



POLITICAL CONDITIONS OF INDIA IN 17TH AND 18TH CENTURIES

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[Two significant events in the 17th and 18th centuries in Indian history were, the invasion of Nadir Shah in 1739 and the Third Battle of Panipat in 1761. Nadir Shah defeated the Mughals in the battle of Karnal. This led to the weakening of the Mughal power and fragmentation of north India and south India into many small kingdoms. Marathas were a might force to reckon with during the time of Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj, but their power was almost annihilated with the Third Battle of Panipat in 1761. As long as Mughals and Marathas were powerful, the Europeans did not exhibit any political ambitions. As the power of Mughals and the Marathas declined, colonial powers started spreading their tentacles. This is the background for the three Carnatic wars.]

Nadir Shah's invasion and the decline of the Mughals:

The Mughal Empire founded by Babur in 1526 A.D started weakening and disintegrating with the death of Aurangzeb in 1707. Death of Aurangzeb in 1707 was followed by war of succession amongst his three surviving sons. Prince Muazzam, his eldest son who was about sixty-five years old, succeeded to the throne of Delhi with the title of Bahadur Shah. Bahadur Shah ruled from 1707 to 1712 A.D. He was succeeded by Jahandar who ruled for a short period of just one year that is from 1712 A.D. to 1713 A.D. Jahandar Shah was murdered by Farrukhsiyar and he was the Mughal emperor from 1713 A.D to 1719 A.D. Farrukhsiyar had to face problems from a powerful duo known as Sayyid brothers. Sayyid Abdullah Khan and Syed Hasan Ali Khan Barha were the two powerful nobles in the Mughal history. They commanded respect amongst the Mughal nobles, because they were believed to be the descendants of Prophet Muhammed through his daughter Fatima and son-in-law Ali. However, due to political difference between Farrukhsiyar and Sayyid brothers they conspired to eliminate this Mughal ruler and so in 1719 A.D succeeded in murdering Farrukhsiyar.

These sayyid brothers next brought up Muhammad Shah and installed him on the throne. Muhammed Shah was the grandson of Bahadur Shah and he was just 18 years of age at the time of his accession to the throne. In Muhammed Shah's long reign of nearly thirty years from 1719 to 1748 A.D Mughal Empire declined and many independent regional kingdoms started emerging and important among these provincial kingdoms were Hyderabad, Bengal, Awadh and Rohilkhand.

Nadir Shah (Aug 1688 – 19th June 1747 A.D) was the ruler of Persia. The first and foremost reason for the weakening and the disintegration of the Mughal Empire was his invasion of Delhi in 1739 A.D. He was a powerful shah of Iran. He has variously been praised by Persian historians as Napoleon of Persia, Sword of Persia and the Second Alexander. Since Mohammed Shah was a weak ruler, the fabulous wealth of the Mughals tempted Nadir Shah to venture into India. In the battle of Karnal that ensued between the Mughals and the Persians, Nadir Shah crushed the Mughal might in about three hours in February 1739. From contemporary sources we get to know that nearly thirty thousand inhabitants of Delhi were massacred in the process of looting of Mughal capital after the Persians victory at Karnal. After the massacre of Delhi, Nadir Shah returned back to Persia with fabulous booty that included the world-famous Peacock Throne, and the world-renowned diamonds that are famous names even today like the Kohinoor (Mountain of Light in Persian) and Darya-ye-Noor (Sea of Light).



The names of Taj Mahal and Peacock Throne are associated with Shah Jahan. While the one survives and inspires awe and wonder in every visitor to the famous monument at Agra, the other, the Peacock Throne survives only in the memory of every Indian. The so talked about Kohinoor diamond which is now part of the British crown was once a part of those hundreds of invaluable diamonds that adorned the royal Peacock Throne.

Peacock throne was made at the order of Shah Jahan, the Mughal ruler whose reign was from 1628 A.D to 1658 A.D, and was originally placed at the Diwan-i-Khas of the Red Fort of Delhi. From the contemporary records we get to know that around 1,150 Kgs of gold and 230 Kgs of precious stone were used in the making of this throne. Kohinoor was one amongst those 230 Kgs of precious stones that were used in the decoration of this throne. Peacock Throne was originally known as Takht – e-tavus which means “The Jeweled Throne”. This throne is popularly known as Peacock Throne as it was designed like two peacocks supporting the throne on either side. The throne measured 6 feet by 4 feet and was rectangular in shape, and was decorated with rubies, diamonds, emeralds, pearls and sapphires. Aurangzeb usurped the throne in 1658 A.D., and confined his father in the Agra fort. He was in the possession of this Peacock Throne for nearly 50 years until his death in 1707. Much of the information we get about this glorious throne was from the travelogue of the French traveler Jean Baptiste Tavernier who travelled in Persia and India between the years 1630 to 1668.

