

# 15

# UNDERSTANDING EIGHTEENTH CENTURY INDIA

The eighteenth century in India was characterized by two critical transitions which altered the structure of power and initiated important social and economic changes. The first was the transition in the first half of the century from the Mughal Empire to the regional political orders. The second was the transition in the polity, society and economy. In the 18th century English East India Company steered its way to position of political dominance. The decline of the Mughal authority gave rise to the emergence of a number of independent kingdoms. In this chapter we will study the emergence of these independent kingdoms in different parts of the country. The aggressive British policies affected the economic situation. The agricultural and non agricultural production was altered. The commercial activities also underwent changes. These will also be discussed in the chapter. The social and cultural scenario of 18th century will also be analysed.

## OBJECTIVES

After studying this lesson, you will be able to:

- explain causes of the fall of the Mughal Empire and rise of the regional polities;
- give an account of major political powers that emerged during this period;
- distinguish the regional variations within the Indian economy of the period;
- identify the features of society and culture in the 18th century and
- list the issues involved in understanding the eighteenth century.

## 15.1 DECLINE OF THE MUGHAL EMPIRE

### The Background

The unity and stability of the Mughal Empire was shaken during the long and strong reign of Emperor Aurangzeb. However, in spite of setbacks and adverse circumstances the Mughal administration was still quite efficient and the Mughal army strong at the time of his death in 1707. This year is generally considered to separate the era of the great Mughals from that of the lesser Mughals. After the death of Aurangzeb the Mughal authority weakened, it was not in a position to militarily enforce its regulations in all parts of the empire. As a result many provincial governors started to assert their authority. In due course of time they gained independent status. At the same time many kingdoms which were subjugated by the Mughals also claimed their indepence. Some new regional groups also consolidated and emerged as political

power with all these developments, the period between 1707 and 1761 (third battle of Panipat, where Ahmed Shah Abdali defeated the Maratha chiefs) witnessed resurgence of regional identity that buttressed both political and economic decentralization. At the same time, intraregional as well as interregional trade in local raw materials, artifacts, and grains created strong ties of economic interdependence, irrespective of political and military relations.

**Passing of the Mughal Empire**

In 1707, when Aurangzeb died, serious threats from the peripheries had begun to accentuate the problems at the core of the empire. The new emperor, Bahadur Shah I (or Shah Alam; ruled 1707–12), followed a policy of compromise, pardoning all nobles who had supported his rivals. He granted them appropriate territories and postings. He never abolished *jizya*, but the effort to collect the tax were not effective. In the beginning he tried to gain greater control over the Rajput states of the rajas of Amber (later Jaipur) and Jodhpur. When his attempt met with firm resistance he realized the necessity of a settlement with them. However, the settlement did not restore them to fully committed warriors for the Mughal cause. The emperor's policy toward the Marathas was also that of half-hearted conciliation. They continued to fight among themselves as well as against the Mughals in the Deccan. Bahadur Shah was, however, successful in conciliating Chatrasal, the Bundela chief, and Churaman, the Jat chief; the latter also joined him in the campaign against the Sikhs.

Jahandar Shah (ruled 1712–13) was a weak and ineffective ruler. His wazir Zulfiqar Khan assumed the executive direction of the empire with unprecedented powers. Zulfiqar believed that it was necessary to establish friendly relations with the Rajputs and the Marathas and to conciliate the Hindu chieftains in general in order to save the empire. He reversed the policies of Aurangzeb. The hated *jizya* was abolished. He continued the old policy of suppression against the Sikhs. His goal was to reconcile all those who were willing to share power within the Mughal institutional framework. Zulfiqar Khan made several attempts at reforming the economic system.

He failed in his efforts to enhance the revenue collection of the state. When Farrukh Siyar, son of the slain prince Azimush-Shan, challenged Jahandar Shah and Zulfiqar Khan with a large army and funds from Bihar and Bengal, the rulers found their coffers depleted. In desperation, they looted their own palaces, even ripping gold and silver from the walls and ceilings, in order to finance an adequate army. Farrukh Siyar (ruled 1713–19) owed his victory and accession to the Sayyid brothers, Abdullah Khan and Husain Ali Khan Baraha. The Sayyids thus earned the offices of *wazir* and chief *bakhshi* and acquired control over the affairs of state. They promoted the policies initiated earlier by Zulfiqar Khan. *Jizya* and other similar taxes were immediately abolished. The brothers finally suppressed the Sikh revolt and tried to conciliate the Rajputs, the Marathas, and the Jats. However, this policy was hampered by divisiveness between the *wazir* and the emperor, as the groups tended to ally themselves with one or the other. The Jats once again started plundering the royal highway between Agra and Delhi. Farrukh Siyar deputed Raja Jai Singh to lead a punitive campaign against them but *wazir* negotiated a settlement over the raja's head. As a result, throughout northern India *zamindars* either revolted violently or simply refused to pay assessed revenues. On the other hand, Farrukh Siyar compounded difficulties in the Deccan by sending letters to some Maratha chiefs urging them to oppose the forces of the Deccan governor, who happened to be the deputy and an associate of Sayyid Husain Ali Khan. Finally, in 1719, the Sayyid brothers brought Ajit Singh of Jodhpur and a Maratha force to Delhi to depose the emperor.



The murder of Farrukh Siyar created a wave of revulsion against the Sayyids among the various factions of nobility, who were also jealous of their growing power. Many of these, in particular the old nobles of Aurangzeb's time, resented the *wazir's* encouragement of revenue farming, which in their view was mere shop keeping and violated the age- old Mughal notion of statecraft. In Farrukh Siyar's place the brothers raised to the throne three young princes in quick succession within eight months in 1719. Two of these, Rafi- ud- Darajat and Rafi- ud- Dawlah (Shah Jahan II), died of consumption. The third, who assumed the title of Muhammad Shah, exhibited sufficient vigour to set about freeing himself from the brothers' control.

