
UNIT 18 EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

POLITIES: I

Structure

- 18.0 Objectives
- 18.1 Introduction
- 18.2 Disintegration of Mughal Empire and its Causes
- 18.3 Later Mughal Rulers
 - 18.3.1 *Salatin*: Alienation and Alliances
 - 18.3.2 Court Rivalries
- 18.4 Regional Kingdoms
 - 18.4.1 Ambitious Mughal Governors and Successor States
 - 18.4.1.1 Bengal and the *Nawabs*
 - 18.4.1.2 Awadh and the *Nawab-Wazirs*
 - 18.4.1.3 Hyderabad and the Nizam
 - 18.4.2 Rajputs: Internal Dissensions
 - 18.4.3 Maratha Confederacy and the Peshwas
 - 18.4.4 Bharatpur and the Jats
 - 18.4.5 Sikhs
- 18.5 Ravages of Foreign Invasions
 - 18.5.1 Nadir Shah
 - 18.5.2 Ahmad Shah Abdali
- 18.6 Summary
- 18.7 Glossary
- 18.8 Exercises
- 18.9 References

18.0 OBJECTIVES

After reading this Unit, you shall be able to learn:

- how the historians have interpreted the eighteenth century variously;
- political changes in eighteenth century – the breakdown of the central power i.e. the Mughal empire and the rise of regional polities as well as the causes and consequences of this phenomenon;
- political continuities in eighteenth century – the Mughal emperor as the continued source of political legitimacy, especially for the successor states, and the continuation of Mughal conventions; and
- the impact of foreign invasions in eighteenth century.

18.1 INTRODUCTION

By the first half of the eighteenth-century drastic decay in the prestige and power of the Mughal empire occurred. The later Mughal rulers owed their throne to prominent nobles. The central administration was declining, imperial treasury was depleting, rivalries among nobles who aspired to the posts of authority and patronage were becoming intense, and centrifugal forces were asserting greater independence at the expense of the empire. There was a growth of several regional polities. From the mid-eighteenth century the East India Company became politically very active. The expansion of its political power is discussed in Unit 17. Thus, the eighteenth century, infused with elements of change and continuity, has been interpreted in various different ways.

18.2 DISINTEGRATION OF MUGHAL EMPIRE AND ITS CAUSES

There are various theories on the decline of the Mughal empire: political, socio-economic, cultural etc. Nationalist historians such as Jadunath Sarkar proposed that the intolerant policies of Aurangzeb such as the destruction of temples, the imposition of *jizya*, the execution of Guru Tegh Bahadur etc. caused the rebellions of the Rajputs, Marathas, Jats and Sikhs which, in turn, led to the downfall of the empire. Sri Ram Sharma and Ishwari Prasad, too, saw these rebellions as a Hindu reaction against the religious policies of Aurangzeb. Sarkar also credits Aurangzeb's Deccan policy responsible for the weakening of the empire. Colonial historians viz. Vincent Smith, William Irvine etc. blame religious fanaticism of Aurangzeb and the weak later Mughal emperors for the downfall. Sharma in *Religious Policy of the Mughals* points out the decline of the Hindu nobles at Aurangzeb's court. But Athar Ali in *Mughal Nobility under Aurangzeb* shows that there were more Hindu nobles at Aurangzeb's court than they were at Akbar's. Due to his Deccan campaigns there was an influx of Marathas into nobility and Rajput nobles like Mirza Raja Jai Singh of Amber and Jaswant Singh of Jodhpur enjoyed the high rank of 7000 *zat* and 7000 *sawar*.

M.N. Pearson in an article titled "Shivaji and the Decline of the Mughal Empire" shows that Shivaji's frequent attacks on Mughal territories had weakened the empire. Surat was one of the major and wealthy Mughal port cities. His sudden attack on Shaista Khan, the governor of the Deccan who narrowly escaped, also demoralized the Mughal army. However, it has been argued that Surat continued to flourish and there has been not enough evidence to indicate that the spirit of the army was crushed.

Marxist-oriented economic historians such as Irfan Habib, Athar Ali, Satish Chandra and others explained the decline in materialistic terms: *jagirdari* crisis and *mansabdari* crisis (caused fiscal crisis), high revenue demand on the peasantry that led to peasant rebellions, agrarian crisis etc. and described the eighteenth century as 'Dark Age'. Satish Chandra observes that factional dissensions among nobility crippled the proper functioning of the administrative system. During the Grand Mughals these different factions (Iranis, Turanis, Hindustani Muslims, Rajputs etc.) were instrumental in upholding and sustaining the power while in the later Mughal period the nobles aimed to turn the emperor into a puppet-ruler and exercise power on his behalf. However, Marxist interpretation of this century has been refuted by revisionist historians such as Christopher Bayly from the Cambridge School and Tapan Raychaudhuri who opine that this was a

century of growth. The works of Muzzafar Alam, Sanjay Subramanyam and others, too, highlight this perspective. Revisionist historians view the eighteenth century with no uniform development and focus on socio-economic functioning of the regional polities.

