INTRODUCTION

The eighteenth century in India was characterised as a century of transition which changed the structure of power and initiated important social and economic reconfigurations.

The factors regarding the political decline of the Mughal Empire has triggered a debate on the nature of economic and social change in the wake of imperial collapse. The political disintegration of the empire is the most important development of the first half of the 18th century. The cataclysmic event has attracted the attention of generation of historians who continue to debate the causes of decline of Mughal empire, opinions are sharply divided between those who view the decline as a consequence of economic crisis and exploitation by the ruling classes and those who regard the political turmoil in terms of regional assertiveness triggered by certain degree of economic prosperity. The interest in the study of imperial decline had brought the economy and society of the 18th century under sharper historical scrutiny. The explanations regarding the Imperial decline are contested, so too was the understanding of change during this period. The historians are divided on the matter of examining the century in the shadow of empire alone. A strong case has been built to view, the period on its own term. Those who support this view see the century being characterised by economic and social reconfigurations that resulted in the emergence of regional political order. The argument in opposition to interpretation is that the imperial political collapse
initiated a process of economic and social decay as well. These counter views
initiated debates on 18th century in the determining of, Dark Age versus Economic
Prosperity.

Second set of arguments around the late 18th century transition in the polity,
society, and economy of India as the English East India Company acquired
political supremacy. The third important consideration is the state and governance.
Lastly, the detailed exploration of regional histories of the period opened new
dimensions.

The early historiography of the decline/disintegration of Mughal Empire
was around administrative and religious policies of the individual rulers and their
nobles. Both the British administrator Scholars and Indian nationalist historians of
late 19th and 20th centuries assessed the empire in terms of the character of the
ruling elite.1 Whereas Jadunath Sarkar focused on Aurangzeb and his religious
policy in particular and later his Deccan campaign were identified as instrumental
for the Mughal decline.2 In the later years he revised his argument and identified
the peasant rebellions (that destroyed the Mughal political stability) as a 'Hindu
reaction' to Aurangzeb's Muslim orthodoxy. The religious policy of the rulers
constituted the chief explanatory points in the subsequent works on Mughals by

1 William Irvine, Later Mughals, edited and augmented with The History of Nadir Shah's
Invasion, by Jadunath Sarkar, reprint, New Delhi, 1971.
2 Jadunath Sarkar, Fall of the Mughal Empire, vol. iv, Calcutta, 1932-50, reprint, Bombay, 1971-
75, and History of Aurangzeb, based on original sources, vol. v, Calcutta, 1924-30, 1973,
(reprint).
Sri Ram Sharma and Ishwari Prasad. From the late 1950s, Marxist historians started to look at Mughal Empire from objective and scientific point of view. Satish Chandra writes in his book, that structural flaws in the working of the Mughal institutions of *jagir* and *mansab* were responsible for the fiscal crisis of the late 17th century. He argued that the efficient functioning of these two institutions depended upon the availability of revenues its collection and distribution. The Mughal failed to maintain the smooth functioning of these two institutions which became vulnerable during the last days of Aurangzeb which led the decline of the Mughal Empire.

From the 1960s onwards some economic historians particularly, Irfan Habib looked Mughal decline from political and social unrest in fiscal terms. He argued that high rate of land revenue demand by Mughal authority which caused rural exploitation leading to peasant migration and rebellions. This facilitated an agrarian crisis that resulted in the weakening of the empire's political foundation. M. Athar Ali followed Irfan Habib's model of fiscally centralized state, but attributed its decline not so much to the high rate of revenue demand but rather a shortage of *jagirs*. This shortage was created due to geo-political expansion of empire in Deccan which was considered a less fertile track. This increased the number of nobles with no *jagir* land to be assigned. This lack of *jagir* created an

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administrative problem, resulting economic crisis.\textsuperscript{6} John F. Richard, refuted the idea that there was lack of useable \textit{jagirs} in Deccan. He argued that Deccan was not a deficit area, that \textit{bejagiri} (the absence of \textit{jagirs}) was a major factor of the economic crisis of empire.\textsuperscript{7}

In 1980s Satish Chandra revised, his notion and shifted to the economic aspects of the politico administrative imperial crisis. He argued that the quantum of land to be given as \textit{jagirs} became few and relatively infertile. Therefore, the discrepancy between the estimated revenue (\textit{jama}) and actual yields (\textit{hasil}) intensified. This had an adverse impact on the ability of state functionaries to ensure the regularity of revenue collection. A \textit{jagirdari} crisis with distinct economic undertones finally ended Mughal stability.\textsuperscript{8}

Besides these, the downfall of the Mughal Empire is also viewed as a cultural failure. Here ‘cultural’ represents technological, intellectual and economic referents. Here the economic crisis that underlined the decline is attributed to the relative economic, technological and intellectual rise of Europe in the period 1500-1700 as a centre of world commerce. As Europe emerged as the principal market for luxurious crafts manufacture of the world and it attracted high value products from its traditional Eastern markets. This was compensable through intensified agrarian exploitation. The intellectual and technological aridity of India did not allow towns to emerge as ‘safety valve’ for the people. These were therefore, no

