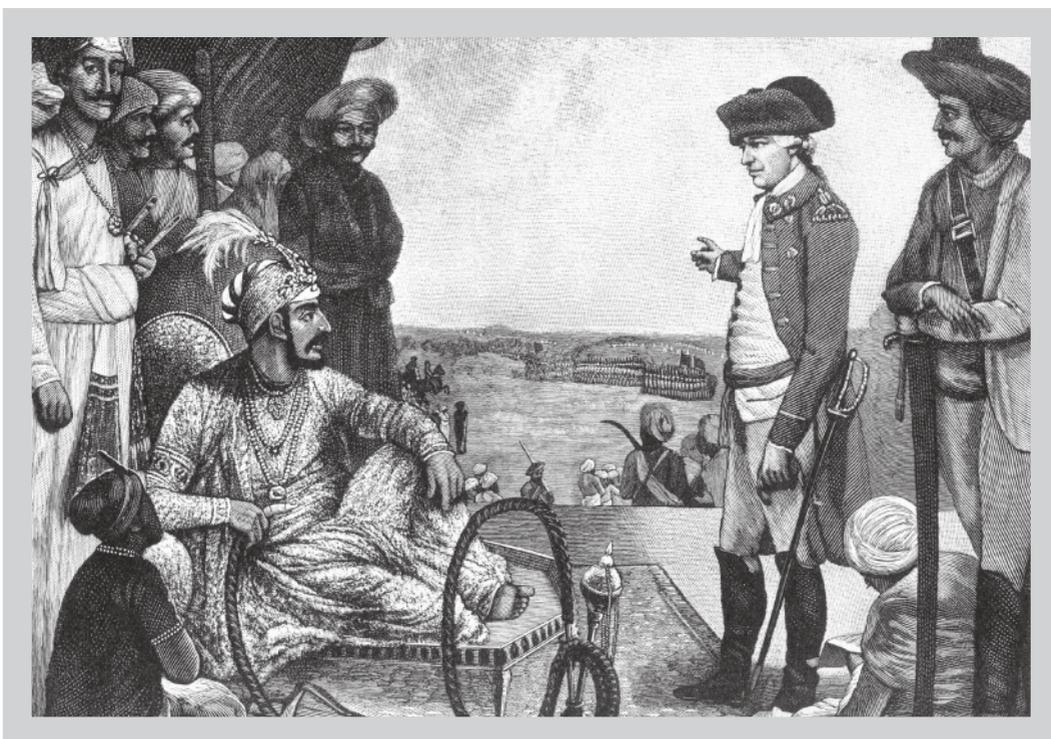


A HISTORY OF MODERN INDIA

The Colourful World of the Eighteenth Century

1



Shah Alam reviewing the East India Company's troops; c. 1781 illustration, artist unknown

Chapter outline

THE END OF AN EMPIRE

CAUSES AND CONSEQUENCES

THE LAND OF KINGS: RAJASTHAN

THE MIGHTY MARATHAS

NAWABS OF BENGAL

THE DECCAN AND THE NIZAM

THE EDEN OF THE EAST: MALABAR

MYSORE AND MEDDLING MERCHANTS

BEGINNINGS OF A NEW EMPIRE

AN INDEPENDENT CENTURY?

LUCKNOW, ONCE MORE

J*ab chod chale Lucknow nagari* (As/when I leave the city of Lucknow)..., lamented the poet Nawab Wajid Ali Shah on the eve of his departure from Lucknow when the East India Company formally annexed Awadh in 1856. What was this *nagari* of Lucknow and how had it become so dear to the nawab? To understand this lament, we need to enter the Lucknow of late-eighteenth century, the buzzingly dynamic capital set-up by Asaf-ud-Daula in 1775. Asaf-ud-Daula succeeded his father, the courageous warrior-king Shuja-ud-Daula, who had joined forces with the Nawab of Bengal, Mir Qasim and the Mughal emperor, Shah Alam II, to fight the East India Company in the Battle of Buxar in 1764, and had zealously guarded Awadh's autonomy till his death.

