Pre Colonial Intelligence System in India with Special Reference to Mughals

Shabir Ahmad Reshi[1*], Dr. Seema Dwivedi[2]

[1]Research Scholar, Department of History, Dr. C.V Raman University, Kota, Bilaspur
[2]HOD, Department of History, Dr. C.V Raman University, Kota Bilaspur, Chhattisgarh

*Corresponding Author:
Shabir Ahmad Reshi
Email: sahilres121@gmail.com

Abstract: For Intelligence, Indian Kingdoms before the colonial period maintains a set of information systems in the form of royal texts. These texts along with the appointment of tribal, mystic and other classes including wanderers in the intelligence and surveillance system plays an important role in the day today functioning of the governments from time to time. The information collected at the grassroot level was passed on to the royal houses through a smooth channel of different appointed officers. Mughals introduced a regular system of political intelligence, but due to the lack of coordination many revolts took place and sometimes the failure of information/intelligence to reach to the touring officers lead to the murder by the thugs. Mughal kingdom along with other kingdoms also employed an effective system of intelligence gathering for the smooth running of their state policies and evolving of such policies. Awadh, Marathas, Nizam of Hyderabad, all took keen interest in establishing different system of political intelligence, espionage etc during the pre colonial period, which later saw its climax during the british colonial phase.
Keywords: Political surveillance, Kamandaki, Jasuds, Espionage, Mughal empire, Marathas, Nizam of Hyderabad, Awadh

INTRODUCTION:

Kautilya's Arthashastra lays out an effective system identifying different roles for various people. It also mentions about the existence of an extensive espionage network that keeps the kings alert about the happenings of the state and keep the king aware of the potential enemies who might plot assassination or over through the royal kingdoms. During seventeenth and eighteenth centuries collectors of intelligence formed a particularly important class of knowledgeable people. Shivaji, the founder of Maratha power in the late seventeenth century, had set up a large Guide (Jasud) Department to supply such agents. Intelligence agents were attached to forts and counter-intelligence measures were taken to preserve the secrets of their construction.

METHODOLOGY:

Documents related to the intelligence processes employed by pre colonial kingdoms are scattered and there is no authentic text which clearly gives any in length detail about the same and most of the details about the same are scattered in the contemporary texts of the period few are preserved in the archives of Delhi, Calcutta & Hyderabad. With an intention to establish the authenticities and creditability of the document the method of corroborative evidences has been followed wherever necessary. While utilizing the diaries and memories personal prejudices and biases have been eliminated to the extent possible. Simply narration of facts and historical method of exposition has been followed in the development of the present article.

OBJECTIVES:

- Trace the different channels of information during the pre colonial period
- To devise the Pre colonial intelligence system along with role of different officers in the mechanism.
- Trace the motive behind employing officers at different levels of administration for passing information to the royal chambers.
- To test the effectiveness of the intelligence apparatus during pre colonial period in different kingdoms.

DISCUSSION:

"Statecraft without spying is like the study of grammar without its most celebrated commentary"

'The Elements of Polity' by Kamandaki (c. 400 - 600 AD) was copied many times in India, Burma and Java. It advised kings and ambassadors to place spies 'in places of Pilgrimage, hermitages and temples' where they could pretend to study the scriptures. As the priests in a sacrifice are guided by the vedic hymns,

Kamandaki urged, so the king should carefully fashion spies 'like vessels for a ritual'. Spies could be of a 'reckless type, mendicant or recluse type, sacrificer or black magician type, or in the guise of persons of noble character'. Brahmins, the priestly caste and seekers of hidden knowledge, were to gather the more sophisticated intelligence and communicate it in writing, but the king also needed the services of people with humbler skills. The kings required runners and trackers, who knew the by-ways, water sources and river fords. The agents should be 'foresters' (tribals), drawn from the domain beyond the arable which was associated with magic, hunting and asceticism. Even in the nineteenth century, these arts could still bring tribal people close to the springs of power and authority in Indian states.