A powerful group under the leadership of the Nizam-ul-Mulk, Chin Qilich Khan, and his father's cousin Muhammad Amin Khan, the two eminent nobles emerged finally to dislodge the Sayyid brothers (1720). By the time Muhammad Shah (ruled 1719–48) came to power, the nature of the relationship between the emperor and the nobility had almost completely changed. Individual interests of the nobles had come to guide the course of politics and state activities. In 1720 Muhammad Amin Khan replaced Sayyid Abdullah Khan as *wazir;* after Amin Khan's death (January 1720), the office was occupied by the Nizam-ul-Mulk for a brief period until Amin Khan's son Qamar-ud-Din Khan assumed the title in July 1724 by a claim of hereditary right. The nobles themselves virtually dictated these appointments. By this time the nobles had assumed lot of powers. They used to get *farmans* issued in the name of emperor in their favours. The position of emperor was preserved as a symbol only without real powers. The real powers seated with important groups of nobles. The nobles in control of the central offices maintained an all-empire outlook, even if they were more concerned with the stability of the regions where they had their *jagirs. Farmans* (mandates granting certain rights or special privileges) to governors, *faujdar,* and other local officials were sent, in conformity with tradition, in the name of the emperor. Individual failings of Aurangzeb's successors also contributed to the decline of royal authority. Jahandar Shah lacked dignity and decency; Farrukh Siyar was fickle-minded; Muhammad Shah was frivulous and fond of ease and luxury. Opinions of the emperor's favourites weighed in the appointments, promotions, and dismissals even in the provinces.

## 15.2 THE RISE OF REGIONAL POLITIES AND STATES

The states that arose in India during the phase of Mughal decline and the following century (roughly 1700 to 1850) varied greatly in terms of resources, longevity, and essential character. Some of them- such as Hyderabad in the south, was located in an area that had harboured regional state in the immediate pre-Mughal period and thus had an older local or regional tradition of state formation. Others were states that had a more original character and derived from very specific processes that had taken place in the course of the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. In particular, many of the post- Mughal states were based on ethnic or sectarian groupings- the Marathas, the Jats, and the Sikhs. In due course, the enrichment of the regions emboldened local land and power-holders to take up arms against external authority. However, mutual rivalry and conflicts prevented these rebels from consolidating their interests into an effective challenge to the empire. They relied on support from kinsfolk, peasants, and smaller *zamindars* of their own castes. Each local group wanted to maximize its share of the prosperity at the expense of the others. The necessity of emphasizing imperial symbols was inherent in the kind of power politics that emerged. Each of the contenders in the regions, in proportion to his strength, looked for and seized opportunities to establish his dominance over the others in the neighbourhood. They all needed

a kind of legitimacy, which was so conveniently available in the long-accepted authority of the Mughal emperor. They had no fear in collectively accepting the symbolic hegemony of the Mughal centre, which had come to co-exist with their ambitions. The gradual weakening of the central authority set in motion new types of provincial kingdoms. Nobles with ability and strength sought to build a regional base for themselves. The *wazir* Chin Qilich Khan himself, showed the path. Having failed to reform the administration, he relinquished his office in 1723 and in October 1724 marched south to establish the state of Hyderabad in the Deccan. The Mughal court's chief concern at this stage was to ensure the flow of the necessary revenue from the provinces and the maintenance of at least the semblance of imperial unity. Seizing upon the disintegration of the empire, the Marathas now began their northward expansion and overran Malwa, Gujarat, and Bundelkhand. Then, in 1738–39, Nadir Shah, who had established himself as the ruler of Iran, invaded India.

### INTEXT QUESTIONS 15.1

1. Who succeeded Aurangzeb in 1707? What kind of policy did he follow?

2. Who were popularly known as 'Sayyed brothers?' Mention a few of their achievements.

3. By whom was the state of Hyderabad founded? What position did he hold under the Mughals?

4. Give two reasons for the rise of the powers of nobles after the death of Aurangzeb.

5. The ruler of which country invaded India in 1738?

## 15.3 THE MARATHA POWER

There is no doubt that the single most important power that emerged in the long twilight of the Mughal dynasty was the Marathas. The most important Maratha warrior clan was of the Bhonsles, Sivaji Bhonsle, emerged as the most powerful figure in the southern politics.

The good fortune of Sivaji did not fall to his sons and successors, Sambhaji, and his younger brother, Rajaran. For a time it appeared that Maratha power was on the decline. But a recovery was effected in the early eighteenth century, in somewhat changed circumstances. A particularly important phase in this respect is the reign of Sahu, who succeeded Rajaram in 1708. Sahu's reign, lasted for four decades upto 1749. It was marked by the ascendancy of a lineage of Chitpavan Brahman ministers, who virtually came to control central authority in the Maratha state. The Bhonsles were reduced to figureheads. Holding the title of peshwa (chief minister), the first truly prominent figure of this line is Balaji Visvanath, who had helped Sahu in his rise to power. Visvanath and his successor, Baji Rao I (peshwa between 1720 and 1740), managed to bureaucratise the Maratha state to a far greater extent than had been the case under the early Bhonsles. They systematized the practice of tribute gathering from Mughal territories, under the heads of *sardeshmukhi*

and *chauth* (the two terms corresponding to the proportion of tribute collected). They seem to have consolidated methods of assessment and collection of land revenue and other taxes, on the lines of the Mughals. Much of the revenue terminology used in the documents of the peshwa and his subordinates derives from Persian. This suggests a greater continuity between Mughal and Maratha revenue practices.

