described the religious bigotry of Aurangzeb as the reason for Mughal decline, he said, "Aurangzeb was an excessively pious person most ridiculously superstitious who professed the Muhammadan religion. This prince had an atrocious heart which, however, did not miss grandeur. He made die his brothers, his nephews and retained until death Shah Jahan, his father, in a rigorous prison. These features show enough the atrocity of its character." After the death of Aurangzeb his successors followed his example and each interregnum always became the time of terrible shocks, which prepared the dissolution of this vast and rich empire.

Under Mughals all his subordinates wanted to detach themselves, but in theory all *subadars* recognized the emperor as their master. Moreover, they acted as if they were completely independent and do not pay revenues and wait for the occasion to shake the foundations of the state and to be the crown himself. In the Mughal region, if the prince conceited of his immense richness which he possessed and flattered by the courtiers, leave to care of all the business of the ministers, then they can invite foreign power to attack as Nizam-ul-Mulk, subahdar of Deccan, invited Nadir Shah who seized Delhi and looted its treasure. Gentil described the massacre of Delhi by Nadir Shah, who gave the orders to massacre all the inhabitants without sparing either the ladies or the children. He said, "Bring me their heads; I will give you their goods. They were executed with all inhumanity and all the ordinary horrors in such a case. The massacre lasted nearly for three hours perished forty thousand people".

Modave gave a detailed description of Nadir Shah's invasion of 1739 and the weakness of Muhammad Shah to be unable to resist his invasion. Nadir Shah, with his devastations, massacres and extortions, made a serious fall in the prestige of Muhammad Shah. He survived for nearly the next ten years of this disaster but never rising above it. This reflected the cowardly act of the Mughal ruler. This French adventurer explained the horrifying scene of 13 March 1739, the massacre of Delhi done by Nadir Shah, the massacre was so dreadful and it killed 200 thousand people.

Although Muhammad Shah was restored only for the namesake, from the time when the treasure fell short in the despotic state, as to fulfil the needs of the army, one recourse to the governors of the provinces who are least interested in giving them the money. Thus, we saw that in the Mughal Empire there were revolts, assassinations, imprisonments to achieve command or rule. In the despotic government, the revolts occur due to fear and personal interest, but it does not see this reason among the Europeans, the love of the prince and the native land.

During this time Mughal Empire consisted of five cities which belonged to the Emperor, namely, Lahore, Delhi, Ajmer, Agra and Allahabad. But the real control of the emperor only consisted up to Delhi because Sikhs possessed Lahore, Ajmer was in the hands of Marathas, Agra was left to Jats and Allahabad was under the control of Subadar of Lucknow. The authority of the Emperor was limited to the walls of the palace which he occupies in Delhi. The Hindu effort to regain the destinies of India failed in the Battle of Panipat in 1761, and some foreign merchants used the circumstances to seize the country. The empire was deteriorated of its structure due to the mediocrity of the sovereign, personal politics and short-sightedness of the ministers. Modave, in 1774, described the political position of the Hindustan, he said "Of all that had been said until now, it is a sight just and true of the actual position of the mogul empire. It does not exist anymore than the corpse and the heart which owed to animate the body is only that an empty shade, without credit and influence. The whole empire, as one saw, is divided or rather divided into small independent parts from one to others. The princes who have a little more power think only of their private interests. Modave further said the "establishment that the English will make in the mogul empire will be dubious and precarious. They will undoubtedly lose it in the continuation of the time, but finally they will enjoy it during a continuation of some unspecified years and probably enough to draw some from the extraordinary sums; with the help of which they will support the main role or rather single and exclusive that they assumed in commercial Europe. Further Modave says that the intentions of the English to expand their domain in India, as he believed if there remains a prolonged peace in Europe then one can see the English of Bengal to expand towards Delhi by sending thousands of soldiers and raise many troops and in the name of the Mughal emperor they will make in Hindustan all that they will find by the relevant and certainly all that will be appropriate the best to the public interest and the greed of the private individuals. He further said "it cannot be the only attraction of a simple curiosity which makes to send on all sides of the active and intelligent emissary to take an exact note of the countries and affairs".

Modave made observations on the military status of Indian armies that had suffered huge losses at the hands of European armies in post-1750s. He stated Indian forces lacked uniformity in recruitment, military skills and weapons, lack of discipline and coordination and obsolete execution. Modave described the alliances made by the Europeans with Indian princes. He said these alliances do not have solidarity because they were made on diverse shrewd motives. "The respective interest of the states which linked itself can only give a durable consistency to political alliances. But here, the bad faith of Indian princes and insatiable greed of Europeans corrupted these connections. All the princes who contracted offensive and defensive links with the Europeans ended up losing their state".

Conclusion

Thus, a close scrutiny of the writings of Lauriston and Modave depicts that the Mughal Empire was steeply declining, and many of its administrative apparatus had either lost efficiency or became dysfunctional. The French accounts offer a crucial alternate window to look at 18th-century Mughal India, which otherwise has primarily been seen from the Persian-based sources. If, at times, they corroborate many developments taking place in 18th-century north India emerging from other sources, then, they also provide many novel inputs on the state of affairs in the period.