Kohinoor diamond was mined from the famous Kollur mines of the Golkonda kingdom. Kollur mines were in the present-day Krishna District of Andhra Pradesh. Prataparudra II, the last ruler of the Kakatiya dynasty who ruled from 1289 to 1323 A.D was considered to be the first owner of this world-renowned diamond. Later this diamond landed in possession of Alauddin Khilji who took it away from Prataparudra II, when this Delhi Sultan invaded Warangal, the Kakatiya capital in the year 1310. Next known famous owner of the Kohinoor was Babur when he grabbed it after his conquest of Agra and Delhi from Ibrahim Lodi, whom Babur defeated in the First Battle of Panipat in the year 1526 A.D. When Shah Jahan had the Peacock Throne made for him this diamond was also one of the many that were used to decorate the throne. Nadir Shah conquered Delhi in 1739 and when he got Kohinoor into his hands, he was immensely delighted and in joy seems to have said to one of his nobles, "If five strong man were to throw four stones – one north, one south, one east, one west, and a fifth stone up into the air – and if the space between them was to be filled with gold, all that mountains of gold would not equal to the value of the Koh-i-Noor”.

Next known owner of this diamond was the famous Sikh ruler Maharaja Ranjit Singh. This devout Sikh king is said to have willed it to the famous Jagannath Temple at Puri after his death. But his successors did not honor his last wish and retained the diamond with them. British conquered Punjab in 1849 and confiscated this coveted diamond and finally handed it over to Queen Victoria in 1850. It is now part of the British Crown Jewels.

Third Battle of Panipat (1761) and the decline of the Marathas:

The next powerful force to reckon with in India after the Mughals was the Marathas. Great inheritors of Chattrapathi Shivaji’s martial spirit. Their political ambitions were shattered in the Third Battle of Panipat in 1761. Marathas kept on extending their control of North India right from 1707 AD, after the death of Aurangzeb. In 1758 the Marathas even occupied Delhi and Lahore. The boundaries of the Maratha Empire extended up to Indus and the Himalayas. Balaji Baji Rao the third Peshwa was desirous of starting a second Maratha empire after Shivaji and was planning to put his son Vishwasrao



on the throne of Delhi. The Muslim nobles were worried over the rapid growth of the Maratha power and wanted to put an end to the Maratha ambitions.

Ahmed Shah Abdali was the king of Afghanistan at that time and Muslim nobles had enough confidence on him that he could be effectively pitted against the Marathas. Perhaps Ahmed Shah Abdali wouldn't have succeeded against the Marathas if he had not got the support of Najib-ud-Daulah, the chief of the Rohillas and Shuja-ud-Daula the Nawab of Oudh. Support of the Rohillas under the leadership of Najib-ud-Daulah enhanced the military might of Ahmed Shah Abdali and much needed financial assistance to take on the mighty Marathas was provided by Shuja-ud-Daulah. One of the bloodiest battles in the history of India started on January 14th, 1761 between the Marathas and the Afghans and was popularly known as the Third Battle of Panipat. Maratha army was led by Sadashiv Rao Bhau and largest number of fatalities occurred on a single day. After the battle nearly 40,000 Maratha prisoners were massacred. After the ill-fated battle Ahmed Shah Abdali returned back to Afghanistan with a lot of war booty. Before his retreat he issued a Royal Farman recognizing Shah Alam II as the ruler of Delhi. Ahmed Shah Abdali also known as Ahmed Shah Durrani wanted even Robert Clive to recognize Shah Alam II as the emperor.

One important fact to be observed is that as long as the Mughals and Marathas were powerful these European trading companies operated in India for nearly 150 years without any territorial disputes between them. Portuguese were confined to Goa, Daman and Diu and Cochin. British were confined to Madras, Bombay and Kolkata. French had their factories in Pondicherry, Karaikal, Mahe and Chandernagore. Since there was no central power that was cable of controlling the colonialist exploitative ambitions, the field was wide open for them to expand their territorial conquests in India. British were perhaps the first to sense the dwindling power of both the Mughals and the Marathas. This is the background for the three Carnatic wars.

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