
UNIT 35 DECLINE OF THE MUGHAL EMPIRE

Structure

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35.0 OBJECTIVES

The objective of this Unit is to provide you with an overview of the problem of the decline of the Mughal Empire. We have aimed at giving you

- information on the different views expressed by scholars on the problem of the decline of the Mughal Empire, and
- a comparative assessment of the evidence garnered in support of these varying views.

35.1 INTRODUCTION

The Mughal Empire held sway over a large part of India for nearly three centuries, but a drastic decline in its power and prestige came about by the first half of the eighteenth century. Not only did the political boundaries of the Empire shrink, the decline also saw the collapse of the administrative structure so assiduously built by rulers like Akbar and Shah Jahan. In the wake of the collapse of the Mughal power a number of Independent principalities emerged in all parts of the Empire.

However, the processes of the decline and the emergence of regional politics have been intensely debated among historians. It has also been a subject on which scholarly opinion is more sharply divided than on any other aspect of Mughal history.

The historiographical perspective on the Mughal decline can be divided into two broad sections. First, the Mughal-centric approach, i.e., historians attempt to identify the causes of the decline within the structure and functioning of the Empire itself. Secondly, the region-centric approach where the perspective goes out of the precincts of the Empire into the regions to look for the causes of turmoil or instability in different parts of the Empire.

35.2 EMPIRE-CENTRIC APPROACH

The Empire-centric approach for explaining Mughal decline has progressed through different stages. Initially, theories focused on the individual rulers and their policies. William Irvine and Jadunath Sarkar wrote the first detailed histories of this period (W. Irvine, *The Later Moghuls*, reprint, New Delhi, 1971; Jadunath Sarkar, *The Fall of Mughal Empire*, I. Calcutta, 1938; *History of Aurangzeb*, I-V, Calcutta 1912, 1916, 1919 and 1924). They attributed the decline to a deterioration in the characters of the Emperors and their nobles. Sarkar had analyzed the developments of this period in the context of law and order. He, therefore, held

Aurangzeb as the arch culprit. According to Sarkar, Aurangzeb was a religious fanatic. He discriminated against sections of the nobles and officials on the basis of religion. This led to widescale resentment among the nobility. He argued that Aurangzeb's successors and their nobles were mere shadows of their predecessors and were thus unable to set right the evils of Aurangzeb's legacy.

35.2.1 Jagirdari Crisis

In 1959 the publication of Satish Chandra's *Parties and Politics at the Mughal Court, 1707-40* (Delhi, 1982, 3rd edition) marked the first serious attempt to study the structure of the Mughal Empire. Both its functioning and its plans were examined to understand the nature of the Empire and the reasons for its subsequent decline. Satish Chandra studied the working of certain key institutions of the Empire. The two institutions he scrutinised were **mansabdari** and the **jagirdari**. The nobles in the Mughal Empire were the core state officials. They were given ranks corresponding to their status in the Mughal official hierarchy. These ranks were called **mansab**. Each holder of a **mansab**, called **mansabdar**, was paid in assignments of land revenue (**jagir**). Among the various obligations, the **mansabdar** had to maintain a requisite contingent of troopers. These troopers were paid and maintained out of the revenue of the **jagir**. They formed the base of the **mansabdar's** power, and assisted him in the collection of land revenue. Availability of the revenues to be assigned and the ability of the Mughals to collect them thus became two crucial pre-requisites for an effective working of the system. According to Chandra, Mughal decline has to be seen in the Mughal failure, towards the end of Aurangzeb's reign, to maintain the system of the **mansabdar-jagirdar**. As this system went into disarray, the Empire was bound to collapse.

Athar Ali's work on nobility and their politics in the late seventeenth century appeared in 1966 (M. Athar Ali, *The Mughal Nobility under Aurangzeb*, Bombay, 1966 reprint, 1970). In this work the problems attending the annexation of the Deccan states, the absorption of the Marathas and Deccanis into the Mughal nobility, and the subsequent shortage of **jagirs** have been emphasized. The sudden increase in the number of nobles, caused due to the expansion of the Empire into the Deccan and Maratha territory, created a crisis in the functioning of the **jagir** system. According to Athar Ali, the nobles competed for better **jagirs**, which were increasingly becoming rare due to the influx of nobles from the south. The logical consequence was the erosion in the political structure which was based on **jagirdari** to a large extent.

