



10 EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY POLITICAL FORMATIONS

If you look at Maps 1 and 2 closely, you will see something significant happening in the subcontinent during the first half of the eighteenth century. Notice how the boundaries of the Mughal Empire were reshaped by the emergence of a number of independent

Map 1
State formations in the eighteenth century.



kingdoms. By 1765, notice how another power, the British, had successfully grabbed major chunks of territory in eastern India. What these maps tell us is that political conditions in eighteenth-century India changed quite dramatically and within a relatively short span of time.

In this chapter we will read about the emergence of new political groups in the subcontinent during the first half of the eighteenth century – roughly from 1707, when Aurangzeb died, till the third battle of Panipat in 1761.



Map 2
British territories in the mid-eighteenth century.

The Crisis of the Empire and the Later Mughals

In Chapter 4 you saw how the Mughal Empire reached the height of its success and started facing a variety of crises towards the closing years of the seventeenth century. These were caused by a number of factors. Emperor Aurangzeb had depleted the military and financial resources of his empire by fighting a long war in the Deccan.

Under his successors, the efficiency of the imperial administration broke down. It became increasingly difficult for the later Mughal emperors to keep a check on their powerful *mansabdars*. Nobles appointed as



See Chapter 4, Table 1. Which group of people challenged Mughal authority for the longest time in Aurangzeb's reign?

governors (*subadars*) often controlled the offices of revenue and military administration (*diwani* and *faujdari*) as well. This gave them extraordinary political, economic and military powers over vast regions of the Mughal Empire. As the governors consolidated their control over the provinces, the periodic remission of revenue to the capital declined.

Peasant and zamindari rebellions in many parts of northern and western India added to these problems. These revolts were sometimes caused by the pressures of mounting taxes. At other times they were attempts by powerful chieftains to consolidate their own positions. Mughal authority had been challenged by rebellious groups in the past as well. But these groups were now able to seize the economic resources of the region to consolidate their positions. The Mughal emperors after Aurangzeb were unable to arrest the gradual shifting of political and economic authority into the hands of provincial governors, local chieftains and other groups.

Rich harvests and empty coffers

The following is a contemporary writer's account of the financial bankruptcy of the empire:

The great lords are helpless and impoverished. Their peasants raise two crops a year, but their lords see nothing of either, and their agents on the spot are virtual prisoners in the peasants' hands, like a peasant kept in his creditor's house until he can pay his debt. So complete is the collapse of all order and administration that though the peasant reaps a harvest of gold, his lord does not see so much as a wisp of straw. How then can the lord keep the armed force he should? How can he pay the soldiers who should go before him when he goes out, or the horsemen who should ride behind him?

In the midst of this economic and political crisis, the ruler of Iran, Nadir Shah, sacked and plundered the city of Delhi in 1739 and took away immense amounts of wealth. This invasion was followed by a series of plundering raids by the Afghan ruler Ahmad Shah Abdali, who invaded north India five times between 1748 and 1761.

Nadir Shah attacks Delhi

The devastation of Delhi after Nadir Shah's invasion was described by contemporary observers. One described the wealth looted from the Mughal treasury as follows:

sixty lakhs of rupees and some thousand gold coins, nearly one crore worth of gold-ware, nearly fifty crores worth of jewels, most of them unrivalled in the world, and the above included the Peacock throne.

Another account described the invasion's impact upon Delhi:

(those) ... who had been masters were now in dire straits; and those who had been revered couldn't even (get water to) quench their thirst. The recluses were pulled out of their corners. The wealthy were turned into beggars. Those who once set the style in clothes now went naked; and those who owned property were now homeless ... The New City (Shahjahanabad) was turned into rubble. (Nadir Shah) then attacked the Old quarters of the city and destroyed a whole world that existed there ...



Fig. 1
A 1779 portrait of Nadir Shah.

Already under severe pressure from all sides, the empire was further weakened by competition amongst different groups of nobles. They were divided into two major groups or factions, the Iranis and Turanis (nobles of Turkish descent). For a long time, the later Mughal emperors were puppets in the hands of either one or the other of these two powerful groups. The worst



Fig. 2
Farrukh Siyar
receiving a noble
in court.

possible humiliation came when two Mughal emperors, Farrukh Siyar (1713-1719) and Alamgir II (1754-1759) were assassinated, and two others Ahmad Shah (1748-1754) and Shah Alam II (1759-1816) were blinded by their nobles.

