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India on the Eve of British Conquest

The first half of the eighteenth century saw the decline of the mighty Mughals, who had been the envy of their contemporaries for almost two centuries. The reign of Aurangzeb (1658-1707) proved to signify the beginning of the end of Mughal rule in India. It is argued that Aurangzeb's misguided policies weakened the stability of the state and the decline gained momentum after his death due to wars of succession and weak rulers. Though Muhammad Shah ruled for a long spell of 29 years (1719-48), a revival of the imperial fortunes did not take place as he was an incompetent ruler. Muhammad Shah's reign witnessed the establishment of the independent states of Hyderabad, Bengal, Awadh and Punjab. Several local chiefs began to assert their independence and the Marathas began to make their bid to inherit the imperial mantle.

Challenges before the Mughals

■ External Challenges

In the absence of internal strength, the Mughals could not put a tough front against external challenges which came in the form of several invasions from the north-west. The north-western borders had been neglected by the later Mughals and not much effort was expended in protecting the border.

View

Nader Shah was Mughal emperor for only fifty-seven days, in 1739, but those days created aftershocks that transformed India's politics. They broke existing centres of authority, massively shrinking the scope of Mughal power. They set loose bands of mounted warriors who ransacked the countryside seeking wealth from villages and towns. They pushed traders behind the walls of whichever power had the strongest forts. For a short period plunder, rather than negotiation, became the most effective tool for creating new centres of wealth. Those fifty-seven days laid the ground which allowed the East India Company to conquer territory in India for the first time.

—Jon Wilson, *India Conquered*

Nadir Shah, the Persian emperor, attacked India in 1738-39, conquered Lahore and defeated the Mughal army at Karnal on February 13, 1739. Later, Muhammad Shah was captured, and Delhi looted and devastated. According to an estimate, apart from the Peacock Throne and the *Kohinoor* diamond, seventy crore rupees were collected from the official treasury and the safes of the rich nobles. Nadir Shah gained the strategically important Mughal territory to the west of the Indus including Kabul. Thus, India once again became vulnerable to the attacks from the north-west.

Ahmad Shah Abdali (or Ahmad Shah Durrani), who was elected the successor of Nadir Shah after the latter's death in 1747, invaded India several times between 1748 and 1767. He continuously harassed the Mughals who tried to buy peace in 1751-52 by ceding Punjab to him. In 1757, Abdali captured Delhi and left behind an Afghan caretaker to watch over the Mughal emperor. Before his return, Abdali had recognised Alamgir II as the Mughal emperor and the Rohilla chief, Najib-ud-Daula, as Mir Bakhshi of the empire, who was to act as personal 'supreme agent' of Abdali. In 1758, Najib-ud-Daula was expelled from Delhi by the Maratha chief, Raghunath Rao, who also captured Punjab. In 1759, Ahmad Shah Abdali returned to India to take revenge on the Marathas. In 1761, Abdali defeated the Marathas in

Why Many Empire-shaking Battles at Panipat?

Panipat and its adjacent region, located in present Haryana on the banks of the Yamuna and between the fertile plains of the Ganga and Indus rivers, have witnessed several battles. These battles changed the course of Indian history at different points of time.

- The first Battle of Panipat in 1526 was between Babur and Ibrahim Lodi. The result of the battle laid the foundation of the Mughal Empire by ending the rule of the Delhi Sultanate.
- The Second Battle of Panipat in 1556 was between Akbar and Hemu; it decided in favour of the continuation of the Mughal rule.
- The Third Battle of Panipat in 1761 between the Marathas and Ahmad Shah Abdali put an end to the Maratha ambition of ruling over India.

Why Panipat was a favourite battle field

● Panipat had a strategic location. One of the parties of the war generally came from the north/northwest through the Khyber Pass to get hold over Delhi, the political capital of northern India. To move a military through rough terrains—deserts of Rajasthan or the other northern areas infested with dense forests—was very risky and difficult. On the other hand, the rulers at Delhi considered Panipat as a confrontable strategic ground and hence they preferred to take the fight there.

● Its proximity to Delhi made it easier for the Indian rulers to transport weapons, military and food supplies etc., to the battleground, and still keep the capital insulated from the conflict at hand.

● Panipat's surrounding region has a flat ground which was suitable for cavalry movement—the main mode of warfare at the time.

● After the construction of the Grand Trunk Road by Sher Shah Suri (1540-45), Panipat was on this route. It became easier for conquerors to find their way there.

● The duration of monsoon rainfall in the region is short in comparison to other areas making it easier to fight.

● The artisans/smiths of these regions were experts in making warfare-related materials and hence it became easier for forces of both parties to replenish their war materials.

the *Third Battle of Panipat*. The last of Abdali's invasions came in 1767.