The century witnessed elements of continuity and discontinuity. The older institutions prevailed with some remodeling at regional levels. The successor states of the Mughal empire continued with Mughal administrative system and continued to see the emperor as the source of political legitimacy. Even the sultans of Mysore – Haider Ali and Tipu Sultan – owed nominal allegiance to Shah Alam-II. Tipu Sultan sought the investiture of the emperor. In the early phase of the century traditional centres of trade, for instance Surat, Calicut and Masulipatnam etc., continued to flourish. However, by the end of the century British East India Company, in terms of the volume of trade amongst the Europeans, successfully marginalized all its competitors. It was also clear that the Company was not just a trading enterprise but had evolved into one of the dominant political entities in India but when the British colonial power was established in India and Queen Victoria assumed the title of the Empress of India in 1877 the Delhi *Durbar* ceremony was chosen as the most befitting for the proclamation. The subjugated rulers and chieftains attended the *darbar* and were as eager to protect their political status as their predecessors had been under the Mughal rule. Mughal institutions such as land revenue system were also adopted.

18.3 LATER MUGHAL RULERS

During the reign of Aurangzeb ominous fissures had developed in the empire which became more obvious during the reigns of his successors. After the death of Aurangzeb, the Mughal empire could no longer command any authoritative power. We will now read about some major political changes the Mughal court was experiencing during the eighteenth century.

18.3.1 *Salatin*: Alienation and Alliances

Salatin were the men of royal blood, either the descendants of former emperors or the male relatives such as the sons or brothers of the reigning emperor. They were seen as a potent political threat. From the reign of Aurangzeb royal princes (sons and grandsons) were kept incarcerated or confined in the harem to avert any political conspiracies against the monarch. They spent their precious years of princehood away from actively participating in any military expeditions or performing administrative tasks, providing no scope for harnessing the skills necessary for ruling. By the late eighteenth century, the condition of *salatin* confined in a *salatin* quarter was highly pitiable. Major George Cunningham (1783-1838), 7th Bengal Native Infantry, in an official paper described their deplorable condition. The *salatin* perished in confinement while the nobles struggled for power, forming alliances against or in favour of the reigning emperor. Powerful nobles like the Sayyid brothers would depose the reigning ruler if he asserted authority and replace him with one of the inexperienced and alienated *salatins* and rule on behalf of a puppet-ruler. This practice clearly enabled powerful and ambitious nobles to intimidate the emperor. The nobles started to view the control over the emperor as a means to derive political power. Hence, factional politics at the royal court became exceedingly pronounced.

18.3.2 Court Rivalries

By the later Mughal period court rivalries became commonplace. On the one hand there were feuds between the reigning emperor and his nobles and, on the other the nobles would compete with one another to grab positions of authority, especially the offices of *Wizarat* and *Mir Bakshi*. Sydney J. Owen remarks in his work *The Fall of the Mogul Empire* that the nobles became more powerful “at the expense of the Imperial prerogative” while the emperor, in order to re-assert his imperial power, resorted to the act of ‘political treachery’. Such frequent political contestations plunged the empire into a state of utter confusion. Evidently, it promoted decadence in its administration, slackness in the army and financial crisis.

Bahadur Shah generously granted high ranks and titles to his courtiers which earlier were a means of generating the spirit of competition among nobles to deliver their duties efficiently and, thus, they were reserved for a few. Jahandar Shah promoted inexperienced and low-ranking people to high ranks, displeasing the veterans. Farrukh Siyar deposed Jahandar Shah in 1713 with the assistance of the Sayyid brothers – Abdullah Khan and Syed Husain Ali Khan (who later became the king-makers and the leaders of the Hindustani faction) – and appointed Abdullah Khan as his wazir while Husain Ali Khan became *Mir Bakshi* (head of the military administration). They dominated Mughal politics from 1713 to 1720. Farrukh Siyar began his reign with gross brutality which has been condemned by the eighteenth-century historian Seid-Ghulam-Hosseini-Khan in his work titled *Seir Mutaqherin*. But, this alliance between the emperor and the Sayyid brothers could not last long and soon they replaced him in 1719 with a puppet-ruler Rafi-ud-Darajat. But, the same year he died and was succeeded by Shah Jahan-II whose reign was also brief. Finally, in 1719 Muhammad Shah became the emperor who began to assert his imperial authority with the support of the Irani and Turani nobles – a rival faction at the court. Prominent nobles such as Chin Qilich Khan (Nizam-ul-Mulk), Itimad-ud-Daula, Saadat Khan etc. hatched a plan to kill the Sayyid brothers. Muhammad Shah had to fight a long war with the Marathas and lost Deccan and Malwa. The reign of Ahmad Shah was dominated by Udham Bai, the queen mother, and Javid Khan, the head-eunuch of the harem, who acted as the emperor’s regent. Again, court rivalries came into play. Finally, in 1754 he was blinded and deposed by the wazir Feroze Jung-III (a grandson of Nizam-ul-Mulk Asaf Jah) who allied with the Marathas. He was also responsible for the assassination of Alamgir-II. Shah Alam-II as Prince Ali Gauhar, like earlier princes, was brought up in semi-captivity in the *Salatin* quarters of the Red Fort. He was blinded and deposed but he was the only Mughal emperor who was blinded and yet regained his throne.