Asaf-ud-Daula, the young nawab, 'fat and dissolute' and averse to politics, left the tiresome affairs of the state to his chief steward Murtaza Khan, packed up the court at Faizabad and moved to the small provincial town of Lucknow. This enabled him to evade the influence of his powerful mother and his father's retainers. The move turned Awadh's administration on its head and shattered the autonomy nurtured by Shuja. Yet, the lack of political prestige was compensated by the cultural prominence that Lucknow came to acquire. The simultaneously 'debauched, corrupt and extravagant' and 'refined, dynamic and generous' nawab founded a city that echoed his flamboyance; Lucknow was 'awash with extravagance and excess' and attracted pioneers, drifters and people on the make. Its ranks swelled with 'eighteenth century's most unlikely "imperialists" and most remarkable profiles in self-fashioning' (Jasanoff 2005: 51).

This picture of eighteenth-century India sharply contrasts the image evoked by the debates that surround it. For long, the eighteenth century in India was regarded as a period of decline and chaos; an inexorable interlude between the collapse of the Mughal empire and the rise of the British. At the same time, this understanding and the arbitrary separation of a century as an independent category of analysis fomented intensive work on it, which yielded richer understandings and revised earlier perceptions. The fact that the eighteenth century retains its importance as a theme of analysis finds reflection in the continued publication of anthologies on it (Alavi 2002; Marshall 2005, for instance). Interestingly, a study of the eighteenth century is considered relevant not only for India, but also for Asia. India's historiography conforms to the wider debate on eighteenth century as a period of Asian decline in maritime trade and the rise and intrusion of European commercial, mercantile and imperial interests in Asian countries on account of certain significant developments in Europe. This Eurocentric analysis, which focused on the eighteenth century only in terms of happenings in and their implications for Europe, was countered by a Dutch historian and administrator, Job Van Leur, in the 1930s.

In a pioneering review article of the fourth volume of *Geschiedenis van Nederlandsch Indië* (History of the Netherland Indies) written in 1940, Van Leur advocated an Asia-centric history by juxtaposing the vitality and strong continuity in Asian history with the abrupt and significant changes in Europe. The continuity was affirmed by the presence, in the eighteenth century, of dynamic polities in Asia uninterrupted by European encroachment, from Persia in the West to Japan in the Far East (Van Leur 1940: 544–67).

There are obvious problems with Van Leur's analysis. But his provocative thesis inspired a range of revisionist writings which vigorously debated the models of continuity and change in Asia. For Cambridge historian Christopher Bayly, a strong advocate of the continuity thesis, Van Leur's essay

is more 'heuristic' than a substantive exercise in historical writing. According to Bayly, the question to ask of the eighteenth century, is not whether there was change or continuity or dissolution or resilience in Asian societies, but why in spite of the transformation of the world economy and the transplanting of the European state in Asia, many features of the earlier order persisted (Bayly 1998: 301). For us, the question is rather what the 'transplanting of the European state' did to the enduring features of Asian societies, and how this resilience affected the European state that was sought to be transplanted. Moreover, did this transportation happen only in the eighteenth century or did the presence of Europeans from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries affect the nature of polities that were taking shape (Subrahmanyam 2001: 3–4)? Is it possible that a combination of changes underway and the occurrence of new happenings produced fascinating mix-ups and conferred on the eighteenth century a new vivacity?

THE END OF AN EMPIRE

In 1707, the year of Aurangzeb's death, the Mughal empire had reached its farthest physical limits. The conquest of the kingdoms of Bijapur and Golconda in the late 1680s had made the empire spread to the southern edge of the Deccan Peninsula and brought almost the entire subcontinent under Mughal sovereignty. Yet, the Mughal imperial structure collapsed within 40 years of Aurangzeb's death. By the middle of the century, the empire lay in ruins with its vast possessions reduced to a 'roughly rectangular wedge of territory about 250 miles from north to south and 100 miles broad' (Spear 1951: 5). How do we understand this apparent paradox?

To do so, we need to trace briefly the 'fault lines' of the Mughal administrative system (Metcalf and Metcalf 2003: 28). To begin with, the Mughal emperor was *Shah-en-Shah*, king of kings, one sovereign among many (Bayly 1988: 13), not the lone, 'despotic' sovereign. This meant that the empire was poised on negotiation and accommodation of competition—between different groups of nobles and aristocrats, military and revenue officers—among whom authority was distributed hierarchically. The emperor stood at the apex of this 'segmentary' structure (Stein 1980, 2010), with members of the aristocracy owing different degrees of personal loyalty to him. Effective functioning of the system depended on the judicious tweaking of conflicts and maintaining balance by the emperor.

