

# **Decline of the Mughal Empire**

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The period of the Great Mughals, which began in 1526A.D. with Babur's accession to the throne, ended with the death of Aurangzeb in 1707A.D. Aurangzeb's death marked the end of an era in Indian history. When Aurangzeb died, the empire of the Mughals was the largest in India. Yet, within about fifty years of his death, the Mughal Empire disintegrated. The sign of degeneration were unmistakably visible in the institutions and systems intrinsic to its cultural character and administrative policies. The general rot that had begun to set in during the reign of Aurangzeb could not be curtailed by his weak successors, and the recurrent war of succession worsened the situation further. The Mughal army too was weakened by a dearth of able commanders; there was no further introduction of military reforms or new technologies as had been done by Akbar. The political situation in Northern India clearly indicated the waning of the glorious days of the Mughal Empire

There are several reasons identified by historians for the decline and disintegration of the mighty Mughal Empire

## **Causes of the decline of the Mughal Empire:**

### ***1. Weak Successors:***

The Mughals did not follow any law of succession like the law of primogeniture. Consequently, each time a ruler died, a war of succession between the brothers for the throne started. This weakened the Mughal Empire, especially after Aurangzeb. The nobles, by siding with one contender or the other, increased their own power. The successors of Aurangzeb were weak and became victims of the intrigues and conspiracies of the faction-ridden nobles. They were inefficient generals and incapable of suppressing revolts. The absence of a strong ruler, an efficient bureaucracy and a capable army had made the Mughal Empire weak.

## ***2. Degeneration of the Mughal Nobility:***

The history of India of the time of Akbar, Jahangir and Shahjahan was made by Bairam Khan , Munim Khan, Muzaffar Khan and Abdur Rahim Khan Khana , Itmad Ud daulah and Mahababat Khan, Asaf Khan and Saadulla khan. But with the decline in the character of the later Mughal Emperors decline also set in the character of the nobility wealth and leisure which the foreign Muslims acquired in India fostered luxury and sloth and the presence of many women in their harems encouraged debauchery, which, in their turn, undermined their character and love of adventure. Consequently, physical, moral and intellectual degeneration overtook the governing classes

## ***3. Aurangzeb's Religious persecution of the Hindus:***

Aurangzeb failed to realize that the vast Mughal Empire depended on the willing support of the people. He lost the support of the Rajputs who had contributed greatly to the strength of the Empire. They had acted as pillars of support, but Aurangzeb's policy turned them to bitter foes. The wars with the Sikhs, the Marathas, the Jats and the Rajputs had drained the resources of the Mughal Empire.

Akbar had won over the Hindus by giving them religious toleration and opening careers to talent irrespective of caste, race or creed. He had enlisted Hindu Warrior tribes, chiefly the Rajput as reliable defenders of his throne. The Rajputs under him and his three immediate successors had carried the Mughal banner to the extreme corner of the subcontinent of India and also into the heart of Central Asia. But Aurangzeb reimpose the hated *jiziyah* on the Hindus, distrusted the Rajputs and made an unworthy attempt to convert the heir to the gaddi of Marwar to Islam. Hence the Rajputs, were alienated and were determined to fight the Mughal oppressor. The Rathors and Sisodias remained practically in rebellion till the downfall of the Empire. Their example was followed by the Bundelas and the Sikhs.

## ***4. Demoralization of the Mughal Army:***

The demoralization of the Mughal Army was the another major reason for the decline of the Mughal Empire the Mughal army which by origin and composition

was became weak and defective. It consisted chiefly of contingents recruited and maintained by the high offices and nobles who were assigned revenues of large tract of the country for their maintenance. On account of this the individual soldier looked upon his *mansabdar* as his chief and not as his officer. There was no touch between the emperor and the individual soldiers who were paid by their, commander or *mansabdar* and not directly from the Royal treasury. The inherent defects of this radically and sound system work aggravated during the reign of Aurangzeb and his successors.

As the authority of the later Mughul emperors relaxed, the great nobles or officers of the empire began to convert the assignment which they held for maintaining troops, into their hereditary possessions. This left the emperor without a strong body of personal troops to enable him to assert his authority. Besides, on account of the weakness of imperial authority the *mansabdars* became so jealous of one another that a commander often deliberately refrain from bringing three- fourth won battle or a siege to a successful conclusion, if he felt that another officer would share the credit of a success.

It became the habit of the Mughul officers from the last quarter of the 17th century to be in treacherous correspondence with the enemy. As the emperor and the Mir Bakshi themselves lacked ability and firmness of character they could not enforce proper discipline in the army which was reduced to a well-armed mob. Military crimes were overlooked even by Aurangzeb and no regular punishments were inflicted for dereliction of duty. For this reason the army which had carried the Mughal banners to the extreme corners of the country and even beyond to the river Oxus and the Helmand in Central Asia became useless for offence and defenses.

