Chapter 3

MUGHAL EMPIRE: CRISIS AND DECLINE
Mughal Empire declined rapidly after demise of Aurangzeb (1707) due to the crisis in its all vital institutions. Although the crisis was discernible from Aurangzeb's reign but his death and absence of efficient ruler, who could arrest the rot, hastened the crisis and decline.

Perhaps the decline of Mughal Empire has attracted as much attention of the scholars as the decline and fall of Roman Empire. There are numerous attempt to explain the decline of Mughal Empire
as well as they also try to find an explanation about the colonial rule. The scholars generally examined nature of the two regimes and try to find whether the 18th century can be divided into two halves historically where the battle of Plassey represented a break point. However, there are scholars, who regard the decline of the Empire as beneficial in a way because it unleashed great talent, which later on developed in collaboration with the colonial power, similarly they do not find any break in the 18th century, and the colonial power merely signified the transfer of administration across the divide.

Historians like Jadunath Sarkar and Irvine find the real cause of crisis in the Empire in the personal deterioration of the kings and nobles due to harem influence.¹

Irvin says that crisis emerged mainly due to the decline in the character of the Emperors who could not choose right persons as their nobles. Aurangzeb had frequently complained about the lack of able officials and he himself cites Sadullah Khan’s dictum that

No age is wanting in able men; it is the business of wise master to find them out, win them over, and get work done by means of them, without listening to the calemnies of selfish men against them²

Irvine further states that

The deterioration in the character of the Emperors must be held to be the primary cause of the decline in the character of the nobility and the downfall of the Empire.... The heirs to the throne of Delhi in the 18th century grew up utterly helpless and dependent upon others, without any independence of thought, fearlessness in assuming responsibility or capacity to decide and act promptly. Their intellect and spirits were dulled and they found diversion only in the society of harem women buffoons and flatters.3

Similarly, Jadunath Sarkar states that

The Mughal Empire and with it Maratha over lordship of Hindustan, fell because of the rottenness at the core of Indian society. This rottenness showed itself in the form of military and political helplessness. The country could not defend itself; the nobles were selfish and shortsighted; complete inefficiency and treachery disgraced all branches of the public service. In the midst of this decay and confusion, our literature, art and even true religion had perished.4

He further says that,

The country's administration had become hopelessly dishonest and inefficient, and the mass of the people had been reduced to the deepest poverty, ignorance and moral degradation by a small, selfish, proud and unworthy, ruling class. Imbecile lechers filled the throne. The purity of domestic life was threatened by the debauchery fashionable in the court and the aristocracy and the sexual literature that grew up under such

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3 Ibid., pp. 311-12.
patrons. Religion had become the handmaid of vice and filly.⁵

It is strange that this unscientific reason meant to blame women for the deteriorating qualities of the noble and crisis. The kings and nobles in 16th and 17th centuries had also enjoyed similar luxurious living as that of the 18th century nobles but strangely they did not suffer from the alleged personal deterioration.

Jadunath Sarkar has further held Aurangzeb’s religious policy responsible to provoke Hindu reaction which produced the crisis.⁶ Some of the Aurangzeb’s measures may be called discriminatory and the most important were

(i) Aurangzeb’s attitude towards temple
(ii) Levying of jizyah
(iii) Annexation of Marwar in khalisa

Aurangzeb’s famous statement, that long standing temples should not be demolished but no new temples allowed to be built, but old places of worship could be repaired as building could not last for ever,⁷ should be taken into account while examining his attitude towards temples.

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⁵ Ibid., The Fall of the Mughal Empire, IV, 1789, 1803, Calcutta, 1972, pp. 343-47.
⁷ Satish Chandra, Medieval India, part II, Mughal Empire (1526-1748), New Delhi, 2000, p. 277.
Such orders were not new, similar orders had existed in Sultanate and even during Shahjahan’s period. However, the interpretation of long standing temples allowed flexibility to the local officials who had to depend on the local elements like zamindars who were largely Hindu for smooth functioning of the administration and thus order for temple destruction was seldom carried out in the countryside. In fact, when Aurangzeb was governor of Gujarat, he ordered for the destruction of temple, which were partially defaced and on his accession he found all these temple rebuilt, which led him to order for the destruction of the temples afresh in 1665.