■ Weak Rulers after Aurangzeb—An Internal Challenge

Bahadur Shah I (1709–March 1712) After a nearly two-year-long war of succession, the 63-year-old Prince Muazzam, the eldest son of Aurangzeb, became the emperor, taking the title Bahadur Shah. He was later called Bahadur Shah I). He had killed his brothers Muhammad Azam and Kam Bakhsh in the war of succession. Khafi Khan gave the title of Shah-i-Bekhabar to Bahadur Shah.

He adopted a pacific policy with the Marathas, the Rajputs and the Jats. Shahu, the Maratha prince, was released from Mughal captivity, and Rajput chiefs were confirmed in their respective states. However, the Sikh leader Banda Bahadur attacked the Muslims in Punjab and hence the emperor took action against him. Bahadur Shah I died in February 1712.

Jahandar Shah (March 1712–February 1713) With the help of Zulfikar Khan, Jahandar Shah became the emperor. Zulfikar Khan was appointed prime minister; he introduced *izara* system to improve the financial condition of the empire. Jahandar Shah abolished Jaziya.

Farrukhsiyar (1713–1719) After killing Jahandar Shah with the help of Sayyid brothers—Abdulla Khan and Hussain Ali (known as 'King Makers'), Farrukhsiyar became the new emperor. He followed a policy of religious tolerance by abolishing Jaziya and pilgrimage tax. In 1717, he gave

View

He (Bahadur Shah I) was the last Emperor of whom anything favourable can be said. Henceforth, the rapid and complete abasement and practical dissolution of the Empire are typified in the incapacity and political insignificance of its sovereigns.

—Sidney Owen

farmans to the British. In 1719, the Sayyid brothers, with the help of Peshwa Balaji Vishwanath, dethroned Farrukhsiyar. Later, he was blinded and killed. It was the first time in the Mughal history that an emperor was killed by his nobles.

Rafi-ud-Darajat (February 28 to June 4, 1719) He ruled for the shortest period among the Mughals.

Rafi-ud-Daula (June 6 to September 17, 1719) The Sayyid brothers placed Rafi-ud-Daula with the title **Shah Jahan II** on the throne. The new emperor was an opium addict.

Muhammad Shah (1719-48) After the death of Rafi-ud-Daula, Raushan Akhtar became the choice of the Sayyid Brothers. Muhammad Shah, as he came to be known in history, was given the title of '*Rangeela*' due to his luxurious life-style.

Muhammad Shah, with the help of Nizam-ul-Mulk, killed the Sayyid Brothers. In 1724, Nizam-ul-Mulk became the *wazir* and founded the independent state of Hyderabad. In 1737, Baji Rao I, the Maratha Peshwa invaded Delhi with a small army of 500 horsemen. In 1739, Nadir Shah defeated the Mughals in the **Battle of Karnal** and later imprisoned Muhammad Shah and annexed areas west of the Indus into the Persian empire.

Ahmad Shah (1748-1754) Ahmad Shah was an incompetent ruler who left the state affairs in the hands of Udham Bai, the 'Queen Mother'. Udham Bai, given the title of Qibla-i-Alam, was a lady of poor intellect who ruled with the help of her paramour, Javid Khan (a notorious eunuch).

Alamgir II (1754-1758) Alamgir II was a grandson of Jahandar Shah. Ahmed Shah Abdali, the Iranian invader, reached Delhi in January 1757. During his reign, the **Battle of Plassey** was fought in June 1757.

Shahjehan III (1758-1759)

Shah Alam II (1759-1806) His reign saw two decisive battles—the **Third Battle of Panipat** (1761) and the **Battle of Buxar** (1764). In 1765, according to the terms of Treaty

of Allahabad (August 1765), he was taken under the East India Company's protection and resided at Allahabad. He also issued a *farman* granting to the Company in perpetuity the Diwani (the right to collect revenue) of Bengal, Bihar and Orissa. In 1772, the Marathas took him to Delhi where he lived till 1803. In 1803, he again accepted the protection of the English, after the defeat of Daulat Rao Scindia by the English. Afterwards, the Mughal emperors became the pensioners of the English.

Akbar II (1806-37) He gave the title of Raja to Rammohan Rai. In 1835, the coins bearing the names of Mughal emperors were stopped.

Bahadur Shah II (1837-1857) Bahadur Shah II or Bahadur Shah Zafar (Zafar being his surname) was the last Mughal emperor. The Revolt of 1857 had made a futile attempt to declare him the Emperor of India. He was captured by the English and sent to Rangoon where he died in 1862. In legal terms, the Mughal Empire came to an end on November 1, 1858 with the declaration of Queen Victoria.

Causes of Decline of Mughal Empire

Why the Mughal Empire declined has been a subject of debate among historians. Scholarly opinion can be divided along two broad lines—those who view the matter as generally **empire-related** and those who regard the developments as **region-related**. The empire-related or Mughal-centric view sees the causes of the decline within the structure and functioning of the empire itself. The region-related view finds the causes of Mughal decline in the turmoil and instability in the different parts of the empire. The decline was due to both aspects.

