



Rise of Independent States After Mughal Decline

Description

The decline of the mighty Mughal Empire in the 18th century marked a significant turning point in [Indian history](#). What had once been a vast and centrally administered realm began to fracture, leading to the emergence of numerous autonomous regional states. This period was characterized by a shift in power from Delhi to provincial capitals, as ambitious governors and local chieftains asserted their independence, often leveraging the weakening imperial authority to consolidate their own positions. These new entities varied greatly in their origin, administration, and aspirations, yet their collective rise fundamentally altered the political landscape of the subcontinent, setting the stage for subsequent conflicts and the eventual establishment of British paramountcy. Understanding this era requires a close examination of both the causes of imperial decay and the specific trajectories of these successor and new states.

Causes of Mughal Weakness and Provincial Autonomy

The unraveling of the Mughal Empire was a complex process driven by a confluence of internal weaknesses and external pressures. Emperor Aurangzeb's prolonged Deccan campaigns, while initially aimed at expanding the empire, severely strained its financial and military resources. His orthodox religious policies alienated a significant portion of the population, leading to widespread discontent and rebellions, particularly from the Marathas and Sikhs. This generated persistent conflict and drained the imperial treasury.

Following Aurangzeb's death in 1707, a succession of weak and incompetent emperors occupied the Mughal throne. These later Mughals were often puppets in the hands of powerful court factions and ambitious nobles. The lack of a strong central figure led to intense infighting among the nobility, who prioritized personal gain over imperial interests. This constant political instability at the center diminished the emperor's prestige and his ability to enforce authority across the vast empire.

The Jagirdari and Mansabdari systems, which were the pillars of Mughal administration, began to suffer severe crises. There was an acute shortage of *jagirs* (land assignments) relative to the number of *mansabdars* (officials holding rank), leading to corruption, frequent transfers, and a decline in

administrative efficiency. Jagirdars, facing uncertainty, often exploited the peasantry, which in turn reduced agricultural output and revenue. Furthermore, the Mughals failed to keep pace with advancements in military technology and tactics, leaving them vulnerable to new emerging powers. The invasions of Nadir Shah in 1739 and Ahmad Shah Abdali multiple times between 1748 and 1767 delivered crippling blows to the already weakened empire, looting immense wealth and exposing its military impotence. These external shocks effectively shattered any illusion of Mughal invincibility and provided the final impetus for provincial governors to declare their de facto independence.

The Foundation of Independent States: A General Survey

The decline of Mughal authority created a vacuum that was quickly filled by various regional powers. These states can be broadly categorized into three types: successor states, new states, and independent kingdoms.

The **successor states** were formed by former Mughal governors (Subahdars) who, while initially maintaining nominal allegiance to the Mughal emperor, effectively declared their independence and ceased sending revenue to Delhi. Bengal, Avadh, and Hyderabad fall into this category. Their rulers often tried to replicate Mughal administrative structures but adapted them to regional needs.

The **new states** were founded by rebels against Mughal authority. These included the Marathas, Sikhs, Jats, and Afghans (like Rohilkhand). Their rise was often fueled by religious or community solidarity and a desire for political autonomy. They developed distinct administrative and military systems, often more agile and adaptable than the declining Mughal model.

Finally, some **independent kingdoms**, like the Rajput states, had maintained a degree of autonomy even during the zenith of Mughal power. With the weakening of Delhi, they further consolidated their positions, although they often faced internal strife and external threats from expanding regional powers like the Marathas. The overall trend was a decentralization of power, leading to a vibrant but often contentious political mosaic across 18th-century India.

Bengal: From Murshid Quli Khan to Siraj-ud-Daula

Bengal emerged as one of the most prosperous successor states, largely due to its fertile lands and vibrant trade. The foundations of its autonomy were laid by **Murshid Quli Khan**, who was appointed Diwan of Bengal in 1700 and later became the Subahdar in 1717. He effectively separated Bengal's administration from Delhi's control, though he never formally renounced allegiance to the Mughal emperor.

