
UNIT 2 BENGAL AND AWADH

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2.0 OBJECTIVES

The eighteenth century is marked by the rise of regional state systems. After reading this Unit you will:

- have an idea about the system of administration prevailing in Bengal and Awadh before autonomy,
- learn about the process of transformation of Bengal and Awadh into autonomous states,
- understand the context in which they were absorbed into the British imperial system, and
- learn about the nature and functioning of the regional polity in Awadh and Bengal.

2.1 INTRODUCTION

Recent historical writings on eighteenth century India have tended to focus on the emergence and experience of regional political systems as a central theme, rather than highlight the decline of the Mughal Empire as a process dominating the century. In Unit 1 you have read about the nature of polity in general in the mid-18th century. In this Unit we shall try to identify the elements and processes that enabled erstwhile imperial provinces to transform themselves into autonomous states. Our focus here is on Bengal and Awadh. In spite of differences in some respect, the regimes of Bengal and Awadh in their early years of inception and organisation shared features in common, an analysis of which could provide useful insight into the features and processes that characterised eighteenth century polities at large. This Unit first takes into account the transition of Bengal and Awadh from Mughal Subas into autonomous states and then their subordination to the British imperial system, in this context we have also taken into consideration the nature and functioning of the regional polity.

2.2 BENGAL AND AWADH: UNDER THE MUGHALS

The emergence of Awadh and Bengal as autonomous independent states in the eighteenth century was not an isolated development. The rise of independent states in Awadh, Bengal, Hyderabad, Mysore and in other regions was one of the predominant characteristics of the eighteenth century Indian polity. The on-going research on the decline of the Mughal Empire has shown that various factors like administrative crisis, agrarian crisis, societal crisis, etc., combining together destabilised the Mughal imperial system. The debate is still on among historians about the nature and relative importance of these various factors (You have got some idea about this in Unit 1). For our present purpose it is important to understand the nature of the Mughal provincial polity in the early eighteenth century so that we can follow the process involved in the emergence of new regimes in Bengal and Awadh.

Bengal and Awadh were integral parts of the Mughal imperial system. In both the provinces higher officials like the Nazim and the Diwan were directly recruited by the Mughal emperors. The provincial officials were as follows. In the **Suba** or province the head of revenue administration was the **Diwan**, and the executive head controlling other matters of civil and military administration was the **Nazim**. These were aided by the **Baksi** who was the military pay-master of the **Suba**, the **Kotwal** who headed the police department, the **Qazi** who dispensed Justice, and the **Waqai Navis** responsible for collecting and reporting news which had a bearing on political affairs. A Suba or Provinces was divided into Sarkars and these units were controlled by **Faujders**. The Sarkars were further subdivided into Parganas. At the local level within the province it was the Zamindars who had maximum control over the local people and administration.

The imperial control over the provinces was mainly through the control over appointment of the Nazim and the Diwan. They were men in whom the emperor had confidence. It was a system of checks and balances, the Diwan was separately appointed by the emperor in order to keep control over the Nazim. Besides these two high officials, in provinces many other officials like Amils, Faujders, etc., were dependent on the emperor who appointed them. Political integration of the empire was a product of the coordination and balancing of the various forces ranging from the Zamindars and a large number of lower-level officials to the highest provincial officials mentioned above.

This system acted well till the imperial authority was able to enforce policy and secure obedience from the provincial administration. But from the late 17th and early 18th century, gradually the relationship of the central authority with the provincial administration was virtually reduced to getting tribute from the provincial governor. While making this token submission to the imperial authority, the provincial governors gradually tried to identify themselves as local powers and to establish their independent authority at the provincial level. The flow of tribute to the imperial treasury became irregular. There was also a tendency among the governors to establish their dynastic rule in the provinces and to appoint their own men in the administration. All these point to the process of weakening of imperial control in the provinces and the making of independent authority at the regional level. In the following sections we will discuss how gradually Awadh and Bengal emerged as autonomous independent states in course of the 18th century.

2.3 BENGAL: TOWARDS AUTONOMY

The rise of Bengal as an independent autonomous state in the first half of eighteenth century typified the emerging trend of regional autonomy in various Mughal Subas. Though the sovereignty of the Mughal emperor was not challenged, the establishment of practically independent and hereditary authority by the governor and subordination of all offices within the region to the governor showed the emergence of an independent focus of authority in Bengal.

2.3.1 Murshid Kuli Khan and Bengal

The basis for an independent state in Bengal was first laid down by Murshid Kuli Khan. He was first appointed as Diwan to reorganise the revenue administration of Bengal. His success as an efficient administrator and the state of uncertainty in imperial administration following the death of Aurangzeb helped him to become the Subadar of Bengal. Although Murshid Kuli did not defy the imperial authority of the Mughals yet it was his administration which showed clear indication of the establishment of a dynastic rule in Bengal. He was the last governor of Bengal directly appointed by the emperor. Murshid Kuli abolished the system of separate offices of the Nazim and the Diwan and combined both the offices. Actually the motive behind the appointment of a Diwan in the provinces was to keep control over the governor of the province. But Murshid Kuli by combining these two posts wanted to strengthen the power of the governor. This was a clear indication of the creation of an independent authority in the province.

Murshid Kuli set the tradition of a dynastic rule in Bengal. It became an established fact in the province that after his death the Nawabship of Bengal would pass into the hands of his family. They continued to seek imperial confirmation but the selection of Nawab no longer remained in the hands of the emperor.