**The Maratha Confederacy**

By the close of Sahu's reign, a few powerful Maratha Kingdoms were in complete control of their territories. This period saw the development of sophisticated networks of trade, banking, and finance in the territories under their control. The banking houses based at Pune, had their branches in Gujarat, Ganges Valley, and the south. Attention was also paid to the Maritime affairs. Bala ji Visvanath took some care to cultivate the Angria clan, which controlled a fleet of vessels based in Kolaba and other centres of the west coast. These ships posed a threat not only to the new English settlement

*Map 15.1 The Maratha Confederacy*

of Bombay, but to the Portuguese at Goa, Bassein, and Daman. On the other hand, there also emerged a far larger domain of activity away from the original heartland of the Marathas. Of these chiefs, the most important were the Gaikwads (Gaekwars), the Sindhias, and the Holkars. Also, there were branches of the Bhonsle family that relocated to Kolhapur and Nagpur, while the main line remained in the Deccan heartland, at Satara. Let us examine their areas of influence.

**The Bhonsles of Nagpur**

Unlike the Kolhapur Bhonsles and the descendants of Vyamkoji at Thanjavur, both of whom claimed a status equal to that of the Satara raja, the line at Nagpur was clearly subordinate to the Satara rulers. A crucial figure from this line is Raghuji Bhonsle (ruled 1727–55), who was responsible for the Maratha incursions on Bengal and Bihar in the 1740s and early 1750s. The relations of his successors, Janoji, Sabaji, and Mudhoji, with the peshwas and the Satara line were varying, and it is in this sense that these domains can be regarded as only loosely confederated, rather than tightly bound together. Other subordinate rulers who emerged under the overarching umbrella provided by the Satara ruler and his peshwa were equally somewhat opportunistic in their use of politics.

**The Gaikwads of Baroda**

The Gaikwads, gathered prominence in the 1720. Initially they were subordinate not only to the Bhonsles but also to the powerful Dabhade family. However, it was only after the death of Sahu, when the power of the peshwas was further enhanced, that the position of the Gaikwads truly improved. By the early 1750s, their rights on large portion of the revenues of Gujarat were recognized by the peshwa. The expulsion of the Mughal governor of the Gujarat province from his capital of Ahmadabad in 1752 set the seal on the process. The Gaikwads preferred, however, to establish their capital in Baroda, causing realignment in the network of trade and consumption in the area. The rule at Baroda of Damaji (d. 1768) was followed by a period of some turmoil. The Gaikwads still remained partly dependent on Pune and the peshwa, especially to intervene in moments of succession crisis. The eventual successor of Damaji, Fateh Singh (ruled 1771– 89), did not remain allied to the peshwa for long in the late 1770s and early 1780s, he chose to negotiate a settlement with the English East India Company, which eventually led to increased British interference in his affairs. By 1800, the British rather than the peshwa were the final arbiters in determining succession among the Gaikwads, who became subordinate rulers under them in the nineteenth century.

**The Holkars of lndore**

In the case of the Holkars the rise in status and wealth was particularly rapid and marked. Initially they had very little political power. However by 1730s their chief Malhar Rao Holkar consolidated his position. He was granted a large share of the *chauth* collection in Malwa, eastern Gujarat, and Khandesh. Within a few years, Malhar Rao consolidated his own principality at Indore, from which his successors controlled important trade routes as well as the crucial trading centre of Burhanpur. After him, control of the dynastic fortunes fell largely to his son's widow, Ahalya Bai, who ruled from 1765 to 1794 and brought Holkar power to great glory. Nevertheless, their success could not equal that of the next great chieftain family, the Sindhias.

**The Sindhias of Gwalior**

The Sindhias carved a prominent place for themselves in North Indian politics in the decades following the third battle of Panipat (1761). Again, like the Holkars, the Sindhias were based largely in central India, first at Ujjain, and later (from the last quarter of

the . 18th century) in Gwalior. During the long reign of Mahadaji Sindhia (1761–94) family's fortunes were truly consolidated.

Mahadaji, proved an effective and innovative military commander. He employed a large number of European soldiers in his force. His power grew rapidly after 1770. During this period he managed to make substantial inroads into North India that had been weakened by Afghan attacks. He intervened with some effect in the Mughal court during the reign of Shah Alam II. The Mughal king made him the "deputy regent" of his affairs in the mid-1780s. His shadow fell not only across the provinces of Delhi and Agra but also on Rajasthan and Gujarat, making him the most formidable Maratha leader of the era. The officials of the East India Company were very cautious in dealing with him.

His relations with the acting peshwa, Nana Fadnavis at Pune were fraught with tension. Eventually, the momentum generated by Mahadaji could not be maintained by his successor Daulat Rao Sindhia (ruled 1794–1827), who was defeated by the British and forced by treaty in 1803 to surrender his territories both to the north and to the west.

The careers of some of these potentates, especially Mahadaji Sindhia, illustrate the potency of Mughal symbols even in the phase of Mughal decline. For instance, after recapturing Gwalior from the British, Mahadaji took care to have his control of the town sanctioned by the Mughal emperor. Equally, he zealously guarded the privileges and titles granted to him by Shah Alam, such as *amir al-umara* ("head of the *amirs")* and *na'ib wakii-i mutlaq* ("deputy regent"). In this he was not alone. Instances in the 18th century of states that wholly threw off all pretense of allegiance to the Mughals are rare. Rather, the Mughal system of honours and titles, as well as Mughal- derived administrative terminology and fiscal practices, continued despite the decline of imperial power.

## INTEXT QUESTIONS 15.2

1. Name the single most important power that emerged during the declining phase of Mughal dynasty.

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2. Who was referred as Peshwa during the Maratha rule? Name the Peshwa who held power between 1720–1740.

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3. In the context of the Marathas what did the following terms indicate?

   (a) Chauth (b) Sardeshmukhi.

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4. Name the important Portuguese trade centres in the Western coast of India.

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5. Name the various ruling dynasties of the Marathas confederacy. In which region did they rule?

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6. Who was Ahalya Bai? What was her main achievement?