Murshid Quli Khan implemented significant administrative and revenue reforms. He reorganized the land revenue system, converting *jagirs* into *khalisa* (crown lands) and introducing the *malzamini* system, where revenue farmers (zamindars) collected revenue directly from the peasants, with strict measures to ensure timely collection. He shifted the capital from Dacca to Murshidabad, which became a center of trade and finance. Under his rule, Bengal maintained law and order and saw considerable economic growth, becoming a key province for foreign trade, particularly with European companies.

His successor, **Alivardi Khan**, took control in 1740 after consolidating his position by overthrowing Sarfaraz Khan, Murshid Quli Khan's grandson. Alivardi Khan successfully defended Bengal from repeated Maratha incursions, though he was eventually forced to cede Orissa. He continued the sound administrative policies, focusing on maintaining internal stability and fostering trade, albeit with a cautious approach towards the growing influence of European trading companies. He understood the potential threat posed by the British and French, advising his successors to prevent them from fortifying their settlements.

The last independent Nawab of Bengal was **Siraj-ud-Daula**, Alivardi Khan's grandson. His reign was short and tumultuous, marked by internal conspiracies and escalating conflicts with the British East India Company. He faced challenges from within his court and family, including Mir Jafar. His attempt to assert authority over the British, particularly regarding their fortification of Calcutta and misuse of *dastaks* (trade permits), led to the infamous Battle of Plassey in 1757. The defeat at Plassey, largely due to Mir Jafar's betrayal, marked the end of independent rule in Bengal and laid the groundwork for British dominance in India.

Avadh: Saadat Khan, Safdar Jang, and Cultural Development

Avadh, located in the fertile Ganga-Jamuna Doab, was another significant successor state that arose from the decline of Mughal power. Its autonomy was effectively established by **Saadat Khan Burhan-ul-Mulk**. He was appointed governor of Avadh in 1722 and rapidly consolidated his position, reducing the power of local zamindars and effectively bringing the province under his control. Although he served the Mughal emperor, he was functionally independent, especially concerning financial matters. Saadat Khan improved the financial state of Avadh by regularizing land revenue collection and introducing a more equitable tax system. He also created a strong, loyal army composed mainly of local recruits, thereby enhancing his administrative and military prowess. His tenure saw Avadh prosper economically and maintain relative stability.

His nephew and son-in-law, **Safdar Jang**, succeeded him in 1739. Safdar Jang continued the policies of his predecessor, further strengthening Avadh's administration and economy. He held the significant post of Wazir (Prime Minister) in the Mughal court for a period, which gave Avadh considerable influence in Delhi politics, though his primary focus remained on Avadh. He fostered a tolerant and inclusive administration, attracting diverse talent to his court. Safdar Jang is particularly noted for promoting justice and ensuring the welfare of his subjects.

Under Safdar Jang and subsequent rulers, Lucknow, the capital of Avadh, blossomed into a major cultural and artistic center. It became renowned for its distinct school of architecture, poetry (especially Urdu ghazals), music, and courtly etiquette. The syncretic culture of Avadh attracted artists, poets, and scholars from across India, creating a vibrant intellectual environment. This cultural flourishing, alongside stable administration and economic prosperity, characterized the period of Avadh's independence, making it a prominent regional power until its eventual annexation by the British in the mid-19th century.

Hyderabad, Mysore, Rajput States, and Rohilkhand

Beyond Bengal and Avadh, several other regional powers emerged and consolidated their positions, each with unique characteristics and trajectories.