Thus, during the later Mughal period the nobles became so domineering that it was they who often exercised the authoritative power on behalf of the reigning emperor. They became king-makers and blinded or assassinated the king if he would assert his authority. A number of later Mughal emperors were blinded because this would disqualify them from ever ascending the Mughal throne. The dominance of one faction at the court arose jealousy and discontentment among the other factions, resulting into a series of court intrigues and counter intrigues. Powerful and discontented governors, as a result of it, aspired to strengthen their base in their respective provinces and acknowledged Mughal authority in name only. Let us now look at the emergence of some powerful regional kingdoms during the eighteenth century.

18.4 REGIONAL KINGDOMS

As the Mughal empire was crumbling, many regional states ensued. Some were the semi-autonomous states founded by some prominent Mughal nobles who were appointed provincial governors to the respective *subahs* (provinces) either to send them away from the imperial court and lessen their effective control over the emperor or the politically ambitious nobles frustrated with court politics would themselves depart from the Mughal *darbar* and focus on building up their power in their respective provinces. Apart from these successor states there were autonomous states which had been resisting Mughal authority and the most important and powerful of them was the Maratha Confederacy. Gradually, Sikhism was militarized in order to defend its followers against Mughal domination. The Afghan kingdom of Rohilkhand was founded by Ali Muhammad Khan during the reign of Muhammad Shah. He ousted the Mughal governors of Moradabad and Bareilly and secured his control over most of Rohilkhand. By 1744 he conquered most of the *terai* region of Kumaon. The envious nawab of Awadh Safdar Jang had him imprisoned at Delhi in 1746 for six months. After that he was appointed as the governor of Sirhind. He fought with Ahmad Shah Durrani against the Mughals and this enabled him to recover all his lost territories. The Rohila chiefs continued to be a menace for the Mughals. Ghulam Qadir, the son of Zabita Khan (a Rohilla chieftain), captured Delhi temporarily in 1788. There were a number of small regional states too which arose. For instance, in 1730 in the Malwa plateau in central India the twin Maratha princely states named Dewas, sharing the same capital town, were founded by two Maratha brothers Tukoji Rao and Kiwaji Rao. In 1778 a European mercenary Walter Reinhardt Sombre received Sardhana in *jagir* from Najaf Khan (Mughal *wazir*) which became his state and it was ruled by his widow Begum Samru after his death.

The south, too, was divided into several principalities. The Sultanate of Mysore was founded by Haider Ali by usurping the power of the Wodeyar ruler Chik Krishnaraj in 1761. The kingdom of Travancore came into prominence during the rule of Martanda Verma in 1729. Carnatic Sultanate was another important state which was formerly part of the Deccan *subah* of the Mughals. As the Nizam of Hyderabad succeeded in carving out a semi-autonomous state of Hyderabad, the Deputy Governor of the Carnatic also made his position hereditary. We will read more about them in the next Unit. However, none of these regional states, autonomous or semi-autonomous, could replace the Mughals and provide a central authority like the Mughals did earlier. This situation was also very conducive for commercial companies in India like the East India Company to make use of. The eighteenth-century India experienced the aforementioned significant political developments.

18.4.1 Ambitious Mughal Governors and Successor States

As the Mughal central authority weakened the provincial governors became more assertive. The erstwhile Mughal states acknowledged the over-lordship of the Mughal emperor but only in a symbolic sense, such as the minting of coins, recital of the *khutba*, sending *peshkash* etc. were done in his name. In all real matters the provincial governors became the *defacto* head, nominating their successors, assigning *mansabs*, waging wars etc. But, they modelled their states after the Mughal administrative practice. Lucknow emerged as the haven of the Mughal culture. You will now understand this transformation through some significant cases.

18.4.1.1 Bengal and the *Nawabs*

Murshid Quli Khan was appointed as the Mughal *subedar* or *nazim* (provincial governor) of the *subah* of Bengal in 1717 by the reigning Mughal emperor Farrukhsiyar. During the time of Aurangzeb, he was the *diwan* (revenue collector) of the province but now he was in-charge of both the offices of *nazim* and *diwan* concurrently. In 1719 he became the governor of Odisha too. This gave this able and ambitious Mughal governor an opportunity to consolidate his position in Bengal and establish an independent state. He shifted the capital of Bengal from Decca to Murshidabad. Muhammad Shah granted his successor Shuja-ud-Din the governorship of Bihar in 1733. His son and successor Sarfaraz Khan was killed in a battle in 1740 by Alivardi Khan who was the Deputy Governor of Bihar and had turned rebellious. The Mughal emperor received two crores of rupees from Alivardi Khan and, thus, he turned a blind eye to this. Muhammad Shah sent him a *farman*, legitimizing the rule of the usurper. Soon Alivardi Khan became the *defacto* ruler of the provinces of Bengal, Bihar and Odisha, though the myth of Mughal authority over Bengal endured.

