

INDIAN HISTORY- Early Modern Period (Mughals)

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Overview The history of early modern India is dominated by the Mughal Empire, and largely by the individual genius of Emperor Akbar (r. 1556-1605). From the 17th century onward, however, the story of the Mughals is intertwined with the emergence of two other powers in the subcontinent: the Mahrattas, a Hindu peasant kingdom in the west, and the British, who came by sea. These three, who fought each other in bloody battles to gain economic and political control, were so different that no two of them could form an alliance to crush the third. In the end, the Mahrattas and the British separately defeated the Mughals, and then the British overran the Mahrattas in the early 19th century. The Mughal splendour did not entirely disappear, however, since the new rulers adopted much of their predecessor's administrative structures and tax collection system. As one small example, Persian continued as the official language of British India until the 1830s.

Events

Battle of Panipat The long struggle by the Muslim rulers of Delhi to prevent other Central Asian groups from claiming India came to end in 1526 CE when the Mughals won a decisive battle against the Lodis and their Rajput allies at Panipat, not far from Delhi. The Mughals' guns and field artillery, plus their military strategy, proved too much for Ibrahim Lodi, the last of the Delhi sultans, who died on the battle field with thousands of his soldiers.

Babur The victor at Panipat was Babur (1483-1530), the first Mughal Emperor (r. 1526-1530). The Mughals came from a lineage of Turko-Mongols who claimed descent from both the Timur warrior Tamerlane and the Mongol [Moghul>Mughal] ruler Chingiz Khan. Babur was born in present-day Uzbekistan. At age 12, he succeeded his father and began a military career by conquering Samarkand, Kabul and Lahore before sweeping down to Delhi. His autobiography, the first written in India, is a remarkable work. His oldest son, Humayun, became emperor upon his death.

Akbar Babur's grandson Akbar (1542-1605) is justifiably the best-known of the Mughal rulers. During his long reign (1556-1605, which paralleled that of Queen Elizabeth I), he introduced major reforms in administration, taxation and warfare, as well as culture and religion. He also built a new capital at Fatehpur Sikri, near Agra. While he is best known for his patronage of the arts and sciences, he also registered military successes. At the second battle of Panipat in 1556 CE, he defeated an Afghan army, and he was swift to fill the vacuum when the Vijayanagar kingdom collapsed in the Deccan.

Aurangzeb The last of the great Mughals was Aurangzeb (r. 1658-1707), who stands in stark contrast to Akbar. While Akbar was a humanist, Aurangzeb was an iconoclast, a ruthless warrior and a poor administrator. In fact, Aurangzeb's military and fiscal policies are often blamed for the downfall of the empire. Through his brilliant military strategy, however, Aurangzeb did achieve glory for the Mughal Empire, conquering more land in northwest India and in the Deccan.

Mughal decline By the early 18th century, the Mughal Empire was in terminal decline. The final humiliation came in 1739 CE, when the Persian ruler Nadir Shah sacked Delhi and stripped it of its riches (including the famous Koh-i-noor diamond). Unsurprisingly, the territorial expansion of the Mughal Empire had sown the seeds of its own destruction, which slowly grew to maturity. Stretched thin over most of the subcontinent, the imperial tax collection system no longer worked efficiently, and it was torn apart by internal divisions. The royal family suffered four internecine struggles in the final decades. In the provinces, local allies turned against Delhi, and insurgencies were led by the Jats, Sikhs, Rajputs and, most conclusively, the Marathas. In the end, the Mughals lost their military superiority, as their enemies adopted their own strategy of maintaining large armies and acquiring the latest guns and artillery. By the end of the 18th century, the once mighty Mughals had become vassals of the Mahrattas.

Mahrattas Beginning as pastoralists and peasants in western India, Mahratta clans joined together in the 17th century to form a nascent state. Their leader, Shivaji Bhonsle (1630-1680), built up a mobile army of capable commanders, often defectors from the periphery of the Mughal Empire.