The process of disintegration of the Mughal Empire began during the reign of Aurangzeb, but it picked up momentum only after his death in 1707. At his death, conditions were not such that the process of decline could

not be checked. Although Mughal authority was challenged by several chiefs and rulers, none could assert independence in the face of the imperial might. The Sikhs, Marathas and Rajputs did not possess the capacity to overthrow the empire; they merely resisted Mughal power to gain and keep their independence in their respective territories. Thus, if the successors of Aurangzeb had been capable rulers, the empire might not have fallen. Most of the emperors who came after Aurangzeb proved to be incapable, weak and licentious monarchs who hastened the process of disintegration of the empire and, finally, its collapse.

The major factors which contributed to the downfall of the Mughal Empire are discussed below.

■ **Shifting Allegiance of Zamindars**

Two classes shared the power of the State with the emperor during the medieval period—the zamindars and the nobles. The zamindars were hereditary owners of their lands who enjoyed certain privileges on hereditary basis, and were variously known as *rais*, *rajas*, *thakurs*, *khuts* or *deshmukhs*. They occupied an important place in the empire because they helped in the collection of revenue and in local administration, for which they maintained soldiers. Though the Mughals had tried to curb the power of the zamindars and maintain direct contact with the peasants, they had not wholly succeeded. During the reign of Aurangzeb itself, there was a marked increase in the power and influence of the zamindars. The biggest fallout of this was that regional loyalties were encouraged. Many local zamindars helped the nobility, the other powerful class within the empire, to take advantage of the weakness of the empire and carve out independent kingdoms for themselves.

■ **Jagirdari Crisis**

The nobility comprised people who were either assigned large jagirs and mansabs or appointed subahdars of Mughal subas and given the responsibility of maintaining these. To

Views

The roots of the disintegration of the Mughal empire may be found in the Medieval Indian economy; the stagnation of trade, industry and scientific development within the limits of that economy; the growing financial crisis which took the form of a crisis of the *jagirdari* system and affected every branch of state activity; the inability of the nobility to realise in the circumstances their ambitions in the service of the state and consequently the struggle of factions and the bid of ambitious nobles for independent dominion; the inability of the Mughal emperors to accommodate the Marathas and to adjust their claims within the framework of the Mughal empire, and the consequent breakdown of the attempt to create a composite ruling class in India; and the impact of all these developments on politics at the court and in the country, and upon the security of the north-western passes. Individual failings and faults of character also played their due role but they have necessarily to be seen against the background of these deeper, more impersonal factors.

—**Satish Chandra**, *Parties and Politics at the Mughal Court, 1707-40*

Various explanations are put forward for the revolts which brought about the collapse of the Mughal Empire... Here our main concern is with what our 17th and early 18th century authorities have to say. And it will be seen that they, at any rate, put the greatest store by the economic and administrative causes of the upheaval and know little of religious reaction or national consciousness... Thus was the Mughal Empire destroyed. No new order was, or could be, created by the forces ranged against it.

—**Irfan Habib**, *The Agrarian System of Mughal India*

The more I study the period, the more I am convinced that military inefficiency was the principal, if not the sole, cause of that empire's final collapse. All other defects and weaknesses were as nothing in comparison with this... Long before it disappeared, it had lost all military energy at the centre, and was ready to crumble to pieces at the first touch. The rude hand of no Persian or Afghan conqueror, no Nadir, no Ahmad Abdali, the genius of no European adventure, a Dupleix or a

Clive, was needed to precipitate it into the abyss. The empire of the Mughals was already doomed before any of these had appeared on the scene; and had they never been heard of there can be little doubt that some Mahratta bandit or Sikh freebooter would in due time have seated himself on the throne of Akbar and Shahjahan.

—William Irvine, *Army of the Indian Mughals*

A common impression is, that...the decline, fall of the Mughal Empire were due to the degeneracy of its sovereigns. But...it was irretrievably ruined in the reign of Aurangzeb, a monarch of great ability, energy and determination, but lacking in political insight, and a bigoted Mussulman. He struck the first mortal blow by reversing Akbar's wise and generous policy of ignoring distinctions of race and religion, and reimposing the *jizya* or poll tax, on his Hindu subjects; whereby he estranged them, and turned the noblest and most warlike of them—the Rajputs, hitherto the staunchest supporters of the throne—into deadly and persistent enemies. And Shivaji and his followers not only vindicated their independence, but struck a second mortal blow at the integrity of the Empire. They destroyed its military reputation. They exhausted its accumulated treasure. They spread disorder and devastation over the Deccan and beyond it...They established an *imperium in imperio*. Thus the Empire, though not dissolved, was hopelessly debilitated. The effective authority of the central government was thenceforth in abeyance...Nadir Shah, after inflicting the extremity of humiliation on the Emperor and his capital, annexed the Imperial territory west of the Indus. The dissolution of the Empire was complete.

