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# **The Economic History of Pakistan since the Mughals, 1520–2020: An Outline**

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## The Economic History of Pakistan since the Mughals, 1520–2020: An Outline\*

The task of writing an economic history of Pakistan covering the last 500 years is both daunting and challenging. The period spans the 70 years since the country became independent in 1947 as well as over 400 years of the areas that now constitute Pakistan, broadly defined by the districts, regions and provinces that existed as administrative and political entities at the time.

The major aim of this research is to help fill the void to which earlier historical accounts of economic development in South Asia – and northern India<sup>1</sup> in particular – refer repeatedly as the “dearth of economic accounts at the regional level.” In the *Cambridge Economic History of India*, covering the period 1200–1970 in two volumes, Raychaudhuri and Habib (1982) candidly admit in their preface to the first volume that “pre-colonial period research into the economic history of the different regions has hardly begun...: the focus here is on the sub-continent as a whole, on the uniformities rather than diversities and on the forces which affected the course of economic life in the greater part of the territory” (p. xv).

Raychaudhuri and Habib try to overcome this shortcoming by discussing South India (and Assam) separately, while still covering all of northern India. In this scholarly work as well as others, details of the economic history of the regions that now constitute Pakistan are scanty, with of course some outstanding exceptions, such as Ali’s (2014) work on the colonisation of Punjab’s agriculture under the British and Habib’s (2013) on the revenue system under the Mughals.

More recently, writing as part of the *New Cambridge History of India* series (edited by G. Johnson, C. A. Bayly and J. F. Richards) on the economy of modern India from 1860 to the twenty-first century, Tomlinson (2013) laments that

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\*This outline provides the broad framework for the project of the Lahore School of Economics started in 2017 on “An Economic History of Pakistan in an historical perspective”.

<sup>1</sup> Defined as comprising the entire Indo-Gangetic plain.

“it is hard to produce a convincing narrative account of what happened to the Indian economy in the nineteenth and twentieth century. Indeed, it is easy to assume that the Indian economy itself is a category that does not have much meaning. Scholars of all persuasion unite in drawing attention to our ignorance about how the economy of the sub-continent fitted together as a whole... Regional specialists often argue that the colonial South Asian economy should be seen as a weakly connected conglomeration of local networks some of which have displayed considerable growth and dynamism (p. 2).”

It is worth bearing in mind that this economic history of Pakistan is being written when an interesting view propounded recently is that the region has had a distinct territorial identity starting from the Mohenjodaro and Harappa civilisations 5,000 years ago. Authors such as Hamza Alavi (2004) have argued that Pakistan’s “nationhood has an objective basis in the historical unity of the Indus Basin. From time immemorial Baluchistan, the Sarhad, the Punjab and the Sind have been held together as a single historical identity.” Indeed, he draws a distinction between the social structures of the Gangetic and Indus peoples by arguing that “kinship in the form of ‘biradaries’ has remained the basis of our social organisation in the Indus Plain. Sindhu (i.e. the Indus) is quite distinct from the Gangetic Plain with regards to its social structure” (ibid).<sup>2</sup>

Prior to 1947, there may have been close economic ties and integration among the areas that now constitute Pakistan, but the fact remains that, for almost three quarters of the period since 1526, these areas were part of a larger political – and geographical – entity under the central rule of the Mughals (Akbar to Aurangzeb) or the British (post-1857 for most of the region). While the degree of economic control these rulers had over the region may have varied, its impact on the area’s economic development is difficult to dispute. There is, therefore, a lot of truth in Bose and Jalal’s (2011) assertion that “the sub-continent defies piecemeal approaches...” (p. 3).

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<sup>2</sup> See also Ahsan (1996) and Hussain (1997) who argue broadly on the same lines.

The purpose of this study is not, however, to try and establish that the areas now constituting Pakistan have always functioned as a distinct political and ethnic entity. Instead, the focus is on tracing the region's economy and investigating which distinct structural features and causes may have shaped for it a different trajectory or economic growth path – even as the region remained broadly integrated within the overall Subcontinent.