Alongside, there was a centralized administrative apparatus developed by the genius of Emperor Akbar in the sixteenth century that intimately linked bureaucracy and military aristocracy. Power was distributed and delegated among the elite in a manner that strengthened the military basis of the 'war state' and retained the supremacy of the emperor. The *mansabdari* system conferred on each *mansabdar*, military officer, a dual numerical rank of *jat* and *sawar*, where *jat* signified personal rank and *sawar* denoted the number of horsemen that the *mansabdar* was required to maintain for the Mughal state. Payment for service and maintaining soldiers and horses was made, in most cases, with the assignment of the right to collect revenue from a *jagir* (landed estate). *Jagirs* were of two kinds—*tankha* (transferable) and *vatan* (non-transferable). Given the logic of the system, most *jagirs* were transferable. *Vatan jagirs* represented a compromise with powerful local princes and landlords, who agreed to offer allegiance to the emperor only on condition that their lands were recognized as *vatan*. While some princes and

landlords were incorporated as Mughal officers by the acknowledgement of *vatan jagirs* in regions under direct imperial control, powerful princes on the fringes of the empire retained autonomy over internal affairs and only agreed to pay an annual tribute to the emperor in recognition of his overall suzerainty.

The *mansabdari* system, undoubtedly consolidated the emperor's position as *Shah-en-Shah*—ranks and *jagirs* were conferred, transferred or dismissed at his will; and power was shared on the basis of direct loyalty to him. The imperial government commanded the right to assemble and dispatch *mansabdars* with their contingents to any points at any time, if the need arose. This centralized apparatus allowed an absolute monarchy to hold its own and function for 150 years without any serious threat (Habib 1999: 364–65).

At the same time, the system produced intense competition among various ethnic and caste groups who comprised the Mughal nobility. It also pushed the Mughal state toward constant expansion of territories; it was the only way of increasing resources and assigning new *jagirs*.

Aurangzeb's wars in the Deccan were expensive; they stretched the treasury to its limits. Acquisition of new territories brought new players in the tussle for prestige and authority. In particular, the incorporation of what is known as the Deccani group in the aristocracy heightened tension and conflicts among the established nobility composed of rival Irani, Turani and Hindustani factions. These groups resented the favour Aurangzeb showed as a diplomatic gesture to the new *mansabdars* and commanders recruited from the defeated territories of the southern sultanates of Bijapur and Golconda (Stein 2010: 181). On the other hand, officials stationed in the Deccan complained that the slender revenue from their *jagirs* was insufficient for their expenses. Thus, the ties that bound the old and the new officials in the Deccan to the Mughal empire became less and less firm. In fact, *mansabdars*, affected by the gap in the demand and actual collection of revenue, reduced the number of soldiers and horses that they were supposed to maintain and tried to extract as much revenue as possible from landlords and peasants. This simultaneously weakened the military might of the empire and caused disaffection among landlords and peasants.

The years between 1689 and 1719 witnessed unrest in the heartland of the empire. The Jat chieftains and zamindars in Agra and Mathura came out in open revolt. They used their strategic position to intercept and plunder the 'bullock trains of treasure and trade passing into the Gangetic basin from the Deccan', causing that route to be abandoned (Stein 2010: 182). Aurangzeb's army, sent to subdue the Jats, was humiliated and his subsequent attempts to quell the revolt prompted some alienated Rajput houses—resolute in opposing the restoration of imperial control—to support the Jats. Aurangzeb died at this critical juncture and his death occasioned a struggle for power among his three surviving sons. The winner, Muazzam, ascended the throne with the title of Bahadur Shah. He was 63 at the time and was to die within the next five years.

