

The Eighteenth Century: An Overview



Subject: History

**Unit: India in the mid eighteenth Century: Society,
Economy, Polity**

Lesson: The Eighteenth Century: An Overview

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The Eighteenth Century: An Overview

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1.1: The eighteenth century: an overview

Introduction

The 18th century occupies an interesting position in the history of India. In recent years, it has also emerged as a major site of debate and deliberations among historians. The reasons for this are many. As a century that witnessed the passing away of an empire (the Mughal) and its replacement by another (the British), it was viewed and described in very different ways by contemporary observers, commentators and participants. For chroniclers of the declining Mughal Empire, (Moving map to be inserted) the century represented a period of political and cultural loss – of profound transformation that was likened to a revolution, an inqilab, that could only be expressed in poems of lament or shahr e ashob.

Value addition: did you know?

Poetry of the declining Mughals

The genre of Urdu poetry known as shahr ashob (literally the city's misfortune) gives us a personalized account of individual reactions to the period of Mughal decline in the 18th century. Two major poets specializing in this genre were MirTaqi Mir (1724-1810) and Mirza Rafi Sauda (1713-81) both of whom were old enough to feel the trauma of Nadir Shah's attack on Delhi, the imperial city. The pain and privations of the city and its residents who faced shortages, hardships and exactions formed the subject matter of a lot of the poetry. Recall how Sauda writes:

"The Income from jagirs is all but cut off now.

For years the country has been at the pleasure of outlaws and renegades.

He who was once sole lord of twenty two subas

Can't even retain the faujdari of Kol.

Those in the country are strong and seditious, what amirs there are feeble,

And those who detain us on the road are in cahoots with them, Their masters cannot collect even a quarter of the harvest."

For Mir, the world was never the same and even as he resided in Lucknow in relative safety, he wrote:

"You would not know this age as you did the one before,

Mir,

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It is not that age now, nor that earth or sky"

Source: Petievich, Carla R. 1990. 'Poetry of the Declining Mughals: The Shahr Ashob'. Journal of South Asian Literature. Vol. XXV No. 1.

For new comers and political aspirants, who were busy building smaller regional states and political units, the century was one of opportunities that permitted a redistribution of resources and produced contrasting and competing narratives of kingship, governance and conflict. For the aspiring English East India Company that looked at every opportunity for expansion and self-aggrandizement, the century had to be projected as one of instability and decay giving them the necessary moral justification for conquest and subjugation. And that was not all. There were regional histories in the vernacular being produced in the 18th century and which indexed a new set of historical sensibilities and political change. These multiple narratives make retrospective history writing difficult but are useful in yielding valuable insights into the complexities of the social, political and cultural landscape of 18th century India.

This lesson will attempt to track overall social change and its manifestations - political, cultural and economic. We will also look at literary and cultural production, regional state building, caste mobility and community formations and the changing balance of political power buttressed by a redistribution of economic resources. Here the first question that we will need to clarify is what we mean by social change. Evidently at one level, we are looking at clearly identifiable processes that affected certain sections of society, altering their status and resource base and with that, occasionally their political orientation or world view. Social change in the 18th century came largely as a consequence of changing economic circumstances in the wake of Imperial Mughal decline and one that generated new possibilities for employment, profit and social mobility for some groups who were positioned to take advantage of the new set up. The dismantling of the imperial Mughal edifice found expression in the emergence of regional states headed by ex-Mughal grandees in some cases and by new claimants in others.

Some historians like C. A. Bayly and Andre Wink have argued that the emergence of the new states itself reflected the maturation of an earlier period of expansion and growth that could not be contained within the faltering Mughal set up. In many cases, the beneficiaries of the economic change became rulers themselves and in any case, along with others, pursued policies of military expansion and bureaucratic centralization that had vital consequences. One important result was the increasing deployment of new methods of revenue extraction and management referred to by David Washbrook as 'military fiscalism'. This referred to a policy of short-term revenue extraction to serve the overall objective of maintaining armed forces by encouraging revenue farming instead of long-term investment in productivity. This in turn benefited a range of groups, especially scribal, managerial groups and holders of landed rights described by some historians as the 'gentry', to come to the forefront. In fact the military requirements of new regional states, especially in the second half of the 18th century, Mysore, Hyderabad, Bengal and Awadh, operating a war economy also brought European mercenary soldiers and adventurers whose presence in

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18th century India added a colorful detail to its rich and vibrant tapestry of social life. The association of adventurers with courts – Polier with Awadh, Marquis de Bussy with Arcot, and de Boigne with Mahadji Sindhia, among others – reminds us of the hybridity and cosmopolitanism of regional courts in 18th century India.

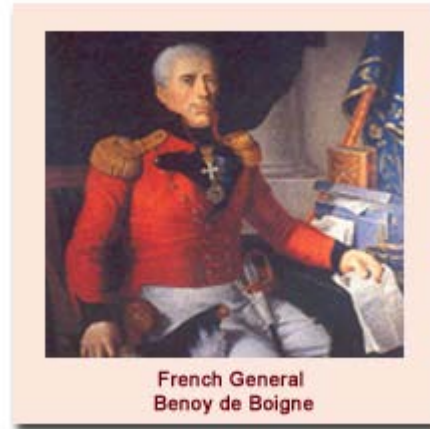


Figure 1.1.1: Benoit de Boigne

Source: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Beno%C3%AEt_de_Boigne

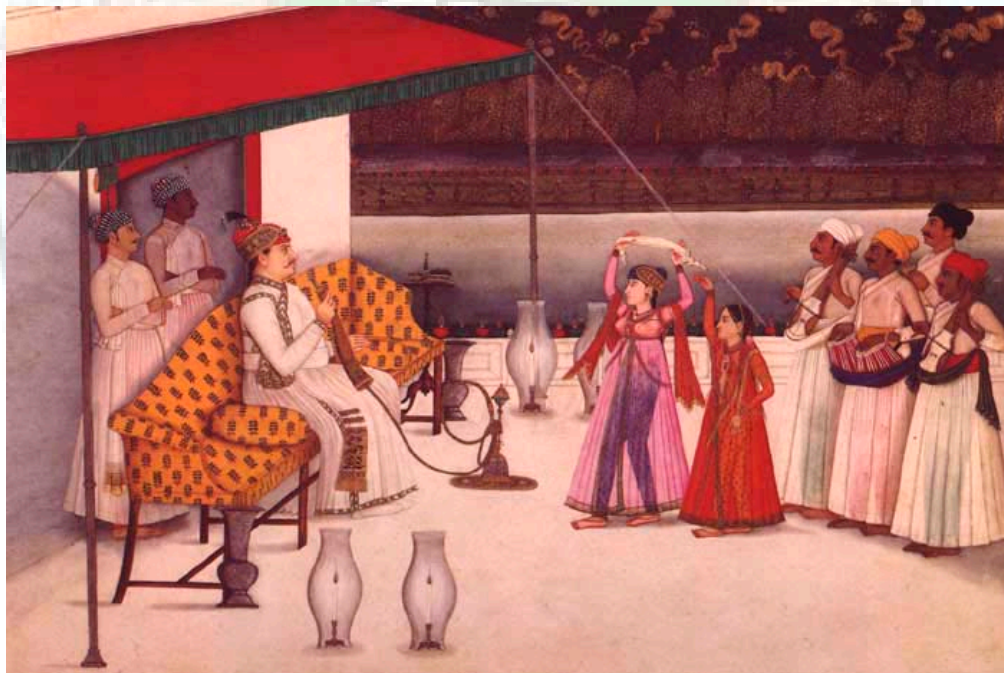


Figure 1.1.2: Col. Polier's Nautch (Lucknow, c.1780), painted by Mihr Chand

http://www.columbia.edu/itc/mealac/pritchett/00routesdata/1700_1799/polier/polier.html

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Accommodation and adaptation, mobility and change, represent only one element in a historical overview of social change. The other has to do with the genealogy of protest and dissidence – of locating sources of unrest and resistance among those groups whose position and status were threatened by the changes in the body politic. The 18th century saw episodic rebellions in various parts of India breaking out during moments of famine, political disruption and war. An overview of the century cannot afford to overlook these moments of rupture and contestation and speculate on their implications for assessing the 18th century in the larger context of change and progression. At the same time, we will need to consider the notion of early modernity, which is now emerging as a major research concern among historians of 18th century India. Historians like Kumkum Chatterjee and Sanjay Subrahmanyam look at historical productions of the 18th century to posit the idea of an early modern conceptualization of history.

Social change and political economy

Tracking social change in 18th century India is no easy task. The first major stumbling block is the size and diversity of the space that constituted India. This is followed by an incredibly dense and mired structure of social relations even at the local level that make any large generalizations impossible. For purposes of clarity and convenience, we will address the issue of social change around the changing political economy of the period. We will be looking at the century in two different temporal segments; the first half of the century that saw regionalism being articulated in the form of actual political units and the following half century that saw a progressive dismantling of the regimes by the English East India Company. By political economy we mean here a commonsensical understanding of the term, that is, the economies of polities and states, which were by and large geared to a war economy that made necessary an efficient bureaucracy and an expanding army. These in turn imposed immense pressure on state revenues forcing the administration to devise new strategies to appropriate greater revenues and facilitate their circulation. Some of these strategies benefited new and emerging social groups who became the movers and shakers of power in the 18th century, financing wars, facilitating transfer of revenues and acquiring increasing influence in the administration. Some of these groups went on to collaborate with the English East India Company in the second half of the 18th century enabling the latter to wrest political power and make a bid for paramountcy in Hindustan. On the other hand, there were others whose resources were strained severely and who were barely in a position to negotiate with the new dispensation.

Historians have begun to realize that the articulation of regionalism as a by-product of the Mughal polity itself was not confined to the political domain. If the 1980's saw a proliferation of region based studies that made a case for pockets of growth and social change and for social tensions generated within the Mughal agrarian order, more recent scholarship has focused attention on the tensions between the centre and the region expressed through the vehicle of language. Muzaffar Alam's work on the political language of Islam in Mughal India referred to both the tension between Persian and regional vernaculars and also the factors that determined the choice of Persian as the language of politics and negotiation, as an instrument of maneuverability and social management. The point that needs to be borne in

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mind here, is how elements of early modernity and a secular polity were present in the late Mughal set up and how in course of the 18th century, the epistemic frame of empire based on Persian was showing signs of wear and tear caused by the assertion of regional tendencies.

Social change and political economy of Hindustan in 1700: a bird's eye view

What would a hypothetical time traveler have found during his travels in India around the first half of the 18th century and how would this have differed from his later counterpart at the end of the period? A lot of course would have been determined by his/her location. The view from Delhi would have been singularly bleak as the death of Aurangzeb in 1707 was accompanied by the steady erosion of political authority in the centre and the articulation of regional aspirations by ex-subadars and/or new members of the landed gentry. As senior Mughal officials and rulers struggled to maintain hold over a deteriorating edifice, new players drawn largely from the landed gentry and mobile peasant backgrounds with their scribal collaborators emerged as the new bosses of the day. Successive onslaughts by the Persians and the Afghans and their sack of the city in 1739 and 1761 respectively, thoroughly destroyed the already paralyzed edifice of the Mughal state, which by this time could boast only of a hollow carapace having yielded to the demands and aspirations of regional leaders.

Between 1707 and 1761, regionalism became the dominant force in Indian politics; everywhere from Bengal in the east to Gujarat in the west, from Punjab in the north to Arcot and Mysore in the south, new aspirants, some ex Mughal grandees, some arrivistes asserted their claims to power. Between these two dates, Bengal, Awadh and Hyderabad had set themselves up as independent units, while during the same period two further regimes were carved out to the north and east of Delhi by Afghan military adventurers – the Rohillas and Bangash Afghans. If these states represented the vitality and enterprise of disaffected Mughal nobles, who astutely solicited the cooperation of local power holders and of mercenary adventurers respectively, there were others like the Marathas, Jats and Sikhs whose politics embodied the interface between social movements, agrarian mobility and political opportunity.

What do we mean by this interface? Typically, an interface indicates a crossing point for different processes. Consequently, we can see economic growth or agricultural expansion over a period of time can enable local rights holders to build up their reserves and improve their political status and then challenge the very foundations of the political authority that had sustained and supported their claims in the first place. Alternatively, there could be as in the case of entities like the Marathas and Sikhs a convergence of land related aspirations with social transformation based on ideology that persuaded and helped mobilize a range of groups to stake claims to regional power. From the older perspective of the established Mughal ruling class, the usurpation of political authority by subject populations was an abhorrence that was to be condemned in the strongest possible terms. Historians of late Mughal India gave vent to this – we have for instance, memoirists and chroniclers lamenting

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the lapses in rule and the assertion of new groups whose politics was seen as an abomination.

These laments reflected not merely a perceptible decline in governance and the resultant political instability but the anxiety about the implications the imperial crisis had for the older, familiar social balance that had once kept the body politic intact. Once the well-known and familiar triad of ruler-magnate-peasant had been disrupted, the foundations of governance were shaken as new aspirants and upstarts raced to make good their fortunes in a time of troubles. This manifested in the form of regional dissociation from the imperial centre, of regional polities mushrooming in Bengal, Awadh, Hyderabad, the Punjab and the Deccan. Regionalism was largely buttressed by economic developments of the preceding decades that had enabled a range of social groups with access to skills and capital to emerge as power brokers if not power-holders. This group, often referred to as the gentry by scholars like C. A. Bayly, embodied the changing pattern of resource distribution and the consequences of the policy of military fiscalism that we have referred to in the context of the new regional states of the 18th century. Responding to the need for building efficient armies, regional states devised new mechanisms for revenue mobilization and extraction and made use of new partners drawn from the commercial sections of the population. At the same time there was a closer and deeper penetration into society with the help of an expanding bureaucracy, a development that further reinforced the status and strength of the mobile scribal and commercial groups of Indian society. The emergence and success of Karanams in the south, Kayasths in Bengal and the Deccan, Chitpavan Brahmins and Shenvis in the Konkan as much as the assertion of Bhumihars in Benaras as a consequence of sustained agrarian colonization, epitomized the changing balance of social power in 18th century India and one that occasionally destabilized older boundaries of caste and status.

Value addition: did you know?

The Rajapur Congress of 1664

In 1664, the small town of Rajapur in the Konkan witnessed a dharmasabha, a gathering of pandits, convened by Shivaji to examine the standing of Shenvis a sub group of the Saraswats. A mobile group, their advancement had become noticeable thanks to the success they enjoyed in trade, landholding, revenue management and local administration. Their success and claims to status raised questions on what constituted a Brahmin. Was it diet, was it particular livelihoods? For the Rajapur assembly the bone of contention was not that Shenvis ate fish but that they pursued agriculture and associated activities that eroded Brahmanical status. These questions of standing cropped up repeatedly after 1664, indicating two things; one that communities were competing for certain kinds of advantages and secondly that a series of local meanings could always be added to the archetypal figure of the Brahmin. For us students and teachers of 18th century India, the most important feature of social history seems to be mobility and how this disturbed and destabilized existing social relations and conventions.

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Source: Rosalind O'Hanlon and Christopher Minkowski. 2008. 'What makes people who they are? Pandit networks and the problem of livelihoods in early modern Western India'. *Indian Economic and Social History Review*. 45, 3, 381-416.

