ANANTAM IAS · OPTIONAL NOTES

History Optional
The Eighteenth Century

Paper 1 · Unit 24

The century that decides your Paper 1 score: why the Mughal empire came apart, what replaced it, and whether the result was collapse or a reordering.

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UPSC SYLLABUS

Factors for the decline of the Mughal Empire; the regional principalities: Nizam's Deccan, Bengal, Awadh; Maratha ascendancy under the Peshwas; the Maratha fiscal and financial system; emergence of Afghan power, Battle of Panipat, 1761; state of politics, culture and economy on the eve of the British conquest.

How historians have framed the century

Start here, because almost every question on this unit is really a question about interpretation. UPSC does not ask what happened in 1761 so much as what 1761 meant, and the marks go to candidates who can name the argument they are joining.

- **Jadunath Sarkar** (*Fall of the Mughal Empire*, 1932 onwards) built the oldest full explanation: decline was moral and religious, traced to Aurangzeb's reversal of Akbar's policy of accommodation, the jizya and the Deccan wars. The thesis is now heavily qualified but it remains the baseline every other historian argues against.
- **William Irvine** located the failure in the army: a mansabdari cavalry that had stopped being effective, with false musters, poor horses and commanders whose rank had become hereditary rather than earned.
- **Satish Chandra** shifted the argument from morality to structure with the **jagirdari crisis**: the number of claimants to jagirs grew faster than the assignable revenue, so nobles fought each other for a shrinking pool and squeezed the peasantry to make up the difference.
- **Irfan Habib** (*The Agrarian System of Mughal India*, 1963) argued an **agrarian crisis**: revenue demand pressed to the limit of what the peasant could pay drove flight, armed resistance and zamindari rebellion, so the system destroyed its own tax base.
- **M. Athar Ali** (*The Mughal Nobility under Aurangzeb*, 1966) quantified the problem as **be-jagiri**, a shortage of jagirs made acute by the absorption of Deccan nobles into an already crowded service elite after the annexations of Bijapur and Golconda.
- **Muzaffar Alam** (*The Crisis of Empire in Mughal North India*, 1986) inverted the picture using Awadh and Punjab: the regions were not impoverished but prospering, and it was precisely local prosperity that let zamindars and local magnates bid for autonomy. Decline at the centre was the other face of growth in the provinces.
- **C. A. Bayly** (*Rulers, Townsmen and Bazaars*, 1983) emphasised **continuity**: intermediate groups of merchants, bankers, scribes and service gentry carried on through the political rupture, and north Indian commercial life expanded rather than contracted.
- **Karen Leonard**'s **great firm theory** (1979) made the bankers decisive: when the major banking houses transferred their credit from the imperial centre to regional courts and later to the English Company, the empire lost the financial machinery it ran on.
- **André Wink** (*Land and Sovereignty in India*, 1986) read Maratha expansion through **fitna**, meaning sedition or the systematic exploitation of internal division, arguing that Maratha svarajya was built by working inside Mughal sovereignty rather than simply overthrowing it.

Historian	Mechanism of decline	What it plays down
Jadunath Sarkar	Religious and moral reversal under Aurangzeb	Structural and fiscal pressures
William Irvine	Military and mansabdari decay	Agrarian and revenue causes
Satish Chandra	Jagirdari crisis, claimants outrunning jagirs	Peasant agency
Irfan Habib	Agrarian crisis from excessive revenue demand	Regional prosperity
M. Athar Ali	Be-jagiri worsened by Deccan absorption	Non-elite actors
Muzaffar Alam	Regional prosperity enabling local autonomy	Genuine imperial breakdown
C. A. Bayly	Continuity through commercial and service groups	Political disruption
Karen Leonard	Withdrawal of banking credit from the centre	Agrarian factors

The decline debate in one view. Learn the pairing of historian to mechanism; that is what an examiner checks.

KEY TERMS

Jagirdari crisis — Satish Chandra's term for the mismatch between the number of nobles owed assignments and the revenue available to assign.

Be-jagiri — Literally landlessness of office: a serving noble holding rank but no productive jagir to draw it from.

Fitna — In Wink's usage, the working of internal division and shifting allegiance as a normal instrument of state building, not simply rebellion.