There was little Bahadur Shah could do to stave the decline. The Jat revolt had encouraged other recalcitrant forces—the Sikhs in Punjab and Marathas in the Deccan—to challenge Mughal authority. The Sikhs, a loose and divergent group spread across northern India, particularly the urban centres of the vast Gangetic plain (Oberoi 1997: 42), were followers of Guru Nanak (1469–1539), an upper caste Hindu, who founded the Sikh community in central Punjab in the 1520s (Mann 2001: 3). Under the guidance of a line of gurus, the community evolved and expanded its base, and by the turn of the

seventeenth century had come to be perceived as a threat to the Mughal administration at Lahore. The tensions between the Sikhs and Mughals resulted in the execution of the fifth guru Arjan (1563–1606) in Lahore, following which the Sikh centre was moved to Shivalik hills. The tenth guru, Govind Singh (born 1666, guru 1675–1708), dissolved the line of personal gurus and conferred its authority on the *Adi Granth* (the original book, the primary scripture that contains the sayings of Guru Nanak) and in the Sikh *panth* (path), that came to include the community (*ibid.*).

At the beginning of the eighteenth century the Sikhs were provided leadership by Banda Bahadur, a charismatic Muslim-born Sikh who gained political power after the assassination of the last guru, Govind Singh. Earlier, in the late-seventeenth century, the Marathas under Shivaji had also successfully demonstrated the vulnerability of the Mughal army. This did not, of course, signify that there was a new self-contained ‘Maratha system’ or a ‘Shivaji’s Maharashtra’ from the seventeenth century. Rather, there was a ‘gradual, many-sided process of centralization’ that co-existed with several centrifugal institutions and identities well into the eighteenth century (Perlin 1985). In the late-nineteenth, twentieth and twenty-first centuries, however, Shivaji’s resistance has come to be viewed as a ‘Hindu’ challenge to ‘Muslim’ aggression and Shivaji has been appreciated as a popular hero and, at times, as a national ‘Hindu’ hero. The Sikh challenge, similarly, has come to be seen as ideologically motivated. Such perceptions, linked to the ‘ambience of the times’ produce particular understandings of history (Alam 1986: 3) that are not at par with the contingent configurations of identities in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

As we will see in the section on the mighty Marathas, Maratha speakers were divided by caste and class status and they owed different degrees of allegiance to the Mughals. Competition was rife among these groups—not only did they actively participate in Mughal factional rivalry and strike deals to gain access to contested territory (Metcalf and Metcalf 2003: 31), some of them also offered help to Aurangzeb against Shivaji’s son Shambhuji. Finally, the Marathas came to the aid of the emperor during the Afghan invasions in the middle of the eighteenth century. Similarly, in Punjab, the authority of the Mughals was exercised on the basis of an accommodation of dominant regional interest groups by the emperor (Singh 1981). Indeed, for the Marathas, as for the Sikhs, alliances proceeded from expediency and not from religious or community identity, which are neither fixed nor permanent.

At the same time, the successful resistance of the Marathas and Sikhs encouraged many zamindars—landholders with local roots, power and prestige—to disavow the authority of the emperor once central power weakened. Mughal officers, such as *diwans* (revenue collectors/administrators) and *subadars* (governors), who did not have local roots but had authority as representatives of the sovereign, followed suit. In the 1720s, revenue officers and governors of the rich provinces of Bengal and Awadh set themselves up as independent rulers, appointed their own officials and nominated their own successors, severing virtually all ties with the Mughal state.

The trend was set by the imperial Prime Minister Nizamul Mulk Asaf Jah. He moved to Hyderabad in 1724, withdrew from imperial projects and started functioning as an autonomous ruler. The emperor granted dignity to this defiant move by recognizing the Nizam as the Viceroy of the southern part of the empire. But for all practical purposes, the Nizam and the nawabs of Bengal and Awadh had become independent. Soon, this was followed by autonomous local princes who stopped paying tribute to the

emperor. Such local rulers and provincial magnates received support from Hindu and Jain moneylenders and merchants—vital players in the functioning of the Mughal taxation system and commodity production. This support enabled them to consolidate their authority. Paradoxically then, commercial growth, which had ‘succoured the power of Delhi ultimately eroded it’ (Bayly 1988: 4).