Surveillance was partly a matter of the representation of power in the absence of local control, the ideal 'universal king' had to be portrayed as an all-seeing icon of royalty. Even in the case of the Muslim kingdoms of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the detailed descriptions of royal intelligence we encounter may have represented more of an aspiration than a reality. Also, the king's wisdom works on the reports of spies to formulate policy. Political surveillance has been vital for all large historical states but it was particularly important to Indian rulers because of certain invariant features of the subcontinent's ecology and society. Despite India's great size, information moved with remarkable speed over long distances. People were always on the move as merchants, pilgrims, soldiers or marriage parties. Although it was not a highly literate society pre-colonial India was a society acutely aware of literacy, where even the poor could gain access to writers and readers at a cost. Knowledge was, however, unevenly distributed within society and kings had to work hard to accumulate information. Indians from different regions still found it difficult to communicate with each other and many influential groups recorded information in scripts and dialects which were rendered deliberately arcane. This posed particular problems for the exercise of state power. While kingship in India may once have been a ritual umbrella opened over a diverse range of communities, the nature of the subcontinent's political economy over recent centuries required that kings attempted to retain a tight control over resources and political allegiance. This was because obligations to the state had widely been rendered in cash from at least the thirteenth century. Rulers needed cash to finance their expenditure on armies and display. To secure it, they required practical information on the doings of peasants, artisans and merchants. The contradiction between a closely-knit, cash-based political economy and a society widely attuned to principles of hierarchy and segmentation placed a heavy significance on information collection.

The basic Indian agencies of domestic intelligence survived from the early centuries of the Christian era to the end of the nineteenth century. Mughals gradually introduced more regular system of official political reporting and a comprehensive grid of regular post stages (dak chaukis) under recognized officials [1]. Under the system reorganized by the Emperor Akbar (1556 - 1605), every provincial and sub divisional headquarters had its 'recorders of events', the waqai nigars who were mainly concerned with revenue matters and waqai Navis who dealt with other matters. These officials noted down the happenings of the week and sent their reports to the Emperor by means of runners (harkaras). They were dispatched under the charge of the head postmaster (daroga-i-dak), who was responsible for the safety of royal letters and also for the correspondence of merchants, intelligentsia and ordinary people. Emperors took particular care to prevent the emergence of private or unauthorized daks, though they did not generally attempt to control the movement of individual runners. In the capital an imperial news writer (waqai Navis) recorded court events. These included details of the royal routine, the issue of licenses, rewards or punishments and marriages and births and authenticated with the seals of high officials, this diary became an official record. Along with the head of the runners the head news writer and his department made sure that the emperor was informed of the intelligence coming in from the regional news writers. This material was supplemented with reports from a range of secret agents (swanih nigars or khufia naviss) who moved around the countryside, listening in at bazaars and checking on the reports of the provincial governors and the official news writers. The men who headed this system were people of importance [2]. Some of the news writers were drawn from distinguished literary families and had historians amongst their members; for history writing and news writing were closely related. Contemporaries stressed the need to select scrupulously honest news writers. Some surviving periodic newsletters (akhbarats) from the regional news writers spend many lines describing the author of the letter, the reliability of the information and the method of its transmission. The court newsletters, which detailed the routine of the emperor or provincial governor, were also notable for the precision with which times, places and conversations were recorded. Various overlapping systems of watch and ward also brought news and information to Muslim officials. A staff of mace-bearers carried messages around the imperial city or encampment and observed the doings of officials and soldiers. The chief police officer of the town (kotwal) had his own staff of constables and night watchmen (chaukidars) who patrolled the streets day and night. They observed every house and brought in reports of affrays, murders, marvels and violations of moral law which were recorded in the police diary of the town. These reports were also passed on to the intelligence

officials of the court. The civil magistrate (kazi), chief cleric (mufti) and 'censor' (muhtasib) all had a part to play in investigating, recording and alerting authority to commercial, proprietary and moral issues [3].