Similarly his order to ban the new temples did not stop the construction at all as well as it never led to the blanket destruction of old temples. However, on encountering resistance from Jats, Marathas, he even destroyed old temples to instil a kind of fear among the subjects. When he learnt that Hindu and Muslim visit Benaras, Mathura temples, he ordered for their destruction. However, there did not seem to had blanket destruction of the temples and Mustaid Khan writing in early 18th century used hyperbole to merely suggest as an attempt to establish Islam. Since, Sharia did not ban the non-Muslim from practising their faith so long

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8 Ibid., p. 278.
they remain loyal to the state. Therefore, Mustaid Khan’s statement can not be acceptable.

But, Aurangzeb’s policy was undoubtedly a setback to the policy of toleration followed by his predecessors and a climate of mutual mistrust come to exist. On the other hand, Aurangzeb gave grants to gurudwara of Guru Ram Das at Dehradun, to Vaishnava temples at Brindavan as well as to jogies and Nath panthies. He gave land grants to Panth Bharati in pargana Siwana in Rajasthan as he stated ‘since he feeds travellers and is worthy of offering prayers’. Despite such grants, undoubtedly, the policy of toleration was not followed in that spirit as it was being followed during Akbar’s reign, but at the same time it did not produce major rebellion from the Hindu officials and if they rebelled they returned to fold later on. Some temples were destroyed but it did not create the crisis which engulfed the Empire later on. Even the contemporary writer Bhimsen did not mention the religious policy of Aurangzeb as a major factor for the ‘crisis’ in the Empire.

Aurangzeb re-imposed Jizyah in his 22 regnal year. It was regressive and the poor suffered more. By 1680, Aurangzeb failed to conciliate Marathas and other Deccan elements and by imposing

9 Ibid.
jizyah he hoped that the orthodox Muslim clergy would rally behind him particularly when he attacked the Deccani Sultans. However, this policy suggested a contradiction in his policy towards non-Muslims. He did not dismiss Hindu Rajas and the number of non-Muslim nobles, in fact, had further increased to all time highest percentage.\textsuperscript{11}

Aurangzeb maintained largely cordial relation with Rajputs. Although Jadunath Sarkar termed the Rathore rebellion was result of Aurangzeb's religious policy where he sought to destroy the centre of Hindu revivalism.\textsuperscript{12} But Waqa-i-Ajmer and Jodhpur Hukumat-ri-Bahi discounted the theory of Jadunath Sarkar and had mentioned different factors responsible for the rebellion.\textsuperscript{13}

Aurangzeb had not followed the liberal tradition established by his predecessors, but this did not cause the crisis as such. Because we find Rajputs had rallied behind the Empire till its last. Thus, scholars have found reason of crisis elsewhere. The jagirdari system faced crisis towards the end of 17\textsuperscript{th} and in the 18\textsuperscript{th} century. The smooth functioning of the jagirdari system depended on the ability of the


\textsuperscript{12} Satish Chandra, \textit{Op cit.}, pp. 302-35

\textsuperscript{13} \textit{Ibid}. It is difficult to establish that Marwar had emerged as centre of Hindu revivalism. Aurangzeb was anxious to protect the region through which important trade route was passing and also provided finest troopers to the Empire. The succession dispute after death of Raja Jaswant Singh finally culminated into rebellion. See M Athar Ali, “
jagirdar to get sufficient resources to maintain quota of troops. There was a correlation between jama (estimated income) and the hasil (actual realisation) and a balance between the two depended on the realistic nature of revenue assignment and its income as well as on the ability of the jagirdar to compel the zamindars to pay the assessed land revenue. Jagirdars used to faundar's services in compelling the zamindars got converted into kharaj (land revenue) collecting agent on payment of nankar.