Initially defeated by the Mughals, Shivaji won battles in the Deccan and the Western Ghats, and in 1659 he scored a significant victory by taking the sultanate of Bijapur. The Mahrattas would eventually face their own defeat at the hands of the British in the early 19th century. With the Mughals weakened and the Marathas forced to retreat to their base in the western mountains, the field was left open for the British.

Europeans Europeans arrived on the subcontinent at the same time as the Mughals, though by a different route and with different motives. When the Portuguese landed at Goa on the west coast in 1498, they came as traders, with no territorial ambitions. The same was true of the British, who came later and built fortified towns at Madras in 1644 and Calcutta in 1696). In 1661, they acquired the Portuguese colony of Bombay through a treaty. Throughout the 18th century, as their profits rose and they shifted from trader to ruler, the British fought wars against the Mughals, the Mahrattas and the French, and won them all. The most decisive battle was that at Plassey, in Bengal, in 1757, after which the English East India Company simply took over the administration of this huge chunk of the Mughal Empire.

Mysore Although the British won a series of wars against the French and Indian rulers in the 18th century, their most powerful enemy (and an ally of France) was the kingdom of Mysore. This south Indian Muslim kingdom had been part of the Hindu Vijayanagar kingdom until the latter fragmented under pressure from the Muslim states in the Deccan in the 16th century. In this vacuum, Mysore expanded its territory and became the most powerful force in South India. Under Hyder Ali and his son Tipu Sultan, Mysore fought four wars against the British and was only defeated in 1799 when the foreigners joined forces with the Nizam of Hyderabad. As a result, by 1800, the British (in the form of the East India Company) controlled most of South India, all of Bengal and parts of the Gangetic plain).

Government

Administration The Mughal Empire was, by the 17th c. CE, the most centralised and efficient state in Indian history. Its success is attributable not just to military superiority (often exaggerated) but also to political consolidation and the individual genius of Akbar. Although centralisation had been achieved to varying degrees by previous regimes, deeply rooted institutions in the countryside concerning land and loyalty were not easily replaced by new external networks. For example, the money-grants that funded the military officials of the Delhi Sultanate turned into patrimonies that eventually put land revenue beyond state control. However, clever administrative reforms enabled the Mughals to surpass their predecessors in maintaining governmental authority in the regions. First, though, we need to consider how they built on work of their predecessors.

Legacy The Mughals borrowed many of the administrative reforms of the Delhi Sultanate. For example, they retained the new territorial unit of the *sarkar*, invented by the Lodi Sultans to organise conquered lands. (The British called this unit a 'district', a term that persists in Independent India.) The Mughals also kept the sub-divisions within a district (the *paragana*) and then added a supra-regional unit, the *suba*, which replicated the administrative structure in Delhi, with the full complement of staff and departments. The number of *subas* varied from 12 under Akbar to 22 under Aurangzeb. The size of each one varied, too; for example, Bengal and Delhi were separate *subas*.

Akbar's reforms Akbar (r.1556-1605 CE) wisely retained land revenue as the basis of his government, but he also introduced reforms. First, he initiated an agrarian survey to identify types of land, crop prices and yields in order to calculate taxes. All land was divided into two categories: *khalisa* and *jagir*. Revenue from the first went to the imperial treasury, and that from the second was assigned to Muslim noblemen/landholders (*jagirdars*) in lieu of a salary. With this *jagir* system Akbar replaced the *iqta* system of the Delhi Sultanate. Second, he required taxes to be paid in cash, and he set about regulating the minting and currency system to enable payment in silver coins. More fundamentally, he created the *mansabdari* system (borrowed from Persia), with 33 different grades of administrative cadre. At the top were the officers (*mansabdars*), who were paid a salary directly from the centre in return for service to the centre. These officers could be posted anywhere in the empire, a practice that discouraged the development of patrimonies that had plagued earlier governments. However, the tax was actually collected by intermediaries, *zamindars*, who became a class of landed gentry. Akbar's treasury was full, but the *zamindars* enjoyed a large degree of local autonomy. Overall, Akbar's *mansabdari* and cash-salary system—rational, transparent and immune from local loyalties—were the keystones of the Mughal state.