After Aurangzeb, the absence of an astute emperor capable of commanding loyalty and allegiance and handling the conflicts with care, as well as the incessant wars of succession hastened Mughal decline. To make matters worse, internal rebellions were accompanied by foreign invasions, often propelled by the decline of Islamic empires in West and Central Asia. The Persian invasion under Nadir Shah in 1738–39, which entailed loot and plunder of Delhi, including the famed Kohinoor diamond, dealt a severe blow to Mughal prestige. The repelling of the first Afghan raid in 1748 signified very limited and temporary success. The Afghans under Ahmad Shah Abdali returned in 1755–56; they conquered Punjab and ransacked Delhi. The Mughals and Marathas combined against the Afghans in the Battle of Panipat in 1761, but were defeated. To the relief of the Mughals, Abdali had to return hastily to Afghanistan. But the days of the Mughals were all but over.

Trouble was brewing all over the empire. Weakness of the central power encouraged not only local elites, but also ambitious figures of lowly origin to stake claims to power. Papadu, a member of the low toddy-tapping caste of Telengana, gathered an army of several thousand men from untouchable and low castes and carried out year-long assaults in several major towns in Telengana. Such resistance was not destined to succeed. Yet, it revealed the frustrations of the subordinate members of society, subject to the double authority of imperial-local and social hierarchies and their aspirations for a different social order.

CAUSES AND CONSEQUENCES

The intricate picture of the collapse of the Mughal empire, as described in the earlier paragraphs, underscores the diversity of processes and factors contributing to its decline. It also projects the various reasons that scholars have formulated to explain the decline. Early historians, such as Sir Jadunath Sarkar, placed the blame squarely on Aurangzeb’s religious bigotry and the weakness of later Mughals and their nobles (Sarkar 1916, 1924, 1938). According to Sarkar, Aurangzeb’s discriminatory religious policy generated a ‘Hindu reaction’ among Rathor, Bundela, Maratha and Sikh groups, which his weak successors could not set right. In a different manner, William Irvine also focused on the ‘ruling elite’ and ascribed Mughal decline to a deterioration of character of emperors and their nobles (1922).

Sarkar’s view is no longer accepted by historians. It is evident that it was not only the Hindus, but also the Muslim nobility and members of religious orthodoxy who created problems for the Mughals. More significantly, contemporary sources identify the rebels and the ‘disturbers’ in terms of their class (zamindar, for instance), clan or region (such as Rajputan or Gujuran), and not as ‘Hindu’ (Alam 1986: 2). Finally, the eighteenth century did not lack able generals and politicians who formed a part of the Mughal coterie. The fact that they did not provide leadership at critical moments and got embroiled in personal aggrandisement highlights that the causes of decline were insipid in the very nature and structure of the Mughal administrative system.

Satish Chandra’s *Parties and Politics at the Mughal Court, 1707–1740* (1959), drew attention to

the ‘jagirdari crisis’ of the late-seventeenth and early-eighteenth century as the root cause of Mughal weakness. This represented the first serious effort at examining the structural weaknesses of the Mughal state. For the proper functioning of the key institutions—the *mansab* and *jagir*—it was necessary that the *mansabdars* and *jagirdars* collect the revenue efficiently. The inability of imperial officials to ensure the smooth collection of revenue from the late-seventeenth century produced a fiscal crisis. This was heightened by several other factors, such as an intense rivalry among *mansabdars* occasioned by the increase in their number during Aurangzeb’s reign and the decline or stagnation of *jagirs* that could be assigned to them. Wars further affected revenue collection in the disturbed areas and widened the gap between demand (*jama*) and collection (*hasil*) of revenue, a gap present since the beginning.

In a later work, Chandra revised his own position somewhat and ruled out the general view that the Deccan was a deficit area and the crisis was on account of *be-jagiri*, that is, the absence of a *jagir* for a newly appointed *mansabdar*. The crisis in the system was intimately tied to its non-functionality, not necessarily to the increase in the number of aristocrats and the decline in *jagirs* (Chandra 1982). It is true, however, that the system of transfer of *jagirs* put the aristocracy under strain; this was compounded by a rise in the price of luxury goods (brought about by increased export to European markets). An added complication was created by the intricate power-plays between *jagirdars*, zamindars and *khudkash* (resident) cultivators. All this made it evident that by the end of Aurangzeb’s reign, the *mansabdari* system had become non-functional.