18.4.1.2 Awadh and the *Nawab-Wazirs*

Awadh became virtually autonomous in 1722 under Saadat Khan. He was also known as *Burhan-ul-Mulk*. This title was awarded to him by Muhammad Shah for his support against the Sayyid brothers in 1720. In addition to that he was appointed as governor of Akbarabad. Thereafter, in 1722 he was granted the governorship of Awadh. He gradually assumed authority in Awadh and, thus, laid down the foundation of the semi-autonomous state of Awadh and became its first *nawab*. When Delhi was attacked by Nadir Shah he marched to the imperial city. There is a great deal of debate over who invited Nadir Shah to the Mughal imperial city to invade – Saadat Khan who lured the Persian Shah to collect 20 crores from Delhi or Nizam-ul-Mulk, who, as per some historians, sought to take revenge at the cost of the prestige of the empire owing to the ill-treatment of the Nizam by Muhammad Shah at his court. The anonymous writer of the *Risala-i-Muhammad shah-wa khan-i-Dauran* and the author of the *Jauhar-i-Samsam* and other historians such as James Fraser held both these ambitious Mughal nobles responsible for the mishap. When the Persian Shah was approaching in this critical situation, too, the nobles were busy negotiating with the emperor over the grant of titles and ranks. Muhammad Shah appointed Nizam-ul-Mulk as *Mir Bakshi*. The envious Saadat Khan who coveted the office invited Nadir Shah to invade Delhi. But, on witnessing the atrocities of the Shah of Persia, Saadat Khan, who was also threatened by Nadir Shah with corporal punishment if the treasures were not revealed to him, committed suicide.

Saadat Khan's nephew Safdar Jung succeeded Saadat Khan as the next *nawab* of Awadh. After the death of Muhammad Shah Ahmad Shah appointed Safdar Jung as his *wazir* in 1748. Since then he and his successors came to be known as *Nawab-Wazirs*. As the *wazir* Safdar Jung usurped all powers. On that account Ahmad Shah was forced to take the help of the Marathas to expel him from Delhi. He was dismissed from the office of *wazir* and he returned to Awadh in 1753, reinforcing his position there.



Safdarjung's Tomb, New Delhi. Source: Dr. Richa Singh

18.4.1.3 Hyderabad and the Nizam

Hyderabad was established in 1724 under Nizam-ul-Mulk Asaf Jah who was a Turani. When Farrukhsiyar ascended the throne, he appointed Nizam-ul-Mulk Asaf Jah as the governor of the Deccan. The dominance of the Sayyid brothers at the Mughal court became cause for concern for the emperor as well as the Turani nobles. A conspiracy was hatched and the governorship of the Deccan was transferred to one of the Sayyid brothers – Husain Ali Khan. When Husain Ali Khan marched to the Deccan on his way he was obstructed by the deputy governor of the Deccan Daud Khan as per the plan. But, the latter was killed and the Sayyid brothers with the help of the Marathas deposed the emperor while the Nizam was downgraded to the governorship of Malwa.

When Muhammad Shah became the emperor, he conspired against the Sayyid brothers and secretly formed an alliance with the Nizam. Nizam-ul-Mulk captured Asirgarh and Burhanpur and strengthened his army. In 1720 in a battle at Husainpur he defeated and killed the newly appointed Deputy *Subehdar* of the Deccan who was the nephew of Husain Ali. Yusuf Husain Khan in his work *The First Nizam; the Life and Times of Nizamul Mulk Asaf Jah* remarks, “This victory established the undisputed supremacy of Nizamul Mulk in the whole of the Deccan.” Soon the Sayyid brothers were also eliminated from the Mughal court politics and the Nizam’s uncle Muhammad Amin Khan was appointed as *wazir* by Muhammad Shah. During his *wizarat*, too, the *wazir* was more powerful than the emperor. But, it enabled the Nizam to completely focus on his affairs in the Deccan, free from worries of intervention from Delhi. After the death of his uncle in 1721 Nizam-ul-Mulk became the next *wazir*. In addition to the office of *wazir* and the governorship of the Deccan he was also granted the governorship of Malwa and Gujarat. However, owing to factional strife at the court Muhammad Shah had him transferred to Awadh to keep him away from the court. To protest, Nizam-ul-Mulk resigned from the *wizarat* and went to the Deccan. Mubariz Khan, the newly appointed governor of the Deccan, was instructed to stop Nizam-ul-Mulk. The Nizam defeated Mubraiz Khan in the Battle of Shakar Kheda in 1724. Left with no choice, Muhammad Shah appointed him as the viceroy of the Deccan and honoured him with the title of *Asaf Jah*. But, the frequent Maratha raids compelled the Nizam to divert their attention to North India by suggesting the Peshwa to invade it. Baji Rao-I

invaded Delhi and Bhopal in 1737. Finally, the sack of Delhi by Nadir Shah in 1739 paralyzed Muhammad Shah and the imperial court. The Nizam was able to further consolidate his power in the Deccan.

