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**EMERGING ELITES: A STUDY OF THE MIDDLE CLASS IN MUGHAL INDIA**

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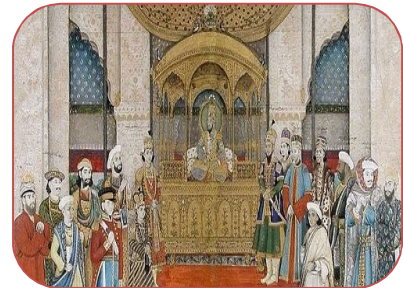
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**ABSTRACT**

*The Mughal period in Indian history (16th–18th century) has been extensively studied for its imperial governance, agrarian economy, and elite politics, but the emergence of a distinct middle class during this era remains an underexplored subject. This study examines the structure, role, and socio-economic dynamics of the middle class in Mughal India, conceptualizing it as an “emerging elite” that occupied a critical position between the nobility and the peasantry. Drawing upon archival sources, contemporary chronicles, economic records, and recent historiographical debates, the research identifies merchants, artisans, scribes, professionals, and lower-tier officials as key constituents of this middle stratum. Their engagement in trade, craft production, bureaucracy, education, and urban life contributed significantly to the administrative and economic vitality of the Mughal Empire.*



*By analyzing patterns of occupational specialization, social mobility, and cultural production, this study challenges the binary framework of elite versus subaltern that has dominated traditional scholarship. It argues that the Mughal middle class was instrumental in shaping urban economies, mediating state-society relations, and laying the groundwork for later socio-political transformations in colonial India. Ultimately, this work repositions the middle class as a dynamic and formative force in early modern Indian society—neither residual nor purely transitional, but integral to understanding the pluralistic character of Mughal India's social order.*

**KEYWORDS:** Mughal India, middle class, emerging elites, socio-economic mobility, urban society, administrative class, artisans, merchants.

**INTRODUCTION**

The Mughal Empire, one of the most enduring and influential regimes in Indian history, fostered a complex and stratified society that extended well beyond the imperial court and agrarian masses. While much scholarly attention has been devoted to the nobility, peasantry, and religious elites, the socio-economic space in between—occupied by merchants, artisans, professionals, and lower-ranking administrators—remains relatively underexplored. These groups, collectively forming what may be called the “middle class,” played a crucial role in sustaining the empire’s urban and bureaucratic life, yet have not been sufficiently recognized in dominant historical narratives. This study seeks to address that lacuna by critically examining the emergence, composition, and functions of the middle class in Mughal India. Rather than treating this class as a modern construct projected backward, the research adopts a contextual approach rooted in Mughal socio-political structures and economic practices. It recognizes

that although the term "middle class" may not have existed in the lexicon of the time, the characteristics and functions typically associated with such a class—relative autonomy, occupational specialization, literacy, engagement with state institutions, and participation in urban culture—were clearly present.

The rise of this group can be traced to broader processes such as the growth of urban centers, monetization of the economy, expansion of trade networks, and the administrative demands of an empire built on revenue extraction and record-keeping. From court scribes and revenue officials to shopkeepers and urban artisans, these individuals formed a critical bridge between the governing elite and the rural base. Their activities not only enabled the Mughal state to function efficiently but also contributed to the vibrancy of cultural and intellectual life. By focusing on this "emerging elite," the study aims to move beyond binary classifications and to offer a more nuanced understanding of Mughal society. It interrogates questions of social mobility, identity formation, and cultural participation to explore how this middle stratum negotiated its position within the imperial framework. In doing so, the research reconsiders the nature of class in early modern India and contributes to broader discussions on precolonial modernities and indigenous forms of social organization.

## AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

### Aim:

To investigate the emergence, composition, and socio-economic significance of the middle class in Mughal India, with a view to understanding its role in shaping urban society, administration, and cultural life during the early modern period.

### Objectives:

1. To identify the key constituents of the middle class in Mughal India, including merchants, artisans, scribes, professionals, and lower-level bureaucrats.
2. To analyze the social and economic conditions that contributed to the emergence and consolidation of this class, particularly in urban and semi-urban contexts.
3. To examine the relationship between the Mughal state and the middle class, especially in terms of employment in revenue administration, trade regulation, and service to local governance.
4. To explore the role of the middle class in cultural, intellectual, and literary production in the Mughal period.
5. To evaluate the extent of social mobility available to members of this class and how they negotiated their status within the larger imperial hierarchy.

## REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The study of Mughal India has traditionally emphasized imperial structures, agrarian relations, and elite politics, often leaving the intermediate social strata underrepresented. However, recent historiographical developments have prompted scholars to reassess the complexities of Mughal society, particularly the emergence of socially mobile, economically significant urban groups. Irfan Habib's pioneering work on the agrarian system (*The Agrarian System of Mughal India*, 1963) opened up discussions on revenue extraction and administrative frameworks, indirectly pointing to the importance of bureaucratic personnel such as qanungos, patwaris, and scribes—many of whom belonged to the emerging middle tier. Habib's materialist approach laid a foundation for exploring class structures beyond the binary of nobility and peasantry. Muzaffar Alam and Seema Alavi, in their studies of Mughal administration and regional power dynamics, have highlighted the role of literate service groups who mediated between the imperial center and provincial society. Alam's analysis of Indo-Persian political culture (*The Crisis of Empire*, 2001) indirectly touches on the ideological and functional space occupied by urban professionals and educated elites.

C.A. Bayly's influential work (*Rulers, Townsmen, and Bazaars*, 1983) though focused on colonial India, traces the continuity of urban commercial classes and their roots in precolonial systems. Bayly's conception of the "proto-bourgeoisie" has informed more recent attempts to trace early forms of middle-class behavior in the Mughal period. Satish Chandra and Shireen Moosvi have also contributed

valuable data on occupational structures, trade guilds, and artisanal production, revealing the economic complexity of Mughal cities. Their quantitative assessments help map out the occupational diversity and economic bases of urban middle groups. Recent scholarship, such as Najaf Haider's work on monetization and credit systems in Mughal India, further underscores the sophistication of commercial and financial operations that depended on the active involvement of middle-tier agents such as sarrafs (money changers), banias, and revenue intermediaries. Despite these scattered references, the middle class in Mughal India has rarely been the central subject of analysis. Most existing works focus either on elite institutions or subaltern groups, leaving a historiographical gap. This study aims to fill that void by offering a focused analysis of the socio-economic, administrative, and cultural roles of this emergent class, bringing together perspectives from economic history, social theory, and urban studies.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative and historical-analytical approach, utilizing both primary and secondary sources to reconstruct the emergence, structure, and socio-economic dynamics of the middle class in Mughal India.

### Primary Sources:

The research relies extensively on Persian chronicles, administrative manuals, revenue records, travel accounts, and court documents from the Mughal period. Texts such as the *Ain-i-Akbari*, *Akbarnama*, *Padshahnama*, and other *farmans* provide insight into the administrative and occupational structures of the empire. Writings by European travelers like François Bernier, Jean-Baptiste Tavernier, and Niccolao Manucci are also examined to understand contemporary perceptions of urban social life and economic activity.

### Secondary Sources:

Scholarly works by historians such as Irfan Habib, Muzaffar Alam, Shireen Moosvi, and C.A. Bayly provide essential frameworks and comparative data. Academic journals, edited volumes, and dissertations related to Mughal socio-economic history, urban studies, and class analysis are critically reviewed.

### Thematic Analysis:

The study employs thematic content analysis to identify recurring patterns related to occupation, income, education, social mobility, and administrative participation. Key themes include:

- Occupational diversity in urban centers
- Relationship with state institutions
- Patterns of wealth accumulation and mobility
- Engagement with cultural and intellectual life

### Comparative Framework:

Where relevant, comparisons are drawn with the evolution of middle classes in other early modern societies to contextualize the Mughal case within broader global patterns of class formation.

### Interdisciplinary Lens:

The research integrates perspectives from economic history, sociology, and cultural studies to interpret the available evidence holistically. This allows a more nuanced understanding of the class beyond economic roles—capturing aspects of identity, aspiration, and social behavior.

### Chronological Scope:

The focus is primarily on the 16th to 18th centuries (roughly from Akbar's reign to the decline of Mughal authority), when urbanization, monetization, and bureaucratic expansion created fertile ground for the emergence of a distinct middle stratum.

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## STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The historiography of Mughal India has predominantly focused on the imperial elite, agrarian structures, and peasant society, often overlooking the intermediate social groups that played a vital role in sustaining and mediating imperial and local dynamics. Despite growing evidence of occupational diversity, urban development, and administrative complexity, the existence and significance of a distinct middle class during the Mughal period remains underexplored. There is a lack of focused research on the socio-economic composition, cultural participation, and political role of this emergent group—comprising merchants, artisans, scribes, petty officials, and service providers—who operated between the nobility and the peasantry. This oversight has contributed to a fragmented understanding of social mobility, class formation, and early modern urbanism in South Asia.