Hyderabad in the Deccan was founded by **Nizam-ul-Mulk Asaf Jah I**. He was a powerful Mughal general and Wazir who, after serving the Mughal Empire, decided to establish his own independent state in the Deccan in 1724. He never formally renounced Mughal authority but acted as an independent ruler. Nizam-ul-Mulk efficiently organized the administration, revenue system, and military of Hyderabad, bringing stability to the Deccan region which had been plagued by Maratha incursions. However, after his death, Hyderabad became embroiled in succession disputes and conflicts with the Marathas and European trading companies, significantly weakening its position.

In the south, the kingdom of **Mysore** rose to prominence under the leadership of **Hyder Ali** and his son, **Tipu Sultan**. Hyder Ali, an ambitious military officer, seized power in 1761, transforming Mysore into a formidable military state. He introduced modern military training, using French expertise, and developed a strong army. Tipu Sultan, known as the "Tiger of Mysore," continued his father's policies, modernizing the army and administration further. He was a keen innovator, implementing new land revenue systems, promoting trade, and even experimenting with rockets. Both Hyder Ali and Tipu Sultan were staunch opponents of British expansion, engaging in a series of Anglo-Mysore Wars, which ultimately led to Tipu's defeat and death in 1799. This point needs attention: Mysore, under Hyder Ali and Tipu, demonstrated a unique ability to challenge European military technology and tactics, distinguishing it from many contemporary Indian states.

The **Rajput states**, particularly Amber (Jaipur), Marwar (Jodhpur), and Mewar (Udaipur), had enjoyed considerable autonomy even under the Mughals. With the weakening of Delhi, they further asserted their independence. **Sawai Jai Singh of Amber (Jaipur)** was an outstanding ruler, scholar, and astronomer. He founded the city of Jaipur, known for its systematic planning, and built several astronomical observatories (Jantar Mantars) in Jaipur, Delhi, Ujjain, Varanasi, and Mathura. He also reformed the Hindu calendar and revised astronomical tables. However, despite such advancements, the Rajput states often suffered from internal feuds, succession disputes, and constant warfare among themselves, which made them vulnerable to Maratha expansion and later British influence. They struggled to form a unified front.

Rohilkhand was another independent state carved out by Afghan immigrants, known as Rohillas, in the fertile region of northern India, east of Delhi. Under leaders like Ali Mohammad Khan, they established an independent state that prospered for a while. Their independent existence was often contested by Avadh and the Marathas, leading to frequent conflicts. The Rohillas were known for their martial prowess and established a relatively stable administration in their territory.

Punjab: The Transformation of Sikhism and Rise of Misls

The region of Punjab witnessed a profound transformation during the 18th century, largely driven by the evolution of Sikhism into a powerful political and military force. Originally a devotional, pacifist movement, Sikhism underwent significant changes in response to Mughal persecution. The martyrdom of Guru Arjan Dev and Guru Tegh Bahadur, and particularly the policies of Aurangzeb, forced the Sikhs to take up arms for self-defense and the protection of their faith.

Under Guru Gobind Singh, the tenth Guru, the Khalsa was created in 1699, transforming the Sikhs into a martial community. After his death, **Banda Singh Bahadur** led an uprising against the Mughals, establishing a short-lived Sikh state. However, his execution in 1716 led to a period of intense persecution and disorganization for the Sikhs.

During the mid-18th century, as Mughal authority crumbled and repeated Afghan invasions under Ahmad Shah Abdali created a power vacuum, the Sikhs began to organize more effectively. They formed the **Dal Khalsa**, a centralized fighting force and decision-making body, under the leadership of Nawab Kapur Singh and Jassa Singh Ahluwalia. The Dal Khalsa united the various Sikh groups for common defense and conquest. They instituted the *Rakhi* system, offering protection to villagers in exchange for a share of their produce, which provided them with a steady source of revenue.

The Dal Khalsa eventually divided into twelve independent territorial units known as **Misls**. Each Misl was led by a Sardar and controlled specific areas. They were largely autonomous but could unite for common causes, especially against external threats like the Afghans. This confederate structure allowed for local self-governance while also providing a framework for collective action. Important Misls included the Bhangi, Sukerchakia, Kanhaiya, and Ahluwalia. The Misls played a crucial role in expelling the Afghans from Punjab and establishing Sikh dominance in the region.

