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## REVIEW ARTICLE

### A STUDY ON EVOLUTION AND DECLINATION OF MUGHAL EMPIRE

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# A Study on Evolution and Declination of Mughal Empire

**Krishan Kumar**

Assistant Professor, M.M. College, Fatehabad (Haryana)

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The Mughal Empire was founded by Babur, a Central Asian ruler who was descended from the Turko-Mongol conqueror Timur on his father's side and from Chagatai, the second son of the Mongol ruler Genghis Khan, on his mother's side. Ousted from his ancestral domains in Central Asia, Babur turned to India to satisfy his ambitions. He established himself in Kabul and then pushed steadily southward into India from Afghanistan through the Khyber Pass. Babur's forces occupied much of northern India after his victory at Panipat in 1526. The preoccupation with wars and military campaigns, however, did not allow the new emperor to consolidate the gains he had made in India.<sup>[35]</sup> The instability of the empire became evident under his son, Humayun, who was driven out of India and into Persia by rebels. Humayun's exile in Persia established diplomatic ties between the Safavid and Mughal Courts, and led to increasing Persian cultural influence in the Mughal Empire. The restoration of Mughal rule began after Humayun's triumphant return from Persia in 1555, but he died from a fatal accident shortly afterwards. Humayun's son, Akbar, succeeded to the throne under a regent, Bairam Khan, who helped consolidate the Mughal Empire in India.

Through warfare and diplomacy, Akbar was able to extend the empire in all directions and controlled almost the entire Indian subcontinent north of the Godavari river. He created a new class of nobility loyal to him from the military aristocracy of India's social groups, implemented a modern government, and supported cultural developments. At the same time, Akbar intensified trade with European trading companies. India developed a strong and stable economy, leading to commercial expansion and economic development. Akbar allowed free expression of religion, and attempted to resolve socio-political and cultural differences in his empire by establishing a new religion, Din-i-Ilahi, with strong characteristics of a ruler cult. He left his successors an internally stable state, which was in the midst of its golden age, but before long signs of political weakness would emerge. Akbar's son, Jahangir, ruled the empire at its peak, but he was addicted to opium, neglected the affairs of the state, and came under the influence of rival court cliques. During the reign of Jahangir's

son, Shah Jahan, the culture and splendour of the luxurious Mughal court reached its zenith as exemplified by the Taj Mahal. The maintenance of the court, at this time, began to cost more than the revenue.

Shah Jahan's eldest son, the liberal Dara Shikoh, became regent in 1658, as a result of his father's illness. However, a younger son, Aurangzeb, allied with the Islamic orthodoxy against his brother, who championed a syncretistic Hindu-Muslim culture, and ascended to the throne. Aurangzeb defeated Dara in 1659 and had him executed. Although Shah Jahan fully recovered from his illness, Aurangzeb declared him incompetent to rule and had him imprisoned. During Aurangzeb's reign, the empire gained political strength once more, but his religious conservatism and intolerance undermined the stability of Mughal society. Aurangzeb expanded the empire to include almost the whole of South Asia, but at his death in 1707, many parts of the empire were in open revolt. Aurangzeb's son, Shah Alam, repealed the religious policies of his father, and attempted to reform the administration. However, after his death in 1712, the Mughal dynasty sank into chaos and violent feuds. In 1719 alone, four emperors successively ascended the throne.

During the reign of Muhammad Shah, the empire began to break up, and vast tracts of central India passed from Mughal to Maratha hands. The campaigns of Nadir Shah, who had reestablished Iranian suzerainty over most of West Asia and Central Asia, culminated with the Sack of Delhi and shattered the remnants of Mughal power and prestige. Many of the empire's elites now sought to control their own affairs, and broke away to form independent kingdoms. The Mughal Emperor, however, continued to be the highest manifestation of sovereignty. Not only the Muslim gentry, but the Maratha, Hindu, and Sikh leaders took part in ceremonial acknowledgements of the emperor as the sovereign of India.

