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From empire to inequality: Lessons from the Mughal collapse for today's social divides

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to analyze in depth the process of the decline and collapse of the Mughal Dynasty (1526–1857), an important event in the history of South Asia that was influenced by a variety of complex factors, both internal and external. Using historical research methods that include heuristic stages, source criticism, interpretation, and historiography, the study relies on primary sources such as *Ain-i-Akbari*, *Akbarnama*, and *Tuzuk-i-Jahangiri*, as well as secondary literature from relevant modern historians. The results of the study show that the collapse of the Mughal Dynasty was not caused by a single factor, but was an accumulation of various structural problems and geopolitical dynamics. Significant internal factors include the weakening of the jagirdari system, repeated succession crises, corrupt bureaucracy, and weak leadership after Aurangzeb's reign. Meanwhile, external factors included invasions from Persia and Afghanistan, the rise of regional powers such as the Maratha and the Sikhs, and the aggressive expansion of the British East India Company, which gradually eroded Mughal sovereignty. This study concludes that the collapse of empires is the result of adaptive failures in dealing with structural challenges and changes in the regional political-economic landscape. The implications of this study broaden our understanding of the dynamics of imperial power disintegration and the transition to colonialism in India. This paper lies in a holistic and systematic approach that links the collapse of the Mughals with the theory of the fall of empires from the perspective of global historiography.

Contribution: By linking the collapse of the Mughal Empire to broader theories on imperial decline and the transition to colonialism, this research broadens the understanding of imperial disintegration and enriches global historiographical perspectives on empire fall.

1. INTRODUCTION

The Mughal Dynasty was one of the largest and most influential Islamic empires in South Asian history. The Mughal Empire, also known as Mogul or Moghul, was a state that ruled Afghanistan, Balochistan, and much of

India between 1526 CE and 1857 CE (Prasad, 2021). Founded in the early 16th century by Zahiruddin Muhammad Babur, the dynasty successfully consolidated its power over much of the Indian subcontinent and established a relatively stable and organized government structure. The Mughal empire reached its peak during the reigns of three great rulers: Akbar (1556–1605), Jahangir (1605–1627), and Shah Jahan (1628–1658). This period was marked by extraordinary progress in various fields, ranging from economic growth and political stability to the development of art, monumental architecture, such as the Taj Mahal, and the implementation of a progressive policy of religious tolerance (Zubrzycki, 2023).

However, this glory did not last forever. Beginning in the second half of the 17th century, the Mughal Dynasty began a slow but consistent decline. The once strong and centralized center of power began to face serious challenges from both within and without. Internal factors such as social tensions, discriminatory policies, and a weakening bureaucratic structure combined with external pressures in the form of invasions and the rise of regional powers, accelerating the empire's disintegration. This process ultimately culminated in the great rebellion of 1857, which became the reason for the British to officially abolish Mughal rule and establish India as a colony under the direct control of the British Crown (Akhtar, 2021).

Socio-politically, this era of decline was heavily influenced by the policies implemented during Aurangzeb's reign (1658–1707), which differed sharply from those of his predecessors. Aurangzeb was known as a religious and conservative ruler, and in many respects, he adopted a more exclusionary approach towards non-Muslim communities. He revoked several tolerant policies inherited from Akbar, such as the abolition of the jizya (head tax on non-Muslims), and conducted aggressive military campaigns against Hindu groups such as the Rajputs and Marathas. As a result, social resistance increased, particularly from groups who felt systematically discriminated against. These tensions not only weakened the legitimacy of the central government but also triggered the fragmentation of power at the local and regional levels (Khaja, 2024).

In southern India, for example, the Deccan rulers began to demonstrate autonomy from the Mughal center of power. Similarly, the Rajputana and Maratha regions began to consolidate their own power and refused to fully submit to imperial authority. This growing discontent was accompanied by administrative fragility that prevented the central government from responding effectively to challenges (Fischel, 2020). Many historians believe this was the beginning of the disintegration of the once-powerful dynasty.

In historiographical studies, the decline of the Mughal Dynasty has been an important topic in the study of South Asian history. Historians such as (Richards, 1993) In his work The Mughal Empire (1993), he emphasized that the main cause of the collapse was not military failure alone, but rather a combination of weak administrative structures, economic inefficiency, and widening social imbalances. Meanwhile, (Chandra, 2005) highlights internal dynamics such as conflict within the imperial family, succession struggles, and the dynasty's inability to adapt to social change as the primary causes of the stagnation of power.

Besides internal factors, external pressures also played a significant role in accelerating the empire's decline. One of the most devastating moments in Mughal history was the invasion of Nadir Shah of Persia in 1739. This attack not only resulted in massive physical destruction, including the sack of Delhi, but also damaged symbols of power such as the loss of the Peacock Throne and the Koh-i-Noor (Zubrzycki, 2023). These losses were symbolic because they reflected the empire's weakened military resilience and the erosion of its political prestige. Following this invasion, the dynasty faced increasing pressure from Afghan forces and the rise of local powers such as the Marathas in the west and the Sikhs in Punjab (Marwat & Latif, 2022).