In an important paper published in 1969, S. Nurul Hassan puts forward the argument that the agrarian relations as they developed during the Mughal rule gave rise to an authority structure which worked like a pyramid. In this form the rights of various kinds came to be superimposed upon each other. As a result bulk of the revenue demand of the state was transferred on to the cultivators. In the eighteenth century, with the decline of the Mughal authority, and with pressure on **jagirs**, agricultural economy began to face a crisis.

The **zamindars** as a class, were quite loyal to the state. But in the kind of agrarian situation that obtained in the Mughal empire, conflict between them and the state as also among themselves could not be checked. This often resulted in law and order problems and decimated the authority of the state. After the death of Aurangzeb and weakening of the imperial authority this equilibrium got disturbed. The **zamindars** in this situation could be contained only by a group which would be independent of the support of the **zamindars**. Since such a class had not emerged by this time, the pattern of agrarian relations could not be changed. The collapse of the system became inevitable. (S. Nurul Hassan, "Zamindars Under the Mughals", *Land Control and Social Structure in Indian History*, ed. R.E. Frykenberg, Madison, 1969.)

35.2.2 Agrarian Crisis

After the pioneering work of Satish Chandra, historians continued to address themselves to various aspects of the functioning of the Empire in order to identify the reasons for its political collapse. The focus had evidently shifted from

personalities and policies of individual rulers to larger and broader developments that were weakening the very structure on which the Mughal edifice had been built. Irfan Habib attempted an in-depth analysis of the collapse of the Empire in his seminal work. (*The Agrarian System of Mughal India, New Delhi, 1963.*) According to Habib, the mechanism of collection of revenue that the Mughals had evolved was inherently flawed. The imperial policy was to set the revenue at the highest rate possible to secure the greatest military strength for the Empire, the nobles. On the other hand, tended to squeeze the maximum from their jagirs, even if it ruined the peasantry and destroyed the revenue paying capacity of the area. Since, the nobles' jagirs were liable to be transferred frequently, they did not find it necessary to follow a far-sighted policy of agricultural development. As the burden on the peasantry increased, they were often deprived of their very means of survival. In reaction to this excessive exploitation of the peasantry, the latter had no option but to protest. The forms of rural protest in Medieval India were varied in nature. In many areas the peasants took to flight. Entire villages were left deserted due to the large scale migration of peasants to the towns or other villages. Very often the peasants protested against the state by refusing to pay the revenue and were up in arms against the Mughals. Habib argued that these peasant protests weakened the political and social fabric of the Empire.

35.2.3 Re-examination of 'Crisis'

J.F. Richards, M.N. Pearson and P. Hardy also give a pivotal position to the Mughal involvement in the Deccan and the affairs of the Marathas in their explanation of the decline of the Empire. (*Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. XXXV No.2, Feb, 1976, pp. 221-63. However, they differ from the Aligarh historians in their understanding of the nature of the Empire. For instance, according to Pearson, Mughal rule was indirect. It was not state control but local ties and norms which governed the lives of people. It was only for the nobles that the concept of the Mughal Empire outweighed other "primordial attachments". The nobles were bound to the Empire only by patronage, which depended on the "constant military success" of the Emperor. Pearson emphasizes the absence of an impersonalised bureaucracy, and its not too optimistic consequences for the Mughal state. Once Mughal patronage slackened due to the lack of any further military expansion, and, a shortage of fertile areas to be allotted as jagirs arose, the "personalised bureaucracy" of the Mughal Empire showed signs of distress. This indeed sounded the death-knell for the Mughal system.

In the 1970s, J. F. Richards added a new dimension to the theories of Mughal decline which looked at *bejagiri* (the absence of *jagirs*) as a major cause of the decline of the Mughal Empire. Using archival material from Golkonda, Richards questioned the long held belief that the Deccan was a deficit area which generated *bejagiri* leading to the Mughal decline.