Also, in the countryside, Village watchmen were sometimes drawn from the same communities as the runners for intelligence purpose. The watchmen brought news to the headman, village accountant (patwari) or chief registrar (kanungo) of affrays, assaults, attacks on grain stores. 'Police' constables (barkandazis), sent out from the police station of a village circle kept in contact with these village officials, bringing information to the sub district police post (thana), sometimes by letter, from where it could be sent in a news report by the news writer. These constables often wore a gilded badge bearing the title of the emperor, representing the most visible local manifestation of the imperial gaze. Hereditary operators of ferries and 'foresters' who guarded the passes were designated agents and secured on grants of revenue-free land. In addition, the army and other institutions of state alongside magnate households maintained staffs of runners, clerks (munshis) and news writers. Even the great Mughal canal systems had their own staffs of watchers to report illegal cuttings by farmers.

These intelligence communities were also enlisted to convey policies of the rulers outward to the population. Officials and runners announced imperial orders and posted signs at the kotwal's platform. The agents of nobles and semi-independent rulers stationed with the ruler or with regional governors listened to the open news reports as they were read out in court and sent hurriedly written transcripts back to their masters in regional centres.

During pre colonial period, Kings and nobles patronized wandering holy men, astrologers, physicians and even musicians partly because they could bring recent news from their travels. Sufi mystics, especially members of the unorganized Sufi sects, were welcomed because these men made regular pilgrimages throughout India and central Asia[4]. Their unworldly status gave them the right and duty to tell men of power the truth without restraint. They carried information between noble houses, and especially between their women's quarters, according to the Venetian, Niccolao Manucci. Physicians and astrologers performed similar functions. Both these groups of specialists provided valuable secret knowledge. Kings, likewise, called on itinerant doctors to report on the condition of their subjects as well as to reveal new cures and mysteries. The Emperor Shahjahan (1628-57) established a model which was followed up to the time of Ranjit Singh (1799 - 1839), ruler of the Punjab in the early nineteenth century. One chronicler reported that Muslim and Hindu physicians presented Shahjahan with 'summary reports of the success of their skill in administering remedies'. A good source of day-to-day information also were the marriage-brokers[5].

Again, while wandering holy-men could be of great use to the state, they could also spread dissidence and bring news to its enemies. An incident in the last years of Aurangzeb, reported by Shiva Das, conveys a sense of the working of imperial intelligence and of the methods of political dissidents. At night someone fixed a flag to the railing of the police chief's platform in the central market of Delhi. On it were written the words 'When the king comes out of the Fort, let him beware!' The Kotwal's assistants sent the flag to the Emperor via their master. A proclamation was issued to find out who the owner of the flag and an ascetic of a militant Sikh order was apprehended. [6]

The sophisticated Indo-Muslim intelligence system had been vulnerable when the populace and magnates challenged the legitimacy of the state. This does not imply that the decline of the Mughals, or of any other pre-colonial state, was primarily caused by the decay of information systems, only that their atrophy was a potent element in that decline once it had begun. Rebels made particular efforts to knock out news writers and daks. Vested interests in the periphery of Empire combined to deny information to the ruler, or to pollute it[7]. Some symptoms of this decay were already clear by the end of the reign of Aurangzeb. The Emperor complained, with justice, that he had never been told of the imminence of war with the English. The imperial intelligence services also hit hard on occasions, as when the Mughals captured the Maratha king, Shambaji, in 1689. Yet other Maratha leaders escaped the Mughal net and, by the 1720s, it was the Maratha chiefs and not the Mughals who had the upper hand in the war of information across the uplands of the Deccan[8]. The Mughal attempt at the beginning of the eighteenth century to expel Hindu Khattris from the office of news writer in the Punjab, because they were thought to be favorable to the Sikhs, was another, self-inflicted wound.

The declining quality of sectors of the Indian intelligence system during the eighteenth century can partly be attributed to economic change. As the grants of land and pensions lapsed estates were seized by intruders. The letters of the early eighteenth century from the permanent ambassadors stationed by the Mughal Emperors at the Rajput courts and from Rajput envoys in Delhi are full of complaints about the failure of their salaries to materialize.