The culmination of all these pressures came in 1857, when a major rebellion known as the Indian Mutiny or Sipahi Rebellion broke out (Mann, 2021). While initially military in nature, the rebellion escalated into a popular movement opposing British domination and challenging the legitimacy of Mughal rule, which was perceived as weakening. The British used this rebellion as a pretext to formally dissolve the Mughal Dynasty, exile the last emperor, Bahadur Shah II, to Burma (now Myanmar), and declare the establishment of the British Raj. Thus, the era of Islamic empires that had lasted for more than three centuries ended (Hegarty, 2023).

This study aims to delve deeper into the causes of the decline of the Mughal Dynasty using a multidisciplinary approach that combines political, social, and economic history. One of the analytical frameworks used in this study is the theory of the fall of civilization proposed by Arnold J. Toynbee in A Study of History. (Toynbee, 1987) argues that great civilizations tend to collapse not simply because of external pressures, but because of an internal failure to creatively respond to those external challenges. In the Mughal context, it appears that although the empire faced significant external challenges, its slow, conservative, and non-inclusive internal response accelerated the process of collapse. The main hypothesis of this study is that the collapse of the Mughal Dynasty was the result of an internal inability to adapt to changing times, as well as an ineffectiveness in maintaining social and political

coherence amidst increasingly complex regional and global pressures (Khairanis et al., 2025). This study is expected to broaden the understanding of how great empires in pre-modern history could collapse not only due to enemy attacks, but also due to a systemic internal failure to innovate and maintain social solidarity amidst cultural and religious diversity.

The Mughal Dynasty was one of the most influential and powerful Islamic empires in South Asian history. Established in the early 16th century and lasting until the mid-19th century, the empire controlled much of the Indian subcontinent and reached its peak during the reigns of Akbar (1556–1605), Jahangir (1605–1627), and Shah Jahan (1628–1658). During this period, Mughal rule was marked by political stability, economic progress, religious tolerance, and rapid developments in art, architecture, and administration (Waheed & Numan, 2024). However, from the second half of the 17th century, the empire gradually declined, culminating in its collapse following the 1857 Indian War of Independence and British colonial intervention.

Socially, the decline of the Mughal dynasty reflected the tension between a weakening central government and the increasing fragmentation of power at the local and regional levels. Aurangzeb's (1658–1707) more religiously conservative policies marked a significant turning point in Mughal social and political relations within the empire. His discriminatory policies against Hindus and the reversal of several policies of religious tolerance previously implemented by Akbar fueled discontent, social divisions, and intensified resistance from non-Muslim groups. The fragility of the social structure and the weakening of the central political legitimacy led to rebellions in regions such as the Deccan, Rajputana, and the Maratha territories, which began to struggle for greater autonomy (Khaja, 2024).

In a literature review, the study of the decline of the Mughal Dynasty has become an important focus in South Asian historiography. Several historians, such as (Richards, 1993) and (Chandra, 2005) emphasizes the importance of viewing this decline as the result of a complex interaction between internal and external factors. Richards, in The Mughal Empire, highlights that the Mughal downfall was not the result of military failure alone, but rather the collapse of administrative structures, economic inefficiency, and worsening social imbalances (Richards, 1993). Chandra, on the other hand, sees how internal conflicts within the imperial family, as well as policies that were not adaptive to changing times, were the main causes of the stagnation and fragmentation of power (Chandra, 2005).

While internal factors were the primary cause of the breakdown of central power, external pressures from beyond the borders also accelerated the process of the empire's disintegration. Nadir Shah's invasion of Persia in 1739, which resulted in the sack of Delhi and the seizure of symbols of power such as the Peacock Throne, not only destroyed the empire's physical assets but also eroded its symbolic prestige (Kamran, 2024). Similarly, waves of Afghan attacks and the rise of regional powers such as the Marathas and Sikhs weakened central control over vast and heterogeneous territories. Ultimately, a major uprising in 1857, known as the Sipahi Rebellion, provided the pretext for the British to formally abolish Mughal rule and exile the last emperor, Bahadur Shah II, thus ending over three centuries of Islamic imperial rule (Frey, 2020).

In the Mughal context, the failure to reform the military, administrative, and socio-economic systems was the primary cause of the dynasty's inability to cope with structural crises. Thus, existing literature suggests that the decline of the Mughal Dynasty was the result of a complex interaction between internal weaknesses and external pressures. This approach emphasizes the need for multidisciplinary analysis to understand the process of imperial collapse in global history.

2. METHOD

The research method used is a qualitative method that seeks to understand the facts behind reality that can be observed or sensed directly. The Methodology section is a study or science that discusses the framework of thought or concepts, methods, or procedures that function to analyze principles or procedures that will later be used to guide and direct us in the investigation and compilation of a field of science (historical science). So, methodology is a science that discusses ways or methods (Heredia et al., 2024).

Historical methodology is a procedure, method, or way to understand events that occurred in the past. Historical research is an instrument for reconstructing historical events. Historical research is classified as a historical method, a research method used specifically in historical research. To make a written work more systematic and structured, the writing process must have several stages. These stages include the first, the heuristic stage, then the criticism stage, the interpretation stage, and the writing stage or historiography (Kosambi, 2023).