It is important to elaborate this question further in order to come up with a coherent and indeed intellectually sound justification for an economic history of Pakistan in a historical context in this case till the start of Mughal rule in 1526. For even if one could show through some broad economic framework that there did indeed exist an integrated “Indus economy” whose working and dynamics was broadly akin to the areas that became Pakistan in 1947 it would still be difficult to justify “a meta-regional framework (such as the Mediterranean, the Indian Ocean or the Silk Road) for the first four hundred years which should ideally transcend and even reject the national history framework – and then all about a national state”.<sup>3</sup>

It is important therefore to emphasize that the framework on which this study is based is not just the river Indus, important though it is in shaping the economy of now Pakistan or in the past, but to explain the dynamic interaction of forces – economic, historical, geographical and social which have resulted in the economy which Pakistan inherited in 1947 and which exists seventy years later in 2017. For example why the areas which became then West Pakistan in 1947 did not have any significant industry despite being one of the biggest producers of cotton or in a historical context the degree of economic autonomy the areas which became Pakistan (in whole or in part) enjoyed impacted on its economic conditions. For example, during the Mughal period, the estimated share of the state in agricultural output was as high as 35 to 40 percent, which included the share of those appointed by the central ruler to collect this output (see Habib, 2013; Maddison, 1971), as compared to say during the fifty years or so of Sikh rule from around 1805 to 1849.

Similarly the study would need to pay careful attention to the differing economic dynamics which shaped the major regional economies as in

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<sup>3</sup> Comment by an anonymous referee on earlier draft of research proposals.

the case of the Punjab just mentioned but also of Sind, the NWFP (now Khyber Pakhtunkhwa) and Baluchistan. Indeed a major part of the study will be to analyse separately and build-up the economic data base from the districts to the provincial level.

It should also be kept in mind that, even after independence in 1947, Pakistan consisted of two wings – West and East Pakistan – separated by almost 1,000 miles of Indian territory until the eastern part became the independent state of Bangladesh in December 1971<sup>4</sup>. While this volume will not cover the economic history of the area that was East Pakistan, it will need to take into account how policies adopted by the central government between 1947 and 1971 affected the western wing and the advantages and disadvantages of being part of what was then a larger country. This will mean examining the flow of resources from the eastern to the western wing, especially that of foreign exchange resources, which were earned primarily in the eastern wing. We must also consider the existence of a larger ‘captive’ market in the form of East Pakistan and analyse how post-1971 Pakistan adjusted to the separation, especially in search of new export markets.

The economic history of Pakistan after independence and of the areas it constituted during the Mughal and British periods has been considerably affected by geography. This is mainly because the region’s western boundary – despite changing over time in terms of location or formal recognition – has been constantly threatened by hostile neighbours or been the preferred path of most invaders entering India, whether to overthrow the existing rulers and take over their kingdom permanently or merely to loot and plunder its wealth.

Pakistan’s strategic location and the build-up of its military defences – a large standing army stationed in what was a frontier region and, after independence, in response to the perceived threat from India – has resulted in substantial government expenditure on defence. This has been equated with the increasing and indeed dominant role of the military in Pakistan’s post-independence power structure – reflected in recent books that refer to it as a “garrison state” or “warrior state” (see Ahmed, 2013; Paul, 2013). In tracing its economic history, this volume will examine the region’s strategic location primarily in terms of its

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<sup>4</sup> I am grateful to S. N. Naseem and Ali Taqi for bringing out this point in their comments on an earlier draft of the outline.



economic impact. This includes the effect of large military expenditures on maintaining a standing army and its areas of recruitment on the economy itself, especially in diverting resources away from more productive sectors. Post-1947, Pakistan's abysmally low expenditures on education were partly a result of high military expenditures. Similarly, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, the subsequent civil war, the rise of the Mujahideen (funded by the US and Saudi Arabia) and the US-led NATO invasion of Afghanistan post-9/11 have had a far-reaching impact on Pakistan's economic development over the last 35 years.

Apart from the region's strategic location, its geography and the predominant role of the river Indus and its major tributaries have governed Pakistan's economy and economic fortunes. There is considerable truth in describing the Indus as the "strong heart of the Pakistan economy" (Chaudhry, 2015). The dominant role of agriculture throughout this period needs careful attention. This includes the availability of water in earlier years through the construction of irrigation canals, which started under the Mughals and expanded under the British, who developed the canal colonies into the world's largest contiguous irrigation system (Ali, 2014 and Zafar 2017). The more recent 'green revolution' drew on high-yield varieties of wheat and rice, together with the use of fertiliser and tubewell irrigation to increase crop yield manifold. Later, tractor mechanisation led to the major displacement of tenant farmers, who joined the ranks of landless labour.