Due to growing number of mansabdars, there arose imbalance between the available resources and demand of jagir in form of salary and this was overcome by reducing the sawar obligation and salary. The jagirdari system faced crisis due to Deccan policy. Bhimsen testifies

The provinces given to the mansabdars in tankhwah (salary) cannot be governed because of the smallness of their force. The zamindars, too, have assumed strength, joined the Marathas, enlisted armies and laid the hands of oppression on the country. when such is the condition of zamindars it had become difficult for a dam or dirham to reach the jagirdars.14

Towards the last years of Aurangzeb's reign majority of mansabdars did not maintain the required contingent and Bhimsen further adds that

The lawless men of every district, disregarding the petty faujdars have acquired strength. The faujdar, despiring of being able to bear the trouble and cost of campaigning, consider it gain to sit at one place, and to enter into an agreement with the enemy i.e., Marathas.\textsuperscript{15}

Owing to wars in Deccan the most paying jagirs were kept in khalisa to meet the expenditure of the war and the jagirdars were given jagir in zor-talab (difficult to realise). When jagirdars failed to meet the obligation, their jagirs were confiscated and the struggle to get beneficial jagir allowed opportunity of corruption for the officials.\textsuperscript{16}

The jagirdari crisis was aggravated by the problem of be-jagiri (lack of sufficient jagirs for assignment). The contemporary historian Khafi Khan informs us that on account of the inadequacy of pai-baqi (land meant for assignment in jagir), and the appointment of large number of mansabdars, particularly absorption of Deccani and Marathas after the annexation of Bijapur and Golconda created problems in jagir assignment and these mansabdars had to wait for four to five years for the jagir assignment.\textsuperscript{17} This had also deprived khanazadas who become discontented.

\textsuperscript{15} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., pp. 352-53.
\textsuperscript{17} It has been argued that there was no jagirdari crisis because after the annexation of the two Deccani kingdoms, the jama of the Empire rose by 23 per cent or Rs. 5.3 crores annually, whereas the number of mansabdars was kept within limit and there was no shortage of pai-baqi. For further argument see J F Richards, Mughal Empire, New Delhi, 1993. But one should consider two aspects before concluding as above, that the jama in the Deccan had been grossly inflated from the time of Akbar and what nobles
It has been established that the total number of mansabdars holding zat and above increased from 486 in 1658-78 to 575 in 1679-1707 thus, there was an increase of 31 per cent. According to M Athar Ali, "the increase in the number of ranks was not anywhere near the scale witnessed between 1595 and 1656-57, an increase of 4.2 times (500 zat and above), and totally out of proportion with the actual increase of territory within the period".18

Irfan Habib has emphasised on the 'agrarian crisis' which led to the decline of the Empire. The Mughal administration was approximating the surplus produce leaving bare minimum with the peasants. Pelsaert writes

> The country is ruined by the necessity of defraying the enormous charges required to maintain the splendour of a numerous count, and to pay a large army maintained for keeping the people in subjection. No adequate idea can be conveyed of the sufferings of that people. The cudgel and the whip compel them to incessant labour for the benefit of others.19

On the other hand, there was contradiction between the interests of the imperial administration and the individual jagirdars.

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A jagirdar, whose assignment was liable to be transferred any moment and who would never hold the same jagir for more than three or four years at the most, did not have any interest in following a far sighted policy of agricultural developments. Similarly, his personal interest would sanction any act of oppression that conferred an immediate benefit upon him. Even if it had ruined the peasantry and so destroyed the revenue-paying capacity of that area for a long time.

Bhimsen also informs us that in the later part of Aurangzeb's reign, the agents of the jagirdar had given up the practice of helping the peasantry, as the jagirdars were not sure of their continuance, therefore, they went for maximisation of revenue collection. Some of the jagirdars also resorted to extortion and in fact imperial regulation remained mute on paper.

Thus, the actual burden on the peasantry became so heavy that it put their subsistence under great strain and they were left with no choice between starvation and armed rebellion.

Pelsaert observed that despite misery, the people endured patiently, professing that they did not deserve anything better.

