



- 18th Century witnessed decline of political unification & rise in uncertainties
- Mughal empire was battered by :- Afghan raiders (Nadir Shah, 1739 and Ahmad Shah Abdali, 1748-1767), Maratha adventurers & various warrior-peasant groups (Jats, Rohillas, and the Sikhs), Its military-bureaucratic apparatus (the mansabdari system), stood by helplessly
- The break down of the fiscal system, thereby threatening the life-styles of a highly urbane class of people and their dependants

WHAT WAS MANSAB SYSTEM?

- Mansabdari System : Mansab means rank. Each individual entered in the Mughal bureaucracy was allotted a mansab.
- It has dual ranks – zat & sawar.
- Zat determined the official hierarchical status of its holder & the personal pay of the holder.
- Sawar rank denotes how much contingent (horses, horsemen, and equipment) a mansabdar was supposed to maintain
- The empire was bankrupt & all elements of political governance & fiscal probity – had apparently disappeared
- Two emperors, Ahmad Shah (1748-1754) & Shah Alam-II (1759-1816) were blinded, & another, Alamgir-II (1754-1759) was assassinated by nobles engaged in factional feuds.
- The speed with which this happened was bewildering.
- In 1700 the Mughal Empire under Aurangzeb was at its territorial zenith.
- By the 1730s – many of its core areas had been fragmented into numerous regional polities.
- Few, like the Nawab of Awadh or the Nizamat in Bengal, took roots as ‘successor’ regimes.
- Others, like the Marathas or the Jats, emerged on the basis of their sustained & violent opposition to the Mughal empire.
- British East India Company, had succeeded in conquering eastern India & influenced the state of affairs in other parts of the sub-continent.
- On the basis of these successful political ventures, creating the bases of an early-colonial system of rule.
- Due to such rapid changes, the eighteenth century has attracted the attention of a number of modern historians & has gradually emerged as the hub of a lively debate
- Because of this, the historiography of this century has seen some very innovative advances
- While interpretations differ sharply on many aspects

- The interpretation that the decline of the Mughal Empire was a result of Aurangzeb's religious bigotry has been comprehensively rejected.
- If Aurangzeb faced opposition from the Marathas, the Jats and some Rajput clans, he was equally troubled by recalcitrant Muslim nobles & officials
- Powerful Rajput ruling houses continued to be loyal to the empire.
- The stereotype that this was a century of moral decadence & cultural decay has also been rejected
- Scholarly Attention is drawn to the dynamic cultural life of the regional states.
- Many regional states carried the legacies of high Mughal culture & blended these with the rich cultural heritage of the regions.
- Lucknow & Hyderabad had emerged as centres of literary & cultural patronage & the hubs
- Banaras emerged as a centre of banking & commerce – centre of religion, education & pilgrimage.
- In Bengal, Nadia was the centre of Sanskrit learning & Dayabhaga Hindu law.
- Bishupur became the regional architectural & musical centre
- Mitakshara: – Rights in the joint family property is acquired by birth, & as a rule, females have no right of succession to the family property. The right to property passes by survivorship to the other male members of the family.
- Dayabhaga : – Rights in the joint family property are acquired by inheritance or by will, and the share of a deceased male member goes to his widow in default of a closed heir.
- Tanjore, under the patronage of its Maratha rulers, became a vibrant centre in the fields of religion, music & dance.
- Thus historians view : –
 - 1) decline of the Mughal Empire & its aftermath not as a result of religious bigotry or the weakness of rulers
 - 2) but as a structural systemic process
- But sharp differences nevertheless remain about the causes & nature of this systemic failure.
- According to some historians : –
 - The decline is due to an economic crisis engendered by an over-exploitative ruling class
 - Decline is a process of local resurgence fuelled by long-term process of economic growth.
- There are differing interpretations of
 - 1) The changing relationships between state & society,
 - 2) The patterns & processes of economic growth,

- 3) The consequences of the tussle between the empire & the localities
- The areas of debate are centred around : –
 - 1) The reasons of the transition of the Company from a commercial to a political entity;
 - 2) Whether the roots of colonialism in India, are exogenous or indigenous
 - 3) What was the nature of its social & economic impact.

SALIENT FEATURES OF 18TH CENTURY

- The 18th century witnessed two transitions : –
 - 1) With the balkanisation of the Mughal Empire into regional, & subregional, political entities.
 - The redistribution of political power among regional social groups, the other transition went much deeper
 - It was unleashed by the political ascendancy of the British East India Company after the battles of Plassey (1757) & Buxar (1763)
- The Battle of Plassey was fought in north-eastern India on 23 June 1757.
- British East India Company, troops led by Robert Clive – against the forces of Siraj-ud-Daulah, the last Nawab of Bengal, & his French allies.
- Clive's victory made the British a greatest economic & military power in India.
- On 22 October 1764, at the battle of Buxar in northeastern India between the forces of the British East India Company, commanded by Major Hector Munro & the army of an alliance of Indian states including Bengal, Awadh, and the Mughal Empire.
- 2) The transformation of an overseas trading organization, (EIC) into a ruling power & the use of this political supremacy for military & commercial purposes.
- In the 1680s : – Amidst the fragmentation of the Mughal Empire. Political dynamics underwent a change.
- By the 1720s : – the aftershocks of the disintegration had been absorbed by the stable regional polities
- From the 1750s : – major political realignments had started – under the growing hegemony of the Company
- By 1820s : – indigenous regimes either annexed or become subsidiary allies of the Company.
- Political regeneration in the provinces was accompanied by regional economic re-orientation.
- Economic growth was spearheaded by local landed & commercial classes.
- Despite EIC imposed pressure on indigenous structures, the prospects of economic growth were not abruptly closed.
- Till first two decades of the 19th century, the slow growth of the eighteenth century was coming to an end.
- Transition in relationship between the Indian & the global economy