Another important question is whether the 'granary of India' (as the British termed this region) provided food security to its inhabitants over this entire period. The evidence available suggests this was clearly not so till only recently. The factors that led to famine or famine-like situations need to be reinvestigated, keeping in mind how similar or different were the recurrences compared to the rest of India.

While the economic fortunes of this region rested on its dominant agrarian economy (which will, therefore, be a major part of the volume), the areas that became Pakistan in 1947 had hardly any industry at all. Virtually all the Subcontinent's industry was located in Mumbai (earlier Bombay) for textiles and in Kolkata (earlier Calcutta) for jute. A key question is, therefore, how Pakistan managed to industrialise so rapidly post-1947 (see Papanek, 1967; Amjad, 1982), but a related question pre-1947 is that of the role of small-scale or household craftsmen in the region's economy. Accordingly, the volume will look at how this sector

flourished during the Mughal years and its fortunes under the British as it was opened to competition from manufactured goods from the UK after the Industrial Revolution. We will also investigate whether the fate of this sector was different from that of similar crafts in the rest of India, though a priori it is difficult to imagine that this was so.

The fact that no significant industry was set up in this region during the British period – unlike in the rest of India – also needs investigation.<sup>5</sup> Again, the region's strategic 'threatened' location was an important factor. During the rapid industrialisation of the 1960s, almost 90 percent of Pakistan's industrial units were located in or around Karachi, mainly because the major cities of the Punjab were seen to be very close to the Indian border. It was only in the 1980s that this changed: industries were set up in the Punjab and beyond primarily as a result of the rising industrial and commercial class in the province.

Given the importance of human capital in economic growth and development, the study will examine the causes of current-day Pakistan's poor human development indicators, but in an historical context, tracing the history of education in the Mughal period and the introduction of the 'Western' model of education under the British. It may also be challenging, but worthwhile, to try and construct a human development index for the entire period on the lines developed by the eminent Pakistani economist Mahbub ul Haq. An important part of this effort will be to focus on the gender dimension of human development throughout the period.

The role of well-functioning institutions and good governance has become central in explaining differences in economic performance and why some countries industrialised and grew quickly while others were left behind (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2012). A critical question is whether India would have witnessed an industrial revolution much earlier had it not come under British rule. The book will examine this issue in the context of the areas that became Pakistan and ask why, over the entire pre-independence period (apart from the canals and railways built under the British), overall economic development was given such low priority. This will bring out the role of the state in economic development and

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<sup>5</sup> For a study on the emergence of capitalism in India since 1700 including trading and financial services in Lahore and Multan and from the 1860s in Karachi, see Roy (2018).

the differences in this role across the Mughal, British and post-independence periods.<sup>6</sup>

The issue of connectivity – the major road, rail, river and sea links – and the resulting trade between the areas that became Pakistan and the rest of India and beyond will be an important part of the study. This will bring out how well these areas were internally linked as well as integrated with the rest of the Subcontinent and the world, given its geographical location. Post-independence, an important development is that land trade routes have taken a north–south direction and the east–west routes have virtually closed down, given Pakistan’s relations with India. This has dramatically reduced trade with India as well as other South Asian neighbours to almost negligible levels. The costs and benefits of this development will be investigated in the context of the recent past, including the planned construction of the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), as well as in terms of trade patterns since the Mughal period.

Urbanisation, its pace and location and the role and development of the major cities (Lahore, Karachi, Peshawar and Quetta) will be covered as part of the study’s analysis of population and labour force growth. Separate chapters may be included on the growth and development of two major historical cities, namely, Lahore and Peshawar and, more recently, Karachi, Pakistan’s main port since independence.

The movement of people within this region and abroad has taken a sharp upturn after the dramatic increase in oil prices in 1970. Today, a significant Pakistani diaspora is resident in the Gulf countries (including Saudi Arabia), the UK, US, Europe and, to a lesser extent, other countries. This is estimated at about 10 million people or around 5 percent of Pakistan’s population in 2016. The officially recorded remittances these workers have sent back to Pakistan were around US\$18 billion in 2015/16: this is equivalent to the country’s total export earnings and funds almost half the total import bill. These outflows of labour and inflows of remittances have had a major impact on the domestic labour market as well as on poverty levels, especially in the areas supplying the bulk of these migrants (Amjad, Irfan & Arif, 2015).