18.4.2 Rajputs: Internal Dissensions

Aurangzeb after the war of succession came into power in 1658 by his military skills and shrewdness and by posing as a defender of Islam in order to please the orthodox theologians. His religious policy became a channel through which he was able to conciliate the *ulema*. By appeasing them, through their influence he hoped to obtain support of all sections of the Muslims. Muhammad Saqi Mustaid Khan in *Ma'asir-i-Alamgiri* informs that Aurangzeb in 1670 issued orders to the *subedars* (provincial governors) to destroy the Hindu temples. Accordingly, Keshav Rai temple at Mathura was demolished, compelling the priests at Vrindavan to take refuge at Nathdwara in the Mewar kingdom which was then ruled by Maharana Raj Singh-I. Nathdwara developed into a popular centre of northern Vaishnavism. In 1679 the Aurangzeb reimposed *jizya*. As per Manucci, by 1679 the Mughal imperial treasury had started to exhaust. Imposing *jizya* meant replenishing the treasury as well as pacifying the *ulema*. Since the Rajput nobles at Mughal court were more concerned with personal gain and acquiring *tika* from the reigning Mughal emperor in order to legitimize their rule in their respective *watan jagirs*, therefore, Aurangzeb did not face any challenges from them at the imperial *darbar* in implementing such discriminatory policies. He faced opposition from those who opposed Mughal hegemony and were attempting to establish their authority. Thus, Shivaji championed himself as the liberator of the Hindus from the shackles of the Muslim domination in order to appeal to the Hindu sentiments. The rebellious Maharana Raj Singh-I of Mewar, too, provided asylum to the Hindu priests.

However, the Mughals did not just face the Mewar hostility. After the death of Maharaja Jaswant Singh of Jodhpur in 1678 Aurangzeb had to deal with the Rathod struggle led by Durgadas. Since it was the Mughal emperor's prerogative to assign *watan jagir* to a Rajput chief in full or in part, therefore, he granted the *tika* of Jodhpur to Inder Singh, the grandson of Rao Amar Singh, and not to Ajit Singh, the posthumous son of Jaswant Singh. This inaugurated a civil strife in Marwar. The supporters of Ajit Singh started the Rathod rebellion which ended when Bahadur Shah accepted Ajit Singh as the ruler of Jodhpur in 1710. During Farrukh Siyar's period Ajit Singh's governorship was transferred from Gujarat (granted by Bahadur Shah) to Thatta (an impoverished province). He formed an alliance with the Sayyid brothers and the emperor was deposed. Thus, the Rajputs, too, played a part in later Mughal court politics and were in constant negotiations either with the emperor or the powerful nobles at the court in order to acquire important positions.

Since the imperial government during the period of the Later Mughals failed to retain command over the fissiparous tendencies, Raja Jai Singh-II of Amber also desired to carve out an independent kingdom. He defeated the Jats in 1717 and founded Jaipur on the land acquired from the Jats. He became a formidable Rajput ruler. However, it was the Marathas who became influential in Rajputana due to internal dissension among Rajputs. They collected tributes from Rajput states. The Battle of Pattan in 1790 fought between the Maratha Confederacy and the allied forces of Jaipur and Jodhpur enabled the Marathas to capture Ajmer and Malwa and establish their control in the Rajputana.

However, the internal conflicts among the Marathas prevented them to establish a long-lasting dominance.

18.4.3 Maratha Confederacy and the Peshwas

The eighteenth century also witnessed the dominance and, later, the fall of the Maratha Confederacy. Aurangzeb considered Shivaji who founded the Maratha empire as a “petty *bhumia*” (landlord) when the latter came to attend the imperial *darbar* (court) at Agra in 1666. Aurangzeb’s misjudgment and mistreatment caused Shivaji to estrange from Aurangzeb. The Marathas, after the death of Shivaji, under the leadership of his son Raja Ram and, after him, his widowed wife Tara Bai as regent for her minor son Shivaji-II continued to offer resistance. Aurangzeb’s successor Bahadur Shah (1707-1712) released Shahu with a motive to weaken the Marathas by inciting a civil war. Shahu emerged victorious. Balaji Vishwanath became the first Peshwa. After his death his son Baji Rao-I (1720-40) strengthened the Maratha Confederacy. He defeated the Nizam of Hyderabad Asaf Jah at the Battle of Palkhed (1728) and forced him to accept the claims of Shahu to *chauth* and *sardeshmukhi* of the six Mughal provinces, recognize Shahu as the sole Maratha ruler and stop supporting the claims of the rival court of Shambhaji at Kolhapur.

The power structure of the Maratha Confederacy experienced three important phases:

- i) In the first phase the Confederates and their kinship were fully under the control of the central authority at Poona or under the Chhatrapati, primarily functioning under the Maratha administration. The Peshwa adopted the expansionist policy in different parts of India.
- ii) In this phase the Shindes, Holkars, Bhonsles and Gaekwads became equally powerful and resourceful in financial and military matters.
- iii) By the final stage the aforesaid four Confederates became more dominant than the Peshwa at Poona. There were frequent overt violations of the orders of the Peshwa, thereby challenging and corroding the sustenance of the central authority.