The first stage in historical research is heuristics, which is the phase in which researchers collect various historical sources that form the basis of the research. Sources The research method used is a descriptive

qualitative method, which aims to gain a sufficiently in-depth understanding of the social phenomena and issues to be discussed. This research uses a descriptive method, data obtained from various text sources, information from books, journals and other scientific works (Hjeij & Vilks, 2023). Heuristics is the stage or process of collecting data or scattered sources, whether sources in the form of writings, testimonies of historical actors, or other data that will later be used for research needs. In this heuristic stage, the author uses written sources originating from previous scientific works, whether from books, scientific articles, theses, or dissertations.

To turn a written work into a good work, the next stage is the critique stage. This critique stage is a very important stage, because in this stage the history writer will select sources. The writer will choose sources that must be appropriate to the needs, as well as which sources are credible and authentic to the writing, the writer will choose which sources will later help the writer to create a good written work and not contain bias. In this critique stage, the writer selects the sources to be used, where the writer chooses sources in the form of books, scientific articles, theses, and relevant dissertations.

The interpretation stage in the research process is a crucial moment where the author begins to decipher and interpret the meaning of previously critiqued information. This stage plays a crucial role in shaping the narrative and understanding of the topic being researched. However, it is important to understand that interpretation in history is relative, influenced by various factors, including the historian's own perspectives, beliefs, and interests. In this interpretation stage, the author adopts a sociological theoretical approach.

The final stage in the historical research method is historiography. Historiography is the final stage of historical research, following heuristics, source criticism, and interpretation. Historiography is the process of compiling facts from various sources, selected in the form of historical writing. As a final stage, historiography also provides an opportunity for authors to reflect on the methodology used and identify potential limitations or shortcomings in the research. This allows authors to contribute to the field of history by providing new interpretations, deeper analysis, or emphasizing aspects that have not been widely studied before (Zhou et al., 2024).

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Post-Aurangzeb weakening leadership

The decline of the Mughal Dynasty after Aurangzeb's death in 1707 can be understood as the result of the collapse of the leadership structure that had previously been the mainstay of the empire's stability and authority. Aurangzeb, although known as a leader who was harsh in religious policies and aggressive in military expansion, still demonstrated strong leadership capacity in maintaining the unity of the empire. However, his death opened a new, turbulent chapter in Mughal history, marked by power struggles between his sons that not only weakened the legitimacy of central power but also opened the space for the emergence of palace intrigues and political fragmentation that undermined the previously centralized government structure (Richards, 1993).

Aurangzeb's successors, such as Bahadur Shah I, Jahandar Shah, and Farrukhsiyar, failed to demonstrate visionary leadership and strong character. They were unable to consolidate power or control the various competing noble factions within the palace. Their heavy reliance on elite groups such as the Turani, Iranian, and Hindustani factions rendered the palace no longer a solid center of government, but rather an arena for conflicting interests that pushed the empire away from stability (Chandra, 2005). These emperors functioned more as formal symbols without substantial power, while other political actors, particularly the viziers and nawabs, began to play a dominant role in determining the direction of government.

This situation was further exacerbated by the strengthening of regional autonomy, which began to de facto break away from central control. Nawabs in key regions such as Awadh, Bengal, and Hyderabad began to assert their own power, establishing military, administrative, and diplomatic structures separate from the center, although they still symbolically recognized the emperor in Delhi as their nominal ruler (Rizvi, 2024). This indicated a profound transformation in the power structure: from a centralized empire to a conglomeration of independent regional powers. This decentralization was not the result of official policy, but rather the weakening of central control, which lacked a leader capable of uniting the empire's elements amidst elite competition and growing internal tensions.

Thus, the decline of post-Aurangzeb leadership was not simply a matter of the individual incompetence of his successors, but reflected a structural disintegration within the empire (Robins, 2012). The absence of a strong unifying figure, increasing elite conflict, and the growing power of regional factions marked a shift from a single, large empire to a phase of political fragmentation that paved the way for new powers in the Indian subcontinent, including British colonialism, which would eventually fill the power vacuum.

Social and religious tensions

The social and religious tensions that arose during Aurangzeb's reign were a significant factor in accelerating the decline of the Mughal Dynasty (Khairanis et al., 2025). Aurangzeb's policies, under the pretext of upholding Islamic orthodoxy, actually led to sharp social polarization in India's multiethnic and multireligious society. During the reign of his grandfather, Akbar, India experienced a period of relative harmony under the sulh-i-kul policy, a concept of universal tolerance that allowed Muslim and non-Muslim communities to live side by side under one rule (Islam, 2023). Akbar even included Hindu figures in the government, abolished the jizya tax, and established interfaith dialogue within the court. However, Aurangzeb systematically erased all of this pluralistic legacy.

Aurangzeb, known as a deeply religious leader, adopted an exclusivist approach to Islam and implemented it as the basis for his government policies. One of his most controversial decisions was the reintroduction of the jizya, a tax imposed on non-Muslims. This policy not only burdened the Hindu and Sikh communities economically but also reinforced social segregation based on religious identity. Aurangzeb also destroyed hundreds of Hindu temples in the name of religious purification and suppressed various non-Islamic religious practices that had long been part of the cultural landscape of the Indian subcontinent (Truschke, 2017).