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23 Pelsaert, *op. cit.*
there were instances where peasants refused to pay land revenue and such villages were designated as mawas and zor-talab. Initially the acts of defiance by the peasantry were mere isolated incidents perhaps due to varied level of distress, but later on in this struggle the peasants and zamindars usually joined hands. The zamindars could be chieftains or could be a person having rights over portion of a village, but they formed a distinct class enjoying common rights like commanding armed retainers and were the leader of caste group. Some of these zamindars’ like Shobha Singh’s rebellion (1695-98) in Bengal had, in fact, shaken the empire and similarly in Kuch-Behar, Bhim Narayan was able to expel the Mughal troops and officials. These frequent rebellion produced agrarian crisis.

The Jats of Agra region rose in revolt during Aurangzeb’s reign. They inhabited the tract across river Yamuna and were notorious for creating law and order problem right from the beginning of the Empire. They always resist before parting with the land revenue. They belonged to basically peasant caste and largely inhabiting under many mahals in the region of Delhi, Agra and trans Yamuna tracts.

The Jat rebellion was led by Gokula Jat, the zamindar of Talpat and then the leadership passed to Raja Ram Jat and Churaman Jat.25

24 Irfan Habib, op. cit., pp. 388-89.
They refused to pay revenue and the *jagirdar* complained about non-receipt of anything for three years from the area. The revolt grew with the time into a big plundering movement and several *parganas* were devastated as well as the trade routes were blocked. The Jat rebellion had greatly undermined the strength of the Empire financially and politically and was suppressed with great difficulty. This was symptomatic of crisis.

Satnamī sect rebelled in 1672. The sect seems to have been founded in 1657 and having done away with caste distinction, it was living on charity of others. The sect displayed an attitude of sympathy with the poor and hostility towards authority and wealth. They abandoned the company of unjust kings. The faith attracted the lower classes. The rebellion started when a foot trooper was involved in a conflict with one peasant belonging to Satnamī sect and the trooper got killed, when the district officials sent the contingent of troops to restore order the conflict began. Initially, they (Satnamī) defeated the imperial army and captured Narnaul and Bairat but finally, they were defeated by the large army sent from imperial court.

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27 *ibid.*
Irfan Habib characterised Sikhism as a peasant religion because most of the Nanak’s verse are in the language of jatt (lingua franca of peasants) and they become great masands (agents) of the Guru. Guru Arjan Das created a disciplined organisation and Guru Hargobind created an army and this had brought them into inevitable conflict with the Mughals which continued till Guru Gobind Singh and later on Banda continued the conflict for some time. The rise of Sikhism, and assimilation of lower caste into the fold and prolonged rebellion greatly diluted the authority of zamindars and jagirdars thus, created agrarian crisis which undermined the strength of the Empire.

Further several small rebellions, around Allahabad in 1662 as referred by Manunchy; Meos rebellion in Mewat in 1630 and 1649-50, and against them first organised campaign was undertaken only in 1703, rebellion of Wattus, Dogas and Gujars in Lakhi jungle who kept on ravaging several sarkars, and Bundela rebellion were detrimental to the strength of Empire.

Irfan Habib suggests the agrarian contexts in which the Maratha movement had started which become great force and could singularly cause decline of the Empire. Bhimsen informs us that zamindars obtained power and aligned with the Marathas and on the

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other hand, the Mughal *jagirdars* were not able to collect land revenue from the area under Maratha influence because they were not maintaining requisite number of troops.\(^{30}\) The peasants of imperial territory, due to excesses of *jagirdars* in revenue collection and absence of any concessions and incentive, started joining Marathas. The Marathas also distributed the Mughal territory among its chiefs and the peasants had to pay the taxes twice — once to Mughal *jagirdars* and other to the Maratha chief who could plunder the village on non-payment. The lack of protection from the imperial authorities further pushed the peasants in the hands of Marathas. Although peasants had aided Shivaji but he was not the leader of peasant uprising.\(^{31}\) Similarly peasants were not free from oppression in Maratha regime as well.

It is apparent that the agrarian crisis had its genesis in the Mughal systems and once the Empire became weak, it failed to arrest such crisis and the downfall of the Empire became inevitable.