According to Richards, the *jagirdari* crisis was of an administrative and managerial nature. He argued that the augmentation of the revenue resources of the Empire following the annexation of the Deccan states roughly kept pace with the expansion of the nobility during the second half of Aurangzeb's reign. The lack of *pal baqi* land was due to a deliberate decision on Aurangzeb's part to keep the most lucrative jagirs under *khalisa* in order to provide for a continued campaigning in the Karnataka and against the Marathas. Thus, the crisis was an administrative one and not caused by *bejagiri*.

In the 1980s, Satish Chandra's researches resolved the problem of *bejagiri* to some extent. He made use of newly discovered archival sources to make a clear distinction between *bejagiri* and the crisis in *jagirdari*. In his opinion, the crisis of the jagir system did not occur because of the growth in the size of the ruling class and the corresponding decline in the revenues earmarked to be assigned in jagir. In fact, jagir system was in crisis because of its non-functionality. According to Satish Chandra, it is important to understand the structure of the Medieval Indian society before one can talk about the background of the non-functionality of *jagirdari*.

A tripolar relationship between the peasants, the *zamindars* and the *mansabdar/jagirdar* formed the base on which the Mughal edifice rested. The ability of the

mansabdar/jagirdar to collect land revenue from the **zamindars** and keep the **rai'vat** engaged in agricultural production was the key to successful working of the **jagir** system. The **jagirdar** could perform his functions properly if he could maintain his military might. This of course was based on his ability to muster enough revenue and resources from his **jagir** in order to maintain the requisite contingent of troopers. Any factor which could disturb this neat balancing of **jagirdar-zamindar-peasant** parameter would ultimately cause the decline of the Empire.

Satish Chandra argues that in the 17th century the social conflicts which the **Mughals** were unable to resolve within the broad framework of the class alliance forged by them, were reflected in financial crisis and in the crisis of the **jagir** system, the two being interrelated. The crisis of the **jagir** system had made its appearance fairly early in the history of the Empire. The problem re-surfaced under **Jahangir** and **Shah Jahan** when the Empire had expanded to fringe areas beyond the fertile tracts of the **Ganga-Yamuna doab**. Towards the end of **Shah Jahan** reign, the difference between **jama** (assessed revenue) and **hasil** (revenue actually collected) in **jagir** lands became too glaring. A **mansabdar** was lucky if the realisation from his **jagir** was more than five-monthly (i.e., revenue equivalent to five months' revenue only in a year). The number of **sawars** he maintained had to be reduced proportionally. In **Deccan**, the realisation was even less—about three-monthly, and the power and influence of the **jagirdar** proportionally lower. Once the military power of the **jagirdar** was eroded, the tripolar relationship which sustained the Empire fell apart.

According to Satish Chandra, perhaps the only manner in which the crisis of the **jagirdari** system could have been deferred for a longer period was a rapid development of the economy, both in agricultural and non-agricultural sectors. Trade was a supplementary source of income for rulers and nobles. Indeed what we need to know is whether the money saved by the nobles was used for investment in trade on a regular basis, or was trade made to yield money for the ostentatious living of the nobles? Some regional studies of traders and politics in **Mughal India** suggest that as a class, on an all India basis, the merchants were not rich or powerful enough to claim a share in state power. Trade and politics, by and large, remained segregated in **Mughal India**.

Developments in the agricultural sector were no less different. For a number of reasons, the state policies were aimed at preserving the small peasant economy. Thus, the **khud-kasht** (the rich peasants) were not allowed to cultivate their lands with the help of hired labour, or to extend their cultivation at the expense of the land held by **pahis** (middle level peasants who did not own land and moved with their implements of production from village to village). Some of the rich peasants used their wealth to lend money on interest, or mortgaged the lands of the poor peasants, reducing them to the position of share croppers. Thus, the only lines on which they could grow was to become intermediary **zamindars** or **mahajans** (grain dealers-cum-money-lenders). This perhaps explains the slow development of the agricultural economy, and its inability to avoid a precipitation of the **jagirdari** crisis. Satish Chandra further argues that the fundamental basis for the **jagirdari** crisis was the medieval social system which limited agricultural growth. The administrative system was reared on this structure, the two acting and reacting on each other. All the other factors like the growth in the size of the ruling class, the growing ostentatious life style of the nobles which limited the surplus available for expanding production and resulted in slow economic growth were contributory factors to the growth of the crisis.

