Griffin Dennis

Department of South Asian Languages and Civilizations

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An Entropic Consideration of 18th Century India

"Was the 18th century a period of decline in India? Did the "fall" of the Mughal Empire hurl India into a period of political, economic, or cultural chaos? Or, are there alternative ways of regarding Indian conditions during this period?

The 18th century was a period of great political turmoil in the Indian subcontinent. It saw the fall of the once mighty Mughal Empire and the rise of a diverse array of military and political players as the century wore on. Though the fall of the Mughals was relatively swift, it is hard to point to one decisive event that. No one military force or decisive victory brought the whole empire crashing down. Instead, a continued assault from all sides wore down the once seemingly centralized administration in Delhi. In the wake of economic and military troubles in the early 18th century, regional powers began to gain more influence. Though there was certainly a large measure of upheaval during this period, there still remain historiographic questions as to the nature of the changes that occurred. Did the fall of the Mughal Empire necessarily cause a period of political, economic or cultural chaos? In answering this question, one must qualify any answer by asking the question "for whom?" The Mughal structures of rule and patronage were upended, but for some regions like Awadh, the period proved to be one of expansion and formation of local power structures. We can characterize 18th century India in a somewhat more nuanced way: the net political *entropy* of the subcontinent increased during the 18th century amid the collapse of established powers and the opening to European trading interests.

I do not wish to launch into a lengthy discussion of semantics, but I should distinguish ‘entropy’ in contrast to ‘chaos’ in the political context. In thermodynamics, entropy is a quantity describing increasing or decreasing disorder within a system. We can use the term analogously in geopolitical matters to discuss consolidation or diffusion of power, effects of outside actors, and the fact that the subcontinent is by no means a closed system. By considering the Indian subcontinent as a collection of interacting and overlapping political systems, we get a more accurate picture of how and why the region changed, as opposed to simply a descent into chaos.

The turn of the century

The sustained attack on, and further weakening of the once consolidated Mughal Empire: Marathas, Afghans, and Britons, oh my! (section each for these)

Awadh and the larger fish that Delhi attempted to fry

The increased importance of international trade within the Indian subcontinent.

The western regions, Bombay, Surat, and the growing trading classes

Britain, Bengal, Plassey, and the expanding governmental role of the East India Company

First, we should consider the numerous factors that led to the ultimate demise of Mughal influence in the 1700s. The most obvious of these was the weakening influence of the Mughal military interests in the Empire's territories. Strained by the continuing conflicts in both the east and west ends of its empire, The Mughals were somewhat exhausted by the continuing assaults by British, Maratha, and Afghan forces. This is fairly clear historically, but the side effects of this were a draining of financial resources, and a focusing of troops and ordinance to the detriment of other regions. Of course, the detriment in this case is Delhi's, as the relative absence of the central authority combined with a newfound economic prosperity allowed some regions to at least nominally break from Mughal administration.

Awadh is perhaps the most notable example of this, breaking from Mughal rule in the early 18th century. Awadh was and continues to be a prosperous agricultural region of India. As such, the transition from Mughal rule to the 100+ year rule of the Nawabs was a relatively non-violent one. It was both a symptom and cause of further decline in the overall power held by Delhi.