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<sup>6</sup> For the post-independence period, see McCartney (2011).

We will juxtapose the movement of labour abroad in more recent years with three earlier migratory movements that took place in the last 180 years. The first occurred in the mid-1880s, with the construction of an extensive network of perennial canals by the British, mostly in the Punjab. The second was the two-way transfer of as many as 14 million people from Pakistan (both wings) to India and vice versa at the time of Partition. The third was the migration of 3.2 million people from Afghanistan to Pakistan, following the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, of which an estimated 2 million remain in Pakistan, making Karachi the second largest Afghan city after Kabul. These flows have had a major impact on economic developments in Pakistan and this will form a key part of the study (see Ali, 2016; Talbot, 2016).

## **Regional Dimension**

The study will as mentioned earlier give due importance to the regional dimension of economic growth and development, given that a key factor in the break-up of Pakistan in 1971 and the creation of Bangladesh was the feeling that East Pakistan had been denied its due share of resources and development expenditures. While it would be overambitious to try and analyse the economic and structural changes that took place in each major region<sup>7</sup> separately, the study will look at the distinct political, economic and geographical differences that helped shape economic growth in each province.

## **Approach**

A major contribution of the study will be to develop a database of key economic variables for this region, going back to the Mughal period. This is an ambitious task and our approach will be to build the database from the district level upwards, onto the provincial and then the national level. These estimates will be compared with the existing estimates for northern India and consistency checks carried out to ensure that the series is robust and reliable.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Broadly represented in the four provinces of Pakistan: the Punjab, Sindh, Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa (previously the North-West Frontier Province) and Balochistan.

<sup>8</sup> The task of collecting this information has already begun. Some basic analysis drawing on the district gazetteers published by the Government of India in the 19th and early 20th centuries and other source material at the provincial level has been conducted (see the Annex to this outline).

We also hope to reinterpret economic performance as modern economic historians have done (see Allen, 2009 and more recently for India, Chaudhary et. al. 2016) in terms of how efficiently economic resources were used and allocated – both in the recent and distant past – and its impact on growth in labour productivity, which is a sine qua non for sustained growth and development (A’Hearn, 2014). This will require analysing fiscal, monetary and trade policies, which determined relative prices and, through these, efficient or inefficient resource allocation and the economy’s capacity to generate the investible surplus needed to sustain growth.

The degree of openness to trade and foreign competition, the relative roles of the state and private sector in driving the economy and the importance of investing in people have dominated recent economic debate in the context of efficiency and competitiveness. These issues also need to be analysed for earlier periods and will be addressed in this study to the extent that robust data is available. Given the importance of investing in human capital (education and health), which the ‘new growth theory’ protagonists convincingly argue is a major engine of economic growth and development (Romer, 1990), there is special need to focus on the issue of ‘investing in people’ over the periods covered in this study.

Finally, though not a book on political economy, we hope the study will generate interesting insights into the role of different classes in dictating economic policy and the direction of growth and structural changes in the economy. In this context, it will investigate the recent emphasis on the role of the “intermediate classes” as drivers of economic change, unleashing forces that eventually led to the creation of Pakistan (Bayly, 2012). Similarly, political economists and sociologists have explained economic developments in Pakistan as being driven primarily by the dominant role of the state, represented by the military and bureaucracy – not just in the earlier years after independence in 1947, but also continuing to do so to varying extents (Alavi, 1972). The study’s sectoral and policy chapters examine this, together with debates on the breakdown of feudalism, the influence of the industrialists and the role of donor assistance and international financial institutions such as the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank and Asian Development Bank.

## **Conclusion**

The study will contribute to the field in three ways. The first is in developing a database on key economic variables (gross national product, population, labour force, investment, human development indicators, trade and others) that spans the period from the Mughals to the present day. The second is in analysing the main structural features of the region's economy and bringing out internal differences as well as with the rest of India, of which the region formed a part until 1947. The third is in explaining why and how the region's economic growth path changed significantly not just after independence in 1947, but also earlier during the British period (the canal colonies and railways, for example) or the Mughal period (in terms of the differences in the agricultural surplus extracted).

Finally, the approach will in no way be rigid in terms of trying to evenly cover the period since 1520. Research studies will concentrate on bringing out the primary 'turning points' in the economic history of this region since the Mughals, depending on the availability of reliable data and sources.

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