Initially Murshid Kuli's main concern was to step up revenue collection in Bengal. In order to do this Murshid Kuli entered into a series of new relations with local power groups within the province. This actually laid the basis for a larger framework within which the autonomous Suba would function in the 1730's and 1740's. The new arrangements followed as a consequence of Murshid Kuli's revenue measures which essentially sought to enhance and render more efficient the collection of land revenue. The measures that he took were:

- Elimination of small intermediary Zamindars,
- Expelling rebellious Zamindars and Jagirdars into the frontier provinces of Orissa,
- Enlarging the scope and extent of the KHALSA lands,
- Encouraging big Zamindars who assumed the responsibilities of revenue collection and payment.

Murshid Kuli encouraged some Zamindars to build up and consolidate their holdings by buying up the estates of defaulters. Some of the important Zamindars in Bengal were those of Rajsahi, Dinajpur, Burdwan, Nadia, Birbhum, Bishnupur and in Bihar Zamindars of Tirhut, Shahbad and Tikari. Murshid Kuli controlled the countryside and collected the revenue through these Zamindars; the Zamindars on their part expanded their dominions by extending their control over the neighbouring Zamindars. The net result was that by 1727, Zamindars as a group definitely emerged as one of the major political forces within the province.

Parallel to this development, was the growing importance of monied and commercial elements. The relentless pressure on the Zamindars to pay their obligations in full enhanced opportunities for financiers who now acted as securities at every stage of the transaction. It is, therefore, not surprising that the house of the Jagat Seths should have enjoyed such unstinted patronage and support of the Nawab. The Seths acted not merely as guarantor of the larger Zamindars but also assumed full responsibility for the remittance of the Bengal revenue to Delhi.

The new power structure that had thus emerged in Bengal was very different from the Mughal provincial model and coincided with Delhi's declining hold over the province. The Nazim, though not unaware of the implications of the changing situation did not contemplate a complete rupture with Delhi, and annual revenue continued to be remitted. But on the other hand, it became increasingly clear that Murshid Kuli had identified Bengal as his domain, and that he would ensure that the Nizamat of the province would pass on to a member of his family and not to an outsider. Thus Murshid Kuli nominated his daughter's son Sarfaraz as his successor. This manoeuvre would scarcely have been tolerated during the days of a strong imperial government.

2.3.2 Shujauddin and Bengal

Sarfaraz, nominated by Murshid Kuli as his successor, was deposed by his father

Shujauddin Muhammad Khan. Ties between Delhi and Murshidabad persisted in the rule of Shujauddin. He continued to pay the tribute to the Mughal court. But besides this aspect, in matters of provincial government Shuja managed the affairs in his own way. He filled the high officers with his own men and got the imperial endorsement later on. The way Murshid Kuli tried to develop a system of administration of his own was also pursued by Shuja. He also developed ties of loyalty with different local power groups to retain his control over the province. It has been observed by Phillip B. Calkins that during the 1730's the government of Bengal began to look more like government by cooperation of the dominant forces in Bengal rather than the imperial rule from outside. The changing power equation was most conspicuously demonstrated in the coup that was effected in 1739-40 by Alivardi Khan who killed Sarfaraz Khan, the legitimate successor to Shujauddin, and seized power. Alivardi was backed by the Zamindars and bankers.

2.3.3 Alivardi Khan and Bengal

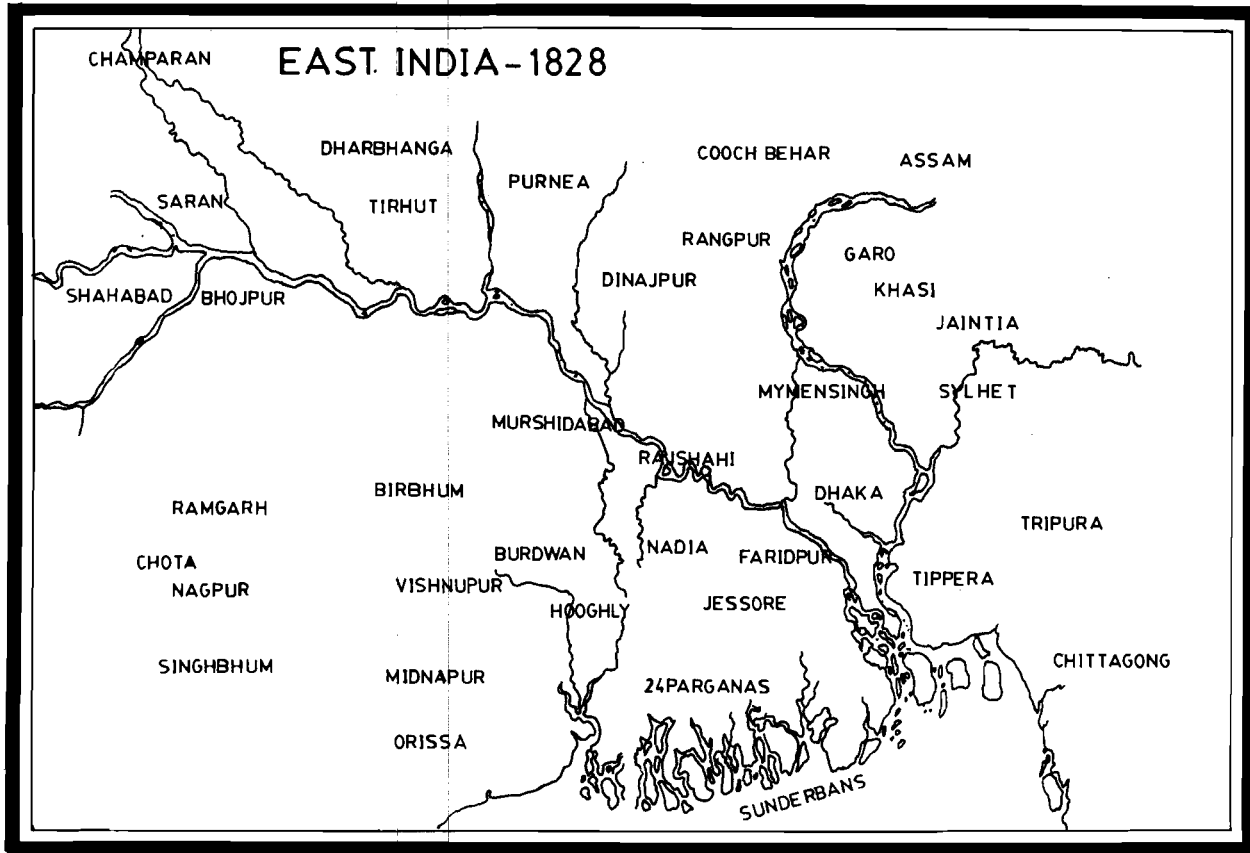
Alivardi's regime added a new dimension in the relations between the Mughal authority and the Bengal government. As it happened in the case of his predecessors Alivardi also obtained imperial confirmation of his position. But his reign showed a virtual break with the Mughals and marked the commencement of autonomy for the Bengal Suba. The major appointments in the provincial administration were made by Alivardi himself without any reference to the Mughal emperor. Previously it was through these appointments that the emperor tried to enforce his authority in the provinces. Men of Alivardi's own choice were appointed as Deputy Nawabs at Patna, Cuttack and Dhaka.

