Decline of the Mughal Empire

The causes of Mughal decline (Aurangzeb, weak successors, Marathas, Sikhs, foreign invasions), the rise of the East India Company, and British expansion to 1857 including the annexation of Sindh, the Punjab and Peshawar.

Decline of the Mughal Empire

The Empire at its height

The Mughal Empire was founded by **Babur** in **1526** (First Battle of Panipat). Under **Akbar**, **Jahangir**, **Shah Jahan** and **Aurangzeb** it ruled most of the subcontinent. It reached its **greatest size** under **Aurangzeb** (ruled **1658–1707**), but he also left problems that led to its fall.

Internal causes of decline

Aurangzeb and his policies

Policy or problem	Effect on the Empire
the long Deccan wars (about 25 years, to 1707)	the army was away from the north, **costs were huge**, and the treasury was emptied
religious policies: re-imposed **jizya** (a tax on non-Muslims) in 1679 and ordered some temples to be destroyed (historians debate the extent)	alienated many **Hindus**, especially the **Rajputs**
conflict with the **Marathas** under **Shivaji** (and later his successors)	a guerrilla war that Aurangzeb could not win
conflict with the **Sikhs** (the execution of Guru Tegh Bahadur in 1675)	the Sikhs became a military force
revolts (Jats, Satnamis, Rajputs)	the Empire spent resources on putting them down
a very large empire to control, with **slow communications**	governors became more independent

His religious policy in detail (the extent is debated, but these are the points usually given):

- the **jizya** was re-imposed (1679) after Akbar had abolished it;
- some **temples** were demolished and mosques built on their sites;

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- **Hindu traders** paid a higher customs duty than Muslim traders (about 5% against half of that);
- an order of about **1670** limited the employment of Hindus in the revenue department, and some high posts went to Muslims;
- limits were placed on new Hindu schools and on some **festivals and public display**;
- **conversion** brought relief from taxes and helped in getting jobs.

These policies led to **revolts** by the Jats, Satnamis, Sikhs, Rajputs and Marathas, which drained money and weakened the Empire.

Some historians say that **Aurangzeb was not the cause**, and that the Empire was already too big to rule effectively. Others say that his policies **made decline faster**. A balanced answer says that he was **partly responsible**: he was a capable ruler, but the Deccan wars and religious policies made the problems worse.

The weakness of the successors

There was **no fixed law of succession**, so each death meant a **war of succession** (Aurangzeb himself had beaten his brothers Dara Shikoh and Shuja). After Aurangzeb died (1707) his sons fought: **Bahadur Shah I** defeated his brothers Azam and Kam Bakhsh and ruled only until 1712, and his own sons then fought for the throne. The result was a **struggle for the throne** and a series of **weak rulers**:

- **Bahadur Shah I** (1707–12), **Jahandar Shah** (1712–13), **Farrukhsiyar** (1713–19), **Muhammad Shah "Rangila"** (1719–48), then **Ahmad Shah**, **Alamgir II** and **Shah Alam II**.
- **Court factions** and the **Sayyid brothers** (kingmakers) made and unmade emperors.
- The rulers were more interested in **pleasure** than government. The nobles (**mansabdars**, officers holding a rank under the system Akbar introduced) fought each other, grew corrupt and kept their own troops, so loyalty went to the noble rather than the Emperor.
- The Empire had **no navy**, so it could not match European ships.
- The **army** was badly paid and poorly led, and its weapons became out of date.
- **Governors (nawabs)** in Bengal, Awadh and Hyderabad became **independent in all but name**, and paid little revenue to Delhi.
- **Revenue fell** because of corruption and tax-farming; **peasants were over-taxed** and rebelled.

External causes of decline

The Marathas and Sikhs

- The **Marathas** grew from a small kingdom under **Shivaji** (d. 1680) into a powerful empire. By the mid-18th century they controlled much of central and western India and raided up to Delhi, collecting *chauth* (a quarter of revenue).
- The **Sikhs** built a state in the Punjab. Under **Maharaja Ranjit Singh** (who took Lahore in **1799**), they ruled the Punjab until 1849, and also took Multan (1818), Kashmir (1819) and **Peshawar** (1834).

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Foreign invasions

Invasion	Effect
Nadir Shah of Persia, **1739**	defeated the Mughals at **Karnal** (February 1739), **sacked Delhi** and took away the **Peacock Throne** and the Koh-i-Noor diamond, and a huge amount of treasure. The Mughal army and prestige were broken
Ahmad Shah Abdali of Afghanistan, **1748–67** (he invaded eight or more times; sources give 8 to 10)	looted Delhi, annexed the Punjab; he defeated the Marathas at the **Third Battle of Panipat (1761)**. But he did not take over the Empire, which left a power vacuum

The East India Company

The **East India Company** was set up in **1600** and got a charter from Queen Elizabeth I. It first came as a **trading** company, with factories at **Surat** and then at Madras, Bombay and Calcutta. As the Mughals weakened, it **took part in Indian politics**, and used its **trained army** and **sea power** to win control.

Why the Company came. The main reason was **trade and profit**: Indian cotton and silk cloth, spices, indigo, saltpetre and tea sold at high prices in Europe. The English were shut out of the spice trade of the East Indies by the **Dutch** (and earlier the Portuguese), so India became their main base. The Company's first ship reached **Surat** in **1608**, **Jahangir** allowed it to trade in **1612**, and it built bases at **Madras (1639)**, **Bombay** and **Calcutta (1690)**. Some writers add the wish to spread **Christianity**, and later a political reason: to protect its trade from the **French** and to guard India against **Russian** expansion towards Afghanistan.

Date	Event	Result
1757	**Battle of Plassey** (Robert Clive v. Siraj-ud-Daula of Bengal). Clive won through the **treachery of Mir Jafar**	the Company gained control of **Bengal**, the richest province
1764	**Battle of Buxar** (British v. Mir Qasim, Shuja-ud-Daula and Shah Alam II)	the Company confirmed as the strongest power in the north
1765	**Treaty of Allahabad**: Shah Alam II gave the Company the **diwani** (the right to collect revenue) of Bengal, Bihar and Orissa	the Company became the **ruler** of eastern India
1799	**Tipu Sultan** of Mysore was killed in the fourth Anglo-Mysore War	a major opponent was removed
1803	the British took **Delhi** and the blind **Shah Alam II** became a British pensioner	the Mughal emperor was now a **puppet**

At Plassey Clive had about **3,000** men (roughly 800 Europeans and 2,200 Indian soldiers) against a Bengal army of about **50,000**, but Mir Jafar and other commanders did not fight. At Buxar (**22 October 1764**)

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Major **Hector Munro** won a clear military victory. The Marathas were broken in the **Third Anglo-Maratha War (1817–18)**, when the Peshwa **Baji Rao II** surrendered, and the **First Afghan War (1839–42)** ended in a British disaster but did not stop expansion elsewhere.

The Company also used methods such as the **Subsidiary Alliance** (Lord Wellesley), under which Indian princes paid for a British force and gave up foreign policy, and the **Doctrine of Lapse** (Lord Dalhousie), under which a state without a natural heir was annexed (for example **Satara, Jhansi and Nagpur**; **Awadh** was taken in 1856 on the ground of misgovernment).

Why Britain was able to win

- The **Industrial Revolution** gave Britain better **weapons**, ships and money; its army was **disciplined and trained** with modern drill.
- A strong **navy** and sea communications; a well-run **administration** and the Company's wealth from Bengal.
- **Divisions among Indian rulers**, who fought each other and sometimes helped the British; treachery such as Mir Jafar's.
- A weak Mughal centre: no one power led the resistance.

Social reform and resentment

The British banned **sati** (the burning of a widow on her husband's funeral pyre) in **1829**. Reforms of this kind, together with missionary activity, made many Indians fear for their religion (see chapter 3).

British relations with the later Mughal emperors

The British treated the later emperors with a show of respect (the Company used the title of emperor on its coins until 1835), but gave them **pensions** and limited their authority to the **Red Fort in Delhi**. In **1857** the last emperor, **Bahadur Shah Zafar**, was deposed and exiled (see chapter 3).

British expansion to 1857

The Sindh annexation (1843)

Sindh was ruled by the **Talpur Mirs**. During the **First Afghan War (1839–42)** the British had used Sindh as a route to Afghanistan. After accusing the Mirs of treachery, **Sir Charles Napier** defeated them at the Battle of **Miani (Meeanee)** in **February 1843** and **annexed Sindh**.

The Anglo-Sikh Wars and the annexation of the Punjab

After **Ranjit Singh** died (1839) the Sikh state **weakened** because of quarrels in the army (the Khalsa) and at court.

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War	Result
First Anglo-Sikh War (1845–46)	the British won; **Treaty of Lahore (1846)**: the Sikhs gave up territory (including Jalandhar Doab and Kashmir, sold to Gulab Singh), paid an indemnity, and a British Resident was placed at Lahore
Second Anglo-Sikh War (1848–49)	after the Multan revolt, the British won at **Gujrat** (February 1849). The Punjab was **annexed on 29 March 1849** by Lord Dalhousie. The young Maharaja **Duleep Singh** was pensioned off

Peshawar (held by the Sikhs from 1834) and the Frontier districts came under British rule with the Punjab. By **1849** the British ruled the territories that now make up Pakistan.

The North-West Frontier

- The British wanted a **secure frontier** to guard against Russian expansion in Central Asia and against Afghanistan (the "**Great Game**").
- They debated a **"natural" frontier**, the River Indus and the mountain line along the edge of the plains, and a **"scientific" frontier**, further forward in the hills (based on strategic strongholds such as the Khyber and Bolan passes).
- The result was two policies: the **Close Border policy** (hold the line of the Indus and leave the tribes alone) and the **Forward policy** (move into the tribal hills and control the passes).
- The **Durand Line** (1893) was agreed with the Amir of Afghanistan, Abdur Rahman, as the boundary between British India and Afghanistan.

Policy towards the tribal territory

The Pathan tribes were hard to control. The British used a **mixture of force and payment**: they paid allowances to tribal leaders, used **political agents**, and punished raids with expeditions. The **Frontier Crimes Regulation** (1901) gave special powers to tribal elders (jirgas). In **1901** Lord Curzon created the **North-West Frontier Province** (separate from the Punjab).

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Summary: causes and consequences of the decline

Causes	Consequences
Aurangzeb's wars and policies	Muslims lost political power
weak successors and quarrelling nobles	the **East India Company** became the ruler
rise of the **Marathas** and **Sikhs**	Muslim society and economy declined
invasions of **Nadir Shah** and **Abdali**	led to the **War of Independence (1857)** and to later Muslim movements
the **East India Company's** power, army and trade	the Mughal emperor became a pensioner

> **TRY IT**
>
> How far was Aurangzeb responsible for the decline of the Mughal Empire?

Outline. *For:* the Deccan wars drained the treasury and the army; his religious policies (jizya) alienated Hindus and the Rajputs; he fought the Marathas and Sikhs; he left a huge empire hard to control. *Against:* the Empire was already too large; **weak successors**, **court factions**, **foreign invasions** (Nadir Shah, Abdali) and the **rise of the East India Company** were also decisive. **Conclusion:** he was a **significant but not the only** cause; his successors and external forces did most damage.

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