

Later Mughals [UPSC History Notes]

The Mughal Empire declined rapidly after the death of Aurangzeb in c. 1707 CE. This year is generally considered the differentiating year to separate the era of the Great Mughals from that of the lesser Mughals, also known as the Later Mughals. In this article, you can read all about the later Mughals and also about the decline of the Mughal Empire. This is an important topic for the [UPSC exam](#) history segment.

Later Mughals

The period between c. 1707 CE and c. 1761 CE (the time of Aurangzeb's death to the period when the [Third Battle of Panipat](#) took place, wherein Ahmad Shah Abdali defeated the Maratha chiefs), witnessed the resurgence of regional identities and highlighted a sad state of affairs for the once-mighty Mughals. The Mughal court became the scene of factions among the nobles. The weakness of the empire was exposed when Nadir Shah imprisoned the Mughal Emperor and looted Delhi in c. 1739 CE. After the death of [Aurangzeb](#) in c. 1707 CE, a war of succession broke out among his three sons - Muazzam (the governor of Kabul), Muhammad Kam Baksh (the governor of Deccan) and Muhammad Azam Shah (the governor of Gujarat). Muazzam emerged victorious and ascended the throne with the title of Bahadur Shah I.

Bahadur Shah I/Shah Alam/Muazzam (c. 1707 - 1712 CE)

Muazzam ascended the throne and assumed the title of Bahadur Shah, at the age of 63.

- He followed a liberal policy towards the nobles, granted them the territories of their preferences and promoted them. This led to the worsening of the state finances. It is also believed that the real power was in the hands of the wazir, Zulfiqar Khan.
- He showed a tolerant attitude towards Hindus, though he never abolished jizya.
- During his reign, the independence of Marwar and Mewar was acknowledged. However, the settlement could not restore these states to become fully committed warriors for the Mughal cause.
- His policy towards the [Marathas](#) was also half-hearted reconciliation. He did not recognize Shahu (whom he released) as the rightful Maratha king. He granted Maratha the sardeshmukhi of the Deccan, but failed to grant the Chauth and thus could not satisfy them fully. Marathas, thus, continued to fight among themselves as well as against the Mughals.
- Jat chief Charuman and the Bundella chief Chattrasal joined him in his campaign against the Sikhs. High mansab was granted to the tenth Sikh Guru, [Guru Gobind Singh](#). He, however, had to face rebellion from Banda Bahadur and it was during the course of his campaign against Banda Bahadur that he died (in c. 1712 CE).
- He was given the title of "Shah-i-Bekhabar" by Mughal historians like Khafi Khan.

Jahandar Shah (c. 1712 - 1713 CE)

After the death of Bahadur Shah, a new form of politics emerged in the Mughals' political sphere wherein the nobles became 'king makers' and the kings mere 'puppets' in their hands. Jahandar Shah was the first puppet ruler in Mughal India. He was supported by Zulfiqar Khan (wazir) who had the reins of the executive in his hands.

- Zulfiqar Khan built friendly relations with the Marathas, the Rajputs and different Hindu chieftains. He abolished jizya and gave the title of "Maharaja" to Ajit Singh (Marwar) and Mirza Raj Sawai to Jai Singh of Amber. He also granted the Chauth and Sardeshmukhi of the Deccan to Shahu. However, the old policy of suppression was continued against Banda Bahadur and the Sikhs.
- Zulfiqar also tried to improve the financial situation of the empire by checking reckless grants of jagirs and offices. He also made mansabdars maintain the official quota of troops. However, he is infamous in history for introducing the evil practice of Ijarah (revenue farming).
- Jahandar Shah's favourite lady, Lal Kanwar (a dancing girl) dominated the court.

Farrukh Siyar (c. 1713 - 1719 CE)

Farrukh Siyar defeated his brother Jahandar Shah at Agra in c. 1713 CE.