(Satish Chandra, *Medieval India: Society, the Jagirdari Crisis and the Village*. Delhi, 1982).

The **Mughal** decline has also been explained in terms of participation in the eighteenth century politics of groups conventionally regarded as non-political. **Karen Leonard** argues that "indigenous banking firms were indispensable allies of the **Mughal State**", and that the great nobles "were more than likely to be directly dependent upon these firms". When in the period 1650-1750 these banking firms began "the redirection of their economic and political support" towards regional

and rulers, including the English East India Company in Bengal, this led to bankruptcy, a series of political crises and the down fall of the Empire (Karen Leonard, 'The "Great Firm" Theory of the Decline of the Mughal Empire', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, Vol. 21 No. 2, April, 1979, pp. 161-7).

The assumptions of Leonard conclusions do not get adequate support from the existing studies of Mughal polity and economy. Philip Calkins and M.N. Pearson, researching on Bengal and Gujarat respectively, give some evidence of merchants, participation in politics (Philip C Calkins, 'The Formation of a Regionally Oriented Ruling Group in Bengal', *Journal of Asian Studies*. Vol. XXIX No. 4, Aug, 1970; M. N. Pearson, *Merchants and Rulers in Gujarat*, California, 1976). However, Pearson refrains from suggesting that the Mughal finance system was dependent on merchants' credit. Calkins also limits his generalisation to the period and the region he examines. Leonard's source material is the same as that used by Calkins and Pearson. However, Leonard's conclusions remain unconvincing because no fresh evidence has been adduced.

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) What is the core argument in jagirdari crisis as the cause of Mughal decline?

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- 2) Write four sentences on 'agrarian crisis'.

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- 3) Summarise J. F. Richards' main argument on jagirdari crisis in four sentences.

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35.3 REGION-CENTRIC APPROACH

Muzaffar Alam and Chetan Singh have used in their works region-centric approach to explain Mughal decline (M. Alam, *The Crisis of Empire in Mughal North India, Awadh and the Punjab, 1707-1748*, New Delhi, 1986; Chetan Singh, *Region and Empire. Punjab in the Seventeenth Century*, New Delhi, 1991). While Muzaffar Alam has made comparative study of the developments in the Mughal Subas of Awadh and Punjab, Chetan Singh has made an in-depth study of the regional history of the 17th century Punjab.

Their studies are significant in that they throw new light on both the nature of the Mughal Empire as well as the process of its weakening and eventual decline in the 17th and early 18th century.

35.3.1 Centre-Region Relationship

Viewing the Mughal State from the perspective of the regional literature of the Mughal suba of Awadh, Alam suggests that the Mughal Empire signified a co-ordinating agency between conflicting communities and the various indigenous

socio-political systems at different levels. The basis of the Empire in a measure had been negative; its strength lay in the inability of the local communities and their systems to mobilize beyond relatively narrow bounds. Political integration in Mughal India was, up to a point, inherently flawed. It was to a large extent conditional on the co-ordination of the interests and the political activities of the various social groups led by local magnates.

