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Cultural Continuity And Transformation In The Later Mughal Era (1707–1857)

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Abstract

The Later Mughal Era (1707–1857) is often characterized primarily by political fragmentation and imperial decline following the death of Aurangzeb. However, this period also witnessed remarkable cultural resilience and creative adaptation. Despite the diminishing authority of the Mughal court in Delhi, the imperial aesthetic-shaped over centuries-continued to influence literature, art, architecture, and social customs across the Indian subcontinent. Regional kingdoms, such as Awadh, Hyderabad, and Bengal, became new centers of cultural patronage, blending Mughal traditions with local artistic expressions and emerging European styles introduced through colonial contact.¹ This era saw the refinement of Indo-Persian literature, the evolution of miniature painting into distinct regional schools, and the continuation of architectural projects that combined Mughal grandeur with regional innovations. Music and performing arts, particularly Hindustani classical traditions, also flourished under the patronage of regional courts, sustaining a legacy of courtly refinement and aesthetic sophistication. Far from being a period of cultural stagnation, the Later Mughal period represents a dynamic phase of synthesis-where imperial ideals were reinterpreted and preserved within a changing socio-political landscape. The endurance and transformation of Mughal cultural identity during this era not only mitigated the impact of political decline but also laid the foundation for subsequent cultural developments in colonial and post-colonial India.²

Keyword: Later Mughal Era, Cultural Continuity, Cultural Transformation, Indo-Persian.

1. Introduction

The death of Aurangzeb in 1707 marked a watershed moment in the history of the Mughal Empire, ushering in what historians term the Later Mughal period (1707–1857). This era has often been characterized by political decline, imperial fragmentation, and a steady erosion of centralized authority. A series of weak successors, dynastic struggles, and the rise of powerful regional kingdoms such as Awadh, Bengal, and Hyderabad weakened the core of the empire. Simultaneously, external pressures-most notably the growing influence of European trading companies-reshaped the subcontinent's political and economic framework, setting the stage for eventual colonial dominance under the British. Despite these political and administrative setbacks, the Later Mughal period was far from a cultural vacuum.³ Instead, it demonstrated extraordinary resilience and adaptability in the realm of art, architecture, literature, music, and courtly traditions. The cultural ideals nurtured during the high Mughal era continued to thrive, even as the imperial court lost much of its former grandeur and authority. Regional courts emerged as vital centers of patronage, sustaining and reinterpreting Mughal artistic conventions. Nawabs, princes, and aristocrats, as well as urban elites, became significant patrons, ensuring the continuity of aesthetic refinement and intellectual pursuits.⁴

Literary traditions flourished during this period, with Urdu poetry emerging as a dominant expressive medium, producing masters such as Mir Taqi Mir, Sauda, and Mirza Ghalib. Mughal miniature painting evolved into distinctive regional styles, incorporating both Persian influences and European naturalism introduced through colonial contact. Architecture, though less monumental than earlier Mughal works, continued to display elegance, craftsmanship, and a unique blend of imperial and regional aesthetics, as seen in palaces, mosques, gardens, and civic structures across northern India.⁵ Furthermore, performing arts such as Hindustani classical music and Kathak dance attained new levels of sophistication, nurtured by regional courts that embraced the cultural legacy of the Mughals. These forms not only preserved earlier traditions but also absorbed local innovations, reflecting a dynamic process of cultural synthesis. Thus, the Later Mughal period cannot be reduced merely to a narrative of political decay. It stands as a testimony to the enduring vitality of Mughal cultural ideals and their capacity to adapt to new socio-political realities. This phase of Indian history reveals how art, literature, and intellectual traditions can outlive imperial structures, shaping the cultural identity of a region long after the decline of centralized political authority.⁶

2. Cultural Continuity

Despite the political disintegration of the Later Mughal Era (1707–1857), the empire's cultural ethos endured with remarkable strength, carried forward by regional courts, aristocrats, and urban elites. Architecture, miniature painting, literature, and music remained deeply rooted in Mughal traditions, ensuring that the artistic and intellectual legacy of the empire continued to thrive. Mughal architectural ideals of symmetry, proportion, and ornamental elegance persisted even as large-scale imperial projects declined. The city of Shahjahanabad (Old Delhi) remained a cultural hub, housing exquisite mansions (havelis), bustling bazaars, mosques, and gardens that reflected Mughal urban aesthetics. The Red Fort and Jama Masjid, though constructed earlier, continued to be focal points of cultural life and inspired subsequent architectural

endeavors.⁷ Regional courts such as Awadh, Hyderabad, Murshidabad, and Jaipur became new centers of architectural patronage. The Nawabs of Awadh commissioned structures like the Bara Imambara and Rumi Darwaza in Lucknow, blending Mughal design elements with regional features such as Indo-Persian arches and elaborate stucco work. In Hyderabad, the Asaf Jahi rulers continued to sponsor palaces and mosques inspired by Mughal grandeur, while also incorporating Deccani stylistic motifs. These constructions signified not only continuity but also adaptation to local tastes and emerging political realities.⁸

The Mughal atelier tradition survived through its influence on regional schools of miniature painting, particularly in Rajasthan, the Deccan, and Bengal. Artists trained in imperial workshops migrated to these courts, carrying with them techniques of fine brushwork, naturalistic portraiture, and elaborate border designs. The Patna Kalam (or Company School) of painting, which emerged in Bihar, combined Mughal artistic sensibilities with European techniques such as perspective and shading, introduced through colonial contact.⁹ Similarly, Lucknow and Murshidabad developed distinctive miniature styles marked by softer color palettes and courtly elegance. These variations demonstrated how Mughal visual culture retained its vitality while embracing new influences. Persian remained the primary language of the Mughal court and continued to serve as the medium for poetry, historical chronicles, and intellectual discourse. Court historians compiled annals that recorded not only political events but also cultural achievements, preserving the sophisticated historiographical traditions of earlier centuries.¹⁰

Simultaneously, Urdu literature rose to prominence, reaching its classical phase during this era. Poets like Mir Taqi Mir, Sauda, and later Mirza Ghalib infused Urdu ghazals with emotional depth, philosophical reflection, and aesthetic refinement. Their works captured the ethos of an age grappling with political decline yet rich in cultural creativity. The proliferation of Urdu prose, including tales (dastans) and satirical writings, also reflected the diversification of literary expression during this period. Music continued to occupy a central place in Mughal cultural life.¹¹ Classical forms such as dhrupad, known for its devotional solemnity, maintained its prestige, while khayal, a more lyrical and improvisational style, gained popularity and became the dominant vocal form by the late 18th century. Regional courts actively patronized musicians and composers, ensuring that traditions of ragas, talas, and intricate compositions flourished. Instruments such as the sitar, sarangi, and tabla achieved greater sophistication, while dance forms like Kathak evolved into refined expressions of rhythm and storytelling, reflecting the fusion of courtly elegance and performative skill. The continued emphasis on musical training and performance revealed the depth of Mughal cultural continuity despite political instability.¹²

3. Cultural Transformation

The Later Mughal Era (1707–1857) was not merely a period of cultural preservation but a dynamic phase of transformation shaped by regional powers, cross-cultural exchanges, and socio-political changes. While Mughal traditions of art, architecture, literature, and music continued to exert influence, they underwent significant evolution under new patrons and absorbed external influences, particularly those brought by European traders and colonial administrators.¹³ With the decline of centralized authority in Delhi, the task of

sustaining Mughal cultural ideals shifted to regional courts, which became centers of creativity and refinement. Among these, Lucknow, Hyderabad, and Murshidabad emerged as leading patrons of artistic expression. In Lucknow, the Nawabs of Awadh developed a distinctive cultural identity, blending Persian elegance with indigenous North Indian traditions.¹⁴ Under rulers such as Shuja-ud-Daula and Asaf-ud-Daula, the city became renowned for its etiquette (*tehzeeb*) and cultural sophistication (*adab*). Literary gatherings (*mushairas*) and musical assemblies (*mehfils*) attracted celebrated poets like Mir Taqi Mir, Insha Allah Khan Insha, and Mirza Ghalib. Architectural masterpieces such as the Bara Imambara (1784) and Chota Imambara (1838) reflected Mughal grandeur fused with Indo-Persian and European stylistic innovations, while dance forms like the Lucknow Gharana of Kathak reached new heights of grace and expression.¹⁵

In Hyderabad, the Nizams cultivated a unique artistic tradition that merged Mughal aesthetics with Deccani sensibilities. Palaces such as Chowmahalla and Falaknuma displayed the symmetrical elegance of Mughal architecture while incorporating European interior designs and decorative techniques. Persian and Urdu literary culture thrived at the court, producing works of both classical refinement and contemporary social relevance. In Bengal, Murshidabad emerged as another center of cultural patronage, where palaces like Hazarduari (built in 1837) showcased a blend of Mughal and neoclassical European designs, and local miniature painting schools evolved into the distinctive Company Style, combining Indian and Western artistic techniques.¹⁶ European influence played a decisive role in shaping cultural transformation during this era. The growing presence of European artists, traders, and officials introduced new approaches to visual art, particularly in painting and portraiture. The Company School of Painting, which flourished in Patna, Calcutta, and Madras, represented a striking synthesis of Mughal miniature traditions with European naturalism and perspective.¹⁷ Indian artists adopted oil painting, a technique introduced by Europeans, to produce lifelike portraits while preserving the elegance of Mughal aesthetics. Indo-European hybrid architecture also became more common, incorporating Gothic arches, Corinthian columns, and Italian balustrades into structures that otherwise retained Mughal symmetry and decorative schemes.¹⁸

One of the most profound cultural changes was the gradual linguistic shift from Persian to Urdu as the dominant medium of refined literary expression. While Persian continued to hold prestige among aristocrats and scholars, Urdu reached its classical zenith during this period. Poets like Mir Taqi Mir explored themes of love and melancholy, while Sauda became known for his sharp satires. Later, Mirza Ghalib elevated Urdu poetry to new intellectual heights, blending Persian sophistication with vernacular vibrancy and philosophical depth.¹⁹ Alongside poetry, Urdu prose began to flourish through *dastans* (epic tales), historical narratives, and moral fables, reflecting the evolving tastes of urban audiences. Architectural practices also underwent significant hybridization. While the essential vocabulary of Mughal architecture—domes, arches, minarets, and charbagh (four-part garden) layouts—remained intact, it was increasingly combined with regional and European elements. In Lucknow, the Bara Imambara and Rumi Darwaza displayed Indo-Persian design enhanced with elaborate stucco work and ornate façades.²⁰ Murshidabad's palaces and mansions incorporated neoclassical European features such as Corinthian columns and grand staircases. Even in Delhi, where imperial resources

had dwindled, havelis (mansions) and mosques were constructed in a style that fused Mughal, Rajput, and Western decorative elements.²¹

The cultural transformations of the Later Mughal Era demonstrate that this was not a time of decline but of innovation and synthesis. Regional courts, European artistic influence, and evolving linguistic preferences combined to create a rich and hybrid cultural legacy. This synthesis shaped the artistic, literary, and architectural traditions of India well into the colonial and modern periods, ensuring that the Mughal cultural heritage remained vibrant, adaptive, and enduring.²²

4. Socio-Political Impact on Culture (Expanded)

The Later Mughal Era (1707–1857) witnessed major socio-political upheavals that directly influenced cultural production and artistic expression across the subcontinent. The death of Aurangzeb left the empire fragmented, with successive emperors lacking both the authority and resources to sustain the grand scale of patronage seen under Akbar, Jahangir, and Shah Jahan. As central control weakened, artisans, musicians, poets, and architects—who had previously depended on the imperial court—were compelled to seek alternative sources of support in regional courts and urban centers.²³ Regional powers such as the Nawabs of Awadh, the Nizams of Hyderabad, and the rulers of Murshidabad became significant cultural sponsors. These courts not only preserved Mughal artistic traditions but also infused them with local styles and preferences. In Lucknow, for example, the Nawabs developed a distinctive Indo-Persian aesthetic visible in monuments like the Bara Imambara and the Rumi Darwaza, which combined Mughal symmetry with Persian arches and intricate stucco decoration. Similarly, Hyderabad nurtured a fusion of Mughal and Deccani styles in architecture and painting, while Murshidabad became a hub for Company School art, reflecting both Indian traditions and European techniques.²⁴

As trade and commerce flourished, wealthy merchants, bankers, and urban elites began investing in cultural activities, becoming new patrons of music, poetry, and visual arts. They sponsored *mushairas* (poetic symposia), *mehfil* gatherings for music and dance, and even supported the publication of literary works. This democratization of cultural patronage allowed art to move beyond aristocratic circles and flourish within urban society, where it became a marker of sophistication and social prestige. Despite regional variations, Mughal artistic ideals—elegance, refinement, and symmetrical beauty—remained the standard of high culture. However, as artists adapted to the tastes of their new patrons, local influences became more prominent.²⁵ Kathak dance, for instance, evolved into a more expressive and theatrical form under the Nawabs of Awadh, incorporating Persian gestures and courtly elegance. Urdu poetry flourished as the language of refined expression, with poets such as Mir Taqi Mir and Mirza Ghalib capturing the emotional depth and existential concerns of a society navigating change and uncertainty.²⁶

Even though political instability and economic challenges marked the Later Mughal Era, cultural life did not merely survive—it transformed. The socio-political context encouraged innovation, hybridization, and the spread of Mughal traditions into diverse regional and social contexts. Rather than a narrative of decline,

this period reflects a vibrant process of adaptation, ensuring that Mughal cultural legacy endured well into the colonial period and beyond.²⁷

5. Conclusion

The Later Mughal period (1707–1857) should not be viewed solely through the lens of imperial decline but rather as a phase of profound cultural transformation and adaptation. While political authority fragmented and imperial patronage weakened, Mughal cultural heritage-rooted in elegance, symmetry, and refined artistic expression-demonstrated remarkable resilience. Regional courts, urban elites, and mercantile classes became new patrons, ensuring that architecture, painting, literature, and music continued to flourish, albeit in localized and hybrid forms. European contact further enriched this cultural evolution, introducing new techniques such as perspective in painting and elements of neoclassical design in architecture, which were seamlessly integrated with traditional Mughal aesthetics. Literary developments, particularly the rise of Urdu poetry through luminaries like Mir Taqi Mir and Mirza Ghalib, reflected both continuity with the Persianate tradition and adaptation to emerging linguistic identities. Thus, the Later Mughal era represents a period of synthesis-where Mughal ideals merged with regional creativity and global influences to shape the cultural fabric of 18th- and 19th-century India. Far from signaling cultural stagnation, it laid the groundwork for modern Indian art, literature, and architecture, leaving a legacy that continues to inspire historical and aesthetic scholarship today.

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