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## 15.4 THE NAWABS OF BENGAL

Murshid Quli Khan who started his career as Diwan of Bengal under Aurangzeb became virtually independent with the growing weakening of the central authority. However, he regularly sent tribute to the Mughal emperor. Ali Vardi Khan deposed the family of Murshid Quli Khan and made himself the Nawab in 1739. These Nawabs brought stability and peace and promoted agriculture, trade and industry. Equal opportunities were given to both Hindus and Muslims. But the Nawabs could not visualise the long term implications of the presence of the European trading companies and neglected military preparedness. In 1756–1757, the successor of Ali Vardi Khan, Siraj- ud - Daulah had to fight the English East India Company over the trading rights. His defeat in the battle of Plassey in June 1757 paved the way for subjugation of Bengal as well as India.

## 15.5 THE NAWABS OF AWADH

With the weakening central control the Mughal *suba* of Awadh also saw emerging ambitions of a provincial governor- Saadat Khan Burhan ul Mulk. Saadat Khan disciplined the local zamindars and gave shape to a well paid, well armed and well trained army. Before his death in 1739, Saadat Khan made the provincial head a hereditary position. His successors Safdar Jung and Asaf ud Daulah not only played very decisive role in the politics of northern India but also gave a long term administrative stability to the nawabi of Awadh. Under the Nawabs firstly Faizabad and then Lucknow became the cultural rival of Delhi in the spheres of arts, literature and crafts. Regional architecture reflected itself in the form of *Imambarah* and other buildings. The evolution of dance form *Kathak* was the outcome of cultural synthesis.

## 15.6 THE SIKHS OF PUNJAB

The Mughal force supressed the Sikhs under Banda Bahadur. But this did not put an end to Sikh resistance to Mughal authority. In the 1720s and 1730s, Amritsar emerged as a centre of Sikh activity, mainly because of its preeminence as a pilgrimage centre. Kapur Singh, the most important of the Sikh leaders of the time, operated from its vicinity. He gradually set about consolidating a revenue-cum military system. Some Sikh groups also started consolidating themselves as political force. These activities discouraged the attempts by the Mughal governors of Lahore Suba to set up an independent power base for themselves in the region. First Abdus Samad Khan and then his son Zakariya Khan attempted to control sovereign power. After the latter's demise in 1745, the balance shifted still further in favour of the Sikh warrior- leaders, such as Jassa Singh Ahluwalia. He later on founded the kingdom of Kapurthala. The mushrooming of pockets under the authority of Sikh leaders was thus a feature of the two decades preceding Ahmed Shah Abdali's invasion of the Punjab. This process was evident in the eastern Punjab and Bari Doab. Though the principal opposition faced by Abdali in his campaigns of the 1750s and 1760s in the Punjab came from the Sikhs, Marathas also played a role of significance on this occasion. Eventually, by the mid- 1760s, Sikh authority over Lahore was established, and the Afghans were not able to consolidate their early gains. Under Ahmad Shah's successor, Timur Shah (ruled 1772–93), some of the territories and towns that had been taken by the Sikhs (such as Multan) were recovered, and the descendants of Ahmad Shah continued to harbour ambitions in this direction until the end of the century. But by the 1770s, they were dealing with a confederation of about 60 Sikh chieftains, some of these were to emerge as princely states under the British- such as Nabha and Patiala.



The Sikh chiefdoms continued many of the administrative practices initiated by the Mughals. The main subordinates of the chiefs were given *jagir* assignments. The Persianized culture of the Mughal bureaucracy continued to hold sway. It was one such chief, Ranjit Singh, grandson of Charhat Singh Sukerchakia, who eventually welded these principalities for a brief time into a larger entity. Ranjit Singh's effective rule lasted four decades, from 1799 to 1839. The power of the English East India Company was growing in all parts of the country during this period. Within ten years of his death, the British had annexed Punjab. His rise to power was based on superior military force, partly serviced by European mercenaries and by the strategic location of the territories that he had inherited from his father. Ranjit Singh's kingdom represented the culmination of nearly a century of Sikh rebellions against Mughal rule. It was based on the intelligent application of principles of statecraft. He used as his capital the great trading city of Lahore, which he captured in 1799. Having gained control of the trade routes, he imposed monopolies on the trade in salt, grain, and textiles from Kashmir to enhance his revenues. Using these earnings, he built up an army of 40,000 cavalry and infantry. By the year 1809 he was undisputed master of the most of Punjab.

## 15.7 JAIPUR AND OTHER RAJPUTANA STATES

Jaipur (earlier Amber) in eastern Rajasthan, was a Rajput principality controlled by the *Kachwaha* clan. In the early eighteenth century, the ruler Jai Singh Sawai took steps to increase his power manyfold. This was done by: (i) arranging to have his *jagir* assignment in the vicinity of his home territories and (ii) by taking on rights on land revenue through farming (for collection of land tax rights on a parcel of land that are rented by the state to an individual), which was gradually made permanent. By the time of his death in 1743, Jai Singh (after whom Jaipur came to be named) had emerged as the single most important ruler in the region. Most of the larger Rajput states were constantly involved in petty quarrels and civil wars. Ajit Singh of Marwar was killed by his own son.

In the 1750s Suraj Mal the Jat ruler of Bharatpur, like Jai Singh- adopted a modified form of Mughal revenue administration in his territories. However, by this time, the fortunes of the Jaipur kingdom were seriously in question. Under threat from the Marathas, recourse had to be taken to adopt short- term fiscal exactions. At the same time a series of crop failures in the 1750s and 60s adversely affected fragile agriculture. The second half of the eighteenth century was thus marked by an economic depression, accompanied by a decline in the political power of Jaipur. During this period Jaipur became a vulnerable target for the ambitions of the Marathas, and of Mahadaji Sindhia in particular.