Emergence of New States

With the decline in the authority of the Mughal emperors, the governors of large provinces, *subadars*, and the great zamindars consolidated their authority in different parts of the subcontinent. Through the eighteenth century, the Mughal Empire gradually fragmented into a number of independent, regional states. Broadly speaking the states

of the eighteenth century can be divided into three overlapping groups: (1) States that were old Mughal provinces like Awadh, Bengal and Hyderabad. Although extremely powerful and quite independent, the rulers of these states did not break their formal ties with the Mughal emperor. (2) States that had enjoyed considerable independence under the Mughals as *watan jagirs*. These included several Rajput principalities. (3) The last group included states under the control of Marathas, Sikhs and others like the Jats. These were of differing sizes and had seized their independence from the Mughals after a long-drawn armed struggle.

The Old Mughal Provinces

Amongst the states that were carved out of the old Mughal provinces in the eighteenth century, three stand out very prominently. These were Awadh, Bengal and Hyderabad. All three states were founded by members of the high Mughal nobility who had been governors of large provinces – Sa'adat Khan (Awadh), Murshid Quli Khan (Bengal) and Asaf Jah (Hyderabad). All three had occupied high *mansabdari* positions and enjoyed the trust and confidence of the emperors. Both

Asaf Jah and Murshid Quli Khan held a *zat* rank of 7,000 each, while Sa'adat Khan's *zat* was 6,000.

Hyderabad

Nizam-ul-Mulk Asaf Jah, the founder of Hyderabad state, was one of the most powerful members at the court of the Mughal Emperor Farrukh Siyar. He was entrusted first with the governorship of Awadh, and later given charge of the Deccan. As the Mughal governor of the Deccan provinces, Asaf Jah already had full control over its political and financial administration. Taking advantage of the turmoil in the Deccan and the competition amongst the court nobility, he gathered power in his hands and became the actual ruler of that region.

Asaf Jah brought skilled soldiers and administrators from northern India who welcomed the new opportunities in the south. He appointed *mansabdars* and granted *jagirs*. Although he was still a servant of the Mughal emperor, he ruled quite independently without seeking any direction from Delhi or facing any interference. The Mughal emperor merely confirmed the decisions already taken by the Nizam.

The state of Hyderabad was constantly engaged in a struggle against the Marathas to the west and with independent Telugu warrior chiefs (*nayakas*) of the plateau. The ambitions of the Nizam to control the rich textile-producing areas of the Coromandel coast in the east were checked by the British who were becoming increasingly powerful in that region (see Map 2).

The Nizam's army

A description of the Nizam of Hyderabad's personal troopers in 1790:

...The Nizam has a swaree (sawari) of 400 elephants, several thousand of horsemen near his person who receive upwards 100 R(upees)s nominal pay (and) are extremely well mounted and richly caparisoned ...



In trying to consolidate their rule, why did Mughal *subadars* also want to control the office of *diwan*?

Awadh

Burhan-ul-Mulk Sa'adat Khan was appointed *subadar* of Awadh in 1722 and founded a state which was one of the most important to emerge out of the break-up of the Mughal Empire. Awadh was a prosperous region, controlling the rich alluvial Ganga plain and the main trade route between north India and Bengal. Burhan-ul-Mulk also held the combined offices of *subadari*, *diwani* and *faujdari*. In other words, he was responsible for managing the political, financial and military affairs of the province of Awadh.



Fig. 3
Burhan-ul-Mulk
Sa'adat Khan.

Burhan-ul-Mulk tried to decrease Mughal influence in the Awadh region by reducing the number of office holders (*jagirdars*) appointed by the Mughals. He also reduced the size of *jagirs*, and appointed his own loyal servants to vacant positions. The accounts of *jagirdars* were checked to prevent cheating and the revenues of all districts were reassessed by officials appointed by the Nawab's court. He seized a number of Rajput zamindaris and the agriculturally fertile lands of the Afghans of Rohilkhand.