Territorial expansion itself put the Mughal state and treasury under strain, although, as mentioned earlier, acquisition of new territories was almost a compulsion. This double-bind was made worse, according to J. F. Richards, by Aurangzeb’s wrong policies. In Richard’s view, there was no real shortage of *jagirs* in the Deccan. While conquests brought newer areas under Mughal control, Aurangzeb decided not to distribute them as *jagirs*. He retained them as *khalisa* (royal lands) to fund further wars in the Deccan. This faulty policy was complicated further by the politics of the ‘warrior aristocracies’ that made problems of Mughal administration in the Deccan acute (Richards 1975). Undoubtedly, Richards’ point that *be-jagiri* was not the main problem in the Deccan is significant. At the same time, collecting revenue in the Deccan had always been problematic. Hence, it is difficult to decide whether the distribution of lands of Bijapur and Golconda as *jagirs* would have resolved the ‘crisis’ in the system.

The most influential theory of Mughal decline was offered in the early 1960s by Irfan Habib, a notable Aligarh historian of the Marxist strain (Habib [1963] 1999), in a work he revised and republished in 1999. Through a detailed reading of Abul Fazl’s *Ain-i Akbari* and a range of other available manuscripts and published accounts, Habib provided a coherent picture of the agrarian system of Mughal India, which encompassed land revenue administration, the agrarian economy and social structure in regions that had been ‘under Mughal control the longest’ (Habib 1999: x). His meticulous study of the different modes of assessing and fixing land revenue and its collection, led Habib to conclude that the agrarian crisis was the primary cause of Mughal decline in the eighteenth century (Habib [1963] 1999: 190–230). The crisis was caused by endemic state oppression, which generated resistance on the part of exploited peasants who had to choose between ‘starvation or slavery and armed resistance’ (Habib 1999: 378).

Such a situation arose owing to the high revenue demand set by imperial Mughals. The demand was kept high in order to allow the *mansabdars* to maintain their military contingents out of the revenues

of their *jagirs*, even though caution was exercised so as not to deprive peasants of the bare minimum required for survival. In Habib's words, the revenue demand was designed 'ideally to approximate to the surplus produce' that left the peasant with 'just the barest minimum needed for subsistence' (Habib 1998: 219; 1999: 367). While this appropriation of the surplus produce generated great wealth for the Mughal ruling class, the common people were subjected to utter poverty (*ibid.*).

It is not easy, affirms Habib, to get a clear idea of the state's revenue demand; it varied from region to region and depended on the nature of crops. Systems of measuring and assessing were also distinct, and often, part of the revenue was paid in cash and part in kind. It is true, however, that in extensive areas where land surveys had been conducted and revenue assessment and collection systematized, the demand amounted to about a third of the produce. Some of it was sent directly to the imperial treasury; most of it was assigned to *jagirdars*.

The disturbed conditions of the late-seventeenth and early-eighteenth centuries coupled with the crisis in the *jagirdari* system prompted *jagirdars* to try and extract more from the peasants. This made the life of poorer peasants extremely difficult. The tendency to press hard upon the peasant, of course, was inherent in the system from the beginning. The imperial administration was aware of it and attempted to set a limit to the demand from time to time (Habib 1999: 367). There was, however, a contradiction in the interests of the Mughal state and individual *jagirdars*. A *jagirdar*, who had rights over the revenue of a land only for three or four years and whose assignment could be transferred any moment, did not have any interest in long-term agricultural development. His personal interests sanctioned 'any act of oppression that conferred an immediate benefit upon him' (*ibid.*: 368). The constant and unpredictable transfer of *jagirs* in the late-seventeenth century made *jagirdars* abandon the practice of helping peasants totally; it became even worse in the eighteenth century. Frequently, peasants were forced to sell their women, children and cattle to meet revenue demands (*ibid.*: 370). When even this did not suffice, peasants fled from their lands, adversely affecting cultivation (*ibid.*: 377).

The last resort for peasants, of course, was rebellion, after they had refused to pay the land revenue. What converted isolated acts of peasant resistance into an uprising was the help of richer peasants who possessed men and weapons, and ties both of caste and of faith—in particular, the large variety of monotheistic sects, current since the fifteenth–sixteenth centuries—that attracted common people. Of far greater significance, in Habib's opinion, was the intervention of zamindars—the hereditary local potentates—who had their own reasons for opposing the Mughal ruling class. The zamindars, it is true, had never liked the extraction of almost the entire revenue surplus from the villages by the Mughals, as it left them with only a marginal share (Alam 1986: 303).