Judiciary The centralised and efficient nature of the Mughal government is illustrated by its judicial system. It consisted of a set of three courts on each of four levels: the imperial courts in Delhi; the provincial (*suba*) courts; the district (*sarkar*) courts; and the sub-district (*paragana*) courts. All these courts were presided over by judges (Qazi) of differing grades of competence, and each court had its own jurisdiction. At the imperial level, for example, the Emperor's court heard cases on appeal as well as criminal and civil cases of first instance. A second court heard cases concerning revenue, and a third specialised in military cases.

Military Although the Mughal Empire was born in war and sustained by war, by the end of its rule, the military was the weakest part of its government. When Babur, the first emperor, won his decisive battle in 1526, his matchlock men and mobile field guns were no match for his enemy whose idea of battle etiquette did not include firearms. But when Aurangzeb, the last emperor, went into battle he commanded an inferior force. The problem was not lack of numbers. Historians estimate that the Mughal army consisted of 440,000 infantry, musketeers, and artillery men, and 185,000 cavalry. The main problem was, in fact, the lack of a centralised structure. The Mughal army comprised four different types of soldiers (those paid for and supplied by the *mansabdars*; those paid for by the state but commanded by *mansabdars*; those paid for by the state but of a higher grade; and those provided by provincial elites, such as the *zamindars*). The Mughal artillery was also of poor quality, and Akbar's efforts to procure new guns from the Portuguese failed. In addition, there was a shortage of trained officers, discipline was lacking and the huge number of camp followers (families of soldiers and courtiers, etc.) meant that the army was cumbersome and slow-footed.

Economy

Capitalism A nascent form of capitalism under the Mughal Empire was stimulated by the cash economy favoured by the Mughals, the modern banking practices of the Mahrattas and the commercial practices of European traders. Near-constant warfare also required all three groups to raise and sustain large armies, which put pressure on the merchants, farmers and officials from whom revenue was squeezed.

Wealth All the many foreign observers of the Mughal Empire remark on wealth, not only at the court but also among traders and merchants outside Delhi. The ruling class apparently enjoyed a higher standard of living than that of their counterparts in Europe. A centralised, cash-based revenue system brought considerable revenue to Delhi, which was then distributed to the artisans who constructed the impressive buildings, to the artists (poets, musicians, painters) who created aesthetic forms, to the craftsmen who manufactured ornaments and tools of warfare, and to the weavers who wove the expensive clothes worn by the ruling class. Money exchange was also facilitated by a modernised banking system of credit and investment.

Rural A centralised state, an efficient revenue system and a large army did not improve the living conditions of the rural peasantry, however. Predatory and sometimes discriminatory tax regulations on Hindus meant that in some places cultivators paid out more than half of the harvest. Although wet-rice agriculture flourished in Bengal, there was low productivity elsewhere, due to poor quality grains, limited irrigation and lack of metal implements. On the other hand, high-value crops such as indigo, opium and sugar showed growth. In the 17th century, some rural communities were quick to take up the cultivation of newly introduced crops, such as tobacco and maize.

Land clearance The agrarian base of the Mughal economy was enlarged by pushing imperial control eastward into Bengal. Here, in the fertile delta of the Ganges and the Brahmaputra rivers, massive land clearance took place, just as it had centuries earlier in the Gangetic plain. After the felling of virgin forests and clearing of land, the state supported the development of wet-rice agriculture as well as Islamic institutions, such as mosques and rural schools, achieving agricultural expansion and conversion of the peasantry in the same plan.