- The Indian Ocean was part of an elaborate commercial network
- Increasing Europeanisation of early modern trade.
- Indian side had always provided goods & the services, But global networks of European commerce boosted the demand
- Much wealth flowed into India through this channel.
- Indian merchant capital was deployed in the service of wider network
- This network was influential from Africa, South-east Asia and Europe as they were from Agra & Delhi.
- The early-colonial intervention deepened this network.
- In the mid 18th century – the earlier linkages between India & west Asia shifted towards east & south-east Asia under the British commerce.
- Since 18th century was period of global economic expansion unlike 17th century – recognized a period of crisis

DEBATES

- Two broad groups were divided -
 - 1) For the pre- 1750 – divide into a) empire-centric view & b) region-centric view
 - 2) For the post – 1750 – Indianists & Europeansists positions.
- The regional formations, succeeding the empire, are ascribed with little potential
- Whereas oppositional movements like the Jats, Sikhs & Marathas are considered a predatory- formations
- The region-centric approach focuses on how social groups became active agents in the political & economic trajectories for their own ends.
- The structures of Mughal provincial govt fundamentally transformed — led to the creation of autonomous kingdoms in Bengal, Awadh and Hyderabad.
- Rise of polities, like the Marathas & Sikhs, had genesis lay in opposition to the Mughals
- But these polities created political systems within the imperial domains – use of the administrative methods of the Mughals
- These modified provincial authorities turned Mughal nobles more powerful — their clients & family members gathered large bundles of proprietary rights
- All this contributed to the process of commercial growth in the regions
- For the post-1750 situation : – Europeanist explanation gives primacy to the, expansionist Europe (especially Britain) defeating India in chaos and disarray.
- Europeanist explanation is the most dominant view amongst Indian nationalist & Marxist historians.
- The nationalist view overwhelmingly see the anarchy in eighteenth century — lapse in nation

building – which allowed a foreign power to conquer and to colonise the country.

- Marxist view see the rise of British rule as a necessary evil as it ended much of the ‘feudal’ disintegration of society .
- Common points in both streams : – Belief that
1) Stability could exist only in large, pan-Indian political structures; 18th century, was a period of chaos, anarchy & decline.
2) British rule as a fundamental disjuncture: a completely foreign & alien system of domination, totally removed from the traditions of Indian governance or culture.
- Indianist perspective : — British emergence is seen not as a one-sided process of conquest & subjugation — seen as a result of Europe’s (especially Britain’s) deep engagement with India over a long period.
- Indianist perspective : – emphasises the political stability imparted by the ‘successor’ states of the Mughal Empire.
- Indianist : – India’s commercial & military sophistication continued in the eighteenth century & the Company used this to its advantage.
- Indian agency was a vital ingredient in ensuring the ultimate success of British rule in India.
- British rule was based on Indian norms of governance, modes of agro-commercial management and the skills of its human resources, but it successfully modified these for its own purposes.
- Indianist view : — the 18th century was not a century of ruptures, but a century of deep continuities
- Indianists are often referred to as the ‘Cambridge School’ as many of the protagonists are situated in North America
- Together they referred to as ‘revisionist’ historians

DECLINE OF MUGHAL & GENESIS

- Theories of moral turpitude, weak rulers & communal policies sounds empirically unsustainable
- Later Mughal emperors, for example Farrukh Siyar, tried in their own way to stem the rot.
- No evidence to suggest that these emperors abdicated their responsibilities, but events were moving too fast for a single person to handle.
- Other theories focus on a rapidly disintegrating structure, a severe crisis in the Empire’s fiscal & jagirdari systems
- For Irfan Habib, the capacity of the economy to expand was self-limiting, & unrestrained tendency of Mughal fiscal system to appropriate huge amounts of the peasants’ surplus.
- This sparked off a tripolar confrontation between the imperial ruling class, the hereditary landholders (zamindars) & peasants