- He ascended the throne with the support of the Saiyyad brothers (the kingmakers) - Saiyyad Abdullah Khan (Wazir) and Hussain Ali Khan (Mir Bakshi). The Saiyyad brothers killed Zulfiqar Khan and appointed themselves to key positions.
- The Saiyyad brothers tried to make peace with the Marathas, the Jats, the Rajputs and were also successful in suppressing the Sikh revolt. It was during this time that Banda Bahadur, the Sikh leader, was executed.
- In c. 1717 CE, Farrukh Siyar granted many trading privileges to the [East India Company](#) and also exempted customs duties for its trading through Bengal.
- The Saiyyad brothers completely did away with jizya and also abolished pilgrimage tax at a number of places.
- Due to the overwhelming powers of the Saiyyad brothers, differences grew between Farrukh Siyar and the Saiyyad brothers. The emperor plotted thrice against the brothers, but failed to overpower them.
- In c. 1719 CE, the Saiyyad brothers forged an alliance with [Balaji Vishwanath](#) (Maratha ruler) and with the help of Maratha troops, the Saiyyad brothers killed Farrukh Siyar.

Rafi-us-Darajat (c. 1719 CE)

The Saiyyad brothers placed Rafi-us-Darajat at the throne. In fact, within a short span of eight months three young princes were raised to the throne by the Saiyyad brothers.

- He died within four months due to excessive consumption.
- Grandson of Aurangzeb, Nikusiyar revolted during his reign and occupied the throne at Agra with the support of Mitrasen (a Nagar Brahmin).

Rafi-us-Daula (c. 1719 CE)

Hussain Ali Khan (the Saiyyad brother) marched upon Agra and imprisoned Nikusiyar.

- Rafi-us-Daula was titled as Shah Jahan II.
- He ruled for a very short period and died of consumption (Tuberculosis).

Muhammad Shah (Rangeela)/Roshan Akhtar (c. 1719 - 1748 CE)

Brother of Jahan Shah who was fond of dancing and was himself an expert [Kathak](#) dancer.

- In c. 1720, he successfully dislodged the Saiyyad brothers with the help of Nizam-ul-Mulk, Chin Qilich Khan and his father's cousin Muhammad Amin Khan. He appointed Muhammad Amir Khan, who killed Hussain Ali Khan, as wazir under the title of Itmad-ud-Daula. However, independent states emerged during his reign, the Deccan under Nizam-ul-Mulk, Awadh under the leadership of Saadat Khan and Murshid Quli Khan reigned Bihar, Bengal and Orissa.
- The weakness of the [Mughal empire](#) was exposed when Nadir Shah invaded India, imprisoned the Mughal emperor and looted Delhi in c. 1739 CE.

Invasion of Nadir Shah (c. 1739 CE)

Nadir Shah was the Emperor of Iran. He was a national hero there who drove the Afghans out of Iran.

Reasons for invasion:

- When Nadir Shah came to power in c. 1736 CE, Muhammad Shah Rangeela withdrew his ambassador from the Persian court and snapped all diplomatic ties with that country. Nadir Shah sent three envoys to the Mughal court and his third envoy was detained by Rangeela which enraged him.
- When Nadir Shah invaded Afghanistan, some of the Afghan nobles took shelter under Rangeela.
- Also, Saadat Khan and Nizam-ul-Mulk invited Nadir Shah to invade India.