### ***5. Economic Bankruptcy:***

Shah Jahan's zeal for construction had depleted the treasury. As well as Shah Jahan and Aurangzeb's long war in the south had further drained the exchequer. They Increased the state demand to one half of the produce of the soil and as the revenue demand rose, the production fell in the same proportion. The cultivators began deserting their fields but they were compelled by force to carry on the cultivation. Bankruptcy began to stare the Mughal government in the face in the

times of Aurangzeb and his successors who had to fight many wars to gain the throne and retain it. The economic collapse came in the time of Alamgir II(1754-1759 ) who was starved and the revenues even of the royal privy purse-estate were usurped by the unscrupulous Wazir Imad-ul-Mulk. A month and a half after his accession, AlamgirII had no suitable convenience to enable him to ride in procession to the *Idgah* and he had to walk on foot from the harem to the stone mosque of the Fort. The wonder is that the bankrupt Mughal government lasted for another 50 years

### **6. Invasions:**

Foreign invasions sapped the remaining strength of the Mughals and hastened the process of disintegration. The invasions of Nadir Shah and Ahmad Shah Abdali resulted in further drainage of wealth. These invasions shook the very stability of the empire.

### **7. Size of the Empire and Challenge from Regional Powers:**

The Mughal Empire had become too large to be controlled by any ruler from one centre i.e. Delhi. The Great Mughals were efficient and exercised control over ministers and army, but the later Mughals were poor administrators. As a result, the distant provinces became independent. The rise of independent states led to the disintegration of the Mughal Empire.



### 8. Aurangzeb's Deccan Policy:

Aurangzeb Deccan policy which cause the destruction of the best soldiers and undermined the Mughul prestige beyond repair, contributed materially to the downfall of his dynasty. He destroyed the *Shia* Kingdoms of Bijapur and Golconda and waged a long, endless war for extermination against the Marathas. This obliged the hardy Marathas to fight in self-defence and when success came to them they were encouraged to take up the offensive, cross the Narmada and invade the Mughal provinces in Northern India. The Hindus in Northern India were already alienated by Aurangzeb's policy of religious persecution and the Hindu officers and vassals of the empire were either indifferent or secretly hostile to the mughal cause. This creates opportunity for the Marathas. They appealed to the common sentiments of Rajput and of the Hindus who secretly allied themselves with Bajirao when the latter boldly proceeded to execute his policy of striking at the withering trunk of the Mughal Empire in the belief that after the fall of that Empire the independent provincial Muslim dynasty would fall of them. Thus, within thirty one years of Aurangzeb's death, his successor had to wage war with the sikhs, Jats,

Bundelas, Rathores, kachwahahas and Sisodias and no Hindu tribe of military value was left on their side.

The Emperor's long absence from Northern India led too many provincial governors becoming independent, with some regions even turning turbulent. The long Deccan wars of Aurangzeb, thus, contributed to the decline of the Mughal Empire

### **9. The Jagirdari Crisis:**

The Mughal emperor was a highly centralized bureaucratized structure with the emperor at the top his vitality depending upon the strength of the military aristocracy, who were placed just below him. With the introduction of the mansabdari system in civil and military organisation in the late 16th century Akbar, had accommodated the aristocracy within this structure. Those mansabdars who were not paid in cash were awarded a *jagir* or landed estate in lieu of salary. They were the *jagirdars* who were required to collect the revenue from the particular *jagir* of which one part would go to the state and the other two parts would cover his personal expenses and the maintenance allowances for his soldiers and horses. During the last years of Aurangzeb's reign, the number of *jagirdars* appointed had risen to such a great number that there was a serious shortage of *paibaqi land* (land earmarked to be given as *jagirs*). This decrease in the resources of the Empire ruptured the functional relationship between the emperor and the aristocracy indicating the beginning of inefficiency within the imperial Mughal administrative system.

As a result of this economic crisis in the 18th century the various ethno-religious group within the aristocracy began competing each other. About four-fifths of the land revenue of the Mughal Empires was under the control of mansabdars and jagirdars; but this income was unevenly distributed among them, creating jealousies within the aristocracy- particularly at the time when the resources of the Empire were diminishing. This economic situation known as the '*jagirdari crisis*' of the 18th century- has been defined by Satish chandra in the following words, 'the available social surplus was insufficient to defray the cost of administration, pay for Wars of one type or another and to give the ruling classes a standard of living in keeping with its expectations'. In this situation the actual revenue

collection was much less than what had been estimated, there by diminishing the expected income of the *jagirdars*.

The crises increased during the last year of Aurangzeb's reign mainly because of the Deccan war, since a greater number of mansabdars was required, the ensuing political turmoil made the collection of revenue a more difficult task .the jagirdari crisis lead to an unhealthy competition to gain control over the fertile jagir. This added to the already existing factionalism at Court after the death of Bahadur Shah in 1712A.D. the problem intensified as low ranking officials now found it difficult to maintain their lifestyle with the meager amount they got from the jagirs.