To manage the revenue administration he appointed a large number of Hindus as Mutasaddis or Amils or local Diwans. Alivardi also organised a strong military force with the help of the Pathans settled in Bihar and North India. Besides these developments, an important sign of declining of imperial control over Bengal was the abrupt end in the flow of regular tribute to Delhi. According to contemporary sources whereas Murshid Kuli and Shujauddin used to pay an annual tribute of Rs. 10,000,000, Alivardi in 15 years had paid Rs. 4,000,000 to Rs. 5,000,000. According to some other sources, Alivardi stopped paying annual tributes.

It is important to note here that by 1740's an administrative system developed in Bengal, Bihar and Orissa which steadily reduced ties with the imperial court in Delhi. It is true that Alivardi Khan did not formally defy the imperial authority. But for all practical purposes we find the emergence of an independent state in eastern India during this period. Two important forms of imperial control over province—payment of annual tribute to the emperor and appointment of higher provincial officials by the emperor, were not visible during Alivardi's regime. Practically there was no imperial intervention in Bengal.

However Alivardi had faced two strong external threats—one from the Marathas and the other from the Afghan rebels—when he was trying to consolidate his base in Bengal. After establishing their control over most of central India Marathas were trying to extend their control beyond central India. They were forcefully collecting Chauth from the neighbouring states. Goaded by the dream of a Maratha Empire and the desire for wealth the Marathas attacked Bengal three to four times during the period 1742 to 1751. Each time when they attacked Bengal it caused lot of damage to the life and property of the local people. Being disturbed by these repeated attacks of the Marathas and failing to stop it Alivardi finally sued for peace with the Marathas in 1751. Alivardi agreed to pay annual Chauth of Rs. 1,200,000 and Orissa was given to the Marathas on condition that the Marathas would not enter the dominions of Alivardi in future.

Another formidable threat that Alivardi had to face was from the rebel Afghan troops. Mustafa Khan, the Afghan general, with the help of the dismissed Afghan troops put forward a serious challenge to Alivardi. In 1748 the rebel Afghan troops seized Patna and plundered it. Alivardi, however, was able to defeat the Afghans after a major battle and recovered Patna. The long wars that Alivardi had to fight against the Marathas and the Afghans put severe strain on the finances of the government. The effect of it was felt very shortly on different local groups like Zamindars, office



Map 2

holders, bankers, merchants and the European companies. In the following section we will see how these different forces weaken the basis of the autonomous state and led to its subjection to the British imperial system.

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) How would you explain the decline of imperial control in the province in the first of 18th century? Write in about 100 words.

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- 2) List three/four characteristics which showed the development of independent political authority in Bengal.

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2.4 BENGAL : TOWARDS SUBJECTION

The death of Alivardi in 1756 gave rise to dissensions among various groups within the court on the question of succession to the throne of Bengal. Actually in the absence of any definite rule of succession each time after the death of Nawab there was a conflict for succession. Alivardi named Siraj-ud-daula, his grandson, as his successor. The succession of Siraj was challenged by other claimants like Shaukat Jang (Faujdar of Purnea) and Ghasiti Begam, daughter of Alivardi. This encouraged factionalism within the court and support offered by Jagat Seths, Zamindars and others to the different warring groups seriously threatened the stability of the independent Bengal Suba. The English East India Company acted as a catalyst to precipitate this crisis.

2.4.1 Plassey and After

Certain developments combined and converged to form the fateful conspiracy and encounter at Plassey in 1757 which set the process of subjugation of Bengal to the English East India Company. The sources of conflict between the Nawab and the English were related to:

- 1) the abuse of the duty free trade privilege (sanctioned by Mughal Emperor Farukhsiyar to the East India Company in 1717) which the company merchants insisted on availing of in their private commerical ventures.
- 2) the right to fortifications within the town of Calcutta. Both these were objected to time and again by successive Bengal Nawabs. Disputes became more acrimonious in Siraj's reign and led to a military encounter. The disaffected notables of Siraj's court, notably the Jagat Seths, Yar Lutf Khan, Rai Durlubh and Amir Chand joined hands with the English to oust Siraj and installed their protege.

In organising the conspiracy, it was not their intention to upset existing political order—a return to the status quo of Alivardi's administration was the probable objective. The battle of Plassey (1757) showed the depth of factionalism in the Nawab's court. The treachery of the close lieutenants of the Nawab rather than the might of the English decided the fate of the battle. Mir Jafar was proclaimed Nawab. An agreement was concluded with the English wherein the Nawab guaranteed and in some cases extended the commerical privileges of the English. The Company on their part agreed not to interfere in the Nawab's government.

A return to the status quo situation, the objective of Plassey conspirators, soon proved an impossibility to achieve. What happened instead was the steady erosion and collapse of the autonomy in Bengal which was so carefully built up by Murshid Kuli and his successors. The inability of Mir Jafar, the ongoing conspiracy within the court and the relative weakness of the Nawab's armed forces gave the English the scope to decisively interfere in the affairs of the province. Mir Jafar's growing dependence on the company for military support was used by the company to demand more finances and other privileges from the Nawab. But the Nawab was not in position to meet the growing financial demands of the company. Thus the company's relentless drive for more revenues in Bengal led to direct confrontation with Mir Jafar. Mir Jafar was ultimately forced to abdicate.

Mir Kasim who got the Nawabship through a secret deal with the English again faced the same fate like Mir Jafar.

- 2) Read the following statements and mark right (✓) or wrong (×).
- Siraj-ud-daula failed in the battle of Plassey because of the superiority of the English army.
 - The real beneficiary of the battle of Plassey was not Mir Jafar but the English East India Company.
 - The conflict between the East India Company and Mir Jafar was because the latter failed to keep his promise.
 - The growing commercial penetration into Bengal by the British led to the conflict with the Nawab.

2.5 AWADH: TOWARDS AUTONOMY

Development in Awadh followed the same trend towards autonomy in the first phase and eventually subjection to the British. The rise of Awadh as an eighteenth century regional political system was fostered as much by economic and geographical factors, as by the pursuit of political autonomy by the Iranian and Shiite family of Burhanulmulik Saadat Khan.

2.5.1 Saadat Khan and Awadh

Autonomy from the Mughal system was, in a sense, thrust upon Awadh following the frustrations and disappointments of Saadat Khan in Delhi. Prevented time and again from playing a larger role in the Mughal imperial politics which he thought he so richly deserved, he concentrated his energies in consolidating his authority in Awadh. He desired to convert Awadh into a power base for launching into imperial politics.

Economically Awadh was prosperous in eighteenth century because of its high level of trade and agricultural prosperity. Geographically it was situated in a very strategic position lying between the north bank of the Ganges and the Himalayan mountains. Awadh's proximity to the centre of imperial power, Delhi, had an added importance.

Saadat Khan was assigned the Subadari of Awadh in 1722 after having held the Agra Province, without conspicuous success against the Jath rebels. Saadat Khan devoted his energies to make Awadh an independent centre of authority. Prevailing weaknesses in the imperial administration following the death of Aurangzeb helped him in fulfilling his ambition. Immediately after taking control of Awadh Saadat Khan faced strong resistance from numerous rebellious chiefs and rajas in Awadh. In order to consolidate his position the measures he took were:

- Suppression of rebellious local Zamindars and chieftains,
- Circumscribing the authority of the Madad-i-mash grantees,
- Systematising revenue collection, and also
- Negotiation with some local Zamindars.

All the important posts in the provincial administration were filled up by his relatives and followers. In this way he wanted to ensure the loyalty of provincial officials to him. With these achievements behind him Saadat Khan felt emboldened enough to nominate his son-in-law Safdar Jang as Deputy governor of the province without waiting for imperial sanction. This was a clear sign of the growing autonomy of the Awadh Suba. By 1735, Saadat Khan's control over Awadh was so complete that Delhi did not hesitate to bestow on him the faujdari of the adjacent Sarkar of Kora Jahanabad and on another occasion the revenue farm of the Sarkars of Benaras, Jaunpur, Ghazipur and Chunargarh. These successes notwithstanding, Saadat Khan's concerns were still primarily determined by prospects of imperial politics and not with regional autonomy. The fact was that, Saadat had not yet given up his stakes in Mughal imperial politics. Admittedly important changes had been introduced and these had undermined the vestiges of imperial control but regional independence and control was still envisaged within the Mughal framework. It was only in 1737 when Saadat's demands for greater territorial resources and military control in lieu of his services against Maratha inroads were rejected outright by the Mughal Court and again 1739-40 when his request for the office of Mir Bakshi was turned down despite

his display of valour against the invading Persians, that the process of disenchantment and disillusionment with the Mughals was complete. In 1739 Saadat Khan came with a huge force to save the Mughal emperor from the Persian attack. But his abrupt attack on the main Persian force led to his capture in the hands of Nadir Shah, the Persian commander. However he was able to influence Nadir Shah and became the negotiator between the Persian and the Mughal camp. What followed was treachery and desertion to the Persian camp with disastrous implications. Saadat had helped in vain to utilise the Persian connection for a greater role in imperial politics. What transpired was Nadir's utter disregard of his clients pretensions and worse still Nadir's escalating cash demands on him. Despairing under the circumstances, Saadat gave up his life and with it his obsession with the imperial game.

2.5.2 Safdar Jang and Awadh

The legacy that Saadat Khan had left for his son-in-law and nominated successor Safdar Jang was a semi-autonomous regional political system. Its internal organisation and working was no longer dependent on imperial dictates and which did not consider it obligatory to remit revenues regularly to Delhi. Furthermore, revenue arrangements of the province had undergone a reorganisation; the office of imperial Diwan was abolished and larger numbers of local Hindu service gentry were absorbed into administration.