The states discussed so far, with the exception of Maratha, were all landlocked. This did not mean that trade was not an important element in their makeup, for the kingdom of Ranjit Singh was crucially linked to trade. However, lack of access to the sea greatly increased the vulnerability of a state, particularly in an era when the major power was the English East India Company, itself initially a maritime enterprise.

## 15.8 POLITICS IN SOUTH INDIA

In the south, unlike the areas discussed so far, several states did make a determined bid in this period to consolidate their power by the use of access to sea and ports. Principal among these were Travancore in Kerala under Martanda Varma and Rama Varma, and Mysore under Haidar Ali and Tipu Sultan.

These states rose to prominence only in the latter half of the eighteenth century, or at least after 1740. Before that, the southern Indian scene had been dominated by a group of Muslim notables who had accompanied the Mughal expansion into the

region in the 1680s and 1690s, or else had come in a second wave that followed immediately after 1700. Many of these notables set themselves up as tribute-paying chiefs under Mughal authority. Some of them were relatively petty *nawabs* (deputies) of the Balaghat, or northern Karnataka (such as Abdul Rasul Khan of Sira). A few of them were political heavy weights like the Nizam-ul-Mulk himself and Sadullah Khan at Arcot. The Nizam-ul-Mulk had consolidated his position in Hyderabad by the 1740s, whereas the Arcot principality had emerged some three decades earlier. Neither of these rulers, while establishing dynastic succession, claimed full sovereignty. Thus they continued to cast themselves as representatives of Mughal authority. Southern Indian politics in the 1720s emerged, therefore, as a game with many petty players and three formidable ones: the Marathas (both at Thanjavur and elsewhere), the Nizam, and the Arcot (or Karnatak) Nawab.

In the second half of the eighteenth century, the power of all three of these centres declined. The succession struggle at Arcot in the 1740s and early 1750s left its rulers open to financial manipulation by private British merchants, to whom they were increasingly in debt for war expenses. In the 1750s the power of Hyderabad also declined (after the death of its founder, the Nizam-ul-Mulk). The control of the coastal districts was soon lost, leaving the kingdom landlocked and relatively sparsely populated. In this context, the only option for states was to build an elaborate and well-organized war machine while keeping external supply lines open. The control of trade was also seen as crucial in the statecraft of the period.

**The State of Travancore**

These principles were put into practice in the southern Kerala state of Venad (Travancore) by Martanda Varma (ruled 1729–58). The king initiated a few measures to strengthen his authority. These were (i) he built a substantial standing army of about 50,000 (ii) reduced the power of the Nayar aristocracy on which rulers of the area had earlier been dependent militarily, and (iii) fortified the northern limits of his kingdom at the so-called "Travancore line." It was also the policy of this ruler to extend patronage to the Syrian Christians, a large trading community within his domains, as a means of limiting European involvement in trade. The key commodity was pepper, but other goods also came to be defined as royal monopoly items, requiring a license for trade. These policies were continued in large measure by Martanda's successor, Rama Varma (ruled 1758–98), who was able to defend his kingdom successfully against a dangerous new rival power- Mysore.

**The Rise of Mysore**

Under rulers of the Vadiyar dynasty, such as Kanthirava Narasaraja and Chikka Deva Raja Mysore emerged as an important state. However, Mysore was a landlocked kingdom and dependent therefore on trade and military supplies brought through the ports of the Indian east coast. As these ports came increasingly under European control, Mysore's vulnerability increased. From the 1760s, steps were taken to change this situation. A cavalry commander of migrant origin, Haidar Ali, assumed effective power in the kingdom in 1761, reducing the Vadiyars to figureheads and displacing the powerful Kalale family of ministers. First Haidar and then, after 1782, his son, Tipu Sultan, made attempts to consolidate Mysore and make it a kingdom with access to not one but both coasts of peninsular India. Against the Kodavas, the inhabitants of the upland kingdom of Kodagu (Coorg), they were relatively successful. Coastal Karnataka and northern Kerala came under their sway, enabling Tipu to open diplomatic and commercial relations on his own account with the Middle East. Tipu's ambitions apparently greatly exceeded those of his father, and he strove actively to

escape the all- pervasive shadow of Mughal suzerainty, as discussed above. However, the problem with the Mysore of Haidar and Tipu was their inability to build an internal consensus. Their dependence on migrants and mercenaries, for both military and fiscal expertise, was considerable, and they were always resisted by local chiefs, the so called *Poligars*. More crucial was the fact that by the 1770s Mysore faced a formidable military adversary in the form of the English East India Company, which did not allow it any breathing room. It was the English who denied Mysore access to the relatively rich agricultural lands and ports of the Coromandel coastal plain in eastern India. Tipu was also finally killed in 1799 by the English forces.

### INTEXT QUESTION 15.3

1. In which region and under whose patronage did the dance form- kathak evolve?

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2. Why was the battle of Plassey, 1757 significant?

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3. Name the sultan of Mysore who faced the challenge of the British East India company. What difficulties did he face during his rule?

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## 15.9 THE ECONOMY IN EIGHTEENTH CENTURY INDIA

The eighteenth century can hardly be said to exhibit any substantial economic continuity between its earlier and later parts. It was a period of considerable political turmoil in India, one in which states were formed and dissolved in quick succession. That there was a great deal of fluidity in the system. It is of course true that raids by military forces would have caused dislocation. The destruction of irrigation tanks, the forcible expropriation of cattle wealth, and even the forced march of masses of people were not unknown in the wars of the 1770s and thereafter. All these must have had a harmful effect on economic stability and curtailed the impulse toward growth.

