En me limitant volontairement à ces quelques notes de lecture, je n’ai pas souhaité critiquer l’œuvre très nécessaire qui a consisté à mener à bien cette publication, j’ai seulement voulu attirer l’attention du lecteur sur le fait que la présence du nom de deux contributeurs modernes sur la couverture de l’ouvrage ne signifie pas que celui-ci a été systématiquement actualisé.

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The title of this small book suggests that it concerns the hollowing-out of the Mughal empire by smaller and more centralised states, and the relation between state and society. Farhat Hasan, reader at Aligarh Muslim University, asserts in this revised version of PhD thesis that he will analyse state and locality, and power relations in a more fruitful manner. He tries to integrate the structural-functionalist model of the Mughal state with its opposite, the action-theoretic model that considers institutions as preconceived, and acknowledges processes only. Power is seen in a Foucauldian way as a perpetual battle between human beings, yet, in contrast to Foucault, confined by institutions limiting the space and the content of human action. Farhat Hasan defends his choice of theories with much emphasis, but his selection of localities, Cambay and Surat, and the sources are legitimised rather superficially. The motivation behind the time period taken up is not discussed at all.

The conquest of Gujarat by Bahadur Shah (1526-27), Humayun (1535-37), and ultimately by Akbar (1572-73) already shows many features that characterised the Mughal rule: annexation by forging alliances with local power-holders, establishment of sovereignty by sharing power with them, but also with lower strata of the society, and the informal and hidden influence of women on politics. An introduction to the current theories and an interpretation of the formative period of conquest 1526-1572 are offered in chapter I and II respectively. Chapters III to VII pay attention to the lower strata of the society: from the system of rule, via order and disorder to the persevering power of women, kin and the shari’ah. Chapters VI and VII treat the state and local complexes of power, and the fiscal system.

Similar to the period of conquest, Farhat Hasan identifies post-1573 period within the Mughal system of rule, as a network of alliances with local power-holders represented by local corporate bodies, i.e. of merchants, and by the local gentry. This meant that the centre of political gravity shifted downwards. Order and disorder were so tightly joined that, paradoxically, they strengthened the ties between sovereignty and local powers, in stead of disrupting them. The subordinated groups possessed an instrument of power in ‘soft’ forms of everyday resistance and in ‘hard’ forms of violence, yet, always within a shared normative system, vaguely described as the shari’ah. Merchants expressed themselves by means of their corporate bodies or religious action. In chapter V women are put in the centre, albeit in relation to the shari’ah. Rulers and subalterns legitimised their dealings within this normative framework, in which customary usages were assimilated. Farhat Hasan asserts that, because of their role in the kindship system, women could manipulate the shari’ah. Putting the theory of Levi-Strauss ‘on its head’, as he says, he doesn’t consider women as a means of maintaining community solidarities, but rather as ‘prime connection’ among joint families and their kin group. Within the local complexes of power, the community-muhalla compact is crucial. It operates between the internal domain and the external political, judicial and ritual institutions, moulding both to its own interests. The qazi, representing the imperial
authority, had to adjust himself to it. Consequently his office was localized. He was the custodian of the shari'a, but its interpretation had been adapted to customary beliefs and values. In cases of adjudication even state officials and local power-holders operated jointly in an assembly. Also religious groups played a crucial role in the normative system, participating in the networks of the state, as well as in those of local power. At last, in chapter VII the fiscal system is deconstructed and integrated with the local structures. It depended heavily on the cooperation of the local power-holders and the merchant corporate bodies. Local cesses joined imperial taxes, formal system operated next to informal arrangements. Without the silent approval of local merchants and service gentry taxes couldn't be levied. In short, the fiscal system reflected the shared and participatory character of imperial sovereignty.

The book is heavily concerned with theories and concepts; events are touched on in passing only. My impression is that the book turns around two entities, operating in Cambay and Surat: the local Mughal sovereignty and the local civil society. The latter was represented by local power-holders, rooted gentry, merchants organized in corporate bodies, gradually structured in mahajans, and women operating from the community/kin-mahalla system. These two entities are negotiating constantly, resulting in assimilation and integration. Spaces of negotiation are the shared normative system of the shari'a, the adjudication by the qazi, and the fiscal system. The paradox of this contest is that imperial sovereignty, to survive, has to empower the local civil society, but in the process it undermines its own power.

Although this study discusses connections between Mughal sovereignty and local power with surprising insights, the evidence in support of the argument is rather scanty. Not that the overall theory is implausible, but the records used are limited and taken at face value. A part of the argument is based on the Cambay Documents from the National Archives of India that comprise of 50 documents only, covering the years 1657 to 1761. This means 50 documents for 104 years. Moreover, the time span of research starts in 1572. For Surat an important source is the Ms. Blochet in the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris. The number of these documents remains unclear and they cover the middle of the seventeenth century, while the book runs to 1730. Another source is the diary of an official in Surat, Itimad Ali Khan, written in 1727, and it is not indicated which years this source covers. At last the Surat Documents at Aligarh Muslim University are consulted, of which the number and the years covered are not mentioned. There is no critical discussion of these documents used extensively for the first time in this book. It is possible that the author or compiler of these records cannot be traced, yet one wonders how they were put together. Are they selected with a special purpose? How far do they represent the proceedings of the institution of origin, or the work of the official by whom they are compiled?

The function of chapter V, ‘Women, kin and shari’a is rather vague. It can be doubted whether the struggle of women against patriarchal oppression based on the shari’a helps to understand how local power-holders and subordinated social groups protected their interests against the Mughal sovereignty. Here social actors are undifferentiated. While the local powers operate in the public domain, women struggle against oppression in the private domain. This comes out clearly, when women use the court of law to resist inter-familial oppression in cases of marriage, divorce, violent incest and inheritance (p. 75). The other parts of this chapter are also dealing with the private domain. The problem treated here is not clearly defined. The subtitle ‘Power Relations in Western India’ doesn’t explain which aspect of state and locality is studied. Actually, two problems are merged. State and locality in Mughal India—Cambay and Surat in particular—is seen as an aspect of power relations in general, and not as power relations between the entities state and locality. Moreover, although it is asserted that Foucault’s theory of power will be adjusted by taking institutions into account, the power of women is not connected to the institutions of the state or of the locality.

This study is inspiring, but it is limited in its archival base, and in its application of theories it is questionable. I will not blame Farhat Hasan for not using the rich records of the Surat factory of the Dutch East India Company. Yet it is remarkable that the book