The Mughal Emperor Shah Alam II made futile attempts to reverse the Mughal decline, and

ultimately had to seek the protection of outside powers. In 1784, the Marathas under Mahadji Scindia won acknowledgement as the protectors of the emperor in Delhi, a state of affairs that continued until after the Second Anglo-Maratha War. Thereafter, the British East India Company became the protectors of the Mughal dynasty in Delhi. After a crushed rebellion which he nominally led in 1857–58, the last Mughal, Bahadur Shah Zafar, was deposed by the British government, who then assumed formal control of the country.

Contemporaries referred to the empire founded by Babur as the Timurid empire, which reflected the heritage of his dynasty, and was the term preferred by the Mughals themselves. Another name was Hindustan, which was documented in the Ain-i-Akbari, and which has been described as the closest to an official name for the empire. In the west, the term "Mughal" was used for the emperor, and by extension, the empire as a whole. The use of Mughal, deriving from the Arabic and Persian corruption of Mongol, and emphasising the Mongol origins of the Timurid dynasty, gained currency during the nineteenth century, but remains disputed by Indologists. Babur's ancestors were sharply distinguished from the classical Mongols insofar as they were oriented towards Persian rather than Turko-Mongol culture.

The beginning of the empire is conventionally dated to the founder Babur's victory over Ibrahim Lodi in the first Battle of Panipat (1526). It reached its peak extent under Aurangzeb, and declined rapidly after his death (in 1707) under a series of ineffective rulers. The empire's collapse followed heavy losses inflicted by the smaller army of the Maratha Empire in the Deccan Wars (1680–1707), which encouraged the Nawabs of Bengal, Bhopal, Oudh, Carnatic, Rampur, the Nizam of Hyderabad and the Shah of Afghanistan to declare their independence from the Mughals. Following the Third Anglo-Maratha war in 1818, the Mughal emperor became a pensioner of the Raj, and the empire, its power now limited to Delhi, lingered on until 1857, when it was effectively dissolved after the fall of Delhi during the Indian Rebellion that same year.

The Mughal emperors were Central Asian Turko-Mongols from modern-day Uzbekistan, who claimed direct descent from both Genghis Khan (through his son Chagatai Khan) and Timur. At the height of their power in the late 17th and early 18th centuries, they controlled much of the Indian subcontinent, extending from Bengal in the east to Kabul & Sindh in the west, Kashmir in the north to the Kaveri basin in the south. Its population at that time has been estimated as between 110 and 150 million (quarter of the world's population), over a territory of more than 3.2 million square kilometres (1.2 million square miles).

The "classic period" of the empire started in 1556 with the ascension of Akbar the Great to the throne. Under the rule of Akbar and his son Jahangir, India enjoyed economic progress as well as religious harmony, and

the monarchs were interested in local religious and cultural traditions. Akbar was a successful warrior. He also forged alliances with several Hindu Rajput kingdoms. Some Rajput kingdoms continued to pose a significant threat to Mughal dominance of northwestern India, but they were subdued by Akbar. Most Mughal emperors were Muslims. However Akbar in the latter part of his life, and Jahangir, were followers of a new religion called Deen-i-Ilahi, as recorded in historical books like Ain-e-Akbari & Dabestan-e Mazaheb.

The reign of Shah Jahan, the fifth emperor, was the golden age of Mughal architecture. He erected several large monuments, the most famous of which is the Taj Mahal at Agra, as well as the Moti Masjid, Agra, the Red Fort, the Jama Masjid, Delhi, and the Lahore Fort. The Mughal Empire reached the zenith of its territorial expanse during the reign of Aurangzeb and also started its terminal decline in his reign due to Maratha military resurgence under Shivaji Bhosale. During his lifetime, victories in the south expanded the Mughal Empire to more than 1.25 million square miles, ruling over more than 150 million subjects, nearly 1/4th of the world's population, with a combined GDP of over \$90 billion.