—Sidney Owen, *The Fall of the Mughal Empire*

The Mughal Empire and with it the Maratha overlordship of Hindustan fell because of the rottenness at the core of Indian society. The rottenness showed itself in the form of military and political helplessness. The country could not defend itself; royalty was hopelessly depraved or imbecile; the nobles were selfish and short-sighted; corruption, inefficiency and treachery disgraced all branches of the public service. In the midst of this decay and confusion, our literature, art and even true religion had perished.

—J.N. Sarkar, *Fall of the Mughal Empire*, Vol. IV

this class belonged many Rajput rulers, subahdars and mansabdars. Mughal rule has often been defined as “the rule of the nobility”, because these nobles played a central role in administering the empire. Although Akbar had provided a well-knit organisation for them, there was divisiveness among the nobility on the basis of religion, homeland and tribe, and each category formed a group of its own. Mutual rivalry, jealousy and contest for power among the various groups during the rule of the later Mughals (in the absence of a strong central leadership) not only reduced the prestige of the emperor, but also contributed to the decline of the empire.

■ Rise of Regional Aspirations

Aurangzeb’s reign itself witnessed powerful regional groups like the Jats, Sikhs and Marathas defying the authority of the Mughal state in their bid to create kingdoms of their own. They did not succeed in their efforts, but they influenced the future course of political events in their respective regions. Their continuous struggle against the empire for political ascendancy weakened the empire considerably. Aurangzeb, and after him Bahadur Shah I, by attempting to suppress the Rajputs, spurred them to battle against the Mughals. The later Mughals made an effort to follow a policy of reconciliation with the Rajputs, but by then it was already too late: the Rajputs no longer trusted the Mughals enough to ally with them for the welfare of the empire.

The Marathas too were becoming a formidable enemy. Their aim was at first limited only to regaining control over the region of Maharashtra; but it soon went on to include getting legal sanction from the Mughal emperor for collecting *sardeshmukhi* and *chauth* throughout India. They forged northwards and, by 1740, succeeded in spreading their influence over the provinces of Gujarat, Malwa and Bundelkhand. The Rajput struggle against the empire and the growing ambition and power of the Marathas, thus, adversely affected the Mughal might.

Causes of the Mughals' Downfall in a Nutshell

Some of the main causes for the decline of the Mughals, briefly put, were as follows:

- (i) The government of the Mughals was a personal despotism and so its success depended on the character of the reigning ruler. The later Mughals were worthless and neglected the administration of the state.
- (ii) With the absence of a definite law of succession, there always occurred a war of succession; this weakened the stability of the government, and fostered partisanship at the cost of patriotism.
- (iii) The degeneration of the rulers led to the degeneration of the nobility, with factious quarrels and intrigues costing the empire heavily.
- (iv) The deterioration of the army also proved disastrous for the empire.
- (v) The empire had become too vast and unwieldy to be efficiently governed from a central authority under weak rulers, especially under the existing conditions of transport and communication.
- (vi) Aurangzeb's religious policy was largely responsible, leading to revolts by Rajputs, Sikhs, Jats and Marathas.
- (vii) Aurangzeb's Deccan policy was a complete failure and was an important cause of the downfall of the Mughal empire.
- (viii) Invasions of Irani and Durrani kingdoms gave a death-blow to the Mughal empire.

■ Economic and Administrative Problems

The number of amirs and their ranks or mansabs had increased sharply over time; there was little land left to be distributed among them as jagirs. Aurangzeb tried to solve the problem of acute shortage of jagirs or bejagiri by showing enhanced income from the jagirs on record. But this was a short-sighted measure as the amirs tried to recover the recorded income from their jagirs by pressurising the peasantry. So both the amirs and the peasantry were antagonised. Then there were the wars, the luxurious lifestyles of the emperors and amirs alike, the reduction in khalisa land, all of which burdened the state. The result was that the expenditure of the state much exceeded its income.

There was, moreover, no significant scientific and technological advance that could have improved a stagnant economy. The once flourishing trade did not enrich the empire's coffers even as the inroads by European traders grew along coastal India.

These economic and administrative problems only multiplied following the death of Aurangzeb. The empire had become too vast to be efficiently administered by a centralised system when the rulers were weak and incompetent.

Rise of Regional States

The states that emerged as a result of the decline of the Mughal Empire can be classified into the following three broad categories:

(i) **Successor States** These were the Mughal provinces that turned into states after breaking away from the empire. Though they did not challenge the sovereignty of the Mughal ruler, the establishment of virtually independent and hereditary authority by their governors showed the emergence of autonomous polity in these territories. Some examples are Awadh, Bengal and Hyderabad.

(ii) **Independent Kingdoms** These states came into existence primarily due to the destabilisation of the Mughal control over the provinces, examples being Mysore, Kerala and the Rajput states.