This, in turn, was dependent on the latter realizing that they could not amass fortunes by themselves. For it was very evident that the nobles were dependent for their position and power directly on the Emperor who appointed them. They had no hereditary estates to consolidate or bequeath to their descendants. Their resources were scrutinized and regulated by the Empire. They were in a way representatives of the Mughal Emperor. Yet the nobility also had its tensions. The policy of jagir transfer, by checking the noble's ambition to build a personal base, was meant to strengthen the imperial organisation. But it inconvenienced the nobles who opposed and resisted its implementation. In many regions of the Mughal Empire it was left unimplemented in the 17th century. Alongside the local elites (*zamindars*) and the nobles, the village and *qasba* based *madad-i ma'ash* holders (men of learning, who were given revenue free grants of land by the Mughal Emperors) and a very large numbers of lower level officials drawn from various regional and local communities, were all integrated intimately into the framework of the Empire. The *madad-i ma'ash* holdings were scattered in the *zamindaris*. They were meant to establish pockets of influence for the Empire in the far flung regions of the countryside. The emperors were of the view that the *madad-i ma'ash* grantees would keep in check the power of the recalcitrant *zamindars* and thereby aid in balancing the social and political groups that constituted the base of the Empire.

According to Alam, the Mughal decline in the early 18th century has to be seen in the inability of the state to maintain its policy of checks and balances between the *zamindars*, *jagirdars*, *madad-i ma'ash* holders and the local indigenous elements, like the *shaikhzadas* in Awadh. In the early 18th century, there was a thrust of the nobles towards independent political alignments with the *zamindars* in order to carve out their own fortunes. Alongside there was an attempt between the various co-sharers of Mughal power (the *zamindars*, *madad-i ma'ash* holders, etc.) to encroach on each other's rights and territorial jurisdictions. These developments were not entirely incompatible with what happened earlier. But in the hey-day of the Empire these tensions had been contained. This was achieved at times by the use of military force and at other times by balancing out the power of one social group by settling another in the vicinity (e.g., the distribution of the *madad-i ma'ash* grantees in and around the *zamindaris* of Awadh).

Alam's major concern is to analyze what triggered off the imbalancing of the social and political equilibrium in the early 18th century. In other words, what caused the Mughal edifice to collapse in the early 18th century? He is of the view that the late 17th and early 18th century, at least in the Awadh and Punjab regions, registered unmistakable economic growth. This is in sharp contrast to the more generalised argument about the early 18th century being in the throes of a financial crisis that was postulated by Satish Chandra and others. Social groups that had hitherto shared Mughal power and contributed to the political stability of the Empire, now began to take advantage of the economic boom in their regions. Many of them amassed wealth which helped them to increase their power to encroach on the rights and privileges of others. The political edifice of the Empire was bound to suffer in the face of these developments.

Muzaffar Alam concludes that the decline of the Mughal Empire was manifested both in Awadh and the Punjab in a kind of political transformation and in the emergence and configuration of the elements of a new *subadari*. The genesis for the emergence of independent regional units was present in both the provinces. But in Punjab it ended in chaos, while Awadh witnessed a stable dynastic rule.

35.3.2 Contours of Regional Polities

Muzaffar Alam's plea to understand the complexities of Mughal decline by looking at regional development in the early 18th century India has been followed up by

tan Singh. His book *Region and Empire* takes a new look at the regional history of the Mughal North India. The history of the Mughal suba of Punjab is reconstructed in the context of both the Mughal politics as well as the wider political changes that swept through the contemporary West Asian world. He argues that the Mughal administrative infrastructure no doubt linked the region to the Mughal administrative core. Yet, this conventional form of integration had its limitations. For local society and polity were subjected to a variety of stresses and the administrative system responded by transgressing the formal administrative divisions and sub-divisions of the Mughal governmental system. This was true both of the general administration where pragmatic considerations led to flexibility in the creation of local offices and the kind of function they performed, as well as of revenue administration. In the revenue administration, with the passage of time, certain norms and conventions evolved which along with formal rules and regulations contributed to the stability of the Mughal Empire.

However, by the late 17th century the silting of the river Indus had adversely affected the riverine traffic of Punjab. Its most serious implication was the gradual erosion of the highly commercialised Punjab economy. The political upheavals in contemporary Turkey, fall of Qandahar to the Shah of Iran and the Mughal attempt to recover it virtually brought overland traffic to a standstill. This development coincided with the Yusufzai uprising (1667) in North-West Punjab and the Afridi rebellion in 1678. Singh argues that these political disturbances had grave social and economic consequences for Punjab: they disrupted trade and thereby gradually eroded the economy which was based on a commercialised agrarian sector.