The eventual unification of these Misls occurred under the brilliant leadership of **Maharaja Ranjit Singh**, who belonged to the Sukerchakia Misl. By the early 19th century, Ranjit Singh had conquered and consolidated most of the Misl territories, establishing a powerful Sikh Empire that stretched from the Khyber Pass to the Sutlej River. His rule brought unprecedented stability and prosperity to Punjab, but his achievements are a subsequent chapter to the initial rise of the Misls.

Understanding the Nature and Challenges of These States

The independent states that emerged in the 18th century shared certain common characteristics but also faced unique challenges. Most of them attempted to maintain elements of the Mughal administrative and revenue systems, albeit with regional modifications. They sought to establish stable and prosperous economies, often through efficient land revenue collection and promotion of trade. The need for a strong military was paramount, given the turbulent political environment. This becomes important: Many of these states, like Mysore under Tipu Sultan or the Sikhs under Ranjit Singh, made significant efforts to modernize their armies and administration.

However, these states also faced considerable internal and external challenges. Internally, succession disputes were a recurring problem, often leading to instability and civil wars. The feudal nature of landholding meant that powerful zamindars and local chieftains often posed a challenge to central authority. This sometimes led to a fragmented power structure, hindering effective governance.

Externally, the expansionist ambitions of the Marathas often brought them into conflict with Bengal, Avadh, Hyderabad, and the Rajput states, creating a constant state of warfare. The Afghan invasions further destabilized northern India. At this stage, one issue becomes clear: the inability of these regional powers to form a united front against common enemies, particularly the Marathas and later the British, was a major weakness. Each state largely pursued its own interests, often at the expense of potential alliances.

Ultimately, the most formidable challenge came from the European trading companies, especially the British East India Company. The British, with their superior military organization, naval power, and diplomatic strategies (often involving playing one Indian state against another), gradually eroded the sovereignty of these independent states. The period of their rise was thus followed by a period of their decline and eventual subjugation by the British, marking a transition from regional fragmentation to colonial centralization.

UPSC Perspective

The rise of independent states after the Mughal decline is a crucial topic for the UPSC [Civil Services Examination](#), offering insights into political decentralization, administrative innovations, and the eventual advent of colonial rule.

Prelims focus:

- **Founders of independent states:** Murshid Quli Khan (Bengal), Saadat Khan (Avadh), Nizam-ul-Mulk Asaf Jah (Hyderabad), Hyder Ali (Mysore).
- **Key administrative figures and posts:** Diwan, Subahdar, Wazir.
- **Important cities and cultural centers:** Murshidabad, Lucknow, Jaipur.
- **Specific events:** Battle of Plassey (1757), Battle of Buxar (1764).
- **Terms:** Dal Khalsa, Misl, Malzamini system, Rakhi system.
- **Major observatories:** Sawai Jai Singh's Jantar Mantars in Jaipur, Delhi, Ujjain, Varanasi, Mathura.

Mains focus:

- **Factors contributing to the disintegration of the Mughal Empire:** Examine Aurangzeb's policies, weak successors, Jagirdari crisis, court politics, and foreign invasions.
- **Administrative policies and economic structures of the successor states:** Analyze revenue systems, military organization, and efforts at good governance in Bengal, Avadh, and Hyderabad.
- **Cultural achievements:** Discuss the flourishing of art, architecture, and literature in centers like Lucknow and Jaipur.
- **Reasons for the varied development and eventual vulnerability of these regional powers:** Evaluate internal weaknesses like succession disputes and factionalism, external threats from Marathas and Afghans, and the decisive impact of European (especially British) intervention.

Common Student Confusion

Students often encounter specific points of confusion when studying the rise of these independent states.