These measures provoked a strong reaction. Hindus, Sikhs, and various other non-Muslim groups felt marginalized and threatened socially, politically, and culturally. As a result, various rebellions began to emerge. In the Deccan region, the Marathas, led by Shivaji and his successors, launched a fierce armed resistance against Mughal domination. The Marathas not only rejected Mughal military and administrative domination but also brought a spirit of religious and cultural liberation to the local Hindu community. In Punjab, the previously placid Sikh community began to mobilize as a military force to defend itself against Aurangzeb's oppressive rule. Even the Rajputs, who had been important allies of the Mughals during the reign of Akbar and Jahangir, began to withdraw and reject central authority due to these discriminatory policies (Kadam, 2023).

These tensions were not merely sectarian or religious in nature, but also spilled over into a crisis of political loyalty and a shift in the regional balance of power. Local communities that had previously supported the empire began to question the legitimacy of central power. Many local figures viewed Mughal rule as no longer representing the common good of a multicultural empire, but rather as a tool for the domination of certain groups over others (A. Singh, 2024). As regional rulers and community leaders felt they were losing their place and protection within the imperial structure, they began to seek alternative forms of sovereignty, whether through open rebellion, de facto autonomy, or symbolic rejection of central sovereignty.

This situation did not improve after Aurangzeb's death in 1707. His successors, such as Bahadur Shah I, lacked the capacity to restructure the social and political relations that had been fractured during his predecessor's reign (Mungasiroh & Mawardi, 2023). Sectarian tensions continued to linger in the collective memory of society, especially in the most affected regions such as Punjab, Gujarat, Maharashtra, and Rajasthan (Chowdhary, 2024). As central authority weakened, local leaders increasingly asserted their ethno-religious identities as a basis for legitimizing their power, replacing the narrative of imperial unity.

Further complicating the situation is how the evolving narrative about post-Aurangzeb Mughal rule began to associate it with an oppressive Islamic identity. This perception was reinforced by memories of discriminatory policies, the destruction of places of worship, and the jizya tax (Roy, 2010). For the Hindu majority, the empire began to lose its legitimacy as an institution representing all segments of society. For other non-Muslim minority groups, such as the Sikhs, the experience of repression became the basis for the formation of group solidarity and narratives of resistance. In this context, religious identity became an effective tool for political mobilization. Regional groups began to use narratives of oppression by the Mughal power center to strengthen the legitimacy of local movements and build support within their communities (Sood, 2022).

It's important to note that these social and religious tensions did not occur in a vacuum. They occurred amidst larger social shifts, including changes in land ownership patterns, social mobility, and bureaucratic structures. Discriminatory policies against certain groups also impacted their economic and political access. Hindu merchants began to feel oppressed by state policies, Sikh nobles lost their privileged status, and local Hindu leaders began to be neglected within the imperial bureaucracy (K. Singh & Maheshwari, 2024). When the state fails to guarantee fair representation and access to resources for all groups, it is natural that widespread resistance will emerge.

This situation paved the way for colonial powers like Britain to take advantage. The British were keen to read the internal tensions plaguing the Mughal Empire. In their colonial strategy, East India Company officials often employed the rhetoric of "liberation" from Muslim tyranny to gain the sympathy of local populations, particularly in Hindu areas (Hall & McClelland, 2024). By positioning itself as a neutral power or even a "defender of liberty,"

Britain gained legitimacy to expand its political and economic influence. The narrative of the Mughals as Islamic tyrants was further developed by colonial historians to justify their intervention (Haque, 2024).

As a result of all this, the Mughal dynasty was not only weakened militarily and administratively, but also lost its symbolic power as a unifier of the nation. The social and religious rifts inherited from Aurangzeb's reign made the project of reunifying the empire nearly impossible for his successors (Khairanis et al., 2025). No effective efforts were made to restore the concepts of pluralism or tolerance seen during Akbar's time. Instead, identity divisions continued to develop into persistent political antagonisms. This sharp social fragmentation eventually combined with a leadership crisis, political decentralization, and foreign intervention to form the chain of causes that led to the collapse of the once-powerful empire.

Thus, social and religious tensions during and after Aurangzeb's reign cannot be seen as a side effect, but rather as the structural roots of the decline of the Mughal Dynasty (Akram & Ishaq, 2023). When the state is no longer able to maintain a sense of justice and togetherness across communities, the binding power of the state is eroded. Leadership without an integrative vision and policies that prioritize narrow orthodoxy over social harmony have proven fatal for a political entity as large as the Mughal Empire. In this context, the lessons of history show that a power that fails to manage diversity will be toppled by that very diversity.

Economic and administrative crisis

One of the important pillars that supported the continuity of the Mughal Empire since its early days was the administrative power and economic stability built through the jagirdari system (Ramesh, 2024b). This system granted land to officials or nobles (*jagirdars*) in return for their military or administrative services, with the expectation that they would not only collect taxes from the land, but also maintain the security and productivity of the areas they governed (Richards, 2024). During the dynasty's heyday, this system was relatively successful in maintaining a balance between central power and local elites, and ensuring a consistent income for the state. However, as central authority weakened, this system became a major weakness, accelerating the empire's decline.