(iii) **The New States** These were the states set up by the rebels against the Mughal empire, examples being the Maratha, the Sikh and the Jat states.

■ Survey of Regional Kingdoms

Hyderabad

The founder of the Asaf-Jah house of Hyderabad was Kilich Khan, popularly known as Nizam-ul-Mulk. It was Zulfikar Khan who had first conceived the idea of an independent state in the Deccan. But with his death in 1713 the dream remained

unfulfilled. Kilich Khan, disgusted with the Mughal emperor who had appointed Mubariz Khan as a full-fledged viceroy of the Deccan, decided to fight Mubariz Khan. He defeated and later killed Mubariz Khan in the Battle of Shahr-Kheda (1724). He now assumed control of the Deccan. In 1725, he became the viceroy and conferred on himself the title of Asaf-Jah.

Awadh

The founder of the independent principality of Awadh was Saadat Khan, popularly known as Burhan-ul-Mulk. Saadat Khan was a Shia. He had joined in a conspiracy against the Sayyid brothers, which resulted in his being given an increased mansab. Later, driven out of the court, he was prompted to found a new independent state. Saadat Khan committed suicide due to pressure from Nadir Shah who was demanding a huge booty from him. He was succeeded by Safdar Jang as the Nawab of Awadh.

Bengal

Murshid Kuli Khan was the founder of the independent state of Bengal. He was a capable ruler and made Bengal a prosperous state. He was succeeded in 1727 by his son Shuja-ud-din. His successor, Sarfaraz Khan, was killed in 1740 by Alivardi Khan, the deputy governor of Bihar at Gheria, who assumed power and made himself independent of the Mughal emperor by giving yearly tribute.

The Rajputs

The Rajputs tried to re-establish their independence in the 18th century. This forced the Mughal ruler Bahadur Shah I to march against Ajit Singh (1708), who had formed an alliance with Jai Singh II and Durgadas Rathor. But the alliance was broken and the situation was saved for the Mughals. At one time the Rajputs controlled the entire territory extending from the south of Delhi up to the western coast.

Mysore

Another important state to make its appearance in the eighteenth century was that of Mysore. This territory located at the junction of the Eastern and Western Ghats was ruled by the Wodeyars. Various powers, interested in this territory, turned the area into a constant battlefield. In the end the Mysore state was brought under the rule of Haider Ali who ruled the state but not without trouble. He was involved in constant warfare with the British and so was his son Tipu Sultan.

Kerala

Martanda Varma established an independent state of Kerala with Travancore as his capital. He extended the boundaries of his state from Kanyakumari to Cochin. He made efforts to organise his army along the Western model and adopted various measures to develop his state.

The Jats

The agriculturist Jat settlers living around Delhi, Mathura, and Agra revolted against the oppressive policies of Aurangzeb. After some initial setbacks, Churaman and Badan Singh succeeded in setting up the Jat state of Bharatpur. But it was under Suraj Mal that Jat power reached its zenith. He not only provided an efficient system of administration but also greatly extended the territory of the state. His state included territories from Ganga in the east to Chambal in the south and included the *Subahs* of Agra, Mathura, Meerut and Aligarh. However, the Jat state suffered a decline after the death of Suraj Mal in 1763. Thereafter, the state split into small areas controlled by petty zamindars who mainly lived by plunder.

The Sikhs

Guru Gobind Singh transformed the Sikhs into a militant sect in defence of their religion and liberties. Banda Bahadur, who later assumed the leadership of the Sikhs in 1708, was

defeated and killed. In the wake of the invasions of Nadir Shah and Ahmad Shah Abdali, the Sikhs once again asserted their authority. At this stage they organised themselves into 12 *misls* or confederacies which exercised control over different parts of the kingdom. The credit for establishing a strong kingdom of Punjab goes to Ranjit Singh. He was the son of Mahan Singh, the leader of the Sukarchakiya *misl*. Ranjit Singh brought under control the area extending from the Sutlej to the Jhelum. He conquered Lahore in 1799 and Amritsar in 1802. By the Treaty of Amritsar with the British, Ranjit Singh acknowledged the British right over the cis-Sutlej territories. Ranjit Singh proved to be an efficient administrator. He greatly modernised his army with the help of Europeans. But towards the close of his reign, the English forced him to sign the Tripartite Treaty in 1838 with Shah Shuja and the English Company whereby he agreed to provide passage to the British troops through Punjab with a view to placing Shah Shuja on the throne of Kabul. Ranjit Singh died in 1839. His successors could not keep the state intact and, soon enough, the British took control over it.

The Marathas

Perhaps the most formidable province to emerge was that of the Marathas. Under the capable leadership of the Peshwas, the Marathas uprooted the Mughal authority from Malwa and Gujarat and established their rule. At one time they claimed the right to be the chief inheritors of the Mughal dominion, but their authority was challenged by Ahmed Shah Abdali in the Third Battle of Panipat (1761). The Marathas quickly recovered from the defeat and offered the most formidable challenge to the English East India Company in the struggle for political supremacy in India.