Kinship politics and family conflicts played a pivotal role in shaping Maratha history, especially after the third Battle of Panipat. Prior to the battle the Peshwa played a dominant role in Maratha politics, even though there were cases of the Confederates forming political alliances with regional powers (the Rajputs, Rohillas, Afghans etc.) which were not in accordance with the diplomatic policies of the Peshwa. The Peshwa did not do much to check such deviations. This encouraged the confederates to form alliances independently.

The mid-eighteenth century was a period of many successful Maratha military campaigns and expansion when Balaji Rao (1740-1761) was the Peshwa. Bengal was repeatedly invaded and plundered from 1741-1751. The treaty of 1751 between the Bhonsles of Nagpur and Alivardi Khan, the nawab of Bengal, assigned revenue of southern Odisha to the Marathas. They were to receive 12 lakhs annually as *chauth* in order to stop the invasions. They also subdued the Jats and Rohillas and occupied Malwa, Gujarat, Bundelkhand and parts of western India. In 1788 when Ghulam Qadir, an Afghan Rohilla leader, occupied Delhi – the seat of the Mughal power – and tortured and blinded the Mughal emperor Shah Alam-II, Mahadji Sindhia, who was appointed as

Vakil-ul-Mutlaq (Regent of Mughal Affairs) in 1784, came to his rescue and restored him to the Mughal throne. Thence, the Sindhis rose to become the most dominant Maratha Confederate. Also, Mahadji modernized his army with the help of French General DeBoigne on European lines. However, the confederates failed to gain any long-term political allies in the north as they were entangled in the kinship conflicts. The house of the Peshwa, too, was grappling with kinship rivalry, Narayan Rao's murder and other marginal issues in the Deccan. This disturbed the equilibrium of power and prevented the sustenance of the political structure of the Maratha confederacy. Eventually, the confederacy was weakened, providing opportunities for the British East India Company to control India.

18.4.4 Bharatpur and the Jats

Under Aurangzeb the Mughal empire achieved its maximum geographical extent. However, this increased the burden on the imperial treasury. So, the tax was increased which, in turn, overburdened the peasants and intensified peasant revolts. The Jat revolts can also be viewed in this context. Jats were an agricultural community in the region between Agra and Delhi. These revolts received the leadership of Jat *zamindars*. Gokla, the *zamindar* of Tilpat and later, Rajarama, the *zamindar* of Sinsini led the uprisings against the Mughal authority but these were repulsed. Rajarama's nephew Churaman defeated the Mughals in 1704 and captured Sinsini. He established the Jat state of Bharatpur. During the reign of Bahadur Shah, he received a *mansab* from the emperor for his support in the war of succession after the death of Aurangzeb. Subsequently, he sided with the Mughals. The period of Suraj Mal (1756-63) was crucial for the Jats. He fortified Bharatpur and plundered Delhi in 1753 and captured Agra in 1761. Although the Jat state was established with the active support of the peasants, *zamindars* continued to hold both administrative and revenue powers and sometimes the land revenue paid by the peasants was higher than it was under the Mughal system. After the death of Suraj Mal in 1763 the Jat state lost its prominence.

18.4.5 Sikhs

By the early seventeenth century significant changes were evident in the Mughal-Sikh relationship. The memoirs of Jahangir – *Tuzuk-i-Jahangiri* – mentions that the emperor felt antagonized by Guru Arjan Dev's act of blessing the rebelled Mughal prince Khusrau challenging his imperial authority. Consequently, in 1605 he was executed. His son and successor Guru Hargobind Singh took to militarization for self-defense, leading to a series of battles between the Sikhs and the Mughals. During Aurangzeb's period long sieges and wars in the south had drained the imperial exchequer. Thus, peasants were burdened with increased land revenue tax. This broke out into frequent peasant rebellions. The ninth *Guru* – Guru Tegh Bahadur – encouraged the peasants at Karnal to take up arms and refuse any tax payment. Therefore, Aurangzeb had him decapitated in 1675. The next *Guru* – Guru Gobind Singh – instituted the *khalsa panth* (military order). He declared Anandpur as a sovereign state and appropriated Mughal symbols of royalty such as wearing a *jigha* or *kalgi* (bejeweled plume) fixed to the turban, calling himself Sacha/Sachcha Padshah etc. This signaled his political ambitions to Aurangzeb and the local hill chieftains. The rising power of the Guru troubled the *rajahs* of the Shivalik hills and they sought the help of Aurangzeb. The Guru lost all four of his sons in this struggle. After the death of the last Guru in 1708 Banda Bahadur continued the fight till his execution in Delhi in 1716.