Entering the 18th century, the jagirdari system experienced a significant functional distortion. Many jagirdars began treating land as a tool for personal exploitation rather than as a trust from the state. Land was no longer managed for the sustainability of agricultural production or the welfare of farmers, but rather simply served as a source of income through compulsory taxation that often ignored the real economic capacity of the people. As a result, the peasants, the backbone of the empire's agrarian economy, were increasingly oppressed and lost the incentive to increase production. In the long run, this practice led to rural economic stagnation and weakened the state's fiscal base (Naz & Luqman, 2023).

The crisis in the jagirdari system also triggered an imbalance between state revenue and expenditure. On the one hand, state revenues declined due to poor land management and high levels of tax evasion. On the other hand, state spending, particularly for military financing and palace maintenance, continued to increase (Walker, 2008). The government had to spend huge sums to maintain power in rebellious areas, including facing resistance from the Marathas, Sikhs and other regional groups (Taylor & Shrimankar, 2024). Not to mention the enormous costs of supporting the lavish lifestyles of the palace nobility, which showed no political or administrative productivity. This imbalance led to chronic budget deficits and reinforced the state's dependence on exploitative taxation.

Amid the central government's inability to reorganize an effective fiscal system, corruption and bureaucratic inefficiency became rampant. Many high-ranking officials bought their positions through bribes and, in turn, used these positions to enrich themselves rather than serve the nation's interests. Administrative positions were no longer awarded based on merit or ability, but rather on proximity to power and certain palace factions. The result was a bureaucratic culture that was unprofessional, slow, and unable to respond to the new challenges emerging in India's changing economic and social landscape (Riesman et al., 2020).

This situation was exacerbated by the worsening security situation resulting from the political fragmentation that occurred after Aurangzeb. In many areas, central authority was no longer respected, and local rulers operated semi-independently (Rashid & Rashid, 2024). They often formed their own militias, which forcibly collected taxes or tribute from passing merchants. Once safe and bustling trade routes were now threatened by robberies, inter-communal conflict, and legal uncertainty. In this climate, not only was the domestic economy under pressure, but India's competitiveness in regional and international trade also declined drastically.

Amidst these structural weaknesses, the Mughal Empire also failed to respond to the ongoing global economic transformation. From the 17th century, India's coastal regions began to become an arena for trade competition between various European powers, such as the Portuguese, Dutch, French, and especially the British

(Y.H. Sim, 2022). Their trading activities flourished, forming new economic centers in port cities such as Surat, Madras, Bombay, and Calcutta (R. Mukherjee, 2022). Unfortunately, the empire was not sufficiently adaptive to these changes. Instead of cultivating intelligent and mutually beneficial relationships with European trading powers, the Mughals displayed suspicion and an unpreparedness to develop economic strategies capable of responding to global dynamics.

The lack of progressive fiscal policies and the weakness in integrating the coastal economy with the agrarian economy of the interior created a deepening gap between the center and the periphery. Much of the revenue from European trade did not flow into the state treasury, but was instead controlled by local groups or European merchants themselves, exploiting loopholes in Mughal administrative weaknesses. In many cases, the East India Company even managed to obtain trade concessions and privileges from local rulers without going through the central authorities, demonstrating the empire's low bargaining power at the time (Rei, 2024).

Thus, economic and administrative decline was not merely a supporting symptom in the process of the collapse of the Mughal Dynasty, but rather one of the main roots of the collapse (Khairanis et al., 2025). When the state is no longer able to guarantee economic security, fiscal justice, and administrative efficiency, the legitimacy of power gradually evaporates. The combination of a corrupt jagirdari system, a dysfunctional bureaucracy, and an inability to respond to global transformations has caused a once-glorious empire to lose its very foundation. In the history of any empire, economic and administrative resilience are essential for continued power. In the case of the Mughals, failure in these two areas marked the beginning of the downfall of a great dynasty (Ramesh, 2024c).

External invasion and interference

Foreign invasion was one of the external factors that was very decisive in accelerating the collapse of the Mughal Empire (Sheth, 2023). Although the empire had already experienced internal decline in leadership, economics, and administration, external pressures exacerbated the existing crisis and shook the foundations of its remaining power. The major invasions of the 18th century were not only physically and economically devastating, but also eroded the empire's symbolic legitimacy in the eyes of its people and the international community (Mankoff, 2022). Two important figures who made a big impact in this regard were Nadir Shah of Persia and Ahmad Shah Durrani of Afghanistan.

Nadir Shah's invasion of India in 1739 was a crucial turning point. In a short time, the well-trained and disciplined Persian army defeated the Mughal forces at the Battle of Karnal (Mankoff, 2022). This victory paved the way for Nadir Shah to enter Delhi, the imperial capital, unopposed. A massive looting ensued, including the plundering of the Mughal palace's vast wealth. Valuables such as the Peacock Throne and the legendary Koh-i-Noor jewel were brought back to Persia as symbols of the glory of the conqueror and the humiliation of the vanquished (S. Singh, 2023)

More than just material losses, Nadir Shah's invasion inflicted deep psychological wounds on the empire. For the Indian people, it demonstrated the utter fragility of Mughal military and morale. The easy Persian victory over this once-respected empire shook confidence in central authority (Matthee, 2024). The empire that once radiated prestige and majesty across the subcontinent now seemed unable to defend its own capital. Indeed, many Mughal nobles and soldiers watched the destruction without serious resistance, reflecting the depth of the crisis of leadership and loyalty that had ensued (Morshed, 2024).

Following Nadir Shah's invasion, Mughal authority rapidly weakened. The various regions began to distance themselves from Delhi, strengthening their autonomy, and governing themselves de facto without central intervention (Khan, 2022). Local rulers, such as those in Awadh, Hyderabad, and Bengal, became increasingly reluctant to send tribute or obey court orders. Amidst this power vacuum, new forces emerged, exploiting the situation to assert their influence, one of which was Ahmad Shah Durrani (Choudhary, 2021).

Ahmad Shah Durrani, the founder of the Durrani Empire in Afghanistan, carried out a series of invasions into northern India throughout the mid-18th century (Archambault, 2023). Unlike Nadir Shah who only invaded India once, Ahmad Shah carried out repeated attacks, targeting fertile and strategic areas such as Punjab and Delhi (Balakrishna, 2020). His campaign was not only for wealth, but also aimed at establishing regional political power that could rival the long-standing authority of the Mughals. In the process, Ahmad Shah confronted various rising local powers, particularly the Marathas, who were then the dominant force in western and central India.

The Third Battle of Panipat in 1761 was one of the culminating moments of the conflict. Although it did not involve Mughal forces directly, it symbolically demonstrated the empire's irrelevance in Indian military politics at

the time (Mukhopadhyay, 2023). The two major warring powers, the Durranis and the Marathas, no longer considered the Mughals a decisive force, but merely a shadow of a past, almost forgotten. The Mughal dynasty still existed formally, but it no longer possessed significant military power, administrative sovereignty, or diplomatic capacity (Osborne, 2020).

This situation was further exacerbated by the fact that the post-Aurangzeb Mughal emperors were often used as pawns by external powers and internal factions (Badiger, 2018). In many cases, they were exploited by court elites or even by foreign powers seeking to exploit imperial symbols for legitimacy. The status of emperor was little more than an honorary title devoid of substantial authority. Mughal emperors were often held captive by the powers that claimed to be their protectors, from the Nawabs to the Marathas to the later British colonial powers (Osborne, 2020).

External invasions and disruptions also had a significant impact on economic stability. These attacks not only destroyed centers of government and commerce, but also disrupted distribution channels, triggered mass migrations, and caused lasting social trauma. The sacking of major cities like Delhi and Lahore resulted in massive damage to infrastructure, architecture, and urban economies. Merchants lost confidence in the stability of markets, and farmers became victims of ongoing conflicts. Supply chains for food, agricultural products, and military supplies were disrupted, exacerbating hunger and social insecurity in various regions (Nadir et al., 2025).

More importantly, external invasions accelerated the emergence of new powers that began to replace the Mughal Empire. European colonial powers, particularly the British through the East India Company, quickly recognized the power vacuum left by the Mughals and began to construct alternative systems of power. The British saw that their once-great empire was now in name only (Nagre, 2023). They used imperial symbols to attract local support, while gradually taking control of India's governmental and economic structures.

Thus, foreign invasion was not merely a military incident, but a catalyst for the complete disintegration of the Mughal power structure. The attacks of Nadir Shah and Ahmad Shah Durrani reflected the empire's lack of strategic resilience to defend itself, both physically and symbolically. Defeat on the battlefield transformed into defeat on the battlefield of legitimacy (Abbasi, 2019). In this process, the Mughal empire slowly but surely experienced the erosion of its function from a feared hegemonic power, to becoming merely a symbol of the past that was no longer relevant in the dynamics of contemporary Indian power.

External invasions and disturbances, therefore, not only contributed to the collapse of the dynasty, but also marked a drastic change in the political landscape of South Asia (Farmer, 2025). The power vacuum left by the Mughals was eventually filled by new powers that were much better organized and connected to the global system, ending the era of traditional Indian power based on multi-ethnic and multi-religious empires such as those built by the Mughal founder, Babur, until the glory days of Akbar.

The rise of regional and colonial powers

The collapse of the central power of the Mughal Empire created a political vacuum that was quickly filled by various regional and colonial powers. As the Delhi court began to lose control of the empire's territories, various local political entities and military groups emerged as new actors redefining the landscape of power in the Indian subcontinent (M. P. Singh & Saxena, 2021). This dynamic not only demonstrates the internal fragmentation of the empire, but also marks the geopolitical transformation of India from a large, centralized empire to an arena of competition between local kingdoms and foreign colonial powers.

One of the most prominent regional powers to emerge in the 18th century was the Maratha Confederacy. Beginning as a local power led by Shivaji in the Maharashtra region, the Marathas grew into a military and political force capable of rivaling Mughal hegemony in central and western India (Ranade, 2017). They adopted a confederal structure with semi-independent rulers in various regions, such as the Holkars in Indore, the Scindias in Gwalior, and the Bhonsles in Nagpur. Using effective guerrilla tactics and adaptability to open warfare, the Marathas gradually wrested territory from the Mughals and even managed to occupy Delhi several times, establishing themselves as the de facto power at the heart of the empire (Nandakumar, 2022).

Meanwhile, in the northwest, the Sikhs emerged as a formidable military and political force after a long period of oppression, particularly under Aurangzeb. The Sikh confederacy, or Misls, collectively began to consolidate control over the Punjab, and by the late 18th century, under the leadership of Maharaja Ranjit Singh, the Sikhs had formed an organized state with a formidable military force. They successfully maintained their independence from domination by both the Mughals and colonial powers for several decades. The Sikhs' strength serves as a key example of how previously marginalized religious and ethnic groups were able to develop the capacity for a

modern state through effective military and administrative leadership structures (Dinesh Kumar Dr. Yashpal Singh, 2024).

In addition, the Nawabs (governors) previously appointed by the empire, such as in Bengal, Awadh, and Mysore, began to operate independently, strengthening local power structures and forming their own dynasties (Choudhary, 2021). They administered the region with independent budgets, military policies, and foreign relations, although they still nominally recognized the Mughal emperor. The Nawab of Bengal, for example, built a strong economic power through the management of ports and international trade, which later made the region a prime target for European colonial powers, particularly Britain (Ramesh, 2024a).

Amidst this rise of regional power, the most significant threat came from abroad, namely, from European colonial powers. Although the Portuguese and Dutch had already established a presence on India's coast, the colonial power that most successfully exploited India's political fragmentation was the British East India Company (Gupta, 2024). These English trading companies, which initially operated solely for commercial purposes, gradually developed military and political capacities that enabled them to intervene in the internal affairs of local kingdoms.

The turning point of British colonial expansion in India began with the victory at the Battle of Plassey in 1757. In this battle, the British managed to defeat the Nawab of Bengal, Siraj-ud-Daula, through a strategy that involved betrayal within the Bengal army itself (B. B. Mukherjee, 2024). This victory gave the British control of one of the richest regions in India and became a springboard for further colonial domination. The Battle of Buxar in 1764 further strengthened their position, when the East India Company's forces defeated a coalition of three Indian rulers: the Nawab of Awadh, the Mughal Emperor Shah Alam II, and the new Nawab of Bengal (Leonard, 2014). From here began the process of systematic subordination of local Indian rulers through political agreements and subsidiary systems.

The subsidiary system, introduced by Lord Wellesley, was a colonial strategy that forced local kingdoms to accept the presence of British troops and financed them through formal treaties (MacKenzie, 2020). Under this system, local rulers nominally retained their positions, but their entire foreign and military policy was controlled by the British. In practice, this meant that many traditional rulers became colonial puppets, surviving only as long as they obeyed British will. Political and economic power became increasingly centralized in the hands of the East India Company, while the Mughal emperors and the old nobility lost their relevance (Vaughn, 2019).

The culmination of the marginalization of the Mughal dynasty occurred in 1857, during an event known as the Sipahi Rebellion, or the First Indian Rebellion. This rebellion was a major movement involving various elements of Indian society—soldiers, peasants, and local nobles—who opposed British domination. Although these movements were diverse in motives and objectives, they united under the name of Emperor Bahadur Shah II as a symbol of resistance to colonialism. In this context, the Mughal Empire is used not for its military might, but for its symbolic power as a symbol of Indian unity before the arrival of the British (Dewan, 2023).

However, after the rebellion was successfully suppressed by the British, its impact on the Mughal dynasty was fatal. Bahadur Shah II was arrested, tried, and exiled to Burma. The Mughal Empire was officially abolished, and the British declared India a direct vassal of the British Crown under Queen Victoria (Haldar, 2025). With this abolition, a long era ended that had dominated Indian history for more than three centuries.

Historical analysis of the collapse process

The collapse of the Mughal Empire was not a sudden event, but rather a gradual process that unfolded over nearly two centuries. In modern historiography, historians have highlighted how a great power like the Mughals could decline not due to a single event, but rather due to the accumulation of various internal and external factors that exacerbated each other (Khairanis et al., 2025). Historians Sanjay Subrahmanyam and Muzaffar Alam, for example, emphasize that this process of disintegration took place gradually, starting from the final decades of Aurangzeb's reign until the formal abolition of the empire by the British in 1858 (Alam & Subrahmanyam, 2011). Over this long period of time, the Mughal Empire underwent a transformation from a hegemonic power to a symbol of honor that no longer had any real power.

A historical analysis of the Mughal decline underscores the importance of a state's ability to continuously adapt to the dynamics of changing times. One particularly relevant theoretical approach is the overexpansion model proposed by Paul Kennedy in his work, The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers. (Kennedy, 2010) shows that many great empires in world history collapsed because territorial and military expansion exceeded the capacity of their institutions to manage and maintain it. In the Mughal context, the vast territory, from Kabul to Bengal, required efficient administrative and communication systems and an adaptive bureaucracy. However, the

Mughal institutions, once a strength, became a liability when they were unable to respond to the complexities of the modern era, especially in the face of colonial threats and global economic changes.