The loosening of Punjab's socio-economic structure led to social unrest in Punjab. However, Singh contends that since the benefits of trade and commerce had been unequally distributed in the region, the discomforts caused by the decline of trade varied in different areas of the Punjab. Thus the areas most closely associated with the Sikh rebellion were those that were also among the most commercialised and therefore most easily affected by economic regression. Thus, he concludes, the social unrest which eventually led to the dissociation of Punjab from the Empire was the product of long term processes. These processes had silently and steadily been at work in the region even before the political weakening of Empire had gained momentum in the 18th century.

It is here that Singh's study adds a new dimension to the already mooted question of the 'crisis of Empire'. For contrary to Muzaffar Alam's study of Mughal Awadh and Punjab, which traces the dissociation of these regions from the Mughal Empire from the early 18th century, Singh sees the process at work in the hey day of the Empire. Thus, looking at the disintegration of the Empire from the point of view of the regional history of Punjab different picture emerges. Not only did different subas of the Empire dissociate from it for different reasons, but very often the dissociations were caused by political, social and economic developments beyond the purview of the Mughal Empire.

35.3.3 An Overview

It is difficult to find a single explanation commonly applicable to the problems of the Mughal Empire in all its regions and provinces. For similar reasons it is difficult to accept a view of Mughal decline which applies uniformly to all parts of the Mughal Empire. The Mughal Empire at best represented a consensus of both the centre and the peripheries. In the early 18th century, it was this consensus which was disturbed. Different peripheries that had constituted the Empire followed their own different paths of developments. The eighteenth century regional histories thus indicate the endeavour to make use of the possibilities for growth within existing social structures.

Evidently the regional history perspective on Mughal decline negates the application of one general theory to explain Mughal collapse all over India. For the Mughal Empire, at best, represented a consensus between the centre and the peripheries. The peripheries were integrated to the Mughal core not merely administratively. For there was an economic and cultural assimilation between the conqueror and the vanquished. It was on certain shared economic and cultural spaces that the Mughal state structure rested.

Regions, held together by these heterogenous linkages to the Mughal core, were bound to be vulnerable to the kinds of social, economic and cultural changes that swept through 17th century Mughal India. Different regions were affected in different ways. While in some regions links with the Mughal core were severed, in others they were retained. It was logical that the different regions followed different paths of dissociation from the Mughal Empire. Mughal decline was thus much more complex than what the historians subscribing to the Mughal-Centric approach would have us believe.

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) What explanation does Muzaffar Alam offer for the decline of the Mughal Empire?

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- 2) What impact did the economy of Punjab receive as a result of the silting of Indus towards the close of the 17th century?

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35.4 LET US SUM UP

The decline of the Mughal Empire, it was initially believed, was the consequence of an administrative maladjustment due to which erupted a crisis in the jagir system, which ultimately led to the emergence of regional powers. Subsequently, the enquiries pertaining to the economic infrastructure of the Mughal empire point towards an agrarian crisis at the close of the seventeenth century, giving rise to rebellions by the Jats, Satnamis and Sikhs. To accept, however, one single explanation for the Mughal decline—an explanation that will cover all regions and provinces of the Empire—is a difficult proposition. In the early eighteenth century, probably the delicate equilibrium that had so long sustained the edifice of the Mughal system got disturbed. What followed then was a process of readjustment of all the diverse constituents of this system, the result being a dislocation of the Empire and the emergence of regional powers.

35.5 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS EXERCISES

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) He says that the paucity of jagirs for distribution among the new nobility created a disorder. Details can be seen in Sub-sec. 35.2.1.
- 2) See Sub-sec. 35.2.2.
- 3) See Sub-sec. 35.2.3

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) He is of the view that the decline was the consequence of the inability of the Mughal state to maintain checks and balances between the various beneficiaries of the Empire, e.g., zamindars, jagirdars, shalkhzadas, etc. For details, see Sub-sec. 35.3.1.
- 2) See Sub-sec. 35.3.2.