Also, most powerful men in Indian and British territories in the mid-eighteenth century ran private intelligence services, as well as maintaining armies and private trade. Some of these were farmers of commodities and revenues. Others were great servants of indigenous courts who entered the fray of diplomacy

and intelligence in their own interest. One of the most knowledgeable men in the later eighteenth century was the Peshwa's minister, Nana Fadnavis, who ran a famed personal intelligence service[9]. The old Maratha intelligence service, the Jasud department, also survived but now acted as a semi-independent corporation, providing services for different rulers. As Awadh's political position became more precarious in the 1780s and 1790s, surrounded by the Sikhs and Marathas and subverted by the British, its officials desperately sought increased dynastic security [10]. The Kayastha patriot, Lala Jhau Lal, remodeled the intelligence services to outface his British enemies. Sir John Shore, visiting Lucknow as Governor- General in 1797, wrote, 'The Dauk, an intelligence department was very extensive under Jhau Lal.' He went on to allege that it was a 'source of great oppression, as the Hercarrahs were much oftener employed as spies and informers for the purpose of extortion than in their proper duties'[11]. Jhau Lal had amalgamated the offices of revenue manager (diwan) and head of intelligence. He also controlled the Lucknow city police chief and used key men in the army as informers[12]. He had established agents at Delhi and, during the later 1790s, the roads of the Nawabi were constantly criss-crossed by his horseback dispatch riders as he desperately sought for allies among the Marathas and Afghans[12].

FINDINGS:

1. In principle, the systems of royal intelligence seem dense and intrusive, capable of bringing in a huge volume of information to the rulers. Following are some important findings about the said intelligence system:

2. The Indo-Islamic system did not apparently compare with the detailed control over information managed by some other contemporary Asian monarchies. In the central domains of the Japanese Tokugawa Shogunate, for instance, households were grouped into fives, and each set to inform on the others. Notice boards existed in every village on which lithographed copies of all official orders were posted.

3. In pre-colonial India, the surveillance and moral suasion exercised by imperial officials did not necessarily give rise to routine bureaucratic procedures. Reports of crimes did not always lead to arrests or punishments by the state, for instance. If they did, rulers did not always inflict standard punishments. Rather, this was a system of watching for infractions of morality or royal right. It was designed to cajole the subject into godly submission, rather than to mount a constant policing of society as some nineteenth century European states attempted to do. Indeed, should a few key people change their allegiance or be eliminated, the system could quickly founder.

This helps to explain how Indian states (including the East India Company's dominion) could appear strong and resilient one year and be on the verge of collapse the next.

4. The Indian elites collected centralised and stored information. They employed concepts of religious community, caste and breeding to distinguish between their subjects. Some of these ideas were taken over and elaborated by the later British rulers.

5. Due to the decline of Mughal control, most of the official informers were poorly paid and sometimes left without any remuneration, which make them easy targets for the enemy states.

6. Intelligence and other surveillance systems was employed in almost all the kingdoms in the pre-colonial period, but the effectiveness of the same is in question.

REFERENCES:

1. Thompson E; The Making of the Indian Princes, London, 1943.
2. Moreland WH; India at the Death of Akbar, A. Ram, Delhi, 1962
3. Chowdhury BM; Muslim Politics in India, Calcutta, 1965
4. Persian Documents, being letters, newsletters and kindred documents pertaining to the several states existing in India in the last quarter of the eighteenth century from the oriental collection of the National Archives of India
5. First Report of the Agra School Book Society', Friend of India, 28 Feb. 1839
6. Browne; Memorandum for Mr. Hastings respecting the state of affairs in Hindostan', 1 Jan. 1785, Hastings
7. Alexander Dow; The History of Hindostan (London, 1768), Kejariwal, The Asiatic Society of Bengal and the Discovery of India's Past, 17841838, (Delhi, 1988); Grewal, Muslim Rule.
8. Haider Beg Khan to Calcutta, 1, 13 May 1783, CPC, VI, 2645, 274; Haider Beg Khan to Tafazzul Hussain, 13 May 1783, ibid., 2756
9. Bayly CA; Rulers, Townsmen and Bazaars, Cambridge, 1983.
10. Chaudhuri KN; The Trading World of Asia and the English East India Company, 16001760, Cambridge, 1978.
11. Christopher Andrew; Secret Service: The Making of the British Intelligence Community, London, 1985.
12. Nehru J; The Discovery of India, 1946