When viewed from Delhi, the 18th century is certainly a gloomy period. The attacks of Nadir Shah, then of Ahmad Shah Abdali, and finally the attacks by the Rohillas (who controlled Delhi in 1761–71) put the city in a state of regular destruction. This perspective can hardly have been shared by the inhabitants of other centres in India, whether Trivandrum, Pune, Patna, or Jaipur. There was a process of economic reorientation that accompanied the political decentralization of the era, and it is on account of this that the experience of Delhi and Agra cannot be generalized. However, the conditions of different regions were not uniform. In some, the first half of the eighteenth century witnessed continued expansion- Bengal, Jaipur, and Hyderabad, for example. While some others were late bloomers, as in the case of Travancore, Mysore, or the Punjab. No single chronology of economic prosperity and decline is likely therefore to fit all the regions of India in the epoch. Despite some key weaknesses and contradictions the economy of the eighteenth century performed well in the spheres of agriculture, inland trade and urbanization. There were some areas which saw agricultural decline- often because of inter state warfare as in the Punjab and parts of north India. Lack of new agricultural methods and techniques was overcome with the experience and management of land and labour. Data of *Taqsim* papers used and compared vis a vis *Ain-i-Akbari* proves that it was not the lack of cultivable land but

lack of labour and peace which resulted into declining agricultural production and fluctuating agricultural prices as well. At the same time the price rise benefited the peasants but unequally according to vertically divided sections of peasantry. States exacted tribute from systems of agricultural commodity production that tied villages to expansive networks of commercial mobility and exchange.

It is noteworthy that, except for a major subsistence crisis in south India between 1702 and 1704, the first seven decades of eighteenth century in India were remarkably free of famine. The great Bengal famine of 1770, in which an estimated one- third of the population perished, occurred soon after the colonial conquest. This was followed by another disastrous famine in north India in 1783. Overall a favourable land- labour ratio had enabled highly mobile peasant and tribal labour to negotiate reasonable terms with controllers of land. But the excessive revenue demands made the peasants' desertion a regular phenomenon particularly in north India. While some village notables managed to transform revenue farms into hereditary estates, others felt the squeeze from powerful regional states as Tipu's Mysore. Population, production, prices and wages tended, generally speaking, to be on a gentle upward incline during the eighteenth century. Fragmented polities did not hamper the development of a thriving inland trade in grain, cloth and cattle. Corporate merchant institutions transcended political boundaries in overseeing the transportation of goods and the provision of credit and insurance services. Pre- colonial era artisnal labour, especially weavers, had ample scope for successfully resisting extravagant demands by intermediate social groups and the state. Even an intrusive state like late- eighteenth century Mysore appeared to attack intermediaries rather than labour. Evidence from Bengal and Madras suggests that urban labour was worse off in relation to the state and the market in the early colonial than in the immediate precolonial period. While inland trade did well, the Indian shippers and merchants involved in export trade declined in the face of European advances. The great Gujarati port city of Surat lost its importance around 1720. There was a resurgence of demand for Indian goods in both West and South East Asia in the late eighteenth century in addition to European demand, but by now British merchants and shippers had achieved dominance at the expense of Indians and took the bulk of the profits.

As the old commercial centres of Surat, Masulipatnam and Dhaka degenerated, colonial port- cities like Bombay, Madras and Calcutta took their pride of place. But the decline of the Mughal capitals of Delhi and Agra was offset by the rise of regional capitals, including Lucknow, Hyderabad, the various Maratha cities, and Seringapatam. The level of urbanization was clearly higher in 1800 than a century before. What had changed in the urban centres was the relative balance of power between rulers and merchants. In some instances, commercial and financial magnets were arrogating to themselves the powers of the state.

It would also appear for a variety of reasons, that the mid- eighteenth century marks a significant change in economic sphere. For example, once the English East India Company got hold on the revenues of Bengal *subah* the flow of money was adversely affected. While earlier Bengal received gold and silver in exchange for its exports, this pattern no longer held. In later part of eighteenth century the peasants were forced to cultivate certain cash crops like indigo and opium. This had adverse impact on food crop production. But another reason why the latter half of the eighteenth century differs from the period before about 1750 is the changing character of war. In the post-1750 period, warfare became more disruptive of civil life and economic production than before, and at the same time the new technologies in use made it a far more expensive proposition. The use of firearms on a large scale, the employment of mercenaries, the maintenance of standing armies, all of these had harmful affects.

## 15.10 THE SOCIAL CONTEXT

The social life in eighteenth century India was continuation of the past legacy. Despite some universal features of socio- cultural unity through out India over the centuries, there was no uniformity in the social patterns. The society was divided into multi layered identities on the basis of religion, region, tribe, language, class and caste. Hindus were divided on the basis of hundreds of castes. The caste was decided by birth, fixing the permanent place of the people in social hierarchy. Inter- caste marriages and inter caste- dining was forbidden. Traditionally, caste was the basis of the profession but by the eighteenth century to some extent social and professional mobility was being followed. For example Brahmans started adopting various progenies and pursuing trading activities. The caste continued to be a major divisive force.

Muslims were also influenced by the considerations of race, caste, tribe and status. The Shias and Sunnis had major religious differences while the Irani, Afghani, Turani and Hindustani Muslims had lot of differences to stand apart from each other. People converted to Islam carried their caste into the religion. The basic social unit was the family based on patriarchal patterns except Kerela where matrilineal system was prevalent. Women's were expected to live as the role models of ideal daughters, wives and mothers. Women of the upper classes, in north India, had to follow *purdah.* Child marriages was prevalent and marriage was a social obligation between the two families. Among the upper classes polygamy and dowry was prevalent but the greatest evil of eighteenth century India were the custom of *sati* and the condition of widows among the Hindus.

The education system could not change according to the requirements of the time. The curriculum was confined to literature, languages, law, religion, philosophy and logic and excluded the study of physical and natural sciences, technology and geography. There was lack of progressive ideas as theoretical framework dominated. Elementary education was widespread. Mediums of higher education were Sanskrit and Persian only. Moreover, this education excluded females and low caste people.