- According to, Satish Chandra empire’s demise was due to its inability to ensure the desired efficiency of the assignment (jagir) system, thus leading to intense factional struggles
- Athar Ali saw the crisis due to growing shortage of jagirs & the inability of the system to accommodate the growing number of aspirants to the assignment system in the aftermath of Aurangzeb’s Deccan campaigns.
- According to John Richards – be-jagiri (jagir-less) wasn’t problem in the Deccan , the failure to devise a viable system of accommodating local elites in the Deccan was the reason.
- According to, Marshall Hodgson the three Islamic empires – the Ottoman, the Safavid & the Mughal – were successful not because of their adherence to a single formal religion, but because of their successful control over the deployment of gunpowder, & they failed because they could not keep up with the changing technologies of warfare.
- Iqtidar Alam Khan tells about correspondence between gunpowder, centralization & resistance — more powerful subjects had access to muskets, cannons & gunpowder to arm themselves and to resist the intrusion of the state.
- It was impossible to prevent such crucial technology from percolating downwards
- Zamindars, chaudhuris & dominant peasant groups controlled large numbers of armed militia
- The Marathas, the Sikhs & the Jats used muskets, as did most other rural-magnates
- Mughal army controlled a great amount of military hardware, as the local magnates were always a serious military threat
- In terms of military technology state & rural magnates, had equalized because of the concerted upsurge in the countryside
- According to, Stewart Gordon , Marathas successfully tapped into a vast & heterogeneous military labour market — one being provided by Europeans
- Mughal Empire provided a number of institutions in order to centralize power, but unfortunately those led to periodic crises in institutional & fiscal arrangements
- For example their inability of the state to affect parity between assessment of revenue (the jama) and what was actually collected (the hasil)
- Structural inability of the empire in enduring systems between the agrarian elite & the state.
- For example, in Rajput policy of Akbar — did not cover the whole of Rajputana or the entire grid of Rajput clans.
- Failure of state to strike out workable arrangements with small zamindars scattered even in the heartland.
- The tension between imperial ruling class & local magnates shaped up the endogenous processes of

centralization, decentralization, & crisis in the Mughal Empire

- These relationships were never fixed at the dictates of the state; they were constantly changing and unfolding.
- There was greater flux in its interstices, & this fluidity allowed for a greater constellation of social groups in different parts of the empire
- This explains the various social configurations in different parts of the empire.
- More the empire tried to centralize, the gainers were the regional groups.

SOCIO-ECONOMIC BACKGROUND OF REGIONAL POLITICS

- Stephen Blake described the Mughal system as a 'patrimonial-bureaucratic' edifice, means, Mughals tried to balance an elaborately personalized style of rule (patrimonial) with a highly militarized & centralized vision of the empire.
- According to, M.N. Pearson, the Mughals failed to bridge the gap between a paternalistic, highly personalized form of govt & its military aspirations.
- In other words, while trying to be militarily effective it failed to deploy an autonomous military bureaucratic system.
- According to, Muzaffar Alam, aims & aspirations of the local gentry subverted the imperial process.
- The nature of the elite was not the same everywhere.
 - In Awadh : – people belonged to the upper echelons of the social system (the ashraf),
 - In Punjab : – they could include more 'subaltern' elements like the Jat peasantry in the Punjab
 - In Bengal : – the Sadgop zamindaris on the fringes
- Merchants & bankers played a crucial role in underwriting them for a consideration.
- The newly constituted regional elite has a striking feature of diversity - it also refers to a system buffeted by multi-polar tensions.
- The crisis now can be seen as one created by resurgent aspirations of groups.
- C.A. Bayly has described as 'many types of military, merchant & political entrepreneurs' – to 'capitalise on the buoyant trade & production of the Mughal realm'.
- This resurgence did not mean a decline; it meant the social displacement & replacement at the top

- Seeds of change germinated within the Mughal institutions themselves.
- Paradoxically, the institutions of centralization generated their own counter-tendencies.
- Process of regionalization can be explained by the consolidation of the imperial elite who took advantage of the disintegrating jagirdari-mansabdari complex for their own purposes.
- Mughals sought to make the zamindars work as intermediaries in their land revenue administration, these local elites, highly armed & ruling over substantial domains like petty kings, generated alternative, localized, sub-imperialisms.
- In the Mughal provinces of Awadh & Bengal, zamindars emerged as a class of rural exploiters.
- On the contrary, they were active agents in local economies as financiers, entrepreneurs and consumers.
- Their retainers became a sub-elite between them & the peasants, as they were usually given prebends.
- They rose in rebellion to defend the fruits of their prosperity from the intrusive pressures of state fiscalism.
- These in turn were used by the provincial satraps to enhance their powers vis-à-vis the centre.
- In Awadh & Bengal, the provincial subahdar enhanced his power by using such agrarian disturbances as a bargaining counter against the centre.
- On the northeast frontier of India Mughal expansion was stopped in the 1680s by the Ahom dynasty that maintained an independent Assam until the British annexed it in the early nineteenth century.
- In the south, royalist concentration occurred only from the 1760s in Mysore.
- According to David Ludden, petty kingdoms being formed by the Telugu-speaking nayakas, who had been subordinate to Vijayanagar based on temples and a highly militarised population.
- On the Malabar coast — alliance between the coastal kingdoms and the landowning households held together by a mutual sharing of profits from trade, land & labour.
- An intrusive monarchical system was introduced in this region only after the invasion by the aggressive Mysore state under Haidar Ali and Tipu Sultan.