Furthermore, the category of "middle class" itself has rarely been theorized in the context of precolonial India. Most studies tend to project colonial-era class structures retroactively, thereby obscuring the specific historical processes that may have given rise to a proto-middle class during the Mughal era. There is thus a pressing need to examine the formation, function, and fluidity of this social stratum on its own terms, grounded in the economic and cultural realities of the period. This research seeks to address these gaps by systematically analyzing the emergence of the middle class in Mughal India as a socio-economic and administrative phenomenon, exploring its composition, roles, and contributions to broader processes of urbanization, statecraft, and cultural production.

## DISCUSSION

The emergence of a middle class in Mughal India was a byproduct of expanding urbanization, administrative centralization, and increasing monetization of the economy during the 16th to 18th centuries. While the term "middle class" is modern, its functional equivalent in the Mughal context can be traced through occupational, economic, and social markers that distinguish this group from both the landed aristocracy and the rural peasantry.

### 1. Composition and Occupational Structure

The Mughal middle stratum was largely composed of merchants, artisans, scribes, moneylenders, teachers, and petty officials. These individuals played essential roles in sustaining urban economies and the bureaucratic apparatus. The presence of sarraf (money-changers), baniya (traders), munshis (scribes), and vakils (legal agents) across imperial and provincial centers reflects the complexity and specialization within this class. Artisans and guild members in cities like Delhi, Agra, Lahore, and Ahmedabad formed part of a skilled, self-organized labor segment that enjoyed upward mobility, especially through trade or state patronage. Many of these occupational groups were literate, multilingual, and well-versed in legal, commercial, or religious literatures, contributing to the cultural vitality of urban centers.

### 2. Economic Role and Wealth Accumulation

The Mughal economy's increasing reliance on money rather than barter elevated the importance of merchant networks and financial agents. Members of the middle class accumulated wealth through trade (both inland and overseas), lending, service to the state, and control of market activities. Their ability to finance agriculture, crafts, and even local governance allowed them to exercise economic influence disproportionate to their formal political status.

### 3. Link with the State and Administration

The Mughal state depended heavily on a literate and technically skilled bureaucracy to manage its complex revenue and legal systems. Middle-class individuals often occupied clerical, record-keeping, judicial, and educational roles. These included qanungos, patwaris, and pandits—figures essential to local administration and revenue collection. Their semi-autonomous position allowed them both access to power and a measure of social prestige.

#### 4. Cultural Contributions and Social Identity

This class also contributed to the cultural and intellectual life of Mughal India. They were patrons and producers of Indo-Persian literature, miniature painting, and educational texts. Many were affiliated with madrasas, temples, or literary circles, where they engaged in the production and transmission of knowledge. The rise of vernacular languages and local histories during this period is also partly attributable to these emerging elites. Their identity was shaped by a blend of pragmatism, social aspiration, and cultural conservatism. While some sought alignment with the elite through marriage, dress, and patronage, others retained distinct group loyalties based on caste, religion, or guild.

#### CONCLUSION

The emergence of a middle class in Mughal India represents a critical yet underexplored dimension of early modern South Asian society. Positioned between the aristocracy and the rural masses, this group comprised merchants, artisans, scribes, and lower-level administrators who contributed significantly to the economic, administrative, and cultural fabric of the Mughal Empire. Their rise was facilitated by increasing urbanization, monetized trade, bureaucratic expansion, and intellectual activity, all of which created space for non-aristocratic individuals to gain wealth, status, and influence. This study has shown that while the Mughal middle class did not form a homogenous or politically unified group, it nonetheless functioned as a dynamic social force. Its members were active agents in mediating imperial authority and local interests, shaping cultural production, and sustaining the mechanisms of governance. They were also instrumental in driving long-term socio-economic change by forging linkages between state power, commerce, and literacy.

Furthermore, the existence of such a class prior to colonial intervention challenges the common notion that modernity—and with it, class-based social structures—arrived solely with European influence. Instead, Mughal India's social landscape was already marked by complex class formations that were shaped by indigenous economic and institutional processes. In conclusion, recognizing the significance of the middle class in Mughal India broadens our understanding of class, power, and mobility in precolonial societies and invites a rethinking of how social stratification functioned in early modern empires. This emerging elite, though often absent from dominant historical narratives, was central to the evolving dynamics of Mughal society and deserves a more prominent place in the historiography of South Asia.

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