## 15.11 THE CULTURAL MILIEU

It is generally maintained that the eighteenth century witnessed a general decline in material life, the cultural life of the period also has often been denigrated. However, there appears to be little justification for such a portrayal of the 18$^{th}$ century. Even Delhi, whose economic condition unequivocally declined, had a number of major poets, philosophers, and thinkers in this epoch, from Shah Waliullah to Mir Taqi Mir. Further, as regional courts grew in importance, they tended to take on the function of the principal patrons of high culture, whether in music, the visual arts, or literature. It is thus also in relatively dispersed centres, ranging from Awadh to Bikaner and Lahore to Thanjavur, that one finds the courtly traditions of culture persisting. Thanjavur under the Marathas is a particularly fine example of cultural efflorescence, in which literary production of a high quality in Tamil, Telugu, Sanskrit, and Marathi continued, with some of the Maratha rulers themselves playing a significant direct role. Similarly, it is in the eighteenth century Thanjavur that the main compositions of what is today known as the Karnatak tradition of Indian classical music came to be written, by such men as Tyagaraja, Muttuswami Diksitar, and Syama Sastri. Finally, the period brought the development of a distinct style of painting in Thanjavur, fusing elements imported from the north with older local traditions of textile painting.

This vitality was not restricted purely to elite culture. To begin with, many of the theatre and musical traditions, as well as formal literary genres of the period, picked

Notes

up and 'reincorporated folk influences. At the same time, the interaction of popular Hinduism and Islam gave a particular flavour to cultural activities associated with pilgrimages and festivals. More than in earlier centuries, the tradition of long-distance pilgrimages to major centres from Varanasi to Rameswaram increased and scan be seen to fit in with a general trend of increasing mobility. It was common for post-Mughal states to employ mercenary soldiers and imported scribes and clerks. In eighteenth century Hyderabad, for example, Kayasthas from the north were employed in large numbers in the bureaucracy. ln Mysore, Maharashtrian Brahmans were given fiscal offices as early as the 1720s. It is apparent that the mobility of musicians, men of letters, and artists was widely prevalent. When a major new political centre emerged, it rapidly attracted talent, as evidenced in Ranjit Singh's Lahore. Here, Persian literature of high quality was produced, but not at the cost of literary output in Punjabi. At the same time, new developments were visible in the fields of architecture and painting. Farther to the north, the principality of Kangra fostered an important new school of painting, devoted largely to Vaishnava themes. The cultural assimilation was outcome of mutual influence and respect. Among the major religions the Marathas supported the shrine of Shaikh Muinuddin Chisti in Ajmer and the Raja of Tanjore financed the shrine of Shaikh Shahul Hamid of Nagaur. Tipu Sultan of Mysore supported Shringeri temple and Muslims joyfully participated in the Hindu festivals just as the Hindus were part of Muharram processions. Indeed, a surprisingly large proportion of what is understood today to be part of India's 'traditional" culture is attributable to this period and also to the preceding century.

## 15.12 DEBATE AND PROBLEMS IN UNDERSTANDING THE HISTORY OF EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

The debate on the nature of eighteenth century has engaged historians of Mughal India as well those interested in colonial studies. Early Mughal studies view the over all changes in the shadow of Mughal political collapse and project the period as "Dark Ages", thus Mughal political crisis is seen to be accompanied by economic and social breakdown as well. However, later studies scrutinize eighteenth century economy and society in regional perspectives preceding the beginning of the colonial rule that characterized the second half of the eighteenth century. Thus the two positions argue around "continuity versus change" paradigm. Generally, Indian historians perceive the colonial conquest which began from the mid eighteenth century as a point of departure for Indian history. So the basic issues pertaining to eighteenth century are two- whether the fall of Mughal Empire initiated the fall of socio- economic structure as well and secondly, whether the arrival of colonialism was a fundamental break or not?

Was the eighteenth century a Dark Age or was it a period of economic boom? Did it mark a sharp break or was it a period of continuity and change? How British power in India expanded during the eighteenth century? These and other questions concerning the nature of politics, society, economy, religion and culture made the study of history of eighteenth century highly debatable. Historians have traditionally viewed India's eighteenth century as a dark era of warfare, political chaos, and economic decline sandwiched between stable and prosperous Mughal and British hegemonies. This view has been vigorously challenged by the most recent generation of Indian historians, who have emphasized the continuities between the earlier Mughal and later British states and the constellation of small successor states that emerged with the ebbing of Mughal power. The political turmoil which affected the whole century, forces one to ask whether the fall of the Mughal empire led to a break of the central

political authority triggering the phase of anarchy, firstly leading to the rise of regional kingdoms then paving the way for dominance of British colonialism. Here it is important to understand whether just the decline of the Mughal state should be seen as a failure of Indian society as well as the vacuum created by the fall of the central authority filled up by the regional powers namely, Nawabs of Awadh and Bengal and Nizam of Hyderabad in the first half of the century. Moreover, whether the emergence of British East India Company as a political power was a break for the Indian society, economy and polity? or marked the beginning of next two hundred years of British colonialism in India?

## INTEXT QUESTIONS 15.4

1. Give two reasons for the economic instability after 1770.

2. Why did Indian export trade decline in the face of European advances?

3. Name major colonial port cities, that replaced earlier commercial centres.

4. Give two main features of eighteenth century Social system.

5. List the major social evils prevalent in 18th Century India.

6. What were the mediums of higher education till 18th Century?

7. What was the main centre for the emergence of Karnatak tradition of Indian classical music? Who were the main exponents of this tradition?

## WHAT YOU HAVE LEARNT

The lesson deals with the history of the 18th century. It provides a brief account of the later Mughal rulers - their weaknesses and difficulties. It also traces the gradual rise of the Mughal nobility and eventual disintegration of the Mughal empire.