Rohilakhand and Farukhabad

The states of Rohilakhand and the kingdom of the Bangash Pathans were a fall out of the Afghan migration into India. Large scale immigration of Afghans into India took place in

mid-18th century because of political and economic turmoil in Afghanistan. Ali Muhammad Khan took advantage of the collapse of authority in north India following Nadir Shah's invasion, to set up a petty kingdom, Rohilakhand. This was the area of the Himalayan foothills between Kumaon in the north and the Ganga in the south. The Rohillas, as the inhabitants of Rohilakhand were known, suffered heavily at the hands of the other powers in the area, the Jats and the Awadh rulers and, later, the Marathas and the British. Mohammad Khan Bangash, an Afghan, set up an independent kingdom to the east of Delhi in the area around Farrukhabad, during the reigns of Farrukhsiyar and Muhammad Shah.

■ Nature and Limitations of Regional States

The independent political systems that emerged in the provinces continued to maintain ties with the Mughal imperial authority and acknowledged the emperor's importance as an umbrella. Even rebel chieftains of the Marathas and Sikhs recognised the Mughal emperor as the supreme authority.

The polity that emerged in these states was regional in character, and functional with the collaborative support of the different local groups like the zamindars, merchants, local nobles and chieftains. The provincial rulers had to take care of these various local interests in order to maintain themselves. Of course, there were exceptions; for instance, in Mysore, rulers did not recognise the local chieftains.

The regional states had certain limitations. The provincial rulers failed to develop a system based on sound financial, administrative and military organisation. Though some of them tried to modernise, notably Mysore, on the whole, they were backward in science and technology. Another drawback was the constant warfare these states had with the neighbouring regional powers—wars in which none could ultimately dominate. In fact, these states were strong enough to challenge Mughal power, but none was able to replace it with a stable polity at an all-India level.

The jagirdari crisis intensified as income from agriculture declined, and the number of contenders for a share of the surplus multiplied. Though trade, internal and foreign, continued without disruption and even prospered, the rest of the economy stagnated.

Socio-Economic Conditions

Eighteenth century India failed to make progress economically, socially or culturally, at an adequate pace. India became a land of contrasts because extreme poverty and extreme luxury existed side by side. The common populace remained impoverished, backward and oppressed and lived at the bare subsistence level; the rich and the powerful enjoyed a life of luxury and lavishness. But it is worth noting that the life of the Indian masses was, by and large, better in the 18th century than it was after 100 years of British rule.

■ Agriculture

Though agriculture was technically backward, it was worked by the hard labour of peasants. But this hard working class seldom got the fruits of their labour. Even though the agricultural produce supported the rest of the society, a peasant's own reward was miserably inadequate. They were forced to pay exorbitant amounts to the state, the zamindars, the jagirdars, and the revenue-farmers. But this worsened under British rule.

■ Trade and Industry

On account of being self-sufficient in handicrafts and agricultural products, India did not import foreign goods on a large scale. On the other hand, its industrial and agricultural products were in good demand in foreign markets. Hence its exports were more than its imports; trade was balanced by import of silver and gold. India was known as a sink of precious metals.

Views

Bear in mind that the commerce of India is the commerce of the world and... he who can exclusively command it is the dictator of Europe.

—Peter the Great

India was a far greater industrial and manufacturing nation than any in Europe or any other in Asia. Her textile goods—the fine products of her looms, in cotton, wool, linen and silk—were famous over the civilised world; so were her exquisite jewellery and her precious stones cut in every lovely form; so were her pottery, porcelains, ceramics of every kind, quality, color and beautiful shape; so were her fine works in metal—iron, steel, silver and gold.

She had great architecture—equal in beauty to any in the world. She had great engineering works. She had great merchants, great businessmen, great bankers and financiers. Not only was she the greatest shipbuilding nation, but she had great commerce and trade by land and sea which extended to all known civilised countries. Such was the India which the British found when they came.

—J.T. Sunderland

For centuries the handloom weavers of Bengal had produced some of the world's most desirable fabrics, especially the fine muslins, light as 'woven air', that were coveted by European dressmakers. As late as the mid-eighteenth century, Bengal's textiles were still being exported to Egypt, Turkey and Persia in the West, and to Java, China and Japan in the East, along well-established trade routes, as well as to Europe.

—Shashi Tharoor, *An Era of Darkness*

Items of Import From the *Persian Gulf Region*—pearls, raw silk, wool, dates, dried fruits, and rose water; from *Arabia*—coffee, gold, drugs, and honey; from *China*—tea, sugar, porcelain, and silk; from *Tibet*—gold, musk, and woollen cloth; from *Africa*—ivory and drugs; from *Europe*—woollen cloth, copper, iron, lead and paper.

