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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 thermodynamics, entropy is a quantity describing disorder within a system. More accurately, it describes how thermodynamic systems interact with one another with regards to diffusion and reaction. Though it may draw the ire of scholars of physics and history, 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 or otherwise.

The turn of the century

At the turn of the 18th century, much of the subcontinent was still under Mughal rule, though during the half-century long rule of Aurangzeb, the once certain power had begun to fade with various wars draining resources from Delhi. As Christopher Bayly notes: “By the time of Aurangzeb’s death, imperial finances were already in disarray, strained to the breaking point by the need to maintain constant campaigns through the whole subcontinent.”[[1]](#footnote-1) The prized assets that the Mughals had fought so hard to acquire became liabilities as the ends of the empire began to fray among resistance from Hindu warriors and peasants displeased with the revenue collection of the Mughals. The diffuseness of the empire had spread its resources thin, and different regional authorities began to take advantage of this. The resulting decrease in revenue contributed to a negative feedback loop that attenuated the central authority in Delhi even more. Of course, where the central powers had weakened, the vacuum was filled by local rajas, diwan, etc.

The canonical example of this phenomenon is the rise of the Nawabs of Awadh. In the years leading up to the official power changing hands around the early 1720s, Delhi had unsure footing in Awadh. John F. Richards notes that between 1707 and 1720 “Awadh … had a total of fifteen governors, some completely absentee. In response to disorder in Awadh, later governors were given unprecedented powers, notably over the fiscal and revenue institutions managed by the provincial diwan.”[[2]](#footnote-2) This would eventually lead to the establishing of an independent Awadh that would remain in place more or less until the exile of Wajid Ali Shah by the East India Company in 1856. Awadh’s agricultural prosperity allowed it to

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.

1. Bayly, Indian Society and the Making of the British Empire, Chapter 1, p 7 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Richards, The Mughal Empire, Chapter 12, p 275 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)