One common misunderstanding is **differentiating between truly independent states and those maintaining nominal allegiance to Delhi**. Many students assume that since rulers like Murshid Quli Khan or Nizam-ul-Mulk did not formally declare independence, they were not truly autonomous. The correction here is to understand that *de facto* independence was the reality. While these rulers often paid lip service to the Mughal emperor, they stopped remitting revenue, appointed their own officials,

and conducted foreign policy effectively independently, exercising sovereign power within their territories. Their administrative and military decisions were made without seeking Delhi's approval.

Another area of confusion is **the distinct organizational structure of the Sikh misls compared to the monarchical states**. Students sometimes try to fit the misls into a conventional king-and-country model. The distinct structure is that the Sikh misls were essentially independent confederacies or commonwealths, each led by a Sardar. They were not monolithic monarchies like Avadh or Hyderabad. While individual misls held territory, their strength often lay in their collective ability to form the Dal Khalsa for common defense, rather than a single supreme ruler exercising absolute power over all of Punjab until Ranjit Singh's consolidation.

Finally, students can be confused about **the roles of initial founders versus later rulers in establishing and prospering a state, such as in Avadh**. It is important to clarify that state-building was often a multi-generational process. While founders like Saadat Khan laid the groundwork and established the initial autonomy, later rulers like Safdar Jang were equally crucial in consolidating power, refining administration, fostering economic growth, and developing cultural centers. The prosperity and stability of a state were often a cumulative effort rather than solely the achievement of the first ruler.

Short Revision Points

- Mughal Empire declined due to Aurangzeb's policies, weak successors, Jagirdari crisis, and foreign invasions.
- Key independent states emerged: Bengal (Murshid Quli Khan), Avadh (Saadat Khan), Hyderabad (Nizam-ul-Mulk Asaf Jah), Mysore (Hyder Ali), Rajput states, Rohilkhand.
- Bengal and Avadh achieved prosperity under able administration, fostering cultural growth.
- Rajput states were often internally divided and vulnerable.
- Sikhism evolved into a militant force after persecutions, forming the Dal Khalsa and later 12 misls, which eventually led to the Sikh Empire under Ranjit Singh.

FAQs

1. **Which Mughal policies and weaknesses contributed to the rise of independent states?**
Aurangzeb's prolonged Deccan campaigns and religious policies, a succession of weak later Mughal emperors, intense court factionalism, the crisis of the Jagirdari system, and the devastating invasions by Nadir Shah and Ahmad Shah Abdali significantly weakened the central Mughal authority, paving the way for provincial governors and local powers to assert independence.
2. **Who was responsible for founding the city of Jaipur and erecting observatories?**
Sawai Jai Singh II of Amber (Jaipur) was responsible for founding the planned city of Jaipur and constructing astronomical observatories (Jantar Mantars) in Jaipur, Delhi, Ujjain, Varanasi, and Mathura.

3. What was the Dal Khalsa and how did it relate to the Sikh misls?

The Dal Khalsa was a centralized Sikh army and decision-making body formed in the mid-18th century for common defense and conquest. It eventually fragmented into twelve sovereign territorial units known as Misls, each led by a Sardar. The Misls operated independently but could unite under the umbrella of the Dal Khalsa for collective action against common enemies.

The emergence of independent states after the decline of the Mughal Empire marks a period of profound transition and transformation in Indian history. These states, while diverse in their origins and characteristics, collectively represent a decentralization of power, regional consolidation, and the flourishing of distinct cultural identities. Their rise and subsequent challenges provide valuable lessons in statecraft, military strategy, and economic management, even as they highlight the vulnerabilities that ultimately led to the ascendancy of colonial powers. A deep understanding of this era is essential for any serious aspirant of the Civil Services Examination. For comprehensive guidance on such critical historical topics and effective preparation strategies for UPSC, [SHRI RAM IAS](#) is regarded as the best [ias coaching in delhi](#).

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