Interestingly, in the first half of the 18\(^{th}\) century not only Mughal Empire faced the crisis, but the Safavid Empire, Uzbek *Khanate* and Ottoman Empire too faced crisis though the factors operating in each case were different, but it is interesting to note that


the crisis had surfaced in all the grand Empires around same time. \(^{32}\) Comparing the growth of population in Europe and India, where European population increased from 50 million in 1450 to 120 million in 1700, the Indian population increased from 150 to 230 million during the corresponding period - an increase of merely 66 percent, thus the shift in the economic balance was owing to this difference between Europe and Asia. \(^{33}\) Due to this Europe emerged principal market for luxuries and craft manufacture of the world. Iran no longer remained principal market for Indian commodities, and similarly India and the Iran together did not remain principal market for Chinese goods. \(^{34}\)

By 1667, one-third of Bengal silk was exported, through Dutch and English East India Companies as well as Armenian merchants, but destination remained Europe and only third remained for Indian markets. \(^{35}\) Obviously this had put Indian supply market under great stress as the production did not increase much due to stationary technology which had put the eastern Empires under extreme strain.

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\(^{34}\) 'the Passing of the Empire', *op. cit.*

and intensified the financial difficulties of the ruling classes and this caused greater agrarian exploitation, which proved counter-productive and acted as catalyst to the crisis.

Similarly, till European imports from the east were paid in form of bullion, there was tremendous urban growth in India as these cities were craft production centres like Lahore and Agra which had dwarfed the European cities in the beginning of the 17th century. But by 1700, European towns like London and Paris surpassed all Indian cities perhaps except Agra. Approximately 13 per cent of the people of England and Wales were living in towns of 5,000 and above in 170136 which had not been reached in India even by 1901. This spurt in the European urban growth was due to cumulative effect of the growth of the new science and technology. In contrast the pace of such development was very slow in Mughal India. Since, the urbanisation was the result of the technological growth in Europe and it could provide a 'safety valve' during time of agrarian crisis, whereas the Indian urban centres were parasitical in nature, depending on the expropriation of agrarian surplus and once agrarian sector faced crisis the scope of urban growth too declined. In other words, so long as craft production did not obtain independent base as

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happened in Europe, it could not take the shock of agrarian crisis. Perhaps due to this Mughal Empire in spite of its army was susceptible to face challenge and crisis from ill armed zamindars and peasants rebels.

Athar Ali characterised this incapacity of the Mughal society to respond to new science and technology and overall stagnation as the 'cultural failure' which was apparent in other states as well, though factors responsible for the respective crisis were different. The cultural failure deprived the Empire of the capacity to grapple with their agrarian crises, and the economic consequences caused the political crisis as well.

It is obvious that the Mughals were able to create an elaborate administrative structure which had sustained the Empire but the Empire's sustenance greatly dependent on the appropriation of the surplus and the process of this appropriation was largely dependent on zamindars and jagirdars. The system perfectly worked till late 17th century and so the surplus extraction continued smoothly which in turn allowed the luxury of ruling class and provided life to the parasitic urban centre. But once, the appropriation got disturbed due to the agrarian crisis, the Mughal urban centres could not find alternative means for survival nor the Mughal state was capable to provide solution as it was completely dependent on the surplus.
Therefore, the Empire edifice was so dependent on agrarian system that its crisis proved to be terminal for the Empire. The series of rebellions in later half of 17th and 18th centuries and Aurangzeb’s Deccan policy heavily drained the resources of the Empire which had become scarce due to the agrarian crisis. After death of Aurangzeb’s death, rulers rose and fell with startling rapidity and no one seriously pondered to save the sinking ship by overcoming the crisis. The frequent disruption and disintegration shook the foundation of the Empire. The administrative institutions like mansabdari and jagirdari also suffered. There was an acute shortage of jagir which created payment problems and mansabdars were not able to maintain obligated contingent. Instead, they were involved in corrupt practices thus greatly weakened the famed Mughal army.

The Mughal Empire had such a enormous presence that besides its successor states, even the independent states of eastern frontier were greatly influenced by the Mughal institutional superstructure

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and the crisis in the eastern frontier states can be examined in the above framework.