\textsuperscript{8} Satish Chandra, \textit{Medieval India: Society, the Jagirdari crisis and the Village}, review of the crisis of the jagirdari crisis, New Delhi, 1982, pp. 61-75.
escape from fiscal arm of the state. All these reasons made the empire politically and economically vulnerable.\(^9\) Even agrarian/jagirdari crisis could be taken as an explanation. It may be argued that this crisis was not sought to be confused with diversification of economy through overseas trade on a big scale, for which some identifiable potentials were certainly there.\(^10\)

Above surveyed literature identify the 18\(^{th}\) century as a 'Dark Age'. The historians were occupied with the notion of the imperial centre alone but they did not pay attention to the Mughal institutions which were being modified and transformed at local and regional level which paved the way for shift of power from centre to periphery. The emergence of the Marathas, the Sikhs and the Satnamis was due to the exploitative policy of the state to peasantry. It was argued that the emergence of regional politics the Marathas, the Sikhs continued the exploitative tendencies of their predecessors, the Mughals. Thus, regional political realignments were explained within the framework of the functioning of the Mughal 'agrarian system' alone. The focus remained on the structures of revenue extraction and not so much on other forms of production or trade.\(^11\)

Apart from these some scholars look from different angle. This can be traced in the work of Herman Goetz on eighteenth century music and architecture and Bernard S. Cohn's study of Banaras. Goetz argued the resilience of Mughal


society as reflected in the involving musical and architectural style in the wake of imperial collapse.\textsuperscript{12}

Scholars, who engaged regional study, emphasize a range of factors that fuelled the imperial decline and encouraged regional economic and political buoyancy. The emphasis was on different non-agricultural strands that sustained the local economy. The regional economy based on shifting patterns of trade, movement of mercantile capital from centre to periphery, war, pillage and political manoeuvring by regional elites were tapped in the works of Ashin Das Gupta, B.R. Grover, Steward Gordon and Richard B. Barnett.

Ashin Dan Gupta displays that the corporate mercantile institutions transcended political boundaries for over seeing the transportation of goods and the provision of credit and insurance services in the period of decline. Even though inland trade increased, export trade and port cities of Surat in Gujarat declined around 1720, as did Masaulipatam in Madras and Dhaka in Bengal, whereas colonial port cities such as Bombay, Madras, and Calcutta rose to prominence.\textsuperscript{13} Karen Leonard argues that "indigenous banking firms were indispensable allies of the Mughal state" and the great nobles "were more likely to be directly dependent upon these firms when in period 1650-1750, these banking firms began the redirection of their economic and political support" towards regional politics and rulers, including the English East India Company in Bengal, this led to

\textsuperscript{12} Herman Goetz, \textit{The Crisis of Indian Civilization in the eighteenth and nineteenth Centuries: The Genesis of Indo-Muslim Civilization}, Calcutta, 1938.

bankruptcy, a series of political crises and downfall of the Empire.\textsuperscript{14} M.N. Pearson gave some evidence of merchant’s participation in politics.\textsuperscript{15} However, Pearson refrains from suggesting that the Mughal finance system was dependent on merchant’s credit.

The studies highlighted regional level changes in the period of transition, provoked reconsideration among historians working on Mughal India as well. They are now making a strong case for studying the 18\textsuperscript{th} century on its own terms as a phase which saw the emergence of regional political orders. The studies are significant in that they throw new light on both the nature of the Mughal Empire as well as the process of its weakening and eventual decline in the 17\textsuperscript{th} and early 18\textsuperscript{th} century.

Viewing the Mughal state from the perspective of the regional literature of the Mughal subah of Awadh, Muzaffar Alam Suggests that the Mughal Empire signified a coordinating agency between conflicting communities and various indigenous socio-political system at different levels. Muzaffar Alam’s study of early 18\textsuperscript{th} century Awadh provides evidence of the remarkable economic growth and prosperity which resulted in zamindari unrest in the region. Economic prosperity was a consequence of increased commercialization and monetization of the economy that was initiated in the heyday of the Mughals. The affluent zamindars took advantage of their newly accumulated assets and disobeyed the


\textsuperscript{15} M.N. Pearson, \textit{Merchants and Rulers in Gujarat}, California, 1976.
order of the Mughal commands. As they rose in rebellions the Mughal *subedar* (governor) in the region enhanced his power by using the unrest as bargaining chip with the emperor. It is under his patronage that regional assertion ultimately buoyed the suba to political autonomy.\(^{16}\) In a later article on 18\(^{th}\) century Bihar, Alam reiterates his fiscal growth argument with evidence from both regional and imperial Persian literature and Urdu poetry. This material, unlike the court chronicle, touches on the life of different social groups. On the basis of this material, Alam infers that 18\(^{th}\) century “crisis” is a more complex issue than the Delhi centered administrative and fiscal studies of empire have so far done. For the numerous voices of different social groups as tapped in the regional Persian sources suggest that one’s order was another’s disorder. The experiences of the crisis were felt differently in Delhi also.\(^{17}\)

Following the general region-centric trend laid out by Alam, Chetan Singh indicates that the political unrest in some provinces such as Punjab was linked to tensions generated between the agrarian economy of the Mughal plains on the one had and fringe tribal societies as they moved towards a sedentary existence on the other. The latter process altered the structure of tribal societies and increased pressure on the agrarian economy which was already under stress. Thus the events of the 18\(^{th}\) century were rooted in the economic processes that shaped the

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functioning of the empire from its very inception. The evidence from most of these regions indicates economic realignments that ensured the dissociation of the regions from imperial control. These studies thus considerably alter the notion of the 18th century as a “Dark Age”.