By the middle of the eighteenth-century Sikhism metamorphosized itself from a peaceful sect into a militarized one. Thereafter, decentralization, owing to the absence of central authority, was setting in. By 1745 the Sikhs formed 25 *Jathas* (an armed body), each consisting of 100 Sikhs. Slowly, it increased to 65. To bring order and unity *Dal Khalsa* was introduced in 1748 and under it 12 *Jathas* were organized which later came to be called the *Misls*. Each *Misl* exercised its authority independently in different regions of the Punjab from 1767 to 1799. The leaders of the *Misls* sometimes collaborated with the Mughals, the Marathas etc. For instance, during the first invasion of Ahmad Shah Abdali in 1748 Baba Ala Singh of Phulkia *Misl* helped the Mughal emperor Muhammad Shah for which he received a *khilat* from the emperor. In 1761 he also helped the Marathas against the Afghan invasion. By the end of the century Ranjit Singh of Sukarchakia *Misl* founded the first Sikh empire. But, after his demise the territories of Dalip Singh were brought under the British dominion.



Fig. 1

Fig. 1: Guru Tegh Bahadur in Dhaka. Painted by Ahsaan, the royal painter of the Mughal governor of Bengal in 1668 – Shaista Khan – who was also the father-in-law of Aurangzeb.

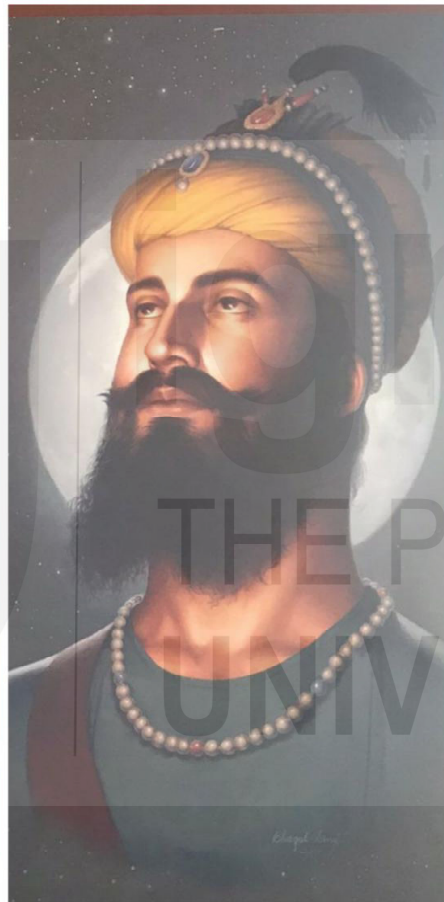


Fig. 2

Fig. 2: Guru Gobind Singh, Sikh Gurdwara Sahib, San Jose, California, USA

Image source for both the figures: Kevin O'Mahony, Santa Clara, California, USA

18.5 RAVAGES OF FOREIGN INVASIONS

Amidst such state of affairs, the decaying Mughal empire fell prey to foreign invasions which became responsible for causing further economic distress. The invasion of Nadir Shah exposed the hollowness of the Mughal empire whereas the frequent invasions of Ahmad Shah showed the eagerness of regional kingdoms to rise and expand at any cost and, so, we find that some local chieftains supported the invaders to gain some political advantages for themselves.

18.5.1 Nadir Shah

Nadir Shah (1736-1747), the founder of the Afsharid dynasty of Persia, invaded the Mughal empire and sacked the entire Mughal capital Shahjahanabad during the reign of Muhammad Shah in 1739 after defeating the Mughal emperor in the Battle of Karnal. The Persian Shah carried away potent symbols of royal authority: *takht-i-taus* (the Peacock Throne embedded with precious stones), *Koh-i-nur* (the celebrated diamond) etc. Prominent nobles such as Nizam-ul-Mulk, Qamaruddin Khan, Burhan-ul-Mulk and others were compelled to pay crores of rupees along with precious stones, gems and elephants. Apart from *umara* (nobles) and *mansabdars* the wealthy inhabitants of the city were also forced to pay *peshkash*. Those who could not choose to commit suicide or else they were tortured pitilessly. Nadir Shah from the Shahi Sunehri Masjid in Chandni Chowk ordered the massacre of the people in the imperial city. Ranga Pillai, an interpreter to the French East India Company, in his private diary records the ravages of Nadir Shah and its devastating impact on the merchant class and that approximately 100,00 to 150,000 inhabitants lost their lives. However, the total number of deaths differs in different contemporary sources. Another important consequence of Nadir Shah's invasion was the annexation of the provinces to the west of the Indus viz., Afghanistan, Kashmir, Sindh and Multan to Persia. As per James Fraser the Persian Shah exacted wealth amounting to 70 crores. The *Iqbalnama* informs that the wealth plundered from the city was so immense that Nadir Shah had remitted the revenue of three years to the people of Persia. It also enabled him to maintain a huge army so as to undertake further military expeditions in Turan, Daghistan, Rum etc. But, on the other hand, it paralyzed the Mughal empire and the empire could never recover from it, which is clearly evident from the lamentations in the writings of Urdu poets such as Mirza Muhammad Rafi Sauda and Mir Taqi Mir. The Persian invasion exposed the shortcomings of the empire to the Marathas and other regional powers.