Select case studies

Let us illustrate this point with a few concrete examples, some of which you will learn in detail on another occasion. Take the case of Bengal where in course of the first half of the 18th century a vibrant regional polity emerged under Murshid Quli Khan (1713-27) and his successors. Sent as subadar to Bengal by Emperor Aurangzeb and armed with instructions to augment the region's revenue collections meant for the imperial treasury, Murshid Quli ended up rehauling the entire administrative set up that not only stepped up the state's revenue shares, but brought about a new social coalition. How did this happen? Conventional wisdom speaks of three sets of reforms the administrator undertook, namely the transfer of a substantial portion of land into direct crown held territory (khalsa), streamlining collection procedures and investing the responsibility of revenue collection with big zamindars who were capable of paying the enhanced revenue assessment. Those who could not, and defaulted, lost their lands with the result that eventually more than two fifths of Bengal's revenue was paid by a small group of about 30 influential zamindari houses. The latter in turn worked with financiers who paid upfront the necessary revenue and even undertook the important business of remitting revenues from Bengal to Delhi and assumed a position of centrality in the set up. The best known among these merchant houses was the house of Jagat Seth. (Box on Jagat Seth)

By eliminating small and middling zamindars and investing large landed houses with the task of revenue collection, Murshid Quli's administration enjoyed greater vertical control over society and aligned it more closely to the interests and concerns of the local elite and merchant groups. His administration was also characterized by the growing preponderance of Hindu scribal groups who manned the administration and who emerged as important members of the literati well versed in Persian. This new arrangement worked well for more than four decades; described by Philip Caulkins as a government by consent until it was destabilized by internal dissensions within the court in Murshidabad and the growing offensive of the English East India Company based in Calcutta. We will have occasion to refer to this in greater detail.

Growth of zamindari power as well as the growing participation of mercantile and scribal groups in the running of the administrative and revenue collecting machinery was evident in other successor states as well. In Hyderabad we have the instance of the emerging power of

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the Kayasths, as record keepers and administrative assistants, whose rise according to historian Karen Leonard, was an inevitable consequence of the policies of the newly created Hyderabad state. Here was a case of a military aristocracy trying to keep a robust army intact so as to further territorial expansion and to consolidate a bureaucracy that benefited record keepers and scribal groups. In Awadh too, we have evidence of magnate power that not only provided leadership to agrarian resistance against the Mughals during the closing decades of the 17th century, but also built substantial holdings and even buttressed the provincial administration's claims to autonomy from the Mughal centre.

A very different set of circumstances operated in the case of social movements translating into political entities in the 18th century – a development that also testifies to the inherent fluidity of the period that made it possible for a range of social groups to improve and articulate their status. Ordinarily, opportunities for social mobility are made possible when there is an expansion of economic opportunities or when there is a growing pressure on territory – a land hunger that drives people to move out and thereafter, aspire to a higher ascriptive caste status. Circumstances in the late 17th and 18th centuries worked to this end at several levels. Here, we have the case of Sikhs, Jats and Marathas, whose numbers were largely drawn from lower ranks of peasant and cultivating society as well as from groups on the fringes of settled agriculture coming forward to support war-bands in search of territory and cohering around a set of socially inclusive doctrines.

Starting off as a reaction to the dominance of revenue extractors in the Deccan, the Marathas represented the coming of age of local co-sharers of revenue who used their military service as a vantage point to claim a new and exalted status in the 17th century and to enjoy certain vested rights in land. The term itself began to represent by the 17th century a category of service elite drawn from diverse castes who in lieu of their military service to Muslim sultanates in the Deccan began to enjoy both status and rights in land. The formation of the category coincided with the rise of a social movement based on inclusive bhakti that convulsed society in Maharashtra and gave an added fillip to the aspirations of ordinary peasant cultivators to aspire to a new status that military service promised. The conditions of Mughal decline in the first half of the 18th century encouraged Maratha leaders to organize bands and carve out zones of influence far removed from their original nucleus in the western Deccan. Between 1713 and 1761 when Maratha expansion was checked by the forces of the Afghan king Ahmad Shah Abdali in the historic battle-fields of Panipat, the power of the Maratha Confederacy as a major contender for paramouncy was evident to any contemporary observer.

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Figure 1.1.3: Maratha soldier

Source: http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/8/80/Maratha_soldier.gif

A similar set of tendencies was evident in the case of Jat expansion and their embrace of Sikhism, the other great social movement that appealed to commercial castes initially but moved robust itinerant groups as well as pioneer peasant castes like the Jats. Repeated struggles against the Mughal administration became effective especially in the wake of the Persian and Afghan invasions that destabilized the situation in the Punjab and the Northwest enabling Sikh war-bands to occupy Lahore and in 1767 found the Patiala state. What united all these regional units was the coalition of interests that developed between rulers and local elite constituted by new and mobile groups, and the tendency towards bureaucratic centralization assumed by the new rulers in their perennial search for revenues needed to finance wars and expansion. Whether it was Alivardi Khan in Bengal or Martanda Varma in

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Travancore, or Hyder Ali and Tipu Sultan in Mysore, the emphasis on bureaucratic reorganization, rigorous taxation, and regulation of commerce and deployment of mercenaries to maintain political control was apparent. It was therefore not entirely coincidental that bankers and service castes everywhere should assume a position of centrality in the fluid and dynamic state system of the 18th century – a development that contributed very substantively to the crystallization of more caste cohesive identities.

If the origins of regional state building were to be found in conditions of growth and redistribution of economic resources among more groups, the consolidation of these regimes and the strategies deployed to achieve it ensured a new coalition of social classes, in which the merchants, scribes and the landed gentry assumed a central position. The process was however, short-lived as the regional state system came under pressure from the second half of the 18th century when the English East India Company thanks to its victory in Bengal in 1757 moved into a new position of competitive advantage in the struggle for Hindustan.

Plassey and the transition to the Company Raj

The growing presence of the English East India Company and its steady assumption of political power was the most visible feature of Indian politics in the half century following Plassey. Beginning as a trading company that was able to manoeuvre for special privileges from the Mughal empire and its representatives, usually in the form of imperial farmans for customs exemption, the Company began to intervene as a mercenary force in the mediation of succession disputes in the regional systems until 1757 when it made a conscious bid for direct political authority and territorial control. This decision coincided with a crisis in the political system of Bengal precipitated by the actions of the new Nawab Sirajuddaulah against powerful members of the ruling elite. The unfolding of a conspiracy among the latter fanned by the English East India Company cost the Bengal system its independence as a farcical battle waged in the groves of Plassey was followed by a humiliating settlement imposed on the chosen Nawab Mir Jafar that enabled the Company to steadily extend its tentacles on the political economy of the region. Less than ten years later, a more decisive battle was fought between the Company and Mir Qasim, the Nawab of Bengal who attempted to resist the steady erosion of his authority. The contest of Buxar gave the Company the right to revenue collection from the subas of Bengal, Bihar and Orissa and armed thus with a huge revenue surplus, the Company was poised to make a bid for the supremacy of Hindustan.

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Figure 1.1.4: Clive and Mir Jafar after the battle of Plassey

Source: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Clive.jpg>

Between 1765 and 1818, the political history of India was marked by conflict and diplomatic negotiations that finally put the Company in control over the subcontinent. The process of domination was complex and chequered – a variety of strategies were deployed ranging from subsidiary alliances to indirect rule to outright conquest and coercion. A situation of endemic conflict inevitably put pressure on the regional states that were forced to rely more and more on what we have referred to as a policy of military fiscalism. The tightening of the bureaucracy, the rampant spread of revenue farming that made both for quick turn over as well as pressure on the cultivators and the intercession of mobile commercial groups with capital in the financing of war and politics emerged as the most distinguishing marks of transition politics in the second half of the 18th century. Bankers were indeed the cement that kept the ties of circulation in place and it was also their collaboration that enabled the Company to score a march over its rivals. The need for remittance facilities to finance war operations in widely dispersed zones of conflict meant that the hundis of Indian bankers like Gopaldas Manohardas, or Hari Bhakti and Tarwady Arjunjee Nathjee became critical determinants of success and failure. The war economy also created a demand for new commodities and helped in the emergence of a nexus between revenue, trade and distribution.

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If merchants were key figures in transition politics, mercenaries were no less important in the political ecology of 18th century India. The conditions of a war economy brought in among other things a train of European adventurers and mercenary soldiers, who introduced new technologies of warfare and who were equally adept at integrating into the Persianized political culture of late Mughal India. Some of them like Polier and Kirkpatrick or Palmer, opted for an 'Orientalized' life style, learnt Indian languages especially Persian, entertained liaisons with local women and became part of a new hybrid temperament that characterized the century. The presence of European military adventurers and missionaries in courts as residents or advisers contributed to the cultural richness of the century when in fact in the domains of art and music there was a marked efflorescence that stood in contrast to the political convulsions.

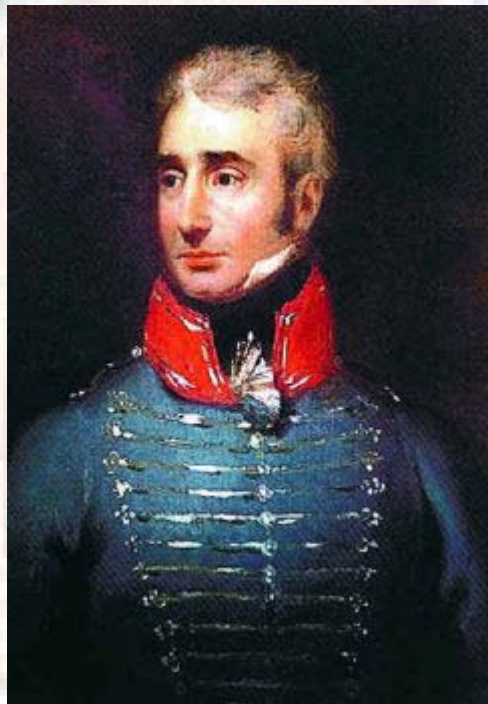


Figure 1.1.5: James Achilles Kirkpatrick

Source: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:James_Achilles_Kirkpatrick.jpg

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Figure 1.1.6: Khair-un-Nissa, a Hyderabad noblewoman and wife of James Achilles Kirkpatrick

Source: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Khair-un-Nissa.jpg>

A social revolution

Can we on the basis of the above survey of political change and its supporting economy, make a definitive formulation about the changing social landscape in 18th century India and if we do, which classes would we be looking at? Clearly we have evidence indicating the assertion and visibility of scribal and commercial groups and of the landed gentry in some parts who benefited from Mughal peace and asserted their autonomy in the 18th century. How did this success find reflection in terms of status and identity? Susan Bayly in an important work on caste and society in India argues that the dynamism of regional state systems in the wake of Mughal decline helped in the crystallization of caste identities and ideals and which were subsequently consolidated under British rule. Historians like Sanjay Subrahmanyam and Kumkum Chatterjee have shown more recently how the articulation of a scribal culture produced new modes of writing history that marked an important break with older traditions of chronicling and reflected a new sense of historical awareness. The rich cultural mix of Persianized ideals and of Brahmanical tradition was especially evident in Bengal. Here the Persianate attainments of the Bengali gentry were remembered with pride and élan even as there was a renewed interest in patronizing Hindu rituals and in the adherence of Sanskrit/Brahmanical culture.

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What stands out in terms of social transformation is the mobility that was available to a variety of enterprising groups to make good in the times. Warrior lineages, peasant-cultivators assuming the status of Bhumihars and Jats and Marathas, bankers and scribes who participated in the Persianized political culture even as they were moving towards a more systematic caste identity clearly emerge as the principal actors of the century. It was also in course of the 18th century that there was what Vijay Pinch refers to as the crystallization of a new phase of armed asceticism embodied by the rise of Gosains as major mercenary soldiers and recruiters as well as traders and money lenders. The changes wrought in the military labour market of Northern India by the English East India Company as well as successor states reinforced caste identities for example – by joining the Company army, many of the social castes hoped to realize their aspirations of upward mobility.

It is possible to inter-relate social turbulence and transformation with religious expressions ; Pinch observes how even after the subjugation of the Gosains, their organizations continued to have important social functions revealed most obviously in their control of the Kumbh pilgrimage held triennially in Hardwar, Allahabad, Nasik and Ujjain. Muslim religious life both in Delhi and elsewhere revolved around new and more rigorous conceptions of fidelity to the Hadith or the sayings of the prophet. In Delhi Shah Waliullah the Naqshbandi Sufi (1703-62) led an important scholarly circle and whose teachings found a deep resonance in the Punjab and Rohilkhand. In Shiah led states like Bengal and Awadh, there was a marked resurgence of elegies and marsia traditions all of which gestured to a heightened sense of religious identification.

The period also saw a remarkable cultural efflorescence – developments in music, poetry, language are seen by scholars as embodying a major change in register and initiating the so called modern turn in artistic production. The region came into full focus – art, architecture and poetry as well as religious expressions tended to be grounded in their regional contexts. We have for instance poets like Shah Abdul Latif of Bhit (1689-1752) writing in Sindhi and Bulhe Shah (1680-1758) and Waris Shah (bc.1730) in Punjabi not to speak of important regional poetry in Bengal and Maharashtra.

Culture in an age of change

Scholars of art and cultural production as well as language have acknowledged the vitality of the 18th century courts that emerged as important patrons and laboratories for innovation. Notwithstanding disruption in structures of imperial patronage, the arts would appear to have thrived in regional courts and imbibed rich regional inputs. This was especially true of painting – the miniature traditions in Rajasthan are a case in point.

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Figure 1.1.7: Akbar watching Tansen take a lesson from Swami Haridas in Vrindavan; from a Mughal miniature painting in the Jaipur-Kishangarh (Rajasthan) mixed style, circa A.D. 1750.

Source: http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Swami_haridas_TANSEN_akbar_minature-painting_Rajasthan_c1750_crp.jpg

Some well known themes that were represented in Rajasthani miniatures were devotional – Krishna lila episodes – as well as representations of melody known as the Ragmala series. There were noticeably Mughal elements in these paintings with similarities in vertical formats and compositions. Rajasthani painting (all its schools) was based on a model of workshop production and that through these workshops there was a dissemination of older Mughal conventions. This was also true of the Pahari style of painting that developed in the Himalayan foothills – in its first phase there was the intense Basohli style and in its later phase the Kangra style seen to be more influenced by the styles of Delhi and Lucknow. This evolved between 1740 and 1775 when a number of artists fled Delhi for the hills in search of patrons and opted for the lyrical style where colours were less intense and there was a more naturalistic treatment of landscape.

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Figure 1.1.8: Bhairavi Ragini, Manley Ragamala, an album painting in gouache on paper

Source: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ragamala_paintings

The vitality of regionalism was evident in architecture as well. The new states invested in public buildings and in the process persisted with the older imperial style in addition to engaging with new idioms and expressions. Catherine Asher in her work, indicates how European styles were preferred for secular architecture in Murshidabad and Lucknow and how in temple architecture in Jaipur and Delhi, the model of the haveli was used to good effect. Surface decoration in temples was also similar to contemporary Muslim architecture. Figures of Europeans in hats also made their way as temple decoration.

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Figure 1.1.9: Constantia Hall in Lucknow

Source:

http://www.columbia.edu/itc/mealac/pritchett/00routesdata/1700_1799/claudemartin/claudemartin.html

It was in the 18th century that remarkable advances in music, both Hindustani and Karnatik, were registered leading to improvisations in form, the khyal and kriti developed and refined by musician-composers like Sadarang and Tyagaraja respectively. Many of the artistic developments were made possible thanks to the interest and eclectic enthusiasm of regional courts that emerged as important sites of change, even modernity. For example, the Tanjore court under the Maratha ruler Serfoji II (1798-1832) undertook a series of interesting experiments, set up a museum, founded free public schools, developed new curricula and tried to synthesize western and Indian methods in medicine. Similarly we have the case of the Jaipur court of Raja Jai Singh who established an astronomical observatory and who displayed a keen interest in music and its systematization. Artists and musicians found new patrons in regional courts such as Awadh, Jaipur, Murshidabad, Hyderabad and Tanjore with the result that there was a greater dissemination of the older high imperial style. Even Delhi until the 1740s appears to have retained its aura as the cultural capital par excellence. We have an excellent account of the arts scene in the Muraqqa e Dehli by Dargah Quli Khan whose snapshots of musicians, entertainers and dancers suggest a vibrant city living life to its full. The development of Urdu poetry in Delhi and Lucknow testified to the vitality of artistic energies in the period making it at least in cultural terms an extremely formative period for the articulation of modern forms and styles. Nowhere was

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this sensibility better articulated than in the sphere of literary and cultural production where new modes of reflection, new methodological strategies were in full display.

Value addition: did you know?

Khyal and Kriti

Khyal and Kriti are the dominant genres of vocal art music in North and South India respectively. Both these composition types are short songs with two or more typically three parts. The Khyal is normally associated with the famous 18th century composer Niyamat Khan Sadarang of the court of Muhammad Shah Rangile (1719-48) in Delhi although more recent research suggests that the genre was in use even earlier. There is little doubt that it enjoyed huge popularity in and after the 18th century and became the basis for modern Hindustani music as we know it now. The composition, set to a particular raga, is the basis for individual improvisation by the singer.

Khyal compositions deployed Brajbhasha for the most part although there are several compositions in Persian as well. Most of the compositions celebrate love and devotion. The perfection of the khyals is associated with the emergence of several gharana or singing styles from the mid 19th century. For those interested in a short history of the evolution of Hindustani Music, see Jon Barlow and Lakshmi Subramanian, 'Music and society from the Mughals to the Mutiny', EPW, May 12, 2007. For those interested in following a class in khyal singing, see the following website <http://openlearn.open.ac.uk/mod/resource/view.php?id=293684>.

Kriti or kirtanai is a form typical to Karnatik music and developed between the 16th and 20th centuries. Reaching its perfection under the Tanjore trinity of Tyagaraja (1759-1847), Diksitar (1776-1827) and Syama Sastri 1762-1827). The kriti is entirely religious in its theme, the composer writing both the poetry and the melody. The language used is mostly Telugu with some compositions in Sanskrit and Tamil.

Source: Subramanian, Lakshmi. 2006. From the Tanjore Court to the Madras Music Academy: A social history of music in south India. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

In conclusion

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Can we on the basis of social and cultural change call the 18th century as a period of early modernity? This is in fact one of the most important research questions to have emerged among historians and scholars of early modern India. Scholars working on literary and historical production suggest that the long 18th century saw important shifts in the way histories were being written and that these reflected new paradigms of power and governance. New kinds of historical production were apparent in southern India where the scribes, referred to as karanams who formed part of the mobile literati, adopted new markers and choices in their descriptions. In Bengal too the impact of a Persianized culture helped the formation of new genres that showed greater sensitivity to political contingencies and contributed to a new political vocabulary. In terms of artistic creativity and cultural expression, there is no doubt that the century saw new forms and styles, especially in music where the steady growth in the popularity of Khyal and Kriti signaled a new cultural choice making possible greater individual improvisation.

This is however, not to argue that the articulation of a new temperament- whether it assumed the forms of greater social mobility, of mercantilist state policy by Indian rulers, of a more hybrid and cosmopolitan court culture or of a more regionally inspired artistic repertoire was a smooth process and that it moved seamlessly into the new colonial dispensation of the succeeding century. The advent of colonial rule was fraught with very serious consequences for the old order while the politics of transition were no less destabilizing. This is evident when we look at the breakdown of social order in the cities and in the countryside that underwent serious episodes of violence that were inspired largely by the dislocation of an older regime of control. The sanyasi and fakir rebellions in Bengal before, during and after the famine of 1770 testified to the resistance among several social groups to the new order and its pecuniary demands. The Dasnami Sanyasis and Madari fakirs were armed wandering mendicants who participated in the business of provisioning, money lending and trade. These groups resented and resisted Company demands for revenue in a rapidly deteriorating situation when large numbers of disbanded soldiers and displaced people especially after the famine of 1770 joined their cause. There were rebellions in Malabar as well against the expanding control of the English Company even if these did not necessarily assume early elements of nationalist feeling. Later writers like Bankim Chandra Chattopadyaya invested such feelings of patriotic fervour in these insurrectionary movements as he represented the skirmishes as an expression of organic nationalist fervour. For as William Pinch has argued, joint Sanyasi-Fakir uprisings are revealing as they suggest the dynamics and technologies of mobilization, recruitment and soldiering among ascetics in the 18th century and the success these groups had enjoyed in the military economy of the period. That war and politics cast a long shadow on the 18th century is perhaps the most enduring impression we carry when we recall the period even as courts and merchants demonstrated their resilience in defining and expanding their domains of creativity and business respectively. The dynamics of transition played themselves out with casualties and beneficiaries left to assume the mantle of resistance and cooperation in the succeeding century.

1.1 Summary

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The eighteenth century occupies a special position in Indian history as it is literally positioned between two empires. In recent decades, the century has engaged the attention of historians who have located important social processes in the period that merit as much attention as the decline of the Mughal political structure.

Among the most significant developments in the period, were regionalism and regional state formation that was based on local economic development and new revenue extracting mechanisms. The regional states were at war with one another and this created conditions of a war economy that in fact constituted the material basis for eighteenth century regimes.

The second half of the century saw the gradual expansion and penetration of the English East India Company with serious consequences for regional polities and economies. This created long term social displacement and which was reflected in a series of popular uprisings as well.

The century was in terms of cultural development, extremely vibrant. In fact this is one of the strange contradictions of the period – political change and fragmentation coexisting with cultural creativity and expression. This may be explained by the fact that regional patronage of the arts was vibrant in the period and it coincided with the emergence of talented artists who brought to their work a new sensibility.

1.1: Exercises

Essay questions

- 1) What in your view is the most striking feature about the 18th century in Indian history?
- 2) How did regional polities in 18th century India facilitate the rise of new social groups?
- 3) Comment on the cultural developments in 18th century India.

Objective Questions

Question Number	Type of question	LOD
1	Arrange in chronological order	1

Question

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- a) Battle of Plassey
- b) Death of Aurangzeb
- c) Sack of Delhi by Nadir Shah

Correct Answer / Option(s)	b) c) a)
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Justification/ Feedback for the correct answer

Death of Aurangzeb (1707)
Nadir Shah's invasion of Delhi 1739-40
Battle of Plassey 23 June 1757

Resource/Hints/Feedback for the wrong answer

Reviewer's Comment:

Question Number	Type of question	LOD
2	Multiple choice question	2

Question

Raag Maala is a form of:

- a) Music
- b) Painting
- c) Poetry
- d) Architecture

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Correct Answer / Option(s)	b)
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Justification/ Feedback for the correct answer

Raag Maala is a specific category of painting associated with medieval Rajasthan. In these painting each raga is personified by a colour, mood, and a verse describing a story of a hero and heroine (nayaka and nayika). It also elucidates the season and the time of day and night in which a particular raga is to be sung; and finally most paintings also demarcate the specific Hindu deities attached with the raga, like Bhairava or Bhairavi to Shiva, Sri to Devi. Literally a garland of melodies – it suggests the close intersection of the visual and the aural as a theme of artistic imagination. Given that the courts in Rajasthan were big time patrons of the arts, it is not surprising that such a genre of painting should have emerged.

Resource/Hints/Feedback for the wrong answer

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Reviewer's Comment:

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Question Number	Type of question	LOD
3	Multiple choice question	2

Question

Military fiscalism denotes:

- a) Army reform
- b) New and centralized tax arrangements
- c) Centralized bureaucracy
- d) Revenue farming

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Correct Answer / Option(s)	b)
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Justification/ Feedback for the correct answer

Military fiscalism is a term specifically used in relation to the centralized tax arrangements that the eighteenth century states adopted in order to appropriate revenues and thereby maintain their fighting forces. Fiscalism suggests close supervision of financial affairs especially as it revolved around the necessity of maintaining an efficient army.

Resource/Hints/Feedback for the wrong answer

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Reviewer's Comment:

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1.1 Glossary

Hundis: negotiable financial instruments or bills of exchange that evolved in India. These were extensively used for the purposes of remittance and financing trade. Hundis were in extensive use in the 18th century to transfer funds for rulers and merchants alike.

Khalsa: this referred to Crown lands where revenue was collected by central officials and deposited in the central treasury.

Khyal: the principal genre of North Indian vocal art music. It is conventionally associated with Ustad Neamat Khan Sadarang of the court of Muhammed Shah Rangila (1719-48). Khyal compositions were composed in Urdu, Brajbhasha and even Persian.

Kirtana/ Kriti: a devotional song type that is the principal genre of South Indian classical or Karnatik music. The majority of these compositions are in Telugu. 18th century composers – Tyagaraja, Diksitar and Syama Sastri elaborated the form and brought to bear on it their unique style.

Shahr e Ashob: refers to a genre of classic Urdu poetry that reflected personal accounts and reactions of various poets to Mughal decline in the 18th century. One of the earliest events that stimulated composition was the sack of Delhi by Nadir Shah. The major poets who specialized in this genre were Mirza Rafi Sauda (1713-81) and Mir Taqi Mir (1724-1810).

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1.1 Further readings

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