By the mid-18th century, the Marathas had routed Moghul armies, and won over several Mughal provinces from the Deccan to Bengal, and internal dissatisfaction arose due to the weakness of the Mughal Empire's administrative and economic systems, leading to the declaration of independence by the Nawabs of Bengal, Bhopal, Oudh, Carnatic, Rampur, the Nizam of Hyderabad and Shah of Afghanistan. In 1739, the Mughals were crushingly defeated in the Battle of Karnal by the forces of Nader Shah, and their capital sacked and looted, drastically accelerating their decline. During the following century Mughal power had become severely limited and the last emperor, Bahadur Shah II, had authority over only the city of Shahjahanabad. He issued a firman supporting the Indian Rebellion of 1857 and was therefore tried by the British for treason, imprisoned, exiled to Rangoon and the last remnants of the empire were taken over by the British Raj.

## DECLINATION OF THE MUGHAL EMPIRE:

The Mughals effectively ruled India for about 150 years during the 16th and 17th centuries, a period roughly comparable with that of the British Raj. On the whole, comparisons favour the latter. The British bequeathed India an impressive network of communications, a legal system and viable administration, a tradition of democratic government that has survived, battered but unbroken.

When Mughal power dwindled, the subcontinent degenerated into a patchwork of warring fiefs, a chaos that offered easy pickings for predatory European imperialists. The Taj Mahal, Shah Jahan's great

masterpiece, may compare favourably with Edwin Lutyens's palace in New Delhi, but after the death of Aurangzeb many of the Mughal monuments crumbled; it took an English viceroy to rescue some of them from dereliction.

The Mughals failed because they made little, if any, effort to drag India out of the Middle Ages. The Mughal empire, writes Abraham Eraly, "lagged way behind Europe, behind even China, Japan and Persia. There was hardly any vigour in the economy, scant spirit of enterprise among the people. In agriculture, industry and trade, Indian practices were archaic. There was no ferment of ideas..." The Mughals were formidable conquerors but inept governors. They did nothing to cure the endemic weaknesses of Indian society and added fresh economic burdens through the profligacy of their courts and the cost of their military campaigns.

Akbar, the greatest of the Mughal emperors, was an honourable exception. He was a man of extraordinary vision, a virtual illiterate with a much-loved and often consulted library of 24,000 volumes, a Muslim who took a keen interest in the Hindu and Christian faiths and devised what was, to all intents and purposes, his own religion. His intellectual curiosity was insatiable and his absolute power allowed him to indulge it to the full. He was convinced that there must be an innate language common to all human beings and, in his quest for it, bought 20 newborn babies from their parents and had them raised in a secluded place where they heard no human speech. After three or four years, they were brought out of seclusion and encouraged to express themselves. Sadly for his theories, "nothing came out of them except the noise of the dumb".

His benign broad-mindedness did not last long after his departure; under Aurangzeb, Hindu temples were demolished, the Jesuit missions curbed, the hated Jizya – a poll tax on all who were not Muslims – reimposed. For a brief period under Akbar it had seemed as if the Mughals might come to terms with the explosion of new scientific and technological ideas that was taking place in Europe; the impulse died and with its death the dynasty was doomed to eventual atrophy and extinction.

One weakness of the Mughals was their failure to contrive a peaceful transition from one ruler to another; Eraly's pages are pitted with accounts of fratricidal purges. Five potentially rival princes were murdered when Shah Jahan succeeded to the throne; the war of succession that raged before Aurangzeb could depose his father and proclaim himself Emperor left his country militarily and economically exhausted.

In 1757, the BEI defeated the Nawab of Bengal and French company interests at the Battle of Palashi (Plassey). After this victory, the BEI took political control of much of the subcontinent, marking the start

of the British Raj in India. The later Mughal rulers held on to their throne, but they were simply puppets of the British.

In 1857, half of the Indian Army rose up against the BEI in what is known as the Sepoy Rebellion or the Indian Mutiny. The British home government intervened to protect its own financial stake in the company, and put down the so-called rebellion. Emperor Bahadur Shah Zafar was arrested, tried for treason, and exiled to Burma. It was the end of the Mughal Dynasty.

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