18.5.2 Ahmad Shah Abdali

After the death of Muhammad Shah his son Ahmad Shah, as the successor of the Mughal empire, had to face the frequent Afghan invasions. Ahmad Shah Abdali of Afghanistan (1747-1772) was the chief of the Afghan mercenaries of Nadir Shah. After founding the Durrani empire he attempted to expand his territories. He invaded India nine times between 1747 and 1769. One of the outcomes of these invasions was that in 1752 Ahmad Shah, the Mughal emperor, had to cede Punjab and Multan to him. During the reign of Alamgir-II the Durrani ruler stripped Punjab, devastated Delhi and other cities including the holy city of Mathura. But, the Third Battle of Panipat in 1761 was the disastrous of all. This was strategically a huge loss for the Marathas from which they never fully recovered. While Abdali gained support from Najib-ud-Daulah (a Rohilla chieftain), *nawab* Shuja-ud-Daulah of Awadh and Baloachi allies, the Marathas, on the other hand, could not win over the support of any local potentates in the north diplomatically. Suraj Mal and Rajput states opted not to participate in the battle because of the Maratha raids in the Jat territory and their interference in internal affairs of the Rajput states and levying of heavy taxes and fines. After the battle Ahmad Shah Abdali appointed Najib-ud-Daulah as Shah Alam II's *wazir*. The emperor left Delhi and the throne was vacant until he returned in 1772 when the Rohillas were ousted from Delhi by Mahadji Scindhia. Thus, foreign invasions impacted political developments in a significant way. This provided the opportunity for some regional

states to rise and opened the doors for the British East India Company to expand its domination.

18.6 SUMMARY

In this Unit, we learned how the Mughal empire went from authority to obscurity, giving way to the growth of regional states. The succession of incompetent Mughal emperors, the rise of powerful nobles such as the Sayyid brothers, Nizam-ul-Mulk, Saadat Khan etc., the division of the Mughal nobility into a number of factions and each contesting to dictate the emperor, the ramification of factionalism on the formulation and the execution of imperial policies, the court conspiracies and counter-conspiracies, political assassinations, the growing centrifugal tendency of the local potentates, the territorial expansion and assertion of authority by the states which resisted Mughal political power were all preparing the ground for the collapse of the Mughal empire. In such an atmosphere of struggle for power there were frequent foreign invasions in the north-west region. By the end of the eighteenth century these all proved to be contributing factors towards the expansion of the East India Company in India. In the next Unit you will learn how this commercial enterprise gained a foothold in eighteenth century India.

18.7 GLOSSARY

- Jizya** : A tax imposed by a Muslim ruler on non-Muslim subjects as a fee for providing protection to them.
- Khilat** : *Khilat* was a robe of honour. The granting of *khilat* by the Mughal emperor was seen as a mark of imperial favour.
- Peshkash** : *Peshkash* was an annual tribute offered to the Mughal emperor by the subordinated rulers and chieftains. It was part of the Mughal gift-giving ceremony to reinforce the elements of dominance and subjugation.
- Padshah** : The Mughal emperors were called *Padshah* while the Sikhs called their gurus as *Sacha/Sachcha Padshah* (True King), implying that the reigning Mughal emperor was a false ruler.
- Tika** : One of the ways through which Mughal paramountcy was maintained in Rajput states was by granting of *tika* (drawing a mark on the forehead) which from Akbar's reign became the Mughal emperor's prerogative. This meant that it was the Mughal emperor who chose the successor in a Rajput state under Mughal authority by granting him *tika*, thereby controlling the transition of power from one Rajput ruler to the next in their states.
- Ulema** : (Singular, *alim*) Muslim scholars specializing in *Sharia* (Islamic canonical law) and theology.

18.8 EXERCISES

- 1) How were the court rivalries at Mughal court and the condition of *salatin* during the later Mughal period interrelated?

- 2) Do you think that regional polities such as the Maratha Confederacy and the Rajputana during the eighteenth century failed to consolidate themselves under one strong and durable central authority? Substantiate your answer with reasons.
- 3) Explain the metamorphosis of Sikhism from a peaceful sect to a militarized one, emphasizing on the political relations between the Sikh *gurus* and the Mughal emperors.
- 4) Why do you think were there frequent foreign invasions during the eighteenth-century India and in what ways did it alter the politics of the eighteenth-century India?

18.9 REFERENCES

Ali, Athar (1997). *The Mughal Nobility Under Aurangzeb*. Delhi: Oxford University Press.

Bandyopadhyay, Sekhar (2004). *From Plassey to Partition: A History of Modern India*. New Delhi: Orient Longman.

Chandra, Satish (2002). *Parties and Politics at the Mughal Court, 1707-1740*. Delhi: Oxford University Press.

Day, U. N. (1971). *Some Aspects of Medieval Indian History*. Delhi: Low Price Publications.

Mehta, Jaswant Lal (2005). *Advanced Study in the History of Modern India, 1707-1813*. New Delhi: New Dawn Press.

Spear, Percival (1951). *Twilight of the Mughals: Studies in Late Mughal Delhi*. London: Cambridge University Press.

Sardesai, G.S. (1948). *New History of the Marathas*. Vol. II. Bombay: Phoenix Publication.