The lesson marks the breaking up of the central authority leading to the emergence of regional kingdoms such as Hyderabad, Awadh and Bengal. The contribution of the regional rulers as well as their internal conflicts are also highlighted.

Emergence of the Maratha confederacy and finally the breakup of Marathas into five Maratha Kingdoms of Bhonsle, Gaikwad, Holkar, Sindhia and Satara was is another important phase. The power of the Peshwas and some of the important administrative features are also mentioned.

Consolidation of Sikhs under Maharaja Ranjit Singh, rise of the Rajput States and the contribution of these Kingdoms towards Indian administration, polity and culture has been explained in brief.

The later half of 18th century saw important developments. Rise of Mysore state under Hyder Ali and Tipu Sultan is worth mentioning. Coming of the East India

Company and the conflict between Mysore and the company marks the beginning of a new phase of Indian political scene.

Along with political developments, the lesson also deals with the new features of Indian economy, discusses the reason for decline of Indian agriculture and export trade paving the way for colonial economy.

While in many ways the social conditions remain stagnant, the 18th Century India also witnessed various new trends in economic and cultural fields.

Because of the complex nature of the 18th century Indian polity and economy there are divergent views among historians about the nature of these developments.

## TERMINAL QUESTIONS

1. After the death of Aurangzeb why did the Mughal authority decline so fast?
2. Examine the process of the rise of regional polities and states. Why did these powers feel the need for imperial symbol for legitimacy?
3. How did the Marathas recover their lost importance in early 18th century?
4. Who was Mahadaji Sindhia? List his contributions?
5. Examine the efforts of nawabs of Bengal to consolidate their position in Bengal.
6. When and by whom was the Sikh authority established over Lahore? Explain role of Maharaja Ranjit Singh in this context.
7. Explain the steps taken by Sawai Raja Jai Singh to increase his power in Rajputana.
8. "When viewed from Delhi, the 18th century is certainly a gloomy period." Justify this statement by giving suitable arguments.
9. Examine the causes of decline of Indian agriculture in 18th century.
10. Describe the significant changes in the economic sphere in 18th Century India.
11. Why is there a debate on the nature of 18th century?
12. On what ground do the historian refer the 18th century as "dark ages"?
13. What are the major problems in understanding the history of 18th century?

## ANSWERS TO INTEXT QUESTIONS

**15.1**

1. Bahadur Shah I or Shah Alam. He followed a policy of compromise.
2. Abdullah Khan and Hussain Ali Khan were popularly known as 'Sayyed Brothers'.

   Achievements:

   i. They held the position of *'Vazir'* and *'Bakshi'* respectively.

   ii. They suppressed the sikh revolts and tried to conciliate the Rajputs.

iii. They abolished repressive tax like *'Jazia.'*

3. The state of Hyderabad was founded by Chin Kilich Khan, the Nizam-ul-mulk. He held the position of the *'Vazir'* under the Mughals.

4. i. The later Mughal rulers were weak and ineffective.

   ii. Many of them were fickle minded and spent them in wasteful luxury and expenditure.

5. During the period of A.D. 1738–1739 Nadir Shah invaded India, he was the ruler of Iran.

**15.2**

1. The Marathas

2. During the region of Shahu, the Maratha ruler, the Chief Minister was referred as Peshwa. Baji Rao I was a very powerful Peshwa who ruled during the period of 1720–1740.

3. Both Chauth and Sardeshmukhi refers to the tributes collected by the Marathas. These corresponded to the proportion of tribute. Chauth was $1/4^{th}$ of the Mughal taxes, Sardeshmukhi was $1/10^{th}$ of the same.

4. Goa, Bassin, Daman

5. Bhonsles of Nagpur, Gaikwards of Baroda, Holkars of Indore, Sindhias of Gwalior and Shivaji's succesors ruled in the region of Satara

6. Ahalya Bai was the widowed daughter in law of the Holkar ruler Malhar Rao. She ruled Indore from 1765 to 1794. Her main achievement was that she consolidated the power of the Holkars and brought it to great glory.

**15.3**

1. Kathak, the new dance form evolved in the region of Lucknow in Awadh under the patronage of the nawabs of Awadh.

2. In this battle the independent nawab of Bengal, Sirajuddaulah was defeated and killed by the British forces. It paved the way for subjugation of Bengal and eventually India by a foreign power.

3. Tipu Sultan. Besides falling to the hostility of the British, Tipu always had to face the resistance of local chiefs called '*Poligars*'.

**15.4**

1. Political turmoil and raids of military forces were two main reasons for economic instability.

2. The great Gujarati port city of Surat lost its importance though there was still a great demand of Indian goods. The British merchant and shippers controlled the export trade by replacing Indian.

3. Colonial cities like Bombay, Madras, Calcutta replaced earlier commercial centers.

4. In many ways the eighteenth century social life was a continuation of past legacy without much change. The society was divided on the multilayered identities on the basis of religion, tribe, cast, language, class etc.

5. Women of the upper classes had to follow Pardah. Child marriage, polygamy and dowry were other social evils in society. But the most cruel and greatest social evil was the custom of Sati.
6. The mediums of higher education in 18th century were Sanskrit and Persian only.
7. Karnatak tradition of Indian classical music developed in the region of Thanjavur. The main exponent of this tradition were Tyagaraja, Muttuswami Diksitar and Syma Sastri.

## HINTS TO TERMINAL QUESTIONS

1. Refer to section 15.1
2. Refer to section 15.2.
3. Refer to section 15.3
4. Refer to section 15.2.(The Sindhias of Gwalior)
5. Refer to section 15.4
6. Refer to section 15.6
7. Refer to section 15.7
8. Refer to section 15.9
9. Refer to section 15.9
10. Refer to section 15.9.
11. Refer to section 15.12
12. Refer to section 15.12
13. Refer to section 15.12