Foreign trade The foreign trade stimulated by the arrival of European ships contributed significantly to the wealth of the Mughals and their allies. Spices, indigo, sugar, salt, turmeric, textiles and opium were exported, in return for guns, horses, amber, precious stones, drugs, perfume and certain types of luxury fabric, such as velvet. But the main import was gold and silver, primarily from the Spanish colonies in the New World. Trade increased considerably in the 17th century. For example, in the

1620s, the English East Indian Company was selling a quarter of a million pieces of cotton cloth at auction in London. By the end of the 17th century, the number of pieces has soared to nearly two million. Indian traders, merchants and artisans, especially silk and cotton weavers, benefitted from this lucrative trade. Once again, Akbar made a vital contribution to this sector of the economy by opening silk weaving workshops in several cities. Most of the profit, however, remained in the hands of foreigners (Portuguese, Dutch and British).

Society

Change The nascent capitalism, fiscal reorganisation, influx of foreigners and military campaigns opened up space for new social groups. A class of local gentry, including officials, warrior-chiefs and rich landowners, emerged in these volatile conditions. The primary beneficiaries were the Muslim officers (*mansabdars*) and landowners (*jagirdars*), and here again it was Akbar's reforms that stimulated change. He recruited men of various backgrounds into his elite administrative/military cadre, not just Afghans and Persians, but also Rajputs and Indian-born Muslims. The dramatic rise in the textile trade also raised the status of Hindu weaving castes. Most of the traders, merchants and money-lenders who participated in the thriving commercial sphere were also Hindu. Outside the Mughal Empire, the Mahratta kingdom in western India was built by peasant groups who rose to warrior status.

Communal Under Muslim rule, Islamic scholars and religious leaders held social authority. Hindus were tolerated but subject to a special tax on non-believers. They were also disadvantaged in competition for civil and military posts, and Hindu merchants had to pay extra duties and levies. Nevertheless, many Hindus, especially elites and in the cities, adopted some social customs of their Muslim rulers, including dress and cuisine. And, given the challenge of governing a mainly non-Muslim population, Muslim courts showed flexibility and often deferred to Hindu custom. Sufism, with its non-sectarian vision, created a cultural bridge between the two religions. Akbar, a Sufi at heart, abolished the hated tax on Hindus (and all non-Muslims).

Culture

Architecture The Mughals developed the tradition of Indo-Islamic architecture that they inherited from the Delhi Sultanate. The Mughals retained the ornate arches and domes, but their buildings tended to be symmetrical, large enclosed spaces, like Hindu temples. Crucially, they also added a garden, itself laid out in a square grid pattern. The most perfect example of the tomb garden is the Taj Mahal, built for the wife of the Emperor Shah Jahan (r. 1628-1658). Other typical structures are the Friday mosques (Jami Masjid) of red sandstone and white marble that were constructed in Delhi, Lucknow, Lahore, Fatehpur Sikri and Agra. The Red Fort, also in Delhi and also built by Shah Jahan, is another impressive structure. Although it is slightly asymmetrical, in order to incorporate an older fort on the same site, this massive sandstone complex was the political and symbolic centre of the Mughal Empire. Regional styles of Indo-Islamic architecture also evolved in the smaller Muslim kingdoms in the Deccan. In particular, the domed tombs at Golconda are spectacular. Built by the Qutb Shahi rulers in the 16th and 17th centuries CE, and once furnished with carpets and chandeliers, these now abandoned mausoleums stand as symbols of a past glory. Hindu temples also became more elaborate, adding porches, columns, doorways, ceilings and passageways. The domes, niches and arches of some temples (e.g., the Govindadeva temple in Mathura) show clear Indo-Islamic influence. On the other hand, some of the most spectacular buildings are the temples and palaces constructed in the far south, at Madurai, Trivandrum and Padmanabhapuram (all 16th-18th c. CE).

Painting The Mughal rulers brought significant changes to Indian painting. From the 16th century onward, book-painting superseded wall-painting as the favoured form and then developed into a visual art altogether separate from manuscripts and books. In another departure from tradition, the names of individual artists were recorded. Once again, Emperor Akbar was instrumental in these developments. He assembled a large contingent of artists from all over his empire and put them under the instruction of a Persian master-painter, who he supervised. Later Mughal emperors continued to patronise 'miniature' painting, as did local rulers in the Deccan and Rajasthan. The Hindu tradition of illustrated manuscripts flourished as part of the *bhakti* movement that developed in north India. Krishna and Radha are wonderfully rendered on manuscripts of the *Bhagavata Purana*,

and a new genre of painting (*ragamala*) appeared, in which a series of images symbolised musical modes.