The state depended on local bankers and *mahajans* for loans. It sold the right to collect tax to the highest bidders. These "revenue farmers" (*ijaradars*) agreed to pay the state a fixed sum of money. Local bankers guaranteed the payment of this contracted amount to the state. In turn, the revenue-farmers were given considerable freedom in the assessment and collection of taxes. These developments allowed new social groups, like moneylenders and bankers, to influence

the management of the state's revenue system, something which had not occurred in the past.

Bengal

Bengal gradually broke away from Mughal control under Murshid Quli Khan who was appointed as the *naib*, deputy to the governor of the province. Although never a formal *subadar*, Murshid Quli Khan very quickly seized all the power that went with that office. Like the rulers of Hyderabad and Awadh he also commanded the revenue administration of the state. In an effort to reduce Mughal influence in Bengal he transferred all Mughal *jagirdars* to Orissa and ordered a major reassessment of the revenues of Bengal. Revenue was collected in cash with great strictness from all zamindars. As a result, many zamindars had to borrow money from bankers and moneylenders. Those unable to pay were forced to sell their lands to larger zamindars.

The formation of a regional state in eighteenth-century Bengal therefore led to considerable change amongst the zamindars. The close connection between the state and bankers – noticeable in

Fig. 4
Alivardi Khan holding court.



Hyderabad and Awadh as well – was evident in Bengal under the rule of Alivardi Khan (r. 1740-1756). During his reign the banking house of Jagat Seth became extremely prosperous.

If we take a bird's eye view, we can detect three common features amongst these states. First, though many of the larger states were established by erstwhile Mughal nobles they were highly suspicious of some of the administrative systems that they had inherited, in particular the *jagirdari* system. Second, their method of tax collection differed. Rather than relying upon the officers of the state, all three regimes contracted with revenue-farmers for the collection of revenue. The practice of *ijaradari*, thoroughly disapproved of by the Mughals, spread all over India in the eighteenth century. Their impact on the countryside differed considerably. The third common feature in all these regional states was their emerging relationship with rich bankers and merchants. These people lent money to revenue farmers, received land as security and collected taxes from these lands through their own agents. Throughout India the richest merchants and bankers were gaining a stake in the new political order.

The *Watan Jagirs* of the Rajputs

Many Rajput kings, particularly those belonging to Amber and Jodhpur, had served under the Mughals with distinction. In exchange, they were permitted to enjoy considerable autonomy in their *watan jagirs*. In the eighteenth century, these rulers now attempted to extend their control over adjacent regions. Ajit Singh, the ruler of Jodhpur, was also involved in the factional politics at the Mughal court.

These influential Rajput families claimed the *subadari* of the rich provinces of Gujarat and Malwa. Raja Ajit Singh of Jodhpur held the governorship of Gujarat and Sawai Raja Jai Singh of Amber was governor of Malwa. These offices were renewed by Emperor Jahandar Shah in 1713. They also tried to

extend their territories by seizing portions of imperial territories neighbouring their *watans*. Nagaur was conquered and annexed to the house of Jodhpur, while Amber seized large portions of Bundi. Sawai Raja Jai Singh founded his new capital at Jaipur and was given the *subadari* of Agra in 1722. Maratha campaigns into Rajasthan from the 1740s put severe pressure on these principalities and checked their further expansion.

Raja Jai Singh of Jaipur

A description of Raja Jai Singh in a Persian account of 1732:

Raja Jai Singh was at the height of his power. He was the governor of Agra for 12 years and of Malwa for 5 or 6 years. He possessed a large army, artillery and great wealth. His sway extended from Delhi to the banks of the Narmada.



Fig. 5
Mehrangarh Fort,
Jodhpur.

Seizing Independence

The Sikhs

The organisation of the Sikhs into a political community during the seventeenth century (see Chapter 8) helped in regional state-building in the Punjab. Several battles were fought by Guru Gobind Singh against the Rajput and Mughal rulers, both before and after the institution of the *Khalsa* in 1699. After his death in 1708, the *Khalsa* rose in revolt against the Mughal authority under Banda Bahadur's leadership, declared their sovereign rule by striking coins in the name of Guru Nanak and Guru Gobind Singh, and established their own administration between the Sutlej and the Jamuna. Banda Bahadur was captured in 1715 and executed in 1716.



