Regional States & Society in 18th Century
Taking advantage of the growing weakness of the central authority Murshid Quli Khan and Alivardi Khan, made Bengal virtually independent.

Even though Murshid Quli Khan was made Governor of Bengal as late as 1717, he had been its effective ruler since 1700, when he was appointed its Dewan.

He soon freed himself from central control, though he sent regular tribute to the Emperor.

He established peace by freeing Bengal of internal and external danger. Bengal was now also relatively free of uprisings by zamindars.

The only three major uprisings during his rule were first by Sitaram Ray, Udai Narayan and Ghulani Muhammad, and then by Shujat Khan, and finally by Najat Khan. (After defeating them, Murshid Quli Khan gave their zamindaris to Ramjivan).

Murshid Quli Khan died in 1727, and his son-in-law Shuja-ud-din ruled Bengal till 1739.

In 1739, Alivardi Khan deposed and killed Shuja-ud-din's son, Sarfaraz Khan, and made himself the Nawab.

These three Nawabs gave Bengal a long period of peace and orderly administration and promoted its trade and industry.

Murshid Quli Khan effected economies in the administration and reorganized the finances of Bengal by transferring large parts of jagir lands into khahsah lands by carrying out a fresh revenue settlement, and by introducing the system of revenue-farming.

Murshid Quli Khan also granted agricultural loans (taccavi) to the poor cultivators to relieve their distress as well as to enable them to pay land revenue in time. He was thus able to increase the resources of the Bengal Government.

But the system of revenue-farming led to increased economic pressure on the peasant. Moreover, even though state demanded only the standard revenue and forbade illegal cesses, the state collected the revenue from the zamindars and the peasants with utmost cruelty.
Another result of his reforms was that many of the older zamindars were driven out and their place taken by revenue-farmers.

Murshid Quli Khan and the succeeding Nawabs gave equal opportunities for employment to Hindus and Muslims.

They filled the highest civil posts and many of the military posts with Bengalis, most of whom were Hindus.

In choosing revenue farmers Murshid Quli Khan gave preference to local zamindars and mahajans (money-lenders) who were mainly Hindus. He, thus, laid the foundations of a new landed aristocracy in Bengal.

All the three Nawabs recognized that expansion of trade benefited the people and the Government, and, therefore, gave encouragement to all merchants, Indian or foreign.

They provided for the safety of roads and rivers from thieves and robbers by establishing regular thanas and chowkies.

They checked private trade by officials and prevented abuses in the customs administration.

At the same time they made it a point to maintain strict control over the foreign trading companies and their servants and prevented them from abusing their privileges.

They compelled the servants of the English East India Company to obey the laws of the land and to pay the same customs duties as were being paid by other merchants.

Alivardi Khan did not permit the English and the French to fortify their factories in Calcutta and Chandranagar.

Alivardi Khan was constantly troubled by the repeated invasions of the Marathas and, in the end, he had to cede a large part of Orissa to them.

In 1756-57, when English East India Company declared war on Siraj-ud-Daulah, the successor of Alivardi, the absence of a strong army contributed much to the victory of the Company.

Later, the Bengal Nawabs also failed to check the growing corruption among their officials. Even judicial officials, the qazis and muftis, were taking bribes. The foreign companies took full advantage of this weakness to undermine official rules and regulations and policies.

Awadh

The founder of the autonomous kingdom of Awadh was Saadat Khan, Burhan-ul-Mulk who was appointed Governor of Avadh in 1722. He was an extremely bold, energetic, iron-willed, and intelligent person.

At the time of his appointment, there was rebel by zamindars everywhere in the province and they refused to pay the land tax, organized their own private armies, erected forts, and defied the Imperial Government.

Saadat Khan succeeded in suppressing lawlessness and disciplined the big zamindars and thus, increased the financial resources of his government. Most of the defeated zamindars were, however, not displaced. They were usually confirmed in their estates after they had submitted and agreed to pay their dues (land revenue) regularly.

The zamindars continued to be refractory. Whenever the Nawab’s military hold weakened or he was engaged in some other direction, they would rebel, thus weakening the Nawab’s power.

He did not discriminate between Hindus and Muslims. Many of his commanders and high officials were Hindus, and he curbed refractory zamindars, chiefs, and nobles irrespective of their religion.

Saadat Khan troops’ were well-paid, well-armed, and well-trained and his administration was efficient.

Before his death in 1739, Saadat Khan became virtually independent and had made the province a hereditary possession.

Saadat Khan was succeeded by his nephew Safdar Jang, who was simultaneously appointed the wazir of the Empire in 1748 and granted in addition the province of Allahabad.
Safdar Jang reign was period of peace for Awadh and Allahabad before his death in 1754.

He suppressed rebellious zamindars and made an alliance with the Maratha sardars so that his dominion was saved from their incursions.

Safdar Jang, Saadat Khan’s successor, made out a fresh revenue settlement in 1723 and improved the lot of the peasant by levying equitable land revenue and by protecting them from oppression by the big zamindars.

He carried on warfare against the Rohelas and the Bangash Pathans. In war against the Bangash Nawabs in 1750-51, he secured Maratha military help by paying a daily allowance of Rs. 25,000 and Jat support by paying Rs. 15,000 a day.

Safdar Jang entered into an agreement with the Peshwa by which the Peshwa was to help the Mughal Empire against Ahmad Shah Abdali and to protect it from such internal rebels as the Indian Pathans and the Rajput rajas.

In return the Peshwa was to be paid Rs. 50 lakhs, granted the chauph of the Punjab, Sindh, and several districts of Northern India, and made the Governor of Ajmer and Agra. The agreement failed, however, as the Peshwa went over to Safdar Jang’s enemies at Delhi who promised him the governorship of Awadh and Allahabad.

Safdar Jang organized an equitable system of justice.

He too adopted a policy of impartiality in the employment of Hindus and Muslims. The highest post in his administration was held by a Hindu, Maharaja Nawab Rai.

The prolonged period of peace and of economic prosperity of the nobles under the the Nawabs resulted in time in the growth of a distinct Lucknow culture around the Awadh court.

Lucknow soon rivaled Delhi in its patronage of arts and literature. It also developed as an important centre of handicrafts.

The Sikhs

In 15th century, the Sikhs originated as a religious group initially and formed a sect within the larger Hindu community, in Punjab.

The Sikh founder, Guru Nanak (1469-1539), was roughly a contemporary of Babur, and belonged to the Khatri community of scribes and traders.

From an early career as a scribe for an important noble of the Lodi dynasty, Nanak became a wandering preacher before settling down at Kartarpur in the Punjab at about the time of Babur’s invasion.

By the time of his death, he had numerous followers, albeit within a limited region, and, like many other religious leaders of the time, founded a fictive lineage (i.e., one not related by blood) of Gurus who succeeded him.

His immediate successor was Guru Angad, chosen by Nanak before his death. He too was a Khatri, as indeed were all the remaining Gurus, though of various sub-castes.

In practice, the essential teachings of Nanak, collected in the Adi Granth, represented a synergetic melding of elements of Vaishnava devotional Hinduism and Sufi Islam, with a good amount of social criticism thrown in.

No political program is evident in the work, but religious movements in the period had a tendency to assume political overtones, by virtue of the fact that they created bonds of solidarity among their adherents, who could then challenge the authority of the state in some fashion.

The Sikh challenge to the Mughal state could be seen as prefigured in Nanak’s own critical remarks directed at Babur, but in reality it took almost three-quarters of a century to come to fruition.

In the early 17th century, when Guru Arjun was tortured and killed by Mughal authorities, first signsof a major conflict appeared.
Guru Arjun was accused of abetting a rebel Mughal prince, Khusraw, and, more significantly, found mention in Jahangir's memoirs as someone who ran a "shop" where religious falsehoods were sold (apparently a reference to the Khatri origins of the Guru).

His successor, Guru Hargobind (1595-1644), then began the move toward armed assertion by constructing a fortified centre and holding court from the so-called Akal Takht ("Throne of the Timeless One").

After a brief imprisonment by the Mughals for these activities, Hargobind was released, and he once more entered into armed conflict with Mughal officials. He was forced to spend the last years of his life in the Rajput principality of Hindur, outside direct Mughal jurisdiction, where he maintained a small military force.

Under Hargobind's son Tegh Bahadur, who became ninth Guru in 1664, conflicts with the Mughals once again increased, partly as a result of Tegh Bahadur's success as a preacher and proselytizer and partly because of the rather orthodox line of Sunni Islam espoused by Aurangzeb.

In 1675 Tegh Bahadur was captured and executed upon his refusal to accept Islam, thus laying the path for the increased militancy under the last of the Gurus, Gobind Singh (1675-1708).

It was the very success of the Sikh Gurus in attracting followers and acquiring temporal power that prompted such a response from the Mughals. However, rather than suppressing Sikhism, the policy of Aurangzeb backfired.

Guru Gobind Singh fought battle with Mughal forces on more than one occasion, and founded a new centre at Anandpur in 1689.

His letters also suggest the partial assumption of temporal authority, being termed hukmnamas (loosely, "royal orders"). However, he still chose to negotiate with the Mughals, first with Aurangzeb and then, after the latter's death, with Bahadur Shah I.

With Gobind Singh’s death, the Sikh threat to Mughal dominance increased and resulted from the assumption of leadership in the Punjab by Banda Singh Bahadur, a Maratha who had come under the Guru’s influence.

Between 1709 and late 1710 the Sikhs under Banda enjoyed successes in the sarkars (districts) of Sirhind, Hisar, and Saharanpur, all of them ominously close to Delhi.

Banda set up a capital at Mukhispur, issued coins in the names of the Gurus and began to use a seal on his orders even as the Mughals did.

In late 1710 and 1711 the Mughal forces counter-attacked, and Banda and his forces retreated. Expelled from Sirhind, he then moved his operations west into the vicinity of Lahore. Here too he was unsuccessful, and eventually he and his forces were forced to retreat to the fort of Gurdas Nangal. There they surrendered to Mughal forces after a prolonged siege, and Banda was executed in Delhi in 1716.

Banda Bahadur leadership phase of activity is especially important for two reasons:

- As distinct from the sporadic militancy exhibited under Hargobind and then Gobind Singh, in this period that a full-scale Sikh rebellion against Mughal authority broke out for the first time.
- Banda’s role in the matter itself, which was somewhat enigmatic, lends the affair a curious flavour. Some of Banda’s communications give the impression of orthodox Islam as an enemy to be rallied against, thus suggesting that the Sikhs at this time were moving somewhat away from their initial orientation as mediators between popular Hinduism and Islam.

In the 1720s and ‘30s Amritsar emerged as a centre of Sikh activity, partly because of its preeminence as a pilgrimage centre.

Kapur Singh, the most important of the Sikh leaders of the time, operated from its vicinity and gradually set about consolidating a revenue-cum-military system, based in part on compromises with the Mughal governors of the province.

Other Sikhs were, however, less willing to deal with the Mughal authorities and took the paths of social banditry and raiding. These activities served as a damper on the attempts by the Mughal governors of Lahore subah to set up an independent power base for themselves in the region.
First Abdus Samad Khan and then his son Zakariyya Khan attempted the twin tracks of conciliation and coercion, but all to little avail. After the latter’s demise in 1745, the balance shifted still further in favour of the Sikh warrior-leaders, such as Jassa Singh Ahluwalia, later the founder of the kingdom of Kapurthala.

Many pockets under the authority of Sikh leaders was thus a feature of the two decades preceding Durrani invasion of the Punjab.

Ahmed Shah Abdali (Durrani dynasty) led his campaigns in 1750s and 1760s in the Punjab and assaulted Lahore and Amritsar.

Eventually, by the mid-1760s, Sikh authority over Lahore was established, and the Afghans were unable to consolidate their early gains.

Timur Shah (1772-93), Ahmad Shah’s son and successor, was able to recover some of the territories and towns that had been taken by the Sikhs (such as Multan) and the descendants of Ahmad Shah continued to harbour ambitions in this direction until the end of the century.

By the 1770s there was confederation of about 60 Sikh chieftains, some of whom remained princely states under the British - Nabha and Patiala.

In the Sikh confederate structure, there were differences or conflicts between these chiefdoms, but in the face of their major adversary, the Durrani’s clan and its allies, these chiefdoms came together to present a united front.

The Sikh chieftdoms continued many of the administrative practices initiated by the Mughals.

The main subordinates of the chiefs were given Jagir assignments, and the Persianized culture of the Mughal bureaucracy continued to be practiced.

Unlike the Gurus who were exclusively drawn from Khatri origin, the bulk of the Sikh chieftains tended to be of Jat origin.

The most famous chief, Ranjit Singh, grandson of Charhat Singh Shukerchakia, eventually subjugated these principalities for a brief time into a larger kingdom.

Ranjit Singh’s effective rule lasted four decades, from 1799 to 1839, and was realized in a context already dominated by the growing power of the English East India Company. Within 10 years of his death, the British annexed Punjab.

His rise to power was based on superior military force, partly serviced by European mercenaries and by the strategic location of the territories that he had inherited from his father.

Ranjit Singh’s kingdom combined disparate elements. On the one hand, it represented the culmination of nearly a century of Sikh rebellions against Mughal rule. On the other hand, it was based on intelligent application of the principles of statecraft learned from the Afghans.

He made the great trading city of Lahore his capital, which he captured in 1799, in the aftermath of invasions by Shah Zaman, the successor of Timur Shah.

After gaining control of the trade routes, he imposed monopolies on the trade in salt, grain, and textiles from Kashmir to enhance his revenues. Using the revenues, he built up a large army and by 1809 he was undisputed master of most of Punjab.

Over the remaining three decades of his rule, Ranjit Singh continued to consolidate his territories, largely at the expense of Afghan and Rajput, as well as lesser Sikh chieftains.

In 1818 he subjugated Multan, and in 1819 he made major gains in Kashmir. At the time of his death, the territory that he controlled included the main trade routes extending from north India to Central Asia, Iran, and western Asia.

In a number of areas, he established tributary relations with chieftains, thus not wholly subverting their authority.

The model around which the Sikh state was built bears a striking resemblance to that of the Mughals.
- **Jagirs remained a crucial form of remuneration for military service**, and, in the directly taxed lands, officials bearing the title of kardar (agent) were appointed at the level of a unit called-as elsewhere in Mughal domains - the talluqa (district).

### Rajput States

- The principal Rajput states took advantage of the growing weakness of Mughal power to virtually free themselves from central control while at the same time increasing their influence in the rest of the Empire.
- In the reigns of Farrukh Siyar and Muhammad Shah the rulers of Amber and Marwar were appointed governors of important Mughal provinces such as Agra, Gujarat, and Malwa.
- The Rajputana states continued to be as divided as before and the strongest among them expanded at the cost of their weaker neighbours, Rajput and non-Rajput.
- The internal politics of these states were often characterized by the same type of corruption, intrigue, and treachery as prevailed at the Mughal court. For example, Ajit Singh of Marwar was killed by his own son.
- The most outstanding Rajput ruler of the 18th century was Raja Sawai Jai Singh of Amber (1681-1743).
- He was a distinguished statesman, law-maker, and reformer and a man of scientific temper in an age when Indians were oblivious to scientific progress.
- He founded the city of Jaipur in the territory taken from the Jats and made it a great seat of science and art.
- Jaipur was built upon strictly scientific principles and according to a regular plan. Its broad streets are intersected at right angles.
- Jai Singh was a great astronomer. He erected observatories with accurate and advanced instruments; some of them of his own invention are at Delhi, Jaipur, Ujjain, Varanasi, and Mathura.
- His astronomical observations were remarkably accurate. He drew up a set of tables, entitled Zij-i- Muhammad Shahi, to enable people to make astronomical observations.
- He got 'Elements of Geometry', translated into Sanskrit as well as several works on trigonometry, and Napier's work on the construction and use of logarithms.
- Jai Singh was also a social reformer. He tried to enforce a law to reduce the lavish expenditure which a Rajput had to incur on a daughter’s wedding and which often led to infanticide.
- He ruled Jaipur for nearly 44 years from 1699 to 1743.

### The Southern States

- In the south several states consolidated their power by the use of maritime outlets and principal among these were Travancore in Kerala under Martanda Varma and Rama Varma, and Mysore under Hyder Ali and Tipu Sultan.
- These states rose to prominence only in the latter half of the 18th century (at least after 1740). Before that, the southern Indian scene had been dominated by a group of Muslim nobles who had accompanied the Mughal expansion into the region in the 1680s and 90s or else had come in a second wave that followed immediately after 1700.
- Neither of these rulers while establishing dynastic succession, claimed full sovereignty, and thus they continued to cast themselves as representatives of Mughal authority.
Southern Indian politics in the 1720s emerged, therefore, as a game with many petty players and three formidable ones: the Marathas the Nizam, and the Arcot (or Karnatak). In the second half of the 18th century, the power of all three of these centres declined.

Hyderabad

- Nizam-ul-Mulk Asaf Jah, the founder of Hyderabad state, was one of the most powerful members at the court of the Mughal Emperor Farrukh Siyar.
- He was entrusted first with the governorship of Awadh, and later given charge of the Deccan.
- As the Mughal governor of the Deccan provinces, Asaf Jah already had full control over its political and financial administration.
- Taking advantage of the turmoil in the Deccan and the competition amongst the court nobility, he gathered power in his hands and became the actual ruler of that region.
- He brought skilled soldiers and administrators from northern India who welcomed the new opportunities in the south and appointed them mansabdars and granted jagirs to them.
- Although he was still in service of the Mughal emperor, he ruled quite independently without seeking any direction from Delhi or facing any interference. The Mughal emperor merely confirmed the decisions already taken by the Nizam.
- The state of Hyderabad was constantly engaged in a struggle against the Marathas to the west and with independent Telugu warrior chiefs (nayakas).
- The ambitions of the Nizam to control the rich textile-producing areas of the Coromandel Coast in the east were checked by the British who were becoming increasingly powerful in that region.
- When the British and French took hold over most of India, the Nizams played a delicate game of balance and maneuver.
- Nizams allied themselves with each side at different times, playing an important role in the wars involving Tipu Sultan, the French, and the British.
- The Nizams eventually won the friendship of the Western invaders without giving up their powers. As a result, Hyderabad was ruled by a Nizam till independence of India, and became the largest princely state of India.

Mysore

- Mysore rose into prominence in the mid-17th century, when rulers of the Vadiyar dynasty, Kanthirava Narasaraja and Cikka Deva Raja, fought campaigns to extend Vadiyar control over parts of interior Tamil Nadu (especially Dharmapuri, Salem, and Coimbatore).
- Until the second half of the 18th century, Mysore was a landlocked kingdom and dependent therefore on trade and military supplies brought through the ports of the Indian east coast.
- As these ports came increasingly under European control, Mysore’s vulnerability increased.
- Hyder Ali, assumed effective power in the kingdom in 1761, reducing the Vaidyars to figureheads and displacing the powerful Kalale family of ministers.
- First Hyder Ali and then, after his death in 1782, his son, Tipu Sultan, made attempts to consolidate Mysore and make it a kingdom with access to both coasts of peninsular India.
- Against the Kodavas, the inhabitants of the upland kingdom of Kodagu (Coorg), they were relatively successful.
Coastal Karnataka and northern Kerala came under their sway, enabling Tipu to open diplomatic and commercial relations on his own account with the Middle East.

However, the problem with Hyder and Tipu was their inability to build an internal consensus. Their dependence on migrants and mercenaries for both military and fiscal expertise was considerable, and they were always resisted by local chiefs, the so-called Poligars.

More crucial was the fact that by the 1770s Mysore faced a formidable military adversary in the form of the English East India Company.

It was the English who restricted Mysore access to the relatively rich agricultural lands and ports of the Coromandel coastal plain in eastern India, and, equally as significant, it was at the hands of an English attacking force that Tipu finally was killed in 1799 during the fourth Anglo-Mysore War.