Music The two schools of 'classical' Indian music both emerged at the end of the early modern era. Although most Hindustani (north Indian) musicians today trace their lineage from Tansen, the great vocalist and instrumentalist at Akbar's court, the style of singing known as *khyal* and the modern style of playing the *sitar* developed in the 18th century. The south Indian tradition of Carnatic music derives from the Maratha court at Tanjore, where three men composed the repertoire that defines the tradition today: Syama Sastry (1762-1827), Tyagaraja (1767-1847) and Muttuswami Dikshitar (1775-1835).

Literature The *Baburnama* ('Book of Babur'), the autobiography of Babur (1483-1530 CE), the first Mughal emperor, is a remarkable work of psychological insight and ethnographic observation. Although written in Babur's native Chagatai (or Turki), a language of central Asia, it is highly Persianised in vocabulary and morphology. During Babur's lifetime, it was translated into Persian and reproduced in illustrated manuscripts. An equally impressive book is the autobiography of a Jain merchant named Banarasidas (1585-1643 CE), whose *Ardhakathanak* ('Half a Story') by is the first autobiography in an Indian language. Among the best-loved Muslim poets was Abul Faizl (Shaikh Abu-al-Fazal-ibn Mubarak, 1547-1595 CE), who wrote in several Persian genres (*qasida*, *ghazal* and *rubai*). An example of narrative fiction is the ever-popular *Hamzanama* (or *Dastan-e-Amir Hamza*, 'Adventures of Amir Hamza'). This picaresque text draws on the Indo-Persian genre of oral storytelling (*dastan/qissa*) to narrate the story of Amir Hamza, the legendary uncle of the prophet Muhammad. Many versions of the work circulated orally and in manuscript, but the canonical text is an illustrated Persian manuscript commissioned by Akbar. Hindu devotional poetry also flourished, providing the stimulus that transformed several regional tongues into literary languages. Even the minor languages (or possibly Hindi dialects) of Braj, Awadhi, Maithili produced poems that are still sung and studied today.

Urdu Not all Muslim poets favoured Persian and many turned to Urdu, with its greater mix of Sanskrit-derived words. Both languages, it should be said, were written in the Arabic script (slightly modified for the new sounds in Urdu), and calligraphy was itself a highly developed art form. Urdu was the choice, not surprisingly, of several writers living outside Delhi in the smaller but still sophisticated Muslim courts in the Deccan. Two representative figures, who mainly wrote *ghazals*, are Ibrahim Adil Shah II (1580-1627), a ruler of Bijapur, and Allah-wirdi Khan (early 18th c.), a military officer in the Muslim court at Hyderabad. By the 18th century, Urdu had become the literary language of Indian Muslims.

European Europeans also made a significant contribution to Indian literature during this period. Missionaries printed the first book in an Indian language, they brought the first printing press to India and they wrote grammars and dictionaries for many regional languages. Perhaps the most remarkable European was C.J. Beschi (1680-1742 CE), an Italian-born missionary who spent four decades in South India. He wrote a Tamil grammar that is still used today and an epic poem that scholars refused to believe could have been written by a non-Tamil. Although the poem (*Tempavani*) tells the story of Joseph, Beschi's patron saint, the biblical story is Indianised so that Joseph is made a prince who chooses the life of an ascetic (like the Buddha) until a sage convinces him to take up his duty (*dharma*) as a householder.