Items of Export Cotton textiles, raw silk and silk fabrics, hardware, indigo, saltpetre, opium, rice, wheat, sugar, pepper and other spices, precious stones, and drugs.

Important Centres of Textile Industry Dacca, Murshidabad, Patna, Surat, Ahmedabad, Broach, Chandernagore, Burhanpur, Jaunpur, Varanasi, Lucknow, Agra, Multan, Lahore, Masulipatnam, Aurangabad, Chicacole, Vishakhapatnam, Bangalore, Coimbatore, Madurai, etc.; Kashmir was a centre of woollen manufactures.

Ship-building Industry Maharashtra, the Andhra region and Bengal were the leaders in ship-building. Indian shipping also flourished on the Kerala coast at Calicut and Quilon. The Zamorin of Calicut used the Muslim Kunjali Maraikkars (who were well known for their seafaring ability) for his navy. Shivaji Bhonsle's navy put up a good defence on the west coast against the Portuguese. According to Bipan Chandra, the European companies bought many Indian-made ships for their use.

■ Status of Education

The education imparted in 18th-century India was still traditional which could not match with the rapid developments in the West. The knowledge was confined to literature, law, religion, philosophy, and logic and excluded the study of physical and natural sciences, technology and geography. In fact, due to over-reliance placed on ancient learning, any original thought got discouraged. Elementary education among the Hindus and the Muslims was quite widespread. The Hindu and Muslim elementary schools were called *pathshalas* and *maktabs* respectively. The education was confined to reading, writing, and arithmetic. Children from the lower caste sometimes attended the schools, but female presence was rare.

Chatuspathis or *Tols*, as they were called in Bihar and Bengal, were the centres of higher education. Some of the famous centres for Sanskrit education were Kasi (Varanasi), Tirhut (Mithila), Nadia and Utkala. *Madrassahs* were the institutions of higher learning for Persian and Arabic, Persian

being the court language and learnt by the Muslims as well as the Hindus. Azimabad (Patna) was a famous centre for Persian education. People interested in the study of the Quran and Muslim theology had to acquire proficiency in Arabic.

■ Societal Set-up

Many Castes, Many Sects

The society of 18th century India was characterised by traditional outlook and stagnation. Though there existed a certain degree of broad cultural unity, people were divided by caste, religion, region, tribe and language. The family system was primarily patriarchal and caste was the central feature of the social life of the Hindus. Apart from the four *varnas*, Hindus were divided into numerous sub-castes which permanently fixed their place in the social scale. Though the choice of profession was mainly determined by caste considerations, exceptions occurred on a large scale, making caste status quite fluid in some parts of the country. Caste councils and *panchayats* enforced caste norms and regulations. Even though Islam enjoined social equality on the Muslims, they too were divided by considerations of caste, race, tribe and status. Religious considerations not only kept the *Sunni* and *Shia* nobles apart but also the Irani, Afghan, Turani and Hindustani Muslim nobles and officials apart from one another. The *sharif* Muslims consisting of nobles, scholars, priests and army affairs often looked down upon the *ajlaf* Muslims or the lower class Muslims in a manner similar to the way of the higher-caste Hindus treated the lower-caste Hindus. Religious conversions occurred and caste proved to be a major divisive force and element of disintegration in 18th century India.

Position of Women in Society

In the patriarchal family system in India (except in some social groups in Kerala), women possessed little individuality

View

A Hindu woman can go anywhere alone, even in the most crowded places, and she need never fear the impertinent looks and jokes of idle loungers.

—**Abbe Dubois**, commented at beginning of the nineteenth century

of their own, though there were a few exceptions. While upper class women remained at home, lower class women worked in fields and outside their homes supplementing the family income. Certain outdated and exploitative social customs and traditions such as the *purdah*, *sati*, child marriage, polygamy did exist which hindered the progress of women. The plight of the Hindu widow was usually miserable. The evil of dowry was especially widespread in Bengal and Rajputana. Sensitive Indians were often touched by the hard and harsh life of the widows. Raja Sawai Jai Singh of Amber and the Maratha General Prashuram Bhau tried to promote widow remarriage but failed.

Menace of Slavery

European travellers and administrators, who came in the 17th century, reported the widespread prevalence of slaves in India. It is believed that some people were compelled to sell their offspring due to economic distress, famines, natural calamities and extreme poverty. Generally higher classes of Rajputs, Khatri and Kayasthas kept women slave for domestic work. However, the status of slaves in India was better than that in Europe. Slaves, were usually treated as hereditary servants rather than as menials. Marriages took place among the slaves, and the offspring coming out of such wedlock were considered free citizens.

The advent of Europeans heightened the slavery and slave trade in India. European trading companies purchased slaves from the markets of Bengal, Assam and Bihar and took

them to the European and American market. Abyssinian slaves were sold at Surat, Madras and Calcutta.

■ Development in Art, Architecture and Culture

The decline of the imperial Mughals forced talented people to seek the patronage of newly established state courts like Hyderabad, Lucknow, Jaipur, Murshidabad, Patna, Kashmir, etc.