These institutional weaknesses were reflected in the stagnation of the jagirdari system, a corrupt bureaucracy, and dependence on a noble elite that prioritized personal gain over the survival of the state (Upadhyaya, 2025). As the realm began to show signs of disintegration, the court in Delhi remained caught up in rituals of symbolic pomp, unaware that its real authority had been supplanted by regional and colonial powers. This is a phenomenon observed in many great empires: the inability of the central elite to reread the changing realities of power. (Selod et al., 2023) even showing that although politically Mughal power was weakening, symbolically they were still considered a source of legitimacy until the mid-19th century, showing how long and complex the process of decline was.

The phenomenon of the Mughal collapse must also be read in the context of the global transitions of the 18th and 19th centuries, particularly the military and economic advances brought by European colonial powers. The British, through the East India Company, brought not only weapons and troops but also new ideas about administration, law, and markets. In many ways, the Mughals' failure to adopt or respond to these changes created strategic gaps that the colonial powers exploited to their full potential. The Mughal fiscal system, for example, remained based on agriculture and aristocratic monopolies over land, while the British began practicing colonial capitalism more integrated with the global market. This transformation was not simply a matter of technology, but also of the readiness of political and social institutions to respond to the challenges of the new era (Bhambra, 2025).

Interestingly, when looking at the world today, the lessons of the Mughal collapse remain relevant. Many modern states face similar challenges: a gap between elites and the masses, rigid institutions, and an inability to respond effectively to geopolitical and technological changes. Countries that fail to reform bureaucracies, strengthen government accountability, and encourage active public participation are highly vulnerable to slow but entrenched instability (Din & Usman, 2024). In this context, the Mughal collapse is not only a local historical record of the Indian subcontinent, but also a universal case study of the continuity and vulnerability of political power.

Just to name a few contemporary countries that have experienced a similar process of erosion of state capacity: Venezuela, which has experienced institutional collapse despite being rich in resources, or Syria, which has been caught up in internal conflict due to weak state legitimacy (Polga-Hecimovich, 2021). In many of these cases, we see the same pattern: an elite disconnected from the realities of its people, an inability to respond to economic crises, and a failure to manage social pluralism. The Mughals, despite ruling a multi-ethnic and multi-religious society for hundreds of years, ultimately failed to maintain that social structure due to policies of exclusion and intolerance, particularly during the later years of Aurangzeb's reign.

Furthermore, another crucial lesson from the Mughal collapse is the importance of symbolic legitimacy and the power of narrative in maintaining the state. Despite the drastic decline in their military power, the Mughal dynasty remained a symbol of unity until the Revolt of 1857. This demonstrates that in politics, symbols and narratives can be powerful mobilizing tools, even when real authority is gone. In the modern world, how symbolic power is used to rebuild national identity or maintain public loyalty. However, symbols without substance, as happened to the Mughals at the end of their lives, only accelerate the dissonance between reality and popular expectations (Ahmad, 2024).

Historian (Bayly et al., 2006) also emphasizes that the collapse of great civilizations rarely occurs in a single burst. Rather, it is a long, cumulative process, often unnoticed by the historical actors themselves. This is what happened to the Mughals: a power that formally remained standing, but was actually crumbling from within. Power is like a magnificent structure that appears intact from the outside, but is fragile and porous inside. Ultimately, only one major shock, such as an invasion or rebellion, is needed to officially bring it down.

4. CONCLUSION

The decline and collapse of the Mughal dynasty was the result of a complex process that lasted for more than a century, marked by the interaction of internal and external factors that mutually weakened the empire's power structure. Internally, the decline in leadership quality after Aurangzeb, the fragmentation of power, bureaucratic dysfunction, and exclusive religious policies accelerated the empire's disintegration. Sectarian social tensions gave rise to persistent regional rebellions, weakening the legitimacy and control of the center over the peripheral regions.

Meanwhile, externally, repeated attacks from Persia and Afghanistan not only inflicted material losses but also humiliated the Mughal Dynasty's symbolic authority. Over time, the rise of regional powers like the Marathas and Sikhs, along with the independence of the nawabs, diminished the influence of the central government. In this power vacuum, the British East India Company was able to expand its influence through diplomacy, military, and economic means. The culmination of this collapse came in 1857, when the Sipahi Rebellion, which used Emperor Bahadur Shah II as a symbol of resistance, failed and instead became the pretext for the British to formally abolish the Mughal Empire. Thus, the once-symbol of political and cultural splendor in South Asia was reduced to a mere shadow of history.

This study demonstrates that the decline of a great empire is determined not only by military defeat or foreign invasion, but also by its internal inability to respond to the challenges of the times and maintain social cohesion and administrative integrity. The Mughal Dynasty, in this case, mirrors the transformation of global power from an agrarian and military-based empire to a colonial domination based on capital and trade. The history of its collapse provides important lessons about the importance of visionary leadership, social stability, and resilience to global structural change.

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