These new studies also find that the trajectories of regional dissociation from the centre were varied even though some general features can be identified across the board. C.A Bayly has articulated these features in his studies. He argues that regional political crystallization was a consequence of three important developments. (a) the emergence of a vibrant cross-caste mercantile organisation and its development in politics. The proliferation of the Mughal practice of revenue farming meant a coalescing of merchant and agrarian interest resulting in the emergence of new class of intermediaries (b) the gentrification process, which brought together a class of scribes, accountants and other Mughal service groups that served the new powers locally and sank their feet deep into society, investing in the small towns or qasbas, (c) the practice of military fiscalism, which meant the maintenance of large armies and their deployment in revenue collection. Bayly gave emphasis on the rise of intermediaries, complete with the trappings of royal power drawing on Mughal military and fiscal institutions and their emergence as new power centres. These revenue collecting intermediaries, who derived their

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power from a variety of portfolios, have been categorized by C.A. Bayly and Sanjay Subrahmanyan as 'portfolio capitalists'.

The 'revisionists' seem to be more coherent in their explanation. As different point of emphasis emerge in this direction with clarity of landed interests, merchants and trading communities and their relationship with political power is now available. This helped Bayly to come out with this argument about the centrality of intermediary groups in the 18th century transition. There are indications that this growth was maintained over much of India in the first half of the 18th century as well.

Growth in the first half of the century in Rajasthan has been clearly documented. Price rose faster than the level of revenue demand. This provided the incentive for increasing the area under cultivation and for growing more valuable crops. Both grain, taken by the state as taxation and cash crops were traded out of the province in large quantity.

The study of craft productions of pre colonial India and their distribution by merchants group has been attracting the attention of the historians from India and abroad. Some of these studies are of general nature and primarily based on European and Persian sources. The regions covered primarily by these scholars

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are, Gujarat, South India and Bengal. However, Rajasthan could not get much attention of scholars though it possesses a treasure house of archival and private records of business families. This enormous material would enable us to trace the growth and development of crafts in the different states (Jodhpur, Jaipur, Bikaner and Kota).

Besides these, it also had a well developed trading and manufacturing unit in town and cities. The significance of trade and commerce for some works has been done at the regional level in which local documents were tapped appreciably.

With the growing interest in the area-specific social and economic history, materials from regional sources acquired a new crucial importance. The study on eastern Rajasthan by S.P. Gupta provides the picture of progress in agricultural production in the area during the entire period 1650-1750.\(^{21}\)

These studies provided a new insight into the agrarian economy of 17\(^{th}\) and 18\(^{th}\) century. It paved the way for evaluating the structure and stratification of the village society in terms of changes taking place. These studies also provided a new dimension to the whole issue of impact of state policies on agrarian economy. But remained confined to the rural economy ignoring the trading and manufacturing urban centres, they were not unworthy of consideration.

Trade in crafts depended much on the merchandise produced by various artisan groups in urban as well as rural areas. The goods produced and

\(^{21}\) S.P. Gupta, *The Agrarian System of the Eastern Rajasthan, (C 1650-1750)*, New Delhi, 1986, however Dilbagh Singh, *The State, Landlords, and Peasants on 2\(^{nd}\) half of the 18\(^{th}\) century*, has a different thing to say that the economy was shattered when the Mughal administration had declined.
manufactured by the artisans were brought to the market for sale. Some of these products such as earthen pot, metal utensils, ornaments, were meant either for local consumption or distant areas. While the textile, calico-prints, indigo assumed added importance besides satisfying the local need they were available for export.

The policy of the Rajput states in their respective regions is quite interesting. Every Rajput state made administrative efforts to regulate the trade and artisan production to augment their income. To achieve this, it appears that they had established separate offices to look after trade and craft sector. Special attention was paid to promote trade and commerce and safety and protection was provided to traders on trade routes. Similarly the interests of the artisans were also looked after. In return the state got appreciable income in the form of the taxes from these two sectors. Besides these, the role of mercantile community and involvement of some other sections in trade (including not so rudimentary banking system) led to the emergence of cross-caste mercantile class. Many towns had emerged as a commercial towns due to their location on the trade routes. Besides some had become a producing units.

Rajasthan was on the Mughal highway junction connecting Agra to Ahmadabad and to some other regions of India which facilitated the accessibility of merchants to it. The eighteenth century Rajasthan witnessed flourishing internal trade. Different Rajput states carried on trade by land route with other parts of the country.