What is the *Khalsa*?
Do you recall
reading about
it in Chapter 8?

Fig. 6
Guru Gobind Singh,
the tenth guru.



Under a number of able leaders in the eighteenth century, the Sikhs organized themselves into a number of bands called *jathas*, and later on *misls*. Their combined forces were known as the grand army (*dal khalsa*). The entire body used to meet at Amritsar at the time of Baisakhi and Diwali to take collective decisions known as “resolutions of the Guru (*gurmata*)”. A system called *rakhi* was introduced, offering protection to cultivators on the payment of a tax of 20 per cent of the produce.

Guru Gobind Singh had inspired the *Khalsa* with the belief that their destiny was to rule (*raj karega khalsa*). Their well-knit organization enabled them to put up a successful resistance to the Mughal governors first and then to Ahmad Shah Abdali who had seized the rich province of the Punjab and the Sarkar of Sirhind from the Mughals. The *Khalsa* declared their sovereign rule by striking their own coin again in 1765. Significantly, this coin bore the same inscription as the one on the orders issued by the *Khalsa* in the time of Banda Bahadur.

The Sikh territories in the late eighteenth century extended from the Indus to the Jamuna but they were divided under different rulers. One of them, Maharaja Ranjit Singh, reunited these groups and established his capital at Lahore in 1799.

The Marathas

The Maratha kingdom was another powerful regional kingdom to arise out of a sustained opposition to Mughal rule. Shivaji (1627-1680) carved out a stable kingdom with the support of powerful warrior families (*deshmukhs*). Groups of highly mobile, peasant-pastoralists (*kunbis*) provided the backbone of the Maratha army. Shivaji used these forces to challenge the Mughals in the peninsula. After Shivaji's death, effective power in the Maratha state was wielded by a family of Chitpavan Brahmanas who served Shivaji's successors as Peshwa (or principal minister). Poona became the capital of the Maratha kingdom.



Fig. 7
Sword of Maharaja
Ranjit Singh.

Chauth

25 per cent of the land revenue claimed by zamindars. In the Deccan this was collected by the Marathas.

Sardeshmukhi

9-10 per cent of the land revenue paid to the head revenue collector in the Deccan.

Under the Peshwas, the Marathas developed a very successful military organisation. Their success lay in bypassing the fortified areas of the Mughals, by raiding cities and by engaging Mughal armies in areas where their supply lines and reinforcements could be easily disturbed.

Between 1720 and 1761, the Maratha empire expanded. It gradually chipped away at the authority of the Mughal Empire. Malwa and Gujarat were seized from the Mughals by the 1720s. By the 1730s, the Maratha king was recognised as the overlord of the entire Deccan peninsula. He possessed the right to levy **chauth** and **sardeshmukhi** in the entire region.

After raiding Delhi in 1737 the frontiers of Maratha domination expanded rapidly: into Rajasthan and the Punjab in the north; into Bengal and Orissa in the east; and into Karnataka and the Tamil and Telugu countries in the south (see Map 1). These were not formally included in the Maratha empire, but were made to pay tribute as a way of accepting Maratha sovereignty. Expansion brought enormous resources, but it came at a price. These military campaigns also made other rulers hostile towards the Marathas. As a result, they were not inclined to support the Marathas during the third battle of Panipat in 1761.

Alongside endless military campaigns, the Marathas developed an effective administrative system as well. Once conquest had been completed and Maratha rule was secure, revenue demands were gradually introduced taking local conditions into account. Agriculture was encouraged and trade revived. This allowed Maratha chiefs (*sardars*) like Sindhia of Gwalior, Gaekwad of Baroda and Bhonsle of Nagpur the resources to raise powerful armies. Maratha campaigns into Malwa in the 1720s did not challenge the growth and prosperity of the cities in the region. Ujjain expanded under Sindhia's patronage and Indore under Holkar's. By all accounts these cities were large and prosperous and functioned as important

commercial and cultural centres. New trade routes emerged within the areas controlled by the Marathas. The silk produced in the Chanderi region now found a new outlet in Poona, the Maratha capital. Burhanpur which had earlier participated in the trade between Agra and Surat now expanded its hinterland to include Poona and Nagpur in the south and Lucknow and Allahabad in the east.