These 'potentially seditious' zamindars made common cause with the peasants in their tussle with the imperial administration. Often these zamindars gave refuge to peasants who had fled their lands to evade the oppression of *jagirdars*. Such peasants added to the resources of the zamindars in two ways: by engaging in cultivation and by providing recruits for their armed bands. The increased strength of the zamindars was reflected in the fact that from the time of Aurangzeb's reign, their struggle against the Mughals ceased to be only defensive. They started making use of their large band, even armies in predatory warfare, to extend their areas of dominance (Habib 1999: 389).

A combination of two elements, therefore, transformed agrarian difficulties into an 'agrarian crisis'

in the eighteenth century. They were the coming together of the peasant and the zamindar on the one hand, and the severing of ties between the zamindar and the *jagirdar*, on the other. Although the peasant-zamindar combine was neither uniform nor widespread, the fact remains that the leadership of the two major revolts against Mughal power, those of the Marathas and the Jats, was provided by zamindars or men who aspired to be so (Habib 1999: 389). Through an exploration of the ‘agrarian aspects’ of several revolts in northern and central India that shook the Mughal empire to its foundations (ibid.: 390–405), Habib affirms that peasant distress was the root cause of such rebellions, although, paradoxically, alleviation of such distress was not the proclaimed aim of the rebels. This analysis, advanced also by K. M. Ashraf (1960) and extended by Athar Ali (1975; 1978–79), made ‘societal crisis’ responsible for Mughal decline, in which economic failures coincided with and sometimes preceded political decline.

Although of great value, this argument overstates the link between the *jagirdari* crisis and the rebellion by zamindars and peasants. It is neither clear nor self-evident. Indeed, in his analysis of the effects of Mughal administration on the economy, Habib makes a clear distinction between the agrarian and commercial sectors and maintains that imperial policies stimulated urban and commercial growth, implicitly inferring that prosperous commerce could co-exist with stagnant agriculture (Chaudhuri 2008: 52), an inference that is inherently problematic. The influence of Habib’s theory, however, has meant that explorations of Mughal decline have paid exaggerated attention to the Mughal state’s fiscal structure and policy, and overlooked socio-cultural processes. Moreover, explaining the decline in terms of structural weakness closely resembles earlier works that held individual rulers responsible.

Both views accept the ‘centre’ as the principal point of analysis and concentrate on imperial policies and practices. They also hold the fact of ‘decline’ and its resultant anarchy and chaos as given and unquestionable, although ‘decline’ is only inferred from a general assumption of political disorder (ibid.: 51). In 1983, Tapan Raychaudhuri indicated that the assumption of ‘decline’ rested on very slender evidence. He argued that although political disarray and armed conflict undoubtedly affected economic life in many parts of the country, it did not imply ‘a general decline in India as a whole. Even at the heart of the much ravaged empire, Agra under Jat and Maratha occupation, was a flourishing city until 1787 with many wealthy Delhi citizens finding refuge in its comparative security’ (ibid.: 7). In a similar manner, the real decline in Bengal’s economy was largely a post-Plassey and even a post-1813 phenomenon (ibid.).

Recent works have seriously revised this picture of unqualified decline by moving away from the centre and looking at regions of growth and vibrancy (Alam 1986; Barnett 1980; Bayly 1983; Grover 1966; Perlin 1983; Stein 1980; Subrahmanyam 1992; Washbrook 1988; Wink 1986). They proffer a ‘disaggregated picture’ of different regional trajectories instead of a ‘monolithic one’ (Subrahmanyam 2001: 8), and urge for an understanding of the eighteenth century ‘in terms of its own structure’ and not in terms of what preceded it and what came after—namely, Mughal decline and colonial rule (Alam 1986: 10). According to this literature, the eighteenth century, far from being a period of decay was one of slow population growth and rise in prices, urbanization, commercialization and the growth of new markets and of new economic and political forces. Muzaffar Alam’s study of two important provinces—Punjab and Awadh—in the eighteenth century, shows that although the histories of the two regions varied in the four phases that he marks out (1707–1713; 1713–c.1722; c.1722–1739; 1739–1748),