The following years between 1739 and 1764 saw Awadh's fortunes at its height and also constituted the period of greatest autonomy. The outward allegiance to the Emperor was still maintained, for example,

- Emperor's formal confirmation was taken for the appointment in the high offices,
- Revenues were sent to the imperial treasury,
- Orders, Titles, etc. were given in the name of the Mughal Emperor, etc.

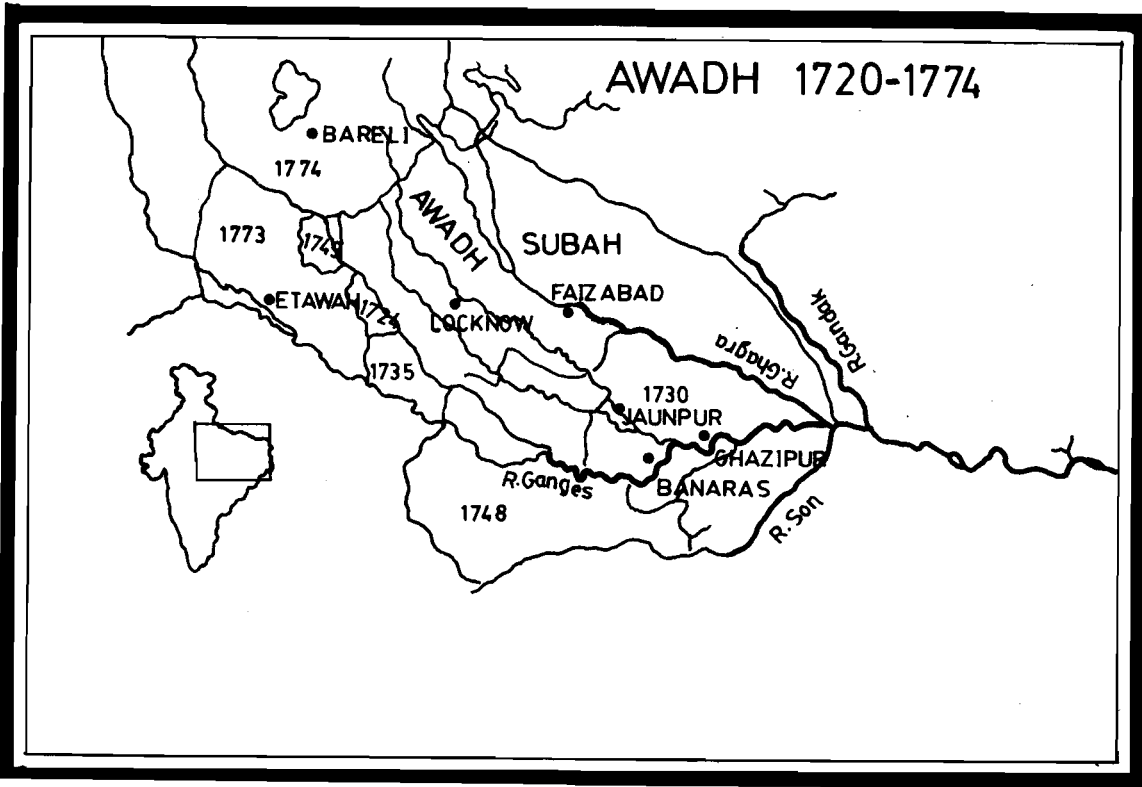
However, Safdar Jang within this imperial context tried his best to strengthen the basis of autonomous political system in Awadh. He extended his control over the Gangetic plains and appropriated the forts of Rohtas, Chunar and also the Subadari of Allahabad. These acquisitions enhanced his status at the imperial court and also earned for him the office of Wizarat. The acquisition of Farukhabad and his continual attempts at self-aggrandisement alienated him from the imperial court. Safdar Jang was dismissed from the office of Wazir. Though during the Maratha attack on Delhi in 1754, he had a brief return to the Mughal court, he virtually lost his influence in the imperial court.



1 Shuja-ud-daula with ten sons

Safdar Jang's successor Shuja-ud-daula achieved greater success in consolidating the expanding frontiers of the province and in adjusting the relations of his independent Suba with the Mughal empire. He was also to contemplate and execute a complex network of alliances against the rising English power in the east. Equally striking successes were registered in the internal sphere—revenue collection were systematised, the army well maintained and the treasury assured of regular receipts. Local Hindu gentry groups were well represented in the administration and bureaucracy, the Naib was Raja Beni Bahadur (Brahmin) while the secretary to the Nawab himself was a Marathi speaking Deshasth Brahmin. Among the Nawab's most reputed generals were not only Hindus but also gosain monks.

Like his predecessors Shuja-ud-daula also did not completely cut off the ties with the Mughal emperor. He also took the confirmation from the emperor for this throne. He successfully outmanoeuvred the emperor's attempt to extend the imperial control over north India. Shuja-ud-daula was able to reestablish the dominance of Awadh over the imperial court and got the appointment of Wazir. He took the side of Ahmad Shah Abdali, the Afghan leader, in the battle against the Marathas in 1761 and thus checked the Maratha threat to north India. Thus Shuja-ud-daula, before the battle with the English East India Company in 1764, had very successfully maintained the autonomous political system that developed in Awadh in the first half of the 18th century.



Map 3

Check Your Progress 3

- 1) How did Saadat Khan try to establish independent political authority in Awadh? Write in about 100 words.

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- 2) Read the following statements and mark right (✓) or wrong (×).
- Safdar Jang stopped sending of revenues to the imperial treasury.
 - Safdar Jang inducted large numbers of Hindu service gentry into the administration.
 - Shuja-ud-daula failed to establish the dominance of Awadh over the imperial court.
 - Shuja-ud-daula completely cut off the ties with Mughal emperor.

2.6 AWADH: TOWARDS SUBJECTION

The second half of eighteenth century witnessed gradual expansion of the English East India Company's role in north India and this had a strong bearing on the economy and politics of Awadh. Until 1801, Awadh was conceived of essentially as a buffer state protecting Bengal against the powers to the West notably the Marathas and the question of encroachment and annexation did not arise. It was only around the turn of the 19th century that Awadh became a block to further British expansion. This led eventually to the take over of the province in 1856.

2.6.1 Awadh: 1764-1775

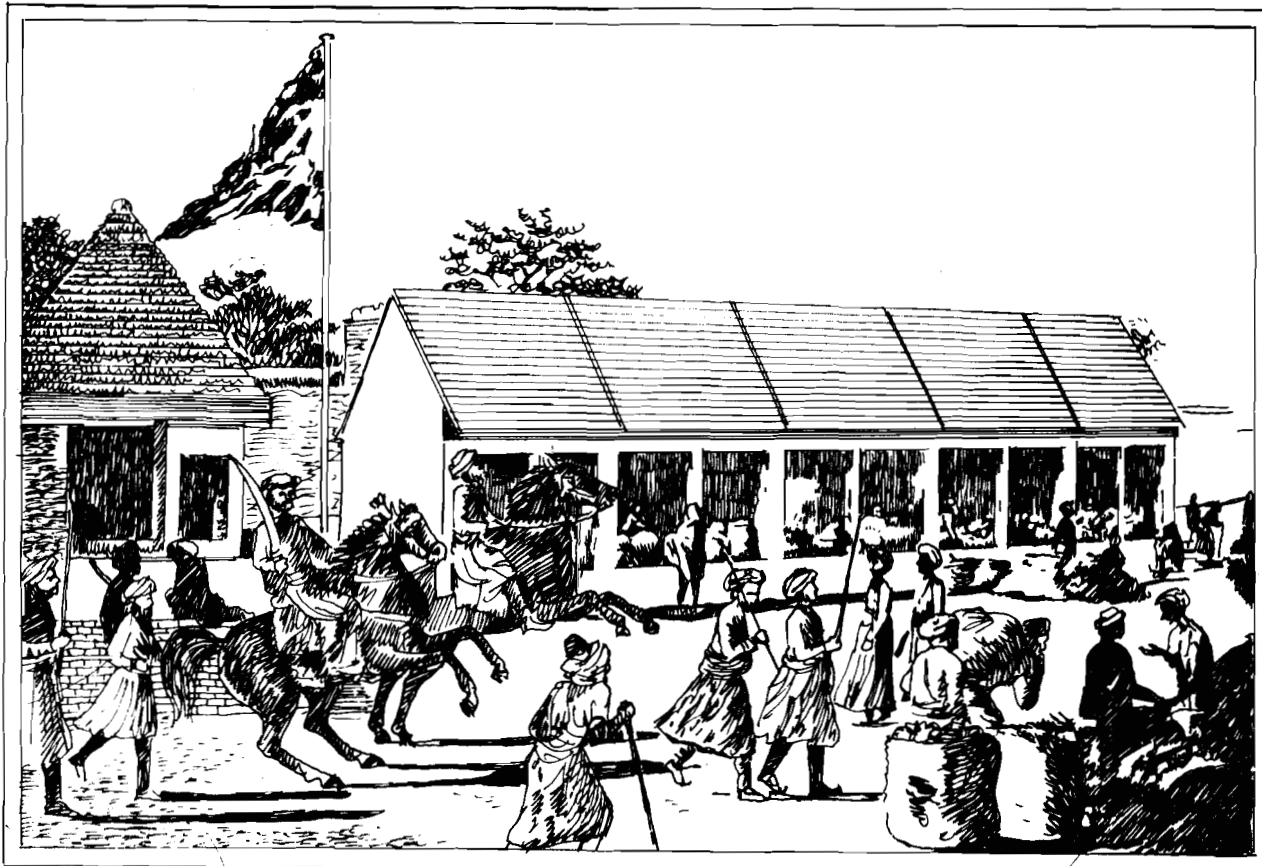
The failure of the combined forces of the Nawab of Bengal, Shuja-ud-daula and the Mughal emperor before the English forces at Buxar certainly undermined the authority and prestige of the Nawab of Awadh. Awadh was brought into the British dragnet by the treaty of Allahabad. According to this treaty Shuja-ud-daula was allowed to retain Awadh proper, however Kora and Allahabad were ceded to Mughal emperor. A war indemnity of Rs. 50,00,000 to be paid in lots was imposed on Shuja who entered into a reciprocal arrangement with the company for defence of each other's territory. The Nawabs were aware of the company's burgeoning strength and aspirations and, like the Bengal Nawabs, they were not prepared to let go without at least a semblance of a struggle. This assumed in the initial stages the form of a concerted drive against British commercial penetration of Awadh. Alongside was initiated a major reorganisation and reform of the Awadh Army.

The military reforms initiated by Shuja-ud-daula after the humiliation at Buxar, were not intended to either intimidate the English or to promote a war against them. Rather it would seem that the overall military effort reflected the Nawab's anxiety to defend his political authority at a time when it was being steadily undermined by the alien company. For the company, Awadh was too important and lucrative a province to be left alone. Its vast amount of revenue could be used to subsidise the company's armies. In carefully planned stages, the company stepped up its fiscal demands. In 1773 was concluded the first definitive treaty between Awadh and the English East India Company. By this treaty the Nawab agreed to pay Rs. 2,10,000 monthly for each brigade of company troops that would remain present in Awadh or Allahabad. This provision first established the beginnings of Awadh's chronic indebtedness to the company and represented the initial British thrust into the region's political system.

2.6.2 Awadh: 1775-97

It was in and after 1775 that the vulnerability of the Nawabi came into sharp focus. It was also in these years, ironically enough, that the emergence of a provincial cultural identity centred around the new court and capital at Lucknow (the capital had been shifted from Fyzabad) was more clearly identifiable than before. Asaf-ud-daula's succession to the throne in 1775 went without a hitch notwithstanding the hostility of some of Shuja's courtiers and of the opposition faction of his brother Saadat Ali, the

governor of Rohil Khand. Soon, however, under the stewardship of Murtaza Khan (Asaf's favourite who received the exalted title of Mukhtar-ud-daula) the stability of the existing political set up was undermined as older nobles and generals were displaced. Furthermore, Mukhtar allowed the company to negotiate a treaty with the Nawab ceding to English control the territories surrounding Benaras, north to Jaunpur and west to Allahabad, then held by Chait Singh. The treaty also fixed a larger subsidy than before for the company brigade and excluded the Mughal emperor from all future Anglo-Nawabi transactions. Finally all diplomatic transactions and foreign intelligence were to be controlled by the English through the Resident at the Nawab's court.



2 Lucknow street in the 18th century

The disintegration of the political system, the blatant intervention of the English in Awadh's affairs and Asaf-ud-daula's excessively indulgent disposition and disregard of political affairs alarmed a sizeable section of the Awadh nobility. The situation worsened as troops were in arrears and at places mutinied. These acts of disturbance and lawlessness smoothed the way for British penetration. In the 1770's the English East India Company persistently eroded the basis of Awadh's sovereignty. The rapid inroads the English made by virtue of their military presence seriously undermined the Nawabi regime which in 1780 came up with the first declaration of protest. The supreme government in Calcutta was forced to realise that unremitting pressure on Awadh's resources could not be sustained indefinitely and that the excessive intervention of the English Resident would have to be curtailed if Awadh's usefulness as a subsidiary was to be guaranteed.

Thus in 1784 Warren Hastings entered into a new series of arrangements with Asaf-ud-daula which reduced the debt by Rs. 50 lakhs and thereby the pressure on the Awadh regime.

In the following decade and a half, the Awadh regime continued to function as a semi-autonomous regional power whose relations with the company were cordial. This state of affairs lasted until 1797, the year of Asaf's demise, when the British once more intervened in the succession issue. Wazir Ali, Asaf's chosen successor was deposed in favour of Saadat Ali. With Saadat Ali a formal treaty was signed on 21 February 1798 which increased the subsidy to Rs. 76 lakhs yearly.



3 Nawab Asaf-ud-daula and his ministers with a British official

2.6.3 Awadh: 1797-1856

A more forward policy was initiated by Lord Wellesley who arrived in 1798 only to reject the Awadh system. The Nawab's declaration of inability to pay the increased financial demand of the company gave Wellesley a suitable pretext to contemplate annexation. In September 1801, Henry Wellesley arrived in Lucknow to force Saadat's surrender of his whole territory. After protracted negotiations, the company accepted the perpetual sovereignty of Rohil Khand, Gorakhpur and the Doab which yielded a gross amount of 1 crore 35 lakhs. The annexations of 1801 inaugurated a new era in Anglo-Awadh relations. The Shrunken Suba could no longer pose a threat to the stability of the company dominions. Nor did in fact the rulers of Awadh entertain any notion of resistance to the relentless forward march of the English. Deprived of their army and half of their territory, they concentrated their energies in cultural pursuits. In this they were following the footsteps of Asaf-ud-daula who had built up around the Lucknow court a vibrant and living cultural arena.

The patronage extended to luminaries and poets, Mirza Rafi Sauda (1713-86), Mir Ghulam Hasan (1734-86), etc., made Lucknow a second home for these sensitive men of letters who had left Delhi and lamented for the world they had loved and lost.

The assumption of imperial status by Ghazi-ud-din-Hyder (1819) and the formal revocation of Mughal sovereignty was an integral part of the blooming court culture of Awadh. But this concided with the decline in the ruler's control over the administration and province. The heavy price that had to be continually paid to the Company for "protection", the devolution of administrative responsibility to ministers, the dominant position of the British Resident, were facts which no regal pomp and ceremony could conceal.

The declining state of affairs continued through the regimes of Nasir-ud-din-Hydar, Muhammad Ali Shah and Amjad Ali Shah (1827-47). None of these rulers could enforce their authority over the administration or free themselves from the political hold of the company. Their achievements were confined to preserving Awadh's nominally autonomous status and to elevating Lucknow's position as the dominant cultural centre in north India. The English Resident was allowed to dominate the administration and to exercise a form of dyarchy or indirect rule. The company was not unaware of the inherent contradictions in the situation and from time to time toyed with the idea of annexation. The idea was vetoed on the grounds that the company was not ready to assume the direct administration of Awadh. It was, in 1856 when Wajid Ali Shah was exiled, Awadh was annexed and Dalhousie, the Governor-General, wrote to his masters, "So our gracious Queen has 5,000,000 more subjects and Rs. 1,300,000 more revenues than she had yesterday." Nishapuri Awadh became British 'Oudh' and thus came to an end the independent Shiite house of the Burhan-ul-mulk (Saadat Khan) which had made and lost its fortunes in the century of transition sandwiched between two empires, that of the Mughal and of the British respectively.

2.7 NATURE OF THE REGIONAL POLITY

In the previous sections on Bengal and Awadh we have discussed the formation and functioning of the regional political regimes. Here we would try to examine the nature of the regional polity and the various forces that were within the regional political system. Though there was a distinct attempt towards the formation of independent state both in Bengal and Awadh, both of them acknowledged Mughal sovereignty as a formality. In the case of Awadh, it was only in 1819 with the coronation of Ghazi-ud-din Hydar that the sovereignty of the Mughals was unilaterally revoked. Ties with the Mughal imperial authority were not completely broken and the forms of the Mughal provincial government did not change much. Major noticeable change was the growing power of the provincial rulers and the central authority had virtually no control over the provincial rulers. This contrasted with the situation in the 17th century.

The independent authority that emerged in the provinces in the 18th century worked with the collaborative support of different groups like the Zamindars, the merchants, etc. Merchants and money lenders who became politically important in the 18th century had an important role in the emergence of the regional political system. During the 17th century this class of people helped the Mughal's taxation system and the expansion of trade in agricultural products and artisan goods. However their role in imperial politics was not much visible. But in the 18th century with the weakening of central authority and the collapse of the Mughal treasury, this commercial class provided the economic basis for the emerging regional political system. They became the guarantor of money for the rulers and the nobles. The extent of mercantile and commercial penetration into the working of the administration was fairly pronounced. The government borrowed substantial sums from the commercial houses. The Agarwal bankers had complete command over the revenue matters in Benares. In fact, in Awadh the debts incurred by the time of Asaf-ud-daula (1755-97) became so staggering a burden that successive English Residents were forced to investigate into the matter. In case of Bengal, the house of Jagat Seths assumed an important role in the main centre of power in the province. Thus the merchants and the money lenders had a share in political power in the regional polity in the eighteenth century.

Parallel to the merchants, Zamindars as a group also had a very significant role within the province. In the wake of the receding tide of the imperial authority the Zamindars consolidated their authority at the local level and began to tax markets and trade in their areas which was beyond their purview during the sunny days of the Mughal rule. The collection of revenues and the maintenance of law and order in the countryside became the concern of the Zamindars. The stability in the regional polity became dependant on the active support of the Zamindars. The Zamindars were usually supportive vis-a-vis merchants and in many cases Zamindars were also money lenders



4 A Seth in the 18th century

and had investment in commerce. So their common interest tied them together. Their support became essential for the ruler to maintain his authority. We have seen how the rulers in Awadh and Bengal tried to develop good relations with the Zamindars in order to retain their control in the state.



5 British officials and an Indian landlord

Another significant characteristic that is observed in the polity of Bengal and Awadh is the appointment of large number of Hindus in the revenue administration. Hindu officials like Atma Ram, Raja Ram Narayan in Awadh and Rai Duriabh, Amir Chand in Bengal were trusted with the charge of revenue administration. The manning of revenue administration by Hindu officials may have been encouraged because there was less chance of resistance from the Hindus to the Nawab's authority. Be that as it may, traditionally many Hindu officials were employed in revenue administration and clerical jobs.

Since the mid-18th century the English East India Company gradually emerged as a strong force in the polity of Bengal and Awadh. The growing economic power of the company backed by military force made it the arbiter of provincial politics. The dissension and rivalry within the provincial administration further strengthened their position in the provincial polity. Taking advantage of the situation they played one faction against the other to consolidate their base in the province.

Check Your Progress 4

- 1) What was the effect of Shuja-ud-daula's failure in the battle of Buxar on Awadh? Write in about 50 words.

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- 2) Explain in about 100 words the reasons for the failure of Awadh to maintain its autonomy.

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- 3) Discuss the role of the merchants in the regional polity in about 60 words.

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2.8 LET US SUM UP

We have seen in this Unit that the first half of the 18th century witnessed the emergence of independent autonomous states in Bengal and Awadh. The emergence of this regional autonomy was not sudden development rather it was the result of the process that followed the failure of the Mughal imperial authority to uphold its control over the provinces. Bengal was able to maintain its autonomous character for three decades only (up to 1757), whereas Awadh virtually ceased to function as an independent state in 1801. It was the English East India Company with its omnipotent military forces and its control over the Kingdom's resources that became the real master of both Bengal and Awadh. In Bengal, British intervention had come half a century earlier and had been more brutal in that the pre-British system had been shattered in one stroke. In Awadh, the process of subordination and emasculation of the political system had been more prolonged but the outcome remained pitifully the same. We would discuss this in detail in Block-3.

2.9 KEY WORDS

Autonomous State: A state that governs itself without being controlled by any other authority or state.

Khalsa lands: Lands in direct possession of the crown.

Madad-i-mash: Revenue free land grants given for religious and charitable purposes.

Nizamat: Office of the governor.

Peshkash: Tributes paid to the Mughal imperial authority by the subordinate provincial chiefs.

Suba: Province. The Mughal emperor divided the whole country into number of provinces for administrative convenience.

Wizarat: Office of the Wazir.

2.10 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS EXERCISES

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) Your answer should focus on the appointment of officials at the provincial level, payment of annual tributes to the imperial treasury, establishment of dynastic rule in the province, etc. See Sec. 2.2.
- 2) Appointment of higher officials, organisation of revenue administration, establishment of hereditary rule, etc. See Sec. 2.3.

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) Your answer should include conspiracy within the Nawab's court, absence of effective control of the Nawabs over administration, role of the English East India Company, etc. See Sec. 2.4.
- 2) a) × b) ✓ c) × d) ✓

Check Your Progress 3

- 1) You have to write about the various measures that Saadat Khan took to establish an autonomous political system in Awadh. See Sub Sec. 2.5.1.
- 2) a) × b) ✓ c) × d) ×

Check Your Progress 4

- 1) You have to focus on how Awadh after Buxar was gradually subjected to the British imperial system. See Sub Sec. 2.6.1.
- 2) Your answer should include the failure of the Nawabs, lack of cohesion in the administration, failure to maintain the army organization, etc. See Sec. 2.6
- 3) Your answer should highlight the growing importance of the merchants in the regional polity. See Sec. 2.7.