Course of invasion:

- He captured Jalalabad, Peshawar (c. 1738 CE) and then Lahore in c. 1739.
- Battle of Karnal (c. 1739 CE)

- Upon hearing of the advancing Persian army, Muhammad Shah marched his forces out of Delhi in order to meet the invading army and prevent their entry into his capital.
- The two forces met at Karnal for battle (about 120 km north of Delhi). The Persian soldiers wreaked havoc on the Mughal army.
- Mughal Emperor Muhammad Shah surrendered and he had to take Nadir Shah to his capital. The entire treasury was looted and the soldiers indulged in a gruesome massacre of the general population including women and children at Delhi.
- The sack of Delhi lasted for several days, after which Nadir Shah asked his men to cease. In May c. 1739 CE, Nadir Shah and his troops left the city.
- Muhammad Shah was retained as the emperor of the Mughal empire but was compelled to cede to him all the provinces of the empire falling west of the river Indus.
- Nadir Shah almost emptied the treasury and also took away the famous [Kohinoor](#) and the Peacock throne.
- Nadir Shah's invasion caused an irreparable loss of prestige and exposed the weaknesses of the empire to the Maratha Sardars and the foreign trading companies as well.
- **Read more about the Battle of Karnal in [This Day in History dated Feb 24](#).**

Ahmad Shah (c. 1748 - 1757 CE)

Son of Muhammad Shah Rangeela and Kudsiya Begum (a dancing girl).

- Ahmad Shah Abdali (ruler of Afghanistan) invaded Delhi many times, and Punjab along with Multan was ceded to him.
- The Marathas snatched Malwa and Bundelkhand.
- His wazir, Imad-ul-Mulk, blinded him and imprisoned him at Salimgarh.

Alamgir II (c. 1754 - 1759 CE)

He was the second son of Jahandar Shah and was raised to the throne by Imad-ul-Mulk after he deposed Ahmad Shah.

- Had to face repeated invasions of Ahmad Shah Abdali.
- The famous [Battle of Plassey](#) (23 June c. 1757 CE) was fought during his tenure. The Battle of Plassey helped the British East India Company to seize control of Bengal.
- He was also murdered by his wazir, Imad-ul-Mulk.

Ali Gauhar/Shah Alam II (c. 1759 - 1806 CE)

During his reign, the Mughal power was so depleted that it led to a saying in Persian “Sultanat-e-Shah Alam, Az Dili ta Palam”, meaning "The kingdom of Shah Alam is from Delhi to Palam," Palam being a suburb of Delhi.

- Due to his conflict with the wazir, he fled to Awadh (c. 1761 - 1764 CE). He returned to Delhi when Marathas re-established their hold and invited him to the capital.
- The third Battle of Panipat (c. 1761 CE) was fought during his reign between the Marathas and Ahmad Shah Abdali.
- The [Battle of Buxar](#) was fought in c. 1764 CE between the forces under the command of the British East India Company, led by Hector Munro and the combined armies of Mir Qasim (Nawab of Bengal), Shuja-ud-Daula (Nawab of Awadh) and the Mughal Emperor Shah Alam II. The war was brought to an end by the Treaty of Allahabad (c. 1765 CE) under which Diwani rights (right to collect land revenue) of Bengal, Bihar and Orissa were granted to the British East India Company.
- **He was the first Mughal ruler who became an East India Company pensioner.**

Akbar II (c. 1806 - 1837 CE)

He was the son of Shah Alam II and remained only under British protection as in c. 1803 CE, the British had captured Delhi.

- He conferred the title of “Raja” on [Ram Mohan Roy](#).
- He was a great poet and is credited with the introduction of the Hindu-Muslim unity festival Phool Walon Ki Sair.

Bahadur Shah II/Zafar (c. 1837 - 1857 CE)

He was the last ruler of the Mughal Empire. He was an accomplished poet and his pen name was Zafar (victory).

- He participated in the [revolt of c. 1857](#) CE. After the revolt was suppressed, he was deported to Rangoon (Burma) where he died in c. 1862 CE.