Religion

Islam During the Mughal Empire, Sunni and Shia Muslims generally practiced Islam in accordance with scripture and followed the guidance of traditional Islamic scholars in the interpretation of *sharia* law. However, Sufism (which had come to India in the 14th c. CE) was also extremely popular. Sufi mysticism, which dismissed institutions in favour of a personal bond between each believer and god, engaged people through ecstatic singing. Nevertheless, and predictably, Sufis formed their own organisations, called orders (*silsilah*), with spiritual leaders and large shrines. The most successful orders were the Suhrawardi and the Chisthi, which cultivated sophisticated Persian poetry. With its shrines, singing and egalitarianism, Sufism played a major role in the accommodation of Islam with Indian traditions, as illustrated by the synthesis created by Akbar. At court he gathered around him a wide spectrum of theologians—Sunni, Shia, Hindu, Zoroastrian, Jain,

Jewish and Catholic. Akbar led a pious life, and could be seen sweeping the floor of the mosque he had built at Fatehpur Sikri (near Agra), where he had relocated his capital. He openly opposed Islamic legal scholars by citing Sufi principles, which traditionalists regarded as heresy.

Hinduism Hindu devotionalism continued to spread during this period, especially to the eastern corners of the subcontinent. Chaitanya in Bengal and Sankaradeva in Assam led popular movements promoting the worship of Visnu. In south India, partly in reaction to the Islamic threat from the north, kings built large temples that employed thousands of Brahmins. However, at the local level, the theologies of Hindu devotionalism and Sufi mysticism were very similar, the Hindu cults of deified heroes were little different to the Muslim cults of saints.

Christianity At first, Christianity was practiced mainly on the southwest and southeast coasts, where Europeans had established trading centres. Although the number of converts was low, church spires soon dotted the shorelines, and the new faith slowly worked its way into the lives of low-castes, particularly the fishermen (who may have felt an affinity with Christ). In fact, by the end of the 18th century, when Christian churches and congregations appeared in Madras and Calcutta, the Indianisation of Christianity, with its doctrinal concessions to local cultural practices, led to the Jesuits being withdrawn from India (and other parts of Asia).

Reading

John F. Richards, *The Mughal Empire* (Cambridge, 1993)
Stewart Gordon, *The Marathas 1600–1818* (Cambridge, 1993)
P. J. Marshall, *Bengal: The British Bridgehead* (Cambridge, 1988)
Ainslie T. Embree, *Sources of Indian Tradition, Vol I* (2nd ed.) (Columbia, 1999)
David Ludden, *An Agrarian History of South Asia* (Cambridge, 1999)

Discussion/questions

1. The Mughal Empire has been called the greatest empire in Indian history. Looking back to the other major states (Maurya, Gupta, Chola, Vijayanagar, Delhi Sultanate), what specific features of the Mughals distinguishes them from their predecessors? Consider also any policies or methods that the Mughals borrowed and/or adapted from those earlier states. Finally, to what extent were the seeds of destruction sown by the success of the Mughal Empire?
2. Akbar is called 'The Great Mughal.' He did rule for a longer time than the other emperors, but he did not conquer the most territory. What, then, accounts for his special status? You will need to describe not only his various reforms but also his intellectual pursuits, including theology. Finally, analyse Akbar's reign as an example of the 'great man' theory of history and consider also how he was influenced by his context.
3. The Portuguese and the Mughals arrived in India at about the same time, yet they represent very different kinds of newcomers. The interaction between the emperors in Delhi and the foreigners on the west coast was more extensive that one might imagine. They traded, they fought battles, they exchanged art forms and they borrowed warfare techniques. Make a study of this interaction as an early indication of how colonialism would develop in India.

Texts

1. In praise of Akbar, from *Dabistan-i-Mazahib* by Muhsin-i-Fani (b. 1615):

Know for certain that the perfect prophet and learned apostle, the possessor of Fame, Akbar, this, the lord of wisdom, directs us to acknowledge that the self-existent being is the wisest teacher and ordains the creatures with absolute power, so that the intelligent among them may be able to understand his precepts; and as reason renders it evident that the world has a Creator, all-mighty and all-wise, who has diffused upon the field of events among the servants, subject to vicissitudes, numerous and various benefits that are worthy of praise and thanