



- The 18th century has been a subject of historical debate among scholars.
- It represents a phase of transition between medieval & modern periods.
- The decline of Mughal power in the 18th century was characterized by the rise of autonomous states
- Earlier the historians regarded this period as crisis torn but recent researches have tried to study 18th century states as separate entities possessing elements of dynamism and growth.

18TH CENTURY DEBATE

- 18th century debate among scholars for understanding the nature of successor states which emerged in this period.
- 18th century has been largely analysed in the context of the Mughal empire.
- However, recent writings focus on 18th century as an epoch in which certain trends emerged which were not wholly governed by the presence of Mughal empire.
- The earliest interpretation of 18th century is contained in Sir Jadunath Sarkar's History of Bengal Vol. II & The Fall of Mughal Empire Volume IV, He subscribes to the dark age postulate of 18th century.
- According to Athar Ali the rise of successor states in the 18th century should be analysed within the framework of Mughal decline.
- Hermann Goetz in his lecture on the crisis of Indian Civilization in the 18th century and early 19th century laid emphasis on the cultural development in India in the 18th century. This was a marked departure from the 'overall decay' theory of 18th century
- Historians analysed the successor states and emergence of new states in the 18th century. These comprised of Awadh, Hyderabad, Bengal, Mysore, Marathas, Sikhs etc.
- These polities are analysed as preparing the ground for the metamorphosis from the Mughal imperial system to the British system.
- the 18th century reflected the political transformation from Mughal decline to British colonialism but the socio economic forces at the local level continued to operate as before.
- But the local groups shifted their political allegiance
- With the decline of Mughal empire the virtually independent zamindars performed the task of collection of revenue & the local rulers used these resources for sustaining court & armies.
- Several types of political formations emerged in this period ranging from successor states to zamindaris which later got absorbed into the category of Princely states under the British.
- Early British writers of Indian history (Elliot, Haig etc.) painted the 18th century in dismal colour they demonstrated that their predecessors were incompetent.
- The contemporary Persian works also portrayed the period as anarchic.
- The Persian writers were patronized by the nobles & with the decline of the Mughal empire their position was adversely affected.
- The contemporary historians were either lower officials or 'prebendaries'.
- M. Alam suggest that the 18th century was caught between the grandeur of the Mughals & the indignity of colonial rule
- The Ashob-I-Zamana of Jafar Zatalli written in 18th century refers to the decay of a pattern of life & setback to a group of people (umara) who gave protection to creative classes (poets, writers) & gains of the 'lower' categories (weavers, butchers etc.) from the changed social milieu.
- It seems that the British historians of the 18th century were not guided by any bias or prejudice towards the Muslim rulers of the previous regime.
- Col. A. Dow & Col. Kirkpatrick the historians cum officials (Lucknow & Hyderabad) of 18th century represent the above mentioned category.
- Dow in his "History of Hindustan", refers to company rule as mercantile misrule & desired the reverting back to Mughal practices.
- Dow's glorification of Akbar made Warren Hastings to order the publication of Francis Gladwin's pioneering English translation of Ain-i-Akbari.
- Kirkpatrick believed that Mughal rule was based on a variegated set of laws and customary traditions which found favour with Lord Cornwallis too.
- The concept of Mughal maladministration was propounded by British officials of mid 19th century viz. Sir Henry Miers Elliot in his Bibliographical Index to the Historians of Mohammadan India.
- This viewpoint was carried further by British as well as Indian historians like Sir Wolseley Haig, Sir Jadunath Sarkar & Dr. R. C. Majumdar.
- Sir Jadunath Sarkar propounded a dark age postulate of the 18th century, which has been refuted and challenged by scholars like Athar Ali, Satish Chandra and Muzaffar Alam.
- It is based on an untenable premise focusing on degeneration which eroded the political organization which was a consequence of incompetent kings and nobles and their extravagant lifestyles

- The 20th century ideology of polity also influenced the perceptions of writers of this period who regarded a centralist system as imparting stability as opposed to the regional or local assertion of authority & power which brought about destabilization.
- Athar Ali's fresh interpretation of Mughal decline in an article in the "Modern Asian Studies", regarded the decline as a form of cultural degeneration.
- Satish Chandra is skeptical regarding economic deterioration in the successor states – emerged in the form of political formations from the erstwhile Mughal system & were later integrated into the British colonial system.
- He refers to them as possessing a vibrant political ethos.
- According to Muzaffar Alam, in the first half of the 18th century the Indo-Gangetic subas of the North, from Allahabad to Lucknow & Multan, experienced multivariate manifestations of crisis rather than a positive linearity of decline.
- He regards Awadh as being a picture of progressive activities with scope for emergence of a regional political system but in the Punjab suba he finds few indications, which testify to modifications in the Mughal system in the sphere of polity & economic growth.
- Prof. Athar Ali identifies transition with the collapse of Mughal empire & then the time gap in which transitional regimes intervened (with) the rise of British power.
- Satish Chandra studies the 18th century in totality placed between the indigenous & exogenous imperialism represented by Mughal and British respectively.
- Sarkar's understanding of 18th century from "History of Bengal Vol II": "On 23rd June 1757, the middle ages of India ended & her modern age began. When Clive struck at the Nawab, Mughal civilization had become a spent bullet. Its potency for good, it's very life was gone.
- According to Satish Chandra in his magnum opus 'Parties & Politics at the Mughal court 1707-1739' in 1959 – opined that – the end of Aurangzeb's reign represented the beginning of 18th century'
- He analysed the disruption of the socio-political system as follows: "social problems which no more devices for expanding cultivation could solve What was really required was the rapid expansion of industry & trade based on the introduction of new technology and the removal of old barriers hindering that expansion.... the existing social order encompassed trade and industry in too narrow a sphere.
- Satish Chandra laid stress on the inability of the ruling class to find new avenues when the tripolar relationship between the center, the zamindars & the Khudkasht (resident cultivator who cultivates with his plough & bullock) was under stress.
- In 1982 the earlier view held by Satish Chandra which regarded the first half of the 18th century as a dead end was modified by him.
- He was now receptive to the idea of the Western Scholars (Sociologists & Indologists) that the 18th century was emerging with opportunities & though the old system was degrading but the possibility of growth existed for worthy people.
- Irfan Habib titled 'The Agrarian System of Mughal India 1556-1707'. Habib refers to the Maratha "plundering & warfare" activities which he thought were responsible for ravaging the countryside & causing ruination of the peasantry.
- He cited Aurangzeb's letters as evidence of the Maratha pillaging in the beginning of the 18th century: "there is no province or district where the infidels have not raised a tumult and since they are not chastised they have established themselves everywhere.
- According to Habib "... the Mughal empire had been its own gravedigger." The crisis in the agrarian economy was reflected in the peasant rebellions which took place frequently and led to the collapse of the imperial system
- Satish Chandra & I. Habib characterized the Mughal ruling elite as possessing a narrow class disposition.
- The absolutist character of the state is reflected in the authority of the racially & hierarchically organized ruling class.
- Athar Ali is known for his writings on administrative history of Mughal India.
- He too like I. Habib and S. Chandra lays emphasis on economic factors which caused the weakening of the Mughal state edifice and paved the way for the establishment of colonial rule.
- The Mughal imperial structure is considered by Athar Ali as analogous to a pan-Indian structure though peripheral (marginal) areas such as Kerala, Dakshin Kanara, Madurai Nayakdom in Southern Tamil Nadu, North East fell outside the pale of Mughal hegemony.
- 1700 onwards impediments & obstacles (peasant revolts, parasitical urban populace) hindered economic growth, which was considerably stifled.
- Athar Ali mentions three categories of state formations in 18th century India:
 - 1) Successor states like Hyderabad, Awadh and Bengal which were part of the Mughal empire and emerged due to the disintegration of Mughal empire. Their administrative structure was a continuation of the Mughal model.
 - 2) The Maratha confederacy, Jats, Sikhs and Afghans rose to power as a consequence of the crisis which had weakened the Mughal imperial structure.
 - 3) South Indian state of Mysore under Hyder Ali Khan and Tipu Sultan.

- In the 1983, Satish Chandra was able to discover possibilities for economic growth in the 18th century.
- He refers to the elasticity & adaptability especially in the sphere of cloth production, long distance trade, dadni (term of agreement for providing means for production to artisans), cash crop, insurance, banking and other categories of rural fiscal mechanisms which led to the emergence of sahkari class to a position of economic and social prominence.
- He referred to the categories of rural society into two groups – the riyasati or privileged & the riyati or others
- The riyasati class was the rural aristocracy comprising of the upper strata, the customary holders (malik) of village lands (khud kashta) and those who held official positions at the village level.
- Satish Chandra suggests that “there were greater possibilities for upward social mobility for the rural privileged sector than in the earlier period but within the broad framework of feudal society”.
- He finally infers that “the 18th century was thus pregnant with possibilities.... The old mould was cracking and there was a possibility of growth in various areas
- Bernard S. Cohn , in the Journal of the American Oriental Society, titled “Political systems in 18th century India: the Banaras Region” deviates from the earlier position of scholars who analyse the 18th century in the context of the crisis which developed in the Mughal administrative and economic system
- He attempted to study the micro political system which developed in the 18th century i.e. the Banaras zamindari as an autonomous domain under the Nawab of Awadh which was finally subordinated to the control of British East India Company
- Cohn argued that political control in pre-modern times was organized along vertical lines (hierarchical).
- The dominance of the hierarchically superior powers was sustained through antagonism among the different categories in society.
- Although state power was legitimized through traditions, rituals etc. but it could be maintained only through rivalry & balance among the various groups in society.
- Cohn formulate four types of political systems in pre-modern India: 1. Imperial 2. Secondary 3. Regional 4. Local.
- Herman Goetz (The Crisis of Indian Civilization in the 18th Century & early 19th Century) was the first scholar to deduce positive features in the 18th century & he felt that the 18th century ought to be studied as separate entity– it was a period of decline in the political and moral sphere but it was marked by an aesthetic sensitivity & contributed to the growth of cultural development in India.
- Satish Chandra emphasizes that — the political decline manifested itself in the late 18th century—in most of the areas there was no sharp fall in agricultural production, land revenue demand did not decrease, agricultural distress was much less as compared to British rule
- Towards the end of the 18th century with the weakening of the power of the regional and local elites in the face of British challenge the economy was marked by destabilization as a consequence of British policies.
- According to, Satish Chandra, in the Riyasati politics a negative feature emerged in the form of the emergence of large zamindars or talluqdaris which tried to thrive on the labour of small landholders and khudkasht peasants.
- In this sense the Mughal tripolar balance between the jagirdar, zamindar and the peasants was replaced by a more exploitative system.
- Most of the historians till 1970 perceived the 18th century as merely an interregnum or a period of transition which marked the fall of Mughals and the rise of British.
- The 18th century has not been studied in terms of changes in the economy and society of the polities of the different regions

BENGAL

- The death of Aurangzeb in 1707 was marked by the decay of Mughal Empire especially the central power in Delhi.
- This was followed by the emergence of successor states which represented the subas of Mughal Empire
- In the 17th century the Mughal administration was extremely compact and cohesive.
- The mansabdars appointed by the center & posted in the provinces constituted the upper layer of administrative official hierarchy.
- Their position was transferable & the central govt had absolute control over the provincial administration especially through the various officials (viz. subedar and diwan) posted there who served as a curb on each other’s power.
- Bengal was a unique province because the zamindars as land holders at the local level enjoyed tremendous power and performed the function of revenue collection and maintenance of law and order.
- In the administrative hierarchy the provincial officials supervised the zamindar & other landholders and peasants.
- In the 17th century the zamindaris in Bengal were not large and therefore it was easier for the imperial govt to manage them

- During the 18th century with the weakening of the central govt the provincial government in Bengal also underwent transformation.
- The power of the mansabdars in Bengal weakened & the size of imperial contingents was reduced.
- The mansabdars found it difficult to send remittances to Delhi due to the declining military capabilities.
- Now a new phenomenon emerged in the form of an alliance between the representatives of Mughal power in the province (Subedar, Diwan) and the zamindars. This collaboration later incorporated the commercial & the financial groups in Bengal.
- In the 18th century Aurangzeb was confronted with the Maratha problem.
- He needed to mobilize resources for meeting the Maratha challenge. Irfan Habib in his Agrarian System of Mughal India points out that in comparison to the 1580 revenue demand did not increase much in Bengal in the 18th century, although in other provinces of northern India the increase was higher as compared to Bengal.
- Due to devaluation of silver coinage (influx of metal due to European traders) in the 17th century agricultural prices soared but correspondingly the jama did not increase in Bengal.
- Bengal in the 17th century was quite prosperous.
- Evidence shows that on account of extension of cultivation, growth of trade and influx of silver the province of Bengal was economically quite stable.
- In spite of economic prosperity the revenue demand in Bengal did not increase.
- The evidence of the administrative document (Risala-i-Ziraat, written in about 1760) informs us that the revenue demand had continued to be the same since Akbar's period and it had not been subject to revision on the basis of actual measurement
- The officials responsible for revenue collection i.e. the mansabdars who possessed jagirs, the zamindars & other intermediate groups (collectors) remitted the revenue to the center in accordance with the official rate of demand whereas the actual collection was much higher.
- Hardpressed for funds to finance wars against the Marathas Aurangzeb decided to streamline the revenue administration in Bengal since its jama was low and it remitted only a small sum to the central treasury.
- Therefore in 1700 he sent, Murshid Quli Khan from the Deccan to Bengal as Diwan. He had earlier demonstrated his skill in revenue administration in the Deccan His revenue reforms prepared the ground for increase in jama (estimated revenue) & hasil (revenue collected) in the 18th century Bengal.
- The increase in jama in the 18th century was about 22.5 % as compared to the figures of revenue demand in 1580 in Bengal.
- This increase was however not very high if we compare it with the increase in the other provinces of north India in the 17th century.
- The upward swing in revenue collections was accompanied by transformation of the revenue administration in Bengal & the establishment of new political alignments in Bengal due to the growth of trade & banking.
- In this period the sum total of zamindaris decreased but there was increase in large zamindaris.
- Money lenders & bankers emerged as important groups and they provided finances to the zamindars who served as the revenue appropriating agency at the local level
- The important steps taken by Murshid Quli Khan were: the jagirs of the mansabdars in Bengal were shifted to Orissa & consequently those lands in Bengal were placed under Khalisa (they yielded more revenue than the lands of Orissa) & thus the revenue collection went directly into the state coffers.
- The Nizam tried to tighten his hold over the zamindars by enquiring into their collections and ensuring that they paid revenue in accordance with state demand.
- By bringing jagir land under khalisa he was able to ensure that revenue assessment was proper & officials were sent to inquire into the revenue yielding capacity through actual field investigation.
- Zamindari sanads (documents relating to revenue records) refer to assessment only upto zamindari level and not village level.
- Thus, the Nazim's policies were aimed to control the zamindar & the lower intermediate landholders and affected the peasants only indirectly.
- In such a situation a zamindar who was not able to pay the state demand was deprived of his holding and it was either taken over by the government or money lender or given to a capable and loyal zamindar
- Certain zamindars were encouraged to create big zamindaris by bringing other zamindaris under their control and also due to grant of lands to them by the Nazim.
- Rajshahi developed as a big zamindari between 1700-1727. Dinajpur, Nadia and Burdwan also emerged as large zamindaris in this period.
- By 1727 half of the revenue collected for the province was provided by 15 large zamindaris which existed in this period.
- The zamindars who made prompt remittances to the govt, were rewarded for their performance.
- Zamindars along with the bankers & money lenders had emerged as a powerful group within the province both economically and politically
- The Risala-i-ziraat refers to the mahajans who gave money to the zamindars as loan for making revenue payments to the Nazim

- In many cases the zamindars got into the debt cycle especially since the Nazim was stern and strict in dealing with defaulters (zamindars).
- The banking house of Jagat Seth benefited immensely due to the revenue policies of the Nazim.
- They were able to establish a big & powerful banking house and became the custodians of the fiscal transactions of the provincial government by the 1730s due to the support of the Nazim. They provided loans to zamindars who were defaulters
- A hierarchically stratified landholding system existed with big zamindars at the top and smaller at the bottom
- In the period when Murshid Quli served as the Nazim in Bengal the power of the central government (Mughal) continued to weaken further and this gave opportunity to him to exercise greater autonomy in provincial matters.
- He tried to strengthen his position by appointing to official position those who were his relatives and who were loyal to him and removing antagonistic mansabdars.
- The big zamindars were his supporters since they had been permitted to enlarge their zamindaris
- He was interested in handing over the Nizamat which he had created to someone in his family. This was the first manifestation of the autonomy gained by Bengal since the centre had little real role to play
- During the period of Shujauddin (son-in-law of Murshid), the successor of Murshid Quli the bond between the centre and the province was further undermined.
- Although he did not possess his father-in-law's acumen, but he was an efficient administrator and imperial revenues continued to be transmitted to Delhi in his period
- Bengal now relied mainly on its own resources (mobilizing troops) for maintenance of law and order meant that he had to seek the support of zamindars, bankers and local militia in Bengal.
- The military support from the center could not be sought (due to the decline of jagirs and removal of mansabdars) in the context of independent policies pursued by the Nazim.
- Shujauddin initiated measures to win the loyalty of zamindars and bankers.
- The zamindars who had been defaulters earlier and had been punished by Murshid Quli were pardoned and an advisory council was established which had as its member Jagat Seth Fateh Chand. Shujauddin tried to secure his position by sending huge amounts to Delhi
- Thus in the 1730s the provincial administration in Bengal was carried out through the cooperation between Nazim, zamindars and bankers
- Thus it seems that the administrative link between the centre and province had been loosened and it was on the verge of being cut.
- During Murshid Quli's period surveys of zamindaris had been conducted to get information about the productivity and efforts were made to arrive at assessment, which was based on field investigations.
- In Shujauddin's period this policy was given up and therefore we find that revenue records of the period after Murshid Quli till 1757 were fewer and less comprehensive
- Murshid Quli being a stern administrator was able to control the big zamindars but his successor was not able to put a check on the growing power of the big zamindars.
- The imposition of abwabs further aggravated the problem as it led to peasant distress. The zamindars however continued to benefit.
- In the 1730s the banker and the zamindar category emerged powerful vis a vis Nazim.
- In 1739 the Nazim Sarfaraz Khan was removed due to the connivance of the Jagat Seth and the zamindars who installed a military commander Alivardi Khan as Nazim. Thus the coup of 1739 marks a new phase in the history of the province of Bengal.
- It shows the complete alienation of the province from the centre
- Alivardi was raised to the position of Nazim on the pretext that Sarfaraz was inefficient and Alivardi would provide better governance to the province.
- Thus in the 18th century, as a province of Mughal empire, Bengal was able to move on the path of autonomy