Decline of Mughal Empire

The decline and downfall of the empire was due to economic, social, political and institutional factors:

1. **Orthodox rule of Aurangzeb** - The religious and Deccan policies of Aurangzeb contributed to the empire's decline. The attempt to extend the Mughal administration over Golconda, Bijapur and Karnataka stretched the Mughal administration to a breaking point. It also laid Mughal lines of communication open to Maratha attacks so much so, that the Mughal nobles in the area found it impossible to collect their dues from the jagirs assigned to them and sometimes made private pacts with the Marathas. His failure to respect the susceptibilities of his non-Muslim subjects on many occasions, his enunciation of a policy that led to the destruction of many temples and re-

imposition of jizya alienated the Hindus and strengthened the hands of the section which were opposed to the Mughal Empire for political or other reasons.

1. It is said that by the time Aurangzeb came to the throne, the socio-economic forces of disintegration were already strong. Aurangzeb lacked the foresight and statesmanship to effect fundamental changes in the socio-political structure, or to pursue policies that could, for the time being, reconcile the various competing elements. Thus, Aurangzeb was both a victim of circumstances and also helped to create the circumstances of which he became a victim.
2. **Weak Successors** - The successors of Aurangzeb were weak and were not able to hold the administration effectively. Most of them were puppets in the hands of powerful nobles. The war of succession that plagued Delhi from c.1707 - 1719 CE gradually weakened the empire.
3. **Role of nobility** - After the death of Aurangzeb, the nobility assumed a lot of powers and the course of politics and state activities were guided by their individual interests. The Mughal court consisted of four groups of nobles - the Turanis, the Iranis, the Afghans and the Indian born Muslims. These groups constantly fought with each other for more power, jagirs and high offices which eventually led to the weakening of the empire.
4. **Lack of strong finances and foreign invasions** - Due to the emergence of many autonomous states, the revenue resources got depleted and the continuous wars further emptied the treasury. Also, the foreign invasions of Nadir Shah and Ahmad Shah Abdali took a heavy toll on the imperial treasury.
5. **Ineffective Mughal army and neglect of naval power** - The Mughal army gradually became inefficient and de-motivated after losing several battles. The neglect of naval power by the Mughals also cost them dearly.
6. **The advent of the British** - The emergence of British and other European colonial powers and their arrival to India was the last nail in the coffin of any hope of survival of the Mughal empire. The western colonial powers were militarily and financially superior and politically informed of the Indian conditions.

Rise of Regional Powers and States

The decline of the Mughal authority gave rise to the emergence of a number of independent kingdoms. The later Mughal rulers were not in a position to militarily enforce its regulations in all parts of the empires; as a result, many provincial governors started to assert their authority. In due course of time, they gained independent status. At the same time, many kingdoms which were subjugated by the Mughals also claimed their independence. Some new regional groups also consolidated and emerged as political powers. The states that arose in India during the decline of the Mughal empire and the following century (between c. 1700 - 1850 CE) varied greatly in terms of resources, longevity and essential character. Some of them - such as Hyderabad had been in a region where there had been an older regional tradition of provincial states in the immediate pre-Mughal period too, whereas many of

the other post-Mughal states were based on either ethnic or sectarian groupings - the Marathas, the Jats and the Sikhs.

The regional states that emerged during this period can be divided into three categories-

1. **States formed by former Mughal nobles** - The founders of these states were important and influential high mansab Mughal nobles. They established some of the formidable provincial kingdoms on the basis of their growing strength and administrative ability. Though they had declared independence from the Mughal rule, they never broke ties with the Mughal state. The prominent states that belonged to this category were Bengal (founder - Murshid Quli Khan), Awadh (founder - Saadat Khan) and Hyderabad (founder - Nizam-ul-Mulk Asaf Jah). The founders of these states were either former governors of these provinces or powerful members of the Mughal nobility.
 2. **Watan Jagirs** - The second category of regional states that emerged in the 18th century had served very well under the Mughals and as a result were allowed to enjoy considerable autonomy in their watan jagirs such as the Rajput states.
 3. **Rebellion states** - The states that had emerged after rebelling against the Mughal authority belonged to this category. The Sikhs, the Jats and the Marathas belonged to this group, and among them, the Marathas over the course of time emerged as a formidable power.
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