At Lucknow, Asaf-ud-Daula built the *bada Imambara* in 1784. In the first half of the 18th century, Sawai Jai Singh built the pink city of Jaipur and five astronomical observatories at Delhi, Jaipur, Benares, Mathura and Ujjain. He also prepared a set of time-tables called *Jij Muhammad-shahi*, to help the people in the study of astronomy. In the south, in Kerala, the Padmanabhapuram Palace, famous for its architecture and mural paintings, was constructed.

New schools of painting were born and achieved distinction. The paintings of the Rajputana and Kangra schools became prominent and revealed new vitality and taste.

A distinct feature of the literary life of the 18th century was the growth of Urdu language and poetry. It was the period of Urdu poets like Mir, Sauda, Nazir and Mirza Ghalib (19th century). In south India, Malayalam literature flourished under the patronage of the Travancore rulers. Kanchan Nambiar was a noted Malayalam poet. The Tamil language was enriched by *sittar* poetry. Tayumanavar (1706-44), one of the best exponents of *sittar* poetry, protested against the abuses of temple-rule and the caste system. *Heer Ranjha*, the romantic epic in Punjabi literature, was composed by Warris Shah. In Sindhi literature, Shah Abdul Latif composed *Risalo*, a collection of poems. These are just some examples of literary works in regional languages.

Summary

Why the Mughal Empire Declined

- **Weak Successors** The Mughal empire was a personal despotism and its success depended upon a strong and capable monarch.
- **Absence of Definite Law of Succession** Continuous wars of succession (absence of law of primogeniture) fostered partisanship at the cost of patriotism.
- **Aurangzeb's Religious and Deccan Policies** The religious policy antagonised the Rajputs, Sikhs, Jats and Marathas; Deccan policy kept the emperor away from the capital for a long duration.
- **Degeneration of Rulers and Nobles**
- **Deterioration of Army**
- **Too Vast an Empire** The vast empire became a difficult task for weak rulers to administer efficiently.
- **External Invasions** Invasions of Irani and Durrani kingdoms (Nadir Shah, Ahmad Shah Abdali) gave a death-blow.
- **Economic Decline** Endless wars, stagnation in agriculture, and decline in trade and industry emptied the royal treasury.
- **Advent of Europeans** European companies interfered in native politics, hastening the disintegration of empire.
- **Shifting Allegiance of Zamindars.**
- **Jagirdari Crisis.**
- **Rise of Regional Aspirations** Rise and establishment of Awadh, Bengal, Hyderabad, Mysore, Kerala, Rajput states and Jat states accelerated the process of disintegration.

Rise of Regional States

- Three categories
- **Successor States** Hyderabad (1724, Nizam-ul-Mulk), Bengal (1717, Murshid Quli Khan), and Awadh (1722, Saadat Khan Burhan-ul-Mulk).
- **Independent States** Mysore (under Haidar Ali), Kerala (King Martanda Varma), and Rajput States (Raja Sawai Singh of Amber).
- **New States** Marathas, Sikhs, Jats and Afghans.

Socio-Economic Conditions

- **Agriculture** ● Stagnant and technologically backward agriculture, compensated by very hard labour of peasants.

- Peasants paid revenues to state, zamindars, jagirdars and revenue-farmers.
- Major produce/crops: rice, wheat, sugar, pepper, spices, cotton, etc.

Trade and Industry Trade flourished. Cotton textiles, raw silk, silk fabrics, hardware, indigo, saltpetre, opium, rice, wheat, sugar, pepper, spices, precious stones, and drugs were exported. Gold, musk, woollen cloth, copper, iron, lead, paper, porcelain, pearls, dates, dried fruits, coffee, tea, ivory, rose water, etc., were imported.

The textile industry was famous for its produce. The ship-building industry flourished. The metal industry was also well developed.

Education ● Elementary education imparted through *pathshalas* and *maktabs*.

- *Chatuspathis* or *Tols* among Hindus, and *Madrasahs* among Muslims were the institutes of higher learning.
- Absence of the study of science and technology and geography was a general feature.

Society ● Apart from the four *varnas*, Hindus were divided into many *sub-castes* which differed in their nature from place to place.

- Muslims were also divided by considerations of caste, race, tribe, and status, even though their religion propagated equality.

Art, Architecture and Culture ● Asaf-ud-Daula, in 1784, built *Bada Imambara* at Lucknow.

- Sawai Jai Singh built pink-city of Jaipur and five astronomical observatories (Delhi, Jaipur, Mathura, Benares, Ujjain).
- Painting schools of Kangra and Rajputana came into prominence.
- In northern India, growth of Urdu language and poetry took place. Prominent Urdu poets were Mir, Sauda, Nazir, and Mirza Ghalib.
- Regional languages developed. Tamil language was enriched by *Sittar* poetry.