As a result of several diverse yet interrelated factors led to the decline of the Mughal Empire with dramatic suddenness within a few decades following the death of Aurangzeb. The period of the great Mughals, which constitutes a glorious era in medieval Indian history ended in this manner, yielding way to the establishment of many independent regional Kingdom in its wake

## **Major Theories on Decline of Mughal Empire**

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. The process of the decline and emergency of regional polities has been intensely debated among historians. It has also been a subject on which scholarly opinion is more sharply divided than on any other aspects of Mughal history. Each and every historian has different theories on the decline of Mughal Empire and the major theories were as follows:

### **Satish Chandra, Jagirdari Crisis:**

The first and foremost among them is the thesis put forward by Satish Chandra in his *Parties and Politics of the Mughal Court (1959)*. He builds up the hypothesis of a *Jagirdari Crisis*. According to him, the crisis was

- (a) Contracting hasil from the mahāls;
- (b) An increase in the number of total mansabdars; and
- (c) A general tendency to allot increasingly high mansabs.

All this, according to Satish Chandra led to a state of bejāgīri. 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.

### **M. Athar Ali, Jagirdari Crisis:**

Athar's Ali Work on *Mughal Nobility under Aurangzeb [1966]*, who made a count of the nobles in the Mughal Empire. According to his count of nobles of the rank of 1000 and above, the percentage of the khānazāds and the Rajputs started falling, while the *Deccanis* and the *Marathas* was growing which emphasized the subsequent shortage of *jagirs*. The sudden increase in the number of nobles, caused due to the expansion of Empire into the Deccan and the 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.

### **Irfan Habib, Agrarian Crisis:**

The second major theory of the Aligarh School was built by Irfan Habib in his *Agrarian System of Mughal Empire (1963)*. He built up the hypothesis of an 'Agrarian Crisis'. He tries to work out the causes of the decline of the Mughal Empire in a class framework which does not stop simply at identifying the classes but extends to identify the Mughal state as 'the protective arm of the exploiting class'. He illustrates the basic nature of the Mughal land-revenue demand. The Mughal *jagirdari system* according to him contributed to a cash nexus and stimulated town-based crafts. Habib implicitly highlights a number of social contradictions in the society controlled and managed by the Mughal Empire. Thus he points out the contradiction between the village headmen, the peasant proprietors and menial workers on the one hand and the nobility on the other. He also points out at the intra-ruling class contradictions: the zamindars and the intermediary zamindars on the one hand, and the nobility on the other. He also



takes into account the contradictions between the *muqaddams* and the ordinary peasants, and between the ordinary peasants including the *muqaddams* and the menial classes.

The basic features of this 'Agrarian Crisis' as propounded by Irfan Habib are:

- (a) High rate of demand built in the zabt system (more than half of the actual produce);
- (b) Increasing gap between the actual hasil and the expected jama;
- (c) Rotation of jagirs, pressurizing the peasants and ruination of agriculture;
- (d) Ruination and flight of peasantry from the jagirs, which affected the zamindars also as they were closely linked to the Village Community; and
- (e) Breakout of agrarian revolts which were manifestations of peasant discontent.

So according to Habib these Peasant protests weakened the political and Social Fabric of the Empire.

### **J.F.Richards, Bejagiri:**

Further improvements were made in the theories of Mughal decline by J.F. Richards who pointed out that the state of bejāgīrī was caused by a deliberate policy of increasing the share of the khalisa revenues, the lack of Paibaki land was due to a deliberate decisions 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 Maratha. This resulted in a further clamour for jagirs by the nobles and the concentration of more funds with the government from 1687 onwards.

### **Muzaffar Alam , Region-centric approach:**

Muzaffar Alam has 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 (1986). Muzaffar Alam has made comparative study of the development in the Mughals subas of Awadh and Punjab.

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 Zamindar, 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-shares of Mughal power 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.

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 emergency and configuration of the elements of a new subadari. The genesis for the emergency of independent regional units was present in both the provinces. But in Punjab it ended in chaos, while Awadh witnessed a stable dynastic rule.

### **Jadunath Sarkar, Deteriorating Characters of the Emperors and their Nobles:**

Jadunath Sarkar, in his work, *The Fall of Mughal Empire, 1938, and History of Aurangzeb, 1912*, attributed the decline to deterioration in the characters of the Emperors and their nobles. Sarkar had analyzed the development 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 of officials on the basis of religion. This led to wide scale resentments among the nobility. He argued that Aurangzeb's successor and their nobles were mere shadows of their predecessors and were thus unable to set right the evils of Aurangzeb's legacy.

It is difficult to find the 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 centers and the peripheries. 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 path 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.

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