The Jats

Like the other states the Jats consolidated their power during the late seventeenth and eighteenth-centuries. Under their leader, Churaman, they acquired control over territories situated to the west of the city of Delhi, and by the 1680s they had begun dominating the region between the two imperial cities of Delhi and Agra. For a while they became the virtual custodians of the city of Agra.

The Jats were prosperous agriculturists, and towns like Panipat and Ballabgarh became important trading centres in the areas dominated by them. Under Suraj Mal the kingdom of Bharatpur emerged as a strong state. When Nadir Shah sacked Delhi in 1739, many of the city's notables took refuge there. His son Jawahir Shah had 30,000 troops of his own and hired

Fig. 8

Eighteenth-century palace complex at Dig. Note the "Bangla dome" on the assembly hall on the roof of the building.



another 20,000 Maratha and 15,000 Sikh troops to fight the Mughals.

While the Bharatpur fort was built in a fairly traditional style, at Dig the Jats built an elaborate garden palace combining styles seen at Amber and Agra. Its buildings were modelled on architectural forms first associated with royalty under Shah Jahan (see Figure 12 in Chapter 5 and Figure 12 in Chapter 9).

The French Revolution (1789–1794)

In the various state systems of eighteenth-century India, the common people did not enjoy the right to participate in the affairs of their governments. In the Western world, this was the situation until the late eighteenth century. The American (1776–1781) and French Revolutions challenged the social and political privileges enjoyed by the aristocrats.

During the French Revolution, the middle classes, peasants and artisans fought against the special rights enjoyed by the clergy and the nobility. They believed that no group in society should have privileges based on birth. Rather, people's social position must depend on merit. The philosophers of the French Revolution suggested that there be equal laws and opportunities for all. They also held that the authority of the government should come from the people who must possess the right to participate in its affairs. Movements such as the French and American Revolutions gradually transformed subjects into citizens.

The ideas of citizenship, nation-state and democratic rights took root in India from the late nineteenth century.

Imagine



You are a ruler of an eighteenth-century kingdom. Tell us about the steps you would take to make your position strong in your province, and what opposition or problems you might face while doing so.

Let's recall

1. Match the following:

| | |
|-----------------|-----------------------------|
| <i>subadar</i> | a revenue farmer |
| <i>faujdar</i> | a high noble |
| <i>ijaradar</i> | provincial governor |
| <i>misl</i> | Maratha peasant warriors |
| <i>chauth</i> | a Mughal military commander |
| <i>kunbis</i> | a band of Sikh warriors |
| <i>umara</i> | tax levied by the Marathas |

2. Fill in the blanks:

- (a) Aurangzeb fought a protracted war in the _____.
- (b) *Umara* and *jagirdars* constituted powerful sections of the Mughal _____.
- (c) Asaf Jah was given charge of the Deccan *subadari* in _____.
- (d) The founder of the Awadh nawabi was _____.

3. State whether true or false:

- (a) Nadir Shah invaded Bengal.
- (b) Sawai Raja Jai Singh was the ruler of Indore.
- (c) Guru Gobind Singh was the tenth Guru of the Sikhs.
- (d) Poona became the capital of the Marathas in the eighteenth century.

4. What were the offices held by Sa'adat Khan?

KEYWORDS

subadari
dal khalsa
misl
faujdar
ijaradari
chauth
sardeshmukhi

Let's discuss

5. Why did the Nawabs of Awadh and Bengal try to do away with the *jagirdari* system?
6. How were the Sikhs organised in the eighteenth century?
7. Why did the Marathas want to expand beyond the Deccan?
8. What were the policies adopted by Asaf Jah to strengthen his position?
9. Do you think merchants and bankers today have the kind of influence they had in the eighteenth century?
10. Did any of the kingdoms mentioned in this chapter develop in your state? If so, in what ways do you think life in the state would have been different in the eighteenth century from what it is in the twenty-first century?

Let's do

11. Find out more about the architecture and culture associated with the new courts of any of the following Awadh, Bengal or Hyderabad.
12. Collect popular tales about-rulers from any one of the following groups of people: the Rajputs, Jats, Sikhs or Marathas.