



# India in 18<sup>th</sup> Century: The Debate

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**Abstract:** In India 18th century has been the controversial period as it triggered a debate regarding the decline of Mughal empire and the changes it brought in the economy and society. This event has led to a debate among historians whose opinions are divided amongst two ideas i.e., those who saw 18th century as an era of decline and political turmoil and others that saw it as period of regional development. This paper is an attempt to analyse the controversy and the of the ongoing debate on the topic that is whether the 18th century was 'dark age' or it was a period of regional autonomy.

## INTRODUCTION

During the 18th century India saw major transitions, on one hand there was the decline of Mughal Empire. The almighty powerful Mughal empire that was once established by Babur in 16<sup>th</sup> century and saw strong emperors like Akbar started disintegrating under the reign and even with the death of Aurangzeb in 1707. There were several reasons that were accompanied with its decline such as Aurangzeb's religious and bigotry policies against Hindus, the Deccan campaigns, the shortage of jagirs and even with the coming of Britishers who interfered with the politics of India and were able to get control over it through several wars such as Battle of Plassey and Battle of Buxar. Thus, there are group of historians who looked at 18<sup>th</sup> century in terms of decline and chaos of Mughal Empire.

On the other there is a group of Revisionist Historians who saw 18th century as a period where certain individuals, groups or other regions became independent of Mughals and flourished.

**Irfan Habib in his book – The Agrarian System of Mughal India 1556-1707**, explained the decline of Mughal Empire and the unrest among the political and social matters in fiscal terms. Habib argued that "**the high rate of land revenue demanded by Delhi caused large-scale rural exploitation, leading to peasant migration and rebellion.**"

As per Irfan Habib the strength of Mughal Emperors lies in the cavalry maintained by Mansabdars who were paid in jagirs or land assignments in lieu of cash salaries in order to maintain the horses and contingents. Thus, we can see that there was a connection between the military power and the Jagirdari system of Mughals. However, the Mansabadari and Jagirdari system were based on the will of the Mughal emperor. This system that was started by Akbar gave him the position of Divine Monarchy as he made the Mughal army centralised and he was the sole one responsible for the conditions and privileges of mansabdars as the rate of land revenue and the assessment method and collection was decided by the emperor himself.

Also, the Revenue Policy of Mughals were based on 2 basic considerations –

First- as the military contingents were maintained out of the revenues of the jagirs granted to mansabdars, the revenue demand was set at the highest rate thus to get the army as strong as the time required.

Secondly- the Mughal administrative officers were aware of the fact that if the revenue was fixed at the highest rate than the peasants will be left with nothing for their survival which can result in the failure of revenue system completely.

Therefore, the imperial authorities fixed the revenue rate on the surplus produce so the peasants were left with the produce for subsistence. This surplus was also appropriated by the mansabdars and zamindars as their profit. However, this Jagirdari system had a major flaw which led to the decline of Mughal economy. The Jagirdars were transferred in every 3 to 4 years in order to protect any kind of their power accumulation in the region assigned to them.

But this has some negative impact as well as Jagirdars were transferred regularly they did not undertake any steps for agricultural development. Also, they were required to collect the Baqaya or the previous arrears and deposit it in the Khalsa the official land of Emperor.

The Jagirdar did not get a fresh assessment of land immediately when he was transferred and remained without Jagir but received a claim known as **Talab** for his pay which was stopped by Aurangzeb later and created problems as Jagirdars collected as much revenue as possible.

**BHIMSEN in his NUSHKA- E- DILKUSHA argued that “owing to the unpredictable transfers of jagirs, the agents of the jagirdars had given up the practice of helping the peasantry.”**

This continuous transfer of Jagirdars, no claim for Talab and the high revenue demand by Jagirdars led to the exploitation of peasantry. The peasants in order to pay the revenue on time were compelled to sell their women, children and cattle. **Bernier too declares that “a considerable portion of the good land remains untilled from the want of labourers, many of whom perish in consequence of bad treatment they received from the Governors.”**

**Irfan Habib** quoted Shah Waliullah of Delhi, 18th century writer who pointed out that as the oppression of peasants increased by the jagirdars the revolts by the peasants also increased. **"He thought that the ruin of the countries or town in his age was due to first- strain on the resources on the Treasury from maintaining a class of idlers."**

Second- due to the high rate of taxes imposed on peasants, artisans and merchants the submissive ones left and the powerful rose in rebellion. Those villages or areas that rose in rebellion and did not pay taxes were termed as Mawas or Zor talab.

The Jat's were the major peasant community that rose to rebellion in Mathura and they were joined by Zamindars as well as now they were also left with nothing as the surplus were taken by the jagirdars.

In 1669 Gokula Jat, a zamindar of Talipat near Mathura rose to rebellion. It was under Churaman Jat that the independent Jat kingdom arose in Mathura.

The Marathas were also responsible for the downfall of Mughal Empire. Bhimsen explained that in the year 1700 Marathas succeeded because of two reasons –

First Bhimsen focused on the Military and argued that the Mughal commanders were unable to maintain the contingent up to the standards. As a result, the Marathas did not fear the Mughals and refused to pay the revenue. The zamindars also allied with Marathas. Second, he argued that as the jagirdars oppressed the peasants and they refused to pay the revenue they also joined the Marathas in Dakhin.

Thus in 18th century Mughal Empire became financially weakened due to ineffective revenue policies.

**Satish Chandra in his book - Parties and Politics of the Mughal Court**, saw the decline of Mughal Empire as a result of Jagirdari Crisis led by the structural flaws in the working of the jagirdari and mansabdari system which in turn is responsible for the fiscal crisis. He argued that the failure of the Mughals to ensure the efficient functioning of these two institutions during Aurangzeb's reign herald the process of imperial collapse.

He argued that how Mughal Empire depended on the Nobility for their effective functioning of administration and military expansion of the empire. These nobles were organised into Mansabdari system under Akbar and were given 2 ranks - Zat that represents their personal pay and sawar that represents the horsemen to be maintained. The salaries of Mansabdars were fixed and as per Irfan Habib as we have already seen were paid in Jagirs. This fixation of salaries made the mansabdars the paid servants and this can be seen as the Bureaucratisation of Nobility.

However, the Jagirdari system was not hereditary and the jagirdars were also not the owners of the land.

Satish Chandra focused on how this nobility which were heterogeneous and included Iranis, Turanis, Uzbeks, Afghans and even Rajputs under Akbar changed under Aurangzeb with the coming of Marathas and Deccanis into Mansabdari system after Bijapur and Golconda were incorporated into Empire in 1685 and 1689 respectively. As the number of Mansabdars increased we see the shortage of Jagirs or what Satish Chandra called as 'Jagirdari Crisis' or 'Be-jagiri' as every noble wanted the fertile land in North India.

This placed the officials of revenue department in an extremely difficult situation as the contingents of the officers were unlimited while the land available for granting as was limited.

This led to delays in granting of jagirs and even the jagirdars were also unable to yield the surplus as revenue due to the infertile lands given to them which led to exploitation of peasants. Thus, the peasants migrated which can be seen also as the result of Jagirdari Crisis. This also led to a widening gap between the estimated revenue i.e., Jama and actual collection i.e, Hasil and in turn led to Revenue Deficit.

**Athar M. Ali** in his book **The Mughal Nobility under Aurangzeb** agreed with both Irfan Habib's idea of a fiscally centralized state, and Satish Chandra's idea of shortage of jagirs. As per him as the Mughal Empire expanded politically into the less fertile lands of Deccan the number of nobles increased but the fertile jagirs became acute.

He too pointed out that the nobility under Aurangzeb changed and studied it under two phases. First was from Aurangzeb's accession to 1678 when the nobility comprised of Turanis, Iranis, Afghans and Hindustanis. All of them were promoted. But it was in the second phase from 1679 till 1707 that the Rajput's were not promoted and in fact their rank from 1000 and above declined. Thus, Rajput's who were allies of Mughals rose into rebellion. He too agreed with Satish Chandra and Irfan Habib that as Aurangzeb led to Deccan Campaigns, large number of Deccani nobles entered into Mughal administration which deteriorated the situation. Thus, Aurangzeb stopped any future recruitments but despite this the nobles increased to such an extent that the condition worsened and the revenue could not be collected and the maintenance of contingents became impossible. All this chaos led to factionalism in Mughal Court and the nobility got divided into factions under Firuz Jung, Ghazi Uddin Khan and Zulfikar Khan which led to the breakdown of the unity of Mughal Empire and emergence of independent kingdoms.

**William Irvine** in his book- **Later Moguls** and **Sir Jadunath Sarkar** in his book- **Fall of the Mughal Empire**- were the first to attribute the decline of Mughal Empire to the deteriorating character of the Mughal emperors and their nobles. Jadunath Sarkar argued that how the Mughal Empire that was prosperous under Akbar in terms of territory, wealth and army declined during and after the reign of Aurangzeb. Jadunath Sarkar first focused on how the grand Mughal Empire that was established by Akbar in 1560 flourished in terms of territory, wealth, military, art and industry. It was in 1707 with the death of Aurangzeb and with the accession of imbecile and weak emperors such as Muhammad Shah that the condition of Mughals deteriorated. Under Muhammad Shah with

invasion of Nadir Shah, Jats and Sikhs rebellions, the political condition of Mughals saw decline as there was no strong army under him to restore peace and maintain law and order. In this book Jadunath Sarkar also emphasised another problem that led to political chaos amongst Mughals was the absence of no strong Wakil or the prime minister. He argued that due to court factionalism that led to separate groups such as Turanis, Iranis and Hindustanis nobles did not let anyone be the prime minister for long time and in fact these Wakils or Wazirs became the King makers.

He argued that **“Where the king has no inborn capacity to rule a realm, government by a responsible prime minister is the only alternative, unless administration is to disappear from the country and the State to break up.” No fainéant Mughal Emperor has given the wazir the chance to strongly administer Delhi which led to decline.”**

**Jadunath Sarkar** in his other book – **History of Aurangzeb** emphasised on 2 policies of Aurangzeb as being the chief reasons for decline-The first is the Deccan Campaigns and second is the Religious Policy of Aurangzeb. Aurangzeb in 17th century led to two campaigns in South India that made the Mughal Empire bankrupt and intensified political disturbances. The two campaigns were launched against Bijapur and Golconda to root out Marathas. As the campaign was far from Delhi the Mughal capital it led to lawlessness and disorder which led to chaos in what was known as Hindustan.

Another reason that led to the decline of Mughals in 18th century was Aurangzeb's religious policies which made the life impossible for Hindus. He pointed out that under Aurangzeb Hindu temples were demolished, they were taxed more than Muslims. Muhatsib who were the censors of Morals of Islam were also appointed by him to ensure that Islam was followed in its true terms. In 1667 Aurangzeb abolished the custom duty called Mahsul for Muslim traders. In 1668 he forbade Hindus to ride palkis and even forbade Hindus to organize fairs and Hindu festivals. In 1679 Aurangzeb re-imposed Jaziya Tax which alienated Hindus further from his rule and led to discontent and Hindus revolt led to decline of Mughal empire.

Ishwari Prasad in his book **India in the 18<sup>th</sup> century** agreed with Jadunath Sarkar that the 18<sup>th</sup> c began with the accession of imbecile kings and degenerate nobles who were unable to maintain the Mughal empire that was in the process of dissolution. He compared Europe and India and emphasised that in 17-18th Century Europe was on the path of progress under Enlightened despots and saw Industrial revolution while India was backward and did not even have printing press that can led to spread of information among masses.

Thus, we can see that in 18th century Mughal empire was politically weakened due to Aurangzeb's policy and the docile and incapable Mughal emperors.

Apart from the above historians who saw 18th century as a period of political and economic decline, there are the revisionists who saw it as a period of Continuity.

**C.A. Bayly** was the pioneer of the ‘revisionist’ approach. In his work **Rulers, Townsmen and Bazaars**, he focused on several developments. First is the emergence of Mercantile organizations and its involvement in the Mughal revenue system as a class of intermediaries. Second is the rise of the class of Gentry comprising of scribes, accountants and other service groups that migrated into other regions when Mughal empire was facing a setback and settled in small towns called Qasbahs. These intermediaries were termed as ‘Portfolio Capitalists.’

**Karen Leonard** in **‘Great Firm Theory of the Decline of Mughal Empire’** focused on how the communities of the bankers called sahkars, shroffs and mahajans in the ‘great firms’ played an important role in the decline of the empire. She argued, that these indigenous banking firms were inevitable allies of the Mughal state, and that the nobles and imperial officers **‘were more than likely to be directly dependent upon these banking firms.** It was in 18th century when the centre weakened the resources of these ‘great firms’ were diverted away from Mughals to other political areas which led to the nobles on path of Bankruptcy and decline.

Thus by 1750 the bankers controlled the collection of land revenue through provision of credit or cash. Therefore, it was with the increasing control of banking firms over revenue that led to fall of Mughal Empire.

**Muzaffar Alam- The Crisis of Empire in Mughal North India: Awadh and Punjab 1707-1748**, pointed out that despite the decline of Mughal Empire in Delhi the region like Awadh saw economic prosperity as a result of commercialization. As the positions of jagirdars weakened, zamindars in Awadh became powerful and refused to comply with Mughal officers. These zamindars became powerful locally and therefore 18th century is not only of decline but of regional growth as well.

## CONCLUSION

Therefore, we can conclude that the decline of Mughal empire started with Aurangzeb’s policies. There were two categories of historians the one who viewed it in terms of decline and the other who saw it in terms of continuity. The Dark Ages theory was supported in terms of political and economic decline and the breakdown of Mughal Empire. But the decline is mostly confined to Delhi and the other regions under Mughal Rule.

But there are other regions such as Awadh and Punjab that showed the signs of economic independence and development even in 18<sup>th</sup> century. Thus, there are regional development that coincided with the imperial collapse.



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