The mechanics of Mughal collapse

Once you can name the schools, you need the sequence. The empire did not fall in one event; it lost the capacity to enforce decisions, and the provinces stopped waiting for orders.

- Aurangzeb's Deccan campaigns ran from 1681 to his death in 1707, tying the emperor and the treasury to a war of attrition against the Marathas that neither annexation nor bribery could end.
- The annexations of **Bijapur (1686)** and **Golconda (1687)** added nobles and claims to jagirs without adding proportionate assignable revenue, which is the material core of Athar Ali's case.
- Succession warfare after 1707 and the rapid turnover of emperors, with **Bahadur Shah I, Jahandar Shah, Farrukhsiyar, Muhammad Shah** in quick order, made the throne a prize contested by noble factions rather than an office that disciplined them.
- The **Sayyid Brothers**, Abdullah Khan and Husain Ali Khan, became kingmakers between 1713 and 1720, deposing and murdering Farrukhsiyar in 1719 and demonstrating that the emperor now served the nobility.
- Noble factions hardened into groups defined by origin, conventionally Turani, Irani, Afghan and Hindustani, which turned court politics into a permanent contest over a shrinking resource base.
- **Nadir Shah's invasion of 1739** and the sack of Delhi removed the Peacock Throne, the Koh-i-Noor and an enormous cash indemnity, and more importantly demonstrated that the capital could not be defended.
- **Ahmad Shah Abdali** invaded repeatedly from 1748 to 1767, and the cession of Punjab and later Sindh detached the empire's most productive northwestern revenue.

- By the **Treaty of Allahabad, 1765**, the East India Company held the diwani of Bengal, Bihar and Orissa, which meant the richest revenue in the subcontinent was collected in the emperor's name and spent by a trading company.
- The critical point for answers: imperial forms survived long after imperial power did. Regional rulers continued to seek Mughal sanads and struck coin in the emperor's name well into the period of British dominance, because legitimacy outlived capacity.

FROM IMPERIAL CRISIS TO REGIONAL AUTONOMY

Deccan wars and be-jagiri → Succession contests after 1707 → Nobles as kingmakers → Provincial governors stop remitting revenue → Successor states with Mughal forms and independent power

The successor states: Bengal, Awadh and Hyderabad

These three are the classic examples of what Muzaffar Alam and Richard Barnett describe as autonomy without secession. Each was founded by a Mughal officer who never formally renounced the emperor and never again obeyed him.

- **Hyderabad** was founded by **Nizam-ul-Mulk Asaf Jah I**, born Chin Qilich Khan, who secured the Deccan after the **Battle of Shakar Kheda in 1724** and ruled until 1748 while retaining the fiction of imperial appointment.
- The Asaf Jahi state governed a Telugu, Marathi and Kannada speaking population through a Persianate administration, and its long survival rested on balancing the Marathas, Mysore, the Company and the French rather than on defeating any of them.
- **Bengal** was made autonomous by **Murshid Quli Khan** from 1717, who moved the capital to Murshidabad, replaced jagirs with khalisa land under direct revenue collection, and remitted a fixed tribute to Delhi while keeping the surplus.
- Murshid Quli's revenue farming settlement concentrated collection in a small number of large zamindars, which is one root of the estate structure the Permanent Settlement would later freeze.
- **Alivardi Khan** seized Bengal after defeating Sarfaraz Khan at the **Battle of Giria in 1740** and spent his reign absorbing repeated Maratha bargi raids into Bengal and Bihar, paying chauth from 1751.
- **Awadh** was founded by **Saadat Khan Burhan-ul-Mulk** in 1722, consolidated by **Safdar Jung** and **Shuja-ud-Daula**, and rested on an accommodation with local Hindu bankers, taluqdars and Shia service gentry rather than on Mughal transplants.
- Awadh's capital moved from Faizabad to Lucknow under Asaf-ud-Daula, and the Lucknow court became the most important centre of Indo-Persian culture, Urdu poetry, Kathak and the imambara tradition in the later century.
- All three states shared a pattern that examiners look for: revenue farming as the fiscal method, a composite service elite recruited locally, continuity of Mughal administrative vocabulary, and a fatal vulnerability to European military finance.

State	Founder and date	Fiscal method	How it ended
Hyderabad	Nizam-ul-Mulk Asaf Jah I, 1724	Jagir and revenue farming, Diwani under the Nizam	Subsidiary alliance, 1798
Bengal	Murshid Quli Khan, 1717	Khalisa expansion, large-zamindar farming	Plassey 1757, Buxar 1764, Diwani 1765
Awadh	Saadat Khan Burhan-ul-Mulk, 1722	Ijaradari revenue farming with taluqdars	Buxar 1764, subsidiary alliance 1801

The three successor states compared. Note that none of them formally declared independence.

KEY TERMS

Ijaradari — Revenue farming: the right to collect a district's revenue auctioned to the highest bidder, who kept anything above the contracted sum.

Bargi — Maratha light cavalry raider; the bargir raids into Bengal in the 1740s entered Bengali folk memory and lullaby.

Maratha ascendancy under the Peshwas

The Marathas are the single most examined theme in this unit, appearing in every one of the last four papers. What UPSC wants is not a campaign narrative but an account of how a regional kingdom became an imperial system and why that system could not hold.

- Under **Balaji Vishwanath (1713 to 1720)** the Peshwa's office became the effective centre of the state, and the 1719 agreement with the Sayyid Brothers secured Mughal recognition of Maratha rights to chauth and sardeshmukhi in the Deccan.
- **Baji Rao I (1720 to 1740)** turned northward expansion into doctrine, is credited with the strategy of striking at the trunk rather than the branches, and brought Malwa, Gujarat and Bundelkhand under Maratha influence.
- **Balaji Baji Rao, called Nanasaheb (1740 to 1761)**, presided over the maximum extent of Maratha power and over its worst defeat, dying within months of Panipat.
- Expansion was delegated to great houses that became near-independent: the **Gaekwads at Baroda, the Holkars at Indore, the Scindias at Gwalior, the Bhonsles at Nagpur, and the Peshwa at Pune**, an arrangement usually called the Maratha confederacy.
- Confederacy is the right word and the right problem. It gave the Marathas reach no single army could have achieved, and it meant that after 1761 and especially after 1772 the houses could and did pursue separate treaties with the English.
- **Madhav Rao I (1761 to 1772)** achieved a genuine recovery, restoring authority in the north and reasserting control over the houses, and his death at twenty seven is conventionally treated as the point after which recovery became impossible.
- **Mahadji Scindia** rebuilt north Indian Maratha power in the 1780s with a European-officered infantry and artillery under Benoit de Boigne, and held the Mughal emperor as a protected figurehead from 1784.

- The internal politics after Madhav Rao I, including the murder of Narayan Rao in 1773 and the Barbhai council's promotion of the infant Sawai Madhav Rao against Raghunath Rao, gave the Company its opening in the First Anglo-Maratha War.
- Signed in 1782, the **Treaty of Salbai** ended that war and bought roughly twenty years of peace, which the 2024 paper asked you to evaluate as strategically costly: it froze Maratha expansion while the Company consolidated Bengal's revenues and its army.
- The **Treaty of Bassein (1802)**, in which Peshwa Baji Rao II accepted subsidiary alliance, split the confederacy irreparably and precipitated the Second Anglo-Maratha War.

KEY TERMS

Saranjam — A revenue assignment granted to a Maratha sardar for the upkeep of troops, in principle resumable, in practice increasingly hereditary.

Barbhai council — The council of twelve ministers led by Nana Phadnavis that governed in the name of the infant Sawai Madhav Rao after 1774.

The Maratha fiscal and financial system

This is named separately in the syllabus, which means it is fair game as a standalone question, and it is the part most candidates skip. Learn the shares, because the arithmetic is exactly what distinguishes a scoring answer here.

- **Chauth** was a levy of one fourth of the assessed revenue of a territory, claimed in return for protection and for refraining from raiding.
- **Sardeshmukhi** was an additional levy of one tenth, claimed on the basis that the Maratha ruler was the hereditary sardeshmukh, the head headman, of the Deccan.
- Chauth was itself divided, and the division is the detail that pays: **babti** at twenty five per cent to the Raja, **mokasa** at sixty six per cent to the sardars who did the collecting, **sahotra** at six per cent to the Pant Sachiv, and **nadgaunda** at three per cent.
- Because mokasa went to the collecting sardar, the fiscal system paid the men who expanded the state, which is precisely why expansion became self-reinforcing and why the sardars became autonomous.
- **Saranjam** assignments supported cavalry, and their drift from resumable grant to hereditary holding reproduced inside the Maratha state the same jagirdari problem that had undone the Mughals.
- The **kamavisdar** was the revenue officer of a district, and the **mamlatdar** its administrative head, both drawn increasingly from Chitpavan Brahmin service families under the Peshwas.
- Maratha state finance depended on **sahukars**, banking houses of which the Pune firms and later the house of the Gaekwads' bankers were the most important, so campaigns were credit operations as much as military ones.
- **Frank Perlin** and **Hiroshi Fukazawa** established that the eighteenth century Deccan under the Marathas saw commercialisation of agriculture, monetisation and an active market in revenue rights, which is evidence against any simple picture of anarchy.
- The structural weakness was that chauth and sardeshmukhi were extractive claims on other people's territory rather than a settled revenue base, so Maratha finance required continuous expansion and collapsed when expansion stopped after 1761.

Share	Proportion of chauth	Recipient
Mokasa	66 per cent	The sardar who collected it
Babti	25 per cent	The Raja
Sahotra	6 per cent	The Pant Sachiv
Nadgaunda	3 per cent	Reserved share

The division of chauth. These four shares are the single most examinable numeric detail in the unit.

KEY TERMS

Chauth — One fourth of assessed revenue, levied as protection money on territory outside direct Maratha administration.

Sardeshmukhi — An extra one tenth claimed by right of the Maratha ruler's hereditary position as sardeshmukh of the Deccan.

Sahukar — A banker or financier; Maratha campaigns ran on sahukari credit, so the bankers had real leverage over policy.

Afghan power and the Third Battle of Panipat, 1761

Fought on 14 January 1761, Panipat is asked repeatedly, and almost always as a question about consequences rather than tactics. Know the alignment, because the diplomatic isolation of the Marathas is the analytical heart of it.

- **Ahmad Shah Abdali**, founder of the Durrani state in 1747 out of the wreckage of Nadir Shah's empire, invaded India repeatedly from 1748, and his conflict with the Marathas was over control of Punjab and Delhi.
- The Marathas had taken Lahore in 1758 under Raghunath Rao, which brought them into direct collision with Abdali's claim to the northwest.
- Abdali's coalition included **Najib-ud-Daula** of the Rohillas and **Shuja-ud-Daula** of Awadh, whose adherence was decisive and reflected Maratha failure to reassure the north Indian Muslim nobility.
- The Maratha army was commanded by **Sadashivrao Bhau** with **Vishwasrao**, the Peshwa's son, as nominal head, and included Ibrahim Khan Gardi's French-trained artillery.
- Crucially the Marathas fought without the Jat support of Suraj Mal, who withdrew after disagreements over strategy and the treatment of Delhi, and without the Rajputs and Sikhs, so a claimed pan-Indian coalition never materialised.
- The immediate outcome was catastrophic: Vishwasrao and Sadashivrao Bhau were killed along with a very large part of the Maratha military leadership, and **Balaji Baji Rao died in June 1761**.
- Strategically the outcome is the examinable part. Panipat did not create British power but it removed the only Indian force capable of contesting north India at the moment the Company was consolidating Bengal after Plassey in 1757.
- Abdali could not exploit his victory, since his army mutinied over arrears and he withdrew, which is why the standard formulation is that Panipat decided who would not rule India rather than who would.
- Maratha recovery under Madhav Rao I was real and quick, with Delhi reoccupied by 1771, so answers that treat 1761 as terminal are wrong; what did not recover was the unity of the confederacy.

The other regional powers

Questions on the eighteenth century frequently move outside the standard three successor states, and the 2023 paper asked about Mysore and the Sikhs directly. Keep a paragraph ready on each.

- **Mysore** under **Haidar Ali**, effective ruler from 1761, was built on a modern infantry, French-trained artillery, and a state monopoly of key commodities that funded it.
- **Tipu Sultan (1782 to 1799)** extended the model with state trading, embassies to France, Ottoman Turkey and Persia, an experiment in sericulture, and a land revenue system that tried to eliminate intermediary poligars.
- The examiner's favourite formulation, that Haidar Ali was born to build an empire and Tipu Sultan to lose one, invites disagreement: Tipu's defeat owed at least as much to the Company's Indian alliances and its Bengal revenue as to his own diplomacy.
- The **Sikhs** moved from Banda Bahadur's revolt after 1708 through the misl period, in which twelve confederacies held territory under the rakhi system of protection payments.
- **Ranjit Singh** took Lahore in 1799 and built a state whose army, the Fauj-i-Khas under European officers including Ventura and Allard, was the most formidable Indian force of the early nineteenth century, and whose administration was notably non-sectarian in recruitment.
- The **Jats** under Churaman, Badan Singh and above all **Suraj Mal of Bharatpur** created a peasant-based state in the Agra and Mathura region whose fortifications at Bharatpur and Deeg outlasted several sieges.
- Under Ali Muhammad Khan the **Rohillas** established Rohilkhand as an Afghan settlement state in the Gangetic doab, and their destruction in 1774 by Awadh with Company troops became a scandal in Britain during Hastings's impeachment.
- The **Nawabs of the Carnatic and the Rajput states** completed the picture of a subcontinent in which effective power was regional and plural, which is exactly the condition the Company exploited through subsidiary alliances.

The dark age debate: economy and society before conquest

This is the question the 2026 paper asked outright and the one most likely to recur. It is an argument with two developed sides, and a good answer occupies the ground between them rather than picking a slogan.

- The older view, associated with **Jadunath Sarkar** and reinforced by colonial writing, treated the century as anarchy, and it suited an imperial narrative in which British rule arrived as order.
- **Irfan Habib** and **Tapan Raychaudhuri** gave a serious economic version of decline: agrarian crisis, disrupted long distance trade, and the ruin of the great Mughal centres.
- The revisionist case rests on regional evidence. **Muzaffar Alam** on Awadh and Punjab, **C. A. Bayly** on the north Indian bazaar economy, **Frank Perlin** on the Deccan, and **David Washbrook** on the south all found buoyant regional economies, monetisation and expanding commercial groups.
- **Ashin Das Gupta** documented the decline of **Surat** as a specific, datable commercial event driven by the loss of Mughal naval protection, Maratha raids and the shift of trade to European-controlled ports, rather than as a symptom of general collapse.

- **Prasannan Parthasarathi** argued that south Indian weavers in the later eighteenth century enjoyed real wages comparable to their British counterparts, which cuts directly against any assumption of pre-colonial impoverishment.
- The cultural record does not look like a dark age. This is the century of **Urdu poetry reaching maturity with Mir Taqi Mir and Mirza Sauda**, of the Lucknow and Murshidabad court cultures, of the Kangra and Rajput painting schools, and of **Kathak** taking its recognisable form.
- In music, the century saw the consolidation of the khayal in north India and continued Carnatic development in the south, and the great **Trinity of Carnatic music, Tyagaraja, Muthuswami Dikshitar and Syama Sastri**, were born within it.
- Religious and intellectual life was active rather than moribund, from **Shah Waliullah's** reform project in Delhi to the continuing Bhakti traditions and the consolidation of Sikh institutions.
- The synthesis that scores: the eighteenth century was a period of political fragmentation and fiscal predation at the imperial level combined with regional economic vitality and cultural productivity, so decline is accurate about the empire and misleading about India.

Position	Principal historians	Evidence relied on
Century of decline	Jadunath Sarkar, Irfan Habib, Tapan Raychaudhuri	Agrarian crisis, ruin of imperial centres, disrupted trade
Regional vitality	Muzaffar Alam, C. A. Bayly, Frank Perlin, David Washbrook	Buoyant provincial revenue, monetisation, commercial groups
Comparative living standards	Prasannan Parthasarathi	South Indian weaver wages against British equivalents
Specific commercial decline	Ashin Das Gupta	Surat, traced to protection failure not general collapse

The two sides of the eighteenth century debate, with the evidence each rests on.

Why the Company won

Close the unit on this, because most eighteenth century questions end here whether or not they say so. The answer is not military superiority in any simple sense.

- Fiscal capacity was decisive. The **diwani of Bengal from 1765** gave the Company a settled land revenue that no Indian rival possessed, and it converted that revenue directly into a standing army.
- The **subsidiary alliance system**, systematised by Wellesley from 1798, transferred the cost of the Company's army onto Indian states while stripping them of independent diplomacy, so each alliance funded the next conquest.
- Indian states fielded able European-trained forces, from Ibrahim Khan Gardi's artillery to de Boigne's brigades and Ranjit Singh's Fauj-i-Khas, so technology alone does not explain the outcome.
- Credit did. As **Karen Leonard** argued for the Mughal case and as the record of the Jagat Seths at Plassey shows, the banking houses moved their support to whichever power looked solvent, and after 1765 that was the Company.
- The absence of a durable Indian coalition mattered more than any single battle. Panipat in 1761, Buxar in 1764 and the successive Anglo-Maratha wars were all fought by Indian powers that were also fighting each other.

- Naval power is the underrated factor: the Company could move men and money by sea between Bengal, Madras and Bombay, while its Indian opponents could not.
- A caution worth carrying into the answer: this outcome was not visible to contemporaries and was not inevitable. As late as 1780 the Company faced simultaneous war with Mysore and the Marathas and came close to serious defeat.

Last-mile revision

- Sarkar means moral decline, Irvine military, Satish Chandra jagirdari, Habib agrarian, Athar Ali be-jagiri, Alam regional prosperity, Bayly continuity, Leonard bankers, Wink fitna.
- Chauth is one fourth, sardeshmukhi one tenth; chauth divides into mokasa 66, babti 25, sahotra 6 and nadgaunda 3 per cent.
- Successor states: Hyderabad 1724 Asaf Jah I, Bengal 1717 Murshid Quli Khan, Awadh 1722 Saadat Khan.
- Panipat 14 January 1761: Abdali with Najib-ud-Daula and Shuja-ud-Daula against Sadashivrao Bhau and Vishwasrao; Jats, Rajputs and Sikhs absent.
- Peshwa sequence: Balaji Vishwanath, Baji Rao I, Balaji Baji Rao, Madhav Rao I, Narayan Rao, Sawai Madhav Rao, Baji Rao II.
- Confederacy houses: Gaekwad Baroda, Holkar Indore, Scindia Gwalior, Bhonsle Nagpur, Peshwa Pune.
- Key treaties: Allahabad 1765, Salbai 1782, Bassein 1802.
- The defensible position on the dark age question is imperial decline plus regional vitality, not one or the other.

Common errors to avoid

- Treating Panipat 1761 as the end of Maratha power. Madhav Rao I had recovered Delhi by 1771; what ended was confederacy unity, not Maratha capacity.
- Writing the decline as a single cause. Every strong answer names at least three mechanisms and says which it finds most persuasive and why.
- Confusing chauth with sardeshmukhi, or forgetting that chauth was subdivided. The shares are the detail examiners use to separate scripts.
- Calling the successor states independent. None formally renounced Mughal sovereignty, and that fiction is analytically important, not a technicality.
- Assuming the Company won by superior technology. Indian powers had European-trained artillery and infantry; the Company's advantages were revenue, credit and sea power.
- Repeating the anarchy thesis without engaging Alam, Bayly, Perlin or Parthasarathi. The revisionist literature is now the mainstream and an answer that ignores it looks dated.
- Dating the Asaf Jahi foundation to 1707 or 1748. The state dates from 1724 after Shakar Kheda; 1748 is the Nizam's death.

Mains Practice

Would you consider the eighteenth century in India an era of 'Dark Age', or a period of economic growth? Elucidate.

20 marks · 250 words · 2026

Critically examine the political, military and administrative factors that transformed the Maratha character in the eighteenth century.

20 marks · 250 words · 2025

The Marathas posed a significant threat to the integrity of the Mughal Empire.

20 marks · 250 words · 2023

Trace the trajectory of Maratha polity from Shivaji to Peshwa Balaji Baji Rao and the impact of the Third Battle of Panipat (1761).

15 marks · 200 words · 2026

How did Maratha guerrilla warfare tactics contribute to their military successes against larger and more established armies?

15 marks · 200 words · 2024

Examine the role of the Asaf Jahi Dynasty in the political transformation of the State of Hyderabad.

15 marks · 200 words · 2024