

Political Dynamics of the Mughal Empire: Evaluating the Roots of Decline and the Emergence of European Power in India (1526–1666 CE)

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: This study investigates the political evolution of the Mughal Empire from 1526 to 1666 CE to identify the key political and structural factors contributing to its gradual decline. It further examines how internal vulnerabilities created openings that facilitated the early rise of European influence in India.

Method: A qualitative research design was employed, relying exclusively on secondary sources, including historical texts, scholarly analyses, and archival materials. These sources were examined through thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns related to imperial governance, succession, administrative capacity, and external commercial pressures.

Results: The findings show that the Mughal Empire's weakening stemmed from declining central authority, persistent succession disputes, administrative overextension, and increasing fiscal strain. These internal challenges reduced political cohesion and administrative effectiveness. At the same time, European trading companies, particularly the Portuguese and the English East India Company, expanded their influence by leveraging maritime advantages, diplomatic access, and strategic trade privileges. Their interventions coincided with and intensified Mughal vulnerabilities, contributing to shifting regional power dynamics.

Practical Implications: The study provides insight into how internal imperial fragility and external commercial expansion interacted to reshape South Asia's political landscape. This integrated perspective helps explain the historical transition from Mughal dominance to the early stages of European political footholds. It offers a framework for analysing similar cases of imperial decline.

Originality/Novelty: This research offers a synthesised analysis that connects Mughal internal structural weaknesses to the earliest phases of European expansion, clarifying how interconnected political and commercial processes laid the foundations for later colonial consolidation. Its focused chronological scope provides a distinct contribution to understanding the initial geopolitical transformations of the subcontinent.

Keywords – *British East India Company, European colonialism, imperial decline, Mughal Empire, political fragmentation.*

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1. INTRODUCTION

Between 1526 and 1666 CE, the Indian subcontinent saw the rise, consolidation, and gradual decline of one of the most powerful empires in early modern history, the Mughal Empire. Founded by Zahiruddin Muhammad Babur after the First Battle of Panipat, this dynasty not only established centralised Islamic rule across northern India but also created the cultural and administrative foundations that shaped South Asia for centuries. The early Mughal rulers, Babur, Humayun, Akbar, Jahangir, and Aurangzeb, led impressive military conquests, architectural advancements, religious discussions, and economic growth. However, by the mid-17th century, internal power struggles, administrative problems, and increasing autonomy of provincial governors started to weaken the empire.

This article looks at the political history of the Mughal Empire. It outlines the timeline and key features of its paramount rulers and highlights the important factors that led to its decline. The article pays special attention to the early interactions between the Mughal emperors and European powers, especially the Portuguese and the British. Their role changed over time from trade partners to colonial rulers. By studying the founding and growth of the British East India Company, the article shows how European influence established itself in India through trade by sea, diplomacy, military alliances, and political influence.

This study uses a range of primary and secondary sources to examine the decline of the Mughal Empire in the broader context of global imperial rivalry, maritime expansion, and the beginnings of European colonialism. It provides a detailed historical analysis of how one of the most advanced Islamic empires in Asia became more exposed to foreign intrusion. This weakness eventually led to British rule in the Indian subcontinent.

2. METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative research design to analyse the political dynamics of the Mughal Empire between 1526 and 1666 CE. The research relies exclusively on secondary sources, including historical books, peer-reviewed articles, archival documents, and reputable scholarly analyses. These materials were examined through thematic analysis to identify recurring political patterns, administrative weaknesses, and external pressures relevant to the empire's decline. The method focuses on comparing different historians' interpretations, tracing cause-and-effect relationships, and synthesising evidence to explain how internal structural issues created openings for the early rise of European influence in India. This approach allows for an in-depth, interpretive understanding of complex historical processes rather than numerical measurement.

3. RESULTS

The Mughal Empire

A total of seventeen rulers sat on the Mughal throne during the empire's existence, but six stand out as the most powerful and influential. The first among them was Zahir-ud-din Muhammad Babur, who ruled from 1526 to 1530 CE, and is often considered the founder of the Mughal Empire. He was a descendant of the Central Asian conqueror Timur, tracing his lineage to the fifth generation. Born in 1483 CE, Babur established his rule in India after his victory at Panipat, thereby laying the foundation for the Mughal Dynasty. He died in 1530 at the age of 47, having spent much of his life in Central Asia before turning his attention to India (Eraly, 2000). After Babur's death, his son Humayun ascended the throne. He ruled from 1530 to 1556 CE, with a brief interruption. Humayun was known for his refined character and intellectual temperament (Eraly, 2000). His reign was troubled by internal and external challenges, and he tragically died after a fall from his library roof (Eraly, 2000). Akbar, Humayun's successor, came to power in 1556 CE at the age of just 13. Over his nearly 50-year reign, he transformed the empire through military conquest, administrative reforms, and cultural patronage. He famously adopted a policy of religious tolerance, engaged with diverse religious thinkers, and encouraged a syncretic cultural environment (Richards, 1993). His son, Jahangir (reigned 1605–1627

CE), continued many of Akbar's policies of moderation and patronage. In 1615, the English diplomat Sir Thomas Roe arrived at his court, was warmly received, and later wrote a detailed account of the grandeur and customs of the Mughal court a source that has since provided valuable insight into Mughal governance and society (Eraly, 2000). Aurangzeb, born in 1618 CE, was the emperor under whose reign the empire reached its greatest geographical extent. However, his more austere religious policies and ongoing military campaigns strained the empire's cohesion. Following his reign, the Mughal Empire began an apparent decline: succession disputes, the rise of powerful regional governors (nawabs), and external invasions fragmented central authority (Sarkar, 1924). By the time of Muhammad Shah (one of the later rulers), the empire's vulnerabilities had become acute. The invasion of Nader Shah in 1739 dealt a devastating blow, both economically and symbolically: vast treasures were looted, and the empire's prestige was shattered. This event is often considered a significant turning point in the disintegration of real Mughal power (Truschke, 2018).

The Grounds for the British Entry into India

1. Sea Travel and Trade Routes

The history of maritime connections between the Indian region and the Arab world predates the advent of Islam by many centuries. Ancient records from Mesopotamian cities such as Ur and Lagash refer to trade with a distant land called "Meluhha," which most historians identify with the Indus Valley Civilisation (Dalrymple, 2019). Later, Arab Muslim traders began travelling from various ports of the Arabian Peninsula to India. Arab merchants sailed from the coasts of Oman and Bahrain to regions such as Kanyakumari, Malabar, and Gujarat. However, their focus did not entirely shift toward maritime commerce, as much of Arab trade at the time remained tied to overland caravan routes (Dalrymple, 2019). After the conquest of Sindh by Hajjaj ibn Yusuf and the subsequent control of the ports of Debal and Mansura, Arab merchants established dominance over Sindh's maritime trade. By 176 AH (792 AD), Muslim merchants had also reached the ports of China, reflecting the expansion of Islamic trade networks. Arab maritime commerce reached its peak during the 9th century AD; however, the arrival of the Portuguese soon challenged their dominance, leading to a gradual decline in Arab control in the Indian Ocean (Dalrymple, 2019).

European powers, equipped with advanced ships and naval technology, soon assumed control over maritime trade routes to India. The first European to reach India by sea was the Portuguese explorer Vasco da Gama. His expeditions were preceded by Prince Henry the Navigator, who in 1487 AD (892 AH) laid the foundations for maritime exploration. That same year, Bartolomeu Dias successfully sailed around the Cape of Good Hope and entered the Indian Ocean, establishing a pathway for European navigation to the East (Chaudhuri, 1985).

In 1498 AD (903 AH), Vasco da Gama landed at the port of Calicut on India's Malabar Coast, effectively opening a direct sea route to India. This event initiated sustained direct contact between India and Europe, marking the beginning of a new era of East-West interactions that lasted approximately 450 years, until India achieved independence. During this period, da Gama exploited local rivalries and loaded his ships with valuable goods, gradually integrating Indian products into European markets. While the initial European objective in India was trade, by the 19th century, their focus had shifted toward political control.

The Portuguese were the earliest European arrivals in India, followed by the Dutch, with France and Britain joining the contest for influence by the mid-18th century. Eventually, the British emerged as the dominant power and maintained control until World War II. Several features characterised this era of European influence in Asia:

- Nations with strong naval forces became dominant over territories with weaker military capabilities.
- Powerful European states exerted control over portions of Asian lands.

- Over these four and a half centuries, Europeans actively promoted Christianity and invested significant effort in missionary activities.
- At the time, American presence in the region was minimal; they began reaching the Pacific coast only in 1844 AD (1260 AH).

2. The Founding of the East India Company

During this period, although the English colonies in America had asserted their autonomy, England still faced significant setbacks in the Indian Ocean due to the Portuguese dominance in maritime trade. In response, English merchants resolved to challenge Portuguese supremacy and establish their own presence in the East Indian trade (Barbara & Thomas , 2002). In 1600 CE, a pivotal moment arrived when Queen Elizabeth I granted a royal charter to a group of English merchants, formally creating the East India Company with exclusive trading rights in the East Indies (Tuck, 1998). Among the founding directors was Sir Thomas Smythe, who became the Company's first governor. With Elizabeth's authorisation, these merchants were empowered to "travel to distant lands, to carry out trading and navigation activities and to expand trade in East India (Pettigrew & Gopalan, 2017). In 1608, after an arduous voyage, the Company dispatched its first ship to India under Captain William Hawkins, who carried a letter from King James I to the Mughal Emperor Jahangir. Hawkins landed at Surat, met the emperor in Agra, and gradually secured favour at court through gifts and diplomatic engagement. Jahangir assigned him a small military retinue of 400 men, signalling a degree of trust, although Hawkins was never able to secure a formal, binding treaty (Barbara & Thomas , 2002).

In 1615, Sir Thomas Roe arrived at the Mughal court as the ambassador of King James I. Roe's diplomatic mission was instrumental: he negotiated trading privileges, won permission for a factory in Surat, and managed to obtain a firman (royal decree) allowing English traders to carry arms and build fortified structures, Roe's detailed journals provide a vivid portrait of life at the Mughal court and the problematic, highly personal nature of early Anglo-Mughal diplomacy. This treaty paved the way for the East India Company's transformation from a mere trading enterprise into an emerging political and military power. Over the following decades, the Company gradually fortified its presence. The naval conflict of 1612 between the English fleet and forty Portuguese ships ended in English victory, further strengthening their position in the region. Jahangir's court, taking note of this shift, began to grant more extensive trading rights. By the late 17th century, ambitions had clearly grown beyond commerce. The Company's directors envisaged a corporate-sovereign model, a hybrid entity combining mercantile functions with political power. As the Mughal Empire weakened, the East India Company secured territorial footholds, notably in Madras, Bombay, and Calcutta. It started asserting direct control, marking the early emergence of British colonial rule in India (Barbara & Thomas , 2002).

The Territory of the East India Company's Activities in 1805

The British East India Company controlled all the principal exports from Bengal during the 18th century. Bengal was renowned for its highly developed textile industry, particularly the production of fine muslin and silk fabrics. The Company established numerous weaving centres throughout Bengal, employing tens of thousands of skilled weavers. For example, in Calcutta alone, nearly 8,000 weavers worked under the Company's patronage to produce textiles for export (Roy, 1994).

As the Company expanded its commercial interests, it also developed a powerful private army to protect its trade routes and enforce its authority. By the mid-18th century, especially after the Battle of Plassey in 1757, the East India Company had transitioned from a mere trading corporation to a territorial power, effectively ruling large parts of Bengal and surrounding regions (Dalrymple, 2019). This combination of economic dominance and military power allowed the Company not only to control trade but also to govern vast territories on behalf of the British Crown, paving the way for the establishment of British colonial rule in India (Chaudhuri, 1985).

4. DISCUSSION

The political dynamics of the Mughal Empire from 1526 to 1666 CE were shaped by both internal consolidation and external pressures, with the empire reaching its zenith under emperors such as Akbar, Jahangir, and Aurangzeb, yet simultaneously setting the stage for gradual decline. The foundation laid by Babur (r. 1526, 1530) established a centralised authority rooted in military conquest and Timurid heritage, while Humayun's intermittent reign (1530, 1556) exposed the vulnerabilities of succession and governance amid internal challenges. Akbar's long reign (1556- 1605) introduced administrative reforms, cultural syncretism, and policies of religious tolerance, consolidating Mughal authority and expanding territorial control, while initiating early European interactions through Portuguese trading posts. Jahangir (1605–1627) continued these policies and welcomed English diplomatic missions, most notably those led by Thomas Roe, which facilitated the East India Company's initial foothold in India (Metcalf & Metcalf, 2012; Pettigrew & Gopalan, 2017). Aurangzeb, despite extending the empire to its most significant territorial limits, implemented stricter religious orthodoxy and engaged in continuous military campaigns, which strained the administrative and fiscal systems, accelerating the fragmentation of central authority. Concurrently, European powers initially the Portuguese, followed by the English and Dutch exploited maritime advancements and Mughal administrative reliance on trade, gradually establishing strategic trading centers and fortifications in coastal regions such as Surat, Madras, and Calcutta, thereby embedding commercial influence that evolved into political leverage (Metcalf & Metcalf, 2012; Tuck, 2001). The East India Company's diplomatic negotiations, military successes against the Portuguese, and acquisition of imperial firmans exemplify how European actors began manipulating local power structures, setting a precedent for colonial expansion (Pettigrew & Gopalan, 2017). By the mid-17th century, the interplay of internal succession disputes, regional autonomy among nawabs, fiscal pressures, and growing European intervention revealed the underlying weaknesses of the Mughal state. The brief result of this period is clear: while the Mughal Empire retained nominal dominance and territorial control, its political cohesion was increasingly compromised, and the rise of European commercial and military power marked the initial phase of a profound transformation in South Asian geopolitics, laying the groundwork for eventual colonial domination.

5. CONCLUSION

The findings of this study show that the Mughal Empire's political weakening between 1526 and 1666 CE resulted from the combined effects of internal instability and rising external pressures. While early emperors established a strong administrative and military foundation, ongoing succession conflicts, prolonged campaigns, and fiscal strains gradually eroded centralised control. At the same time, the arrival and expansion of European maritime powers, particularly the Portuguese and the English East India Company, introduced new geopolitical and economic challenges. By using trade privileges, naval advantages, and strategic alliances, the Company expanded its influence during a period of Mughal vulnerability. Overall, the interaction between domestic fragilities and European expansion created conditions that diminished imperial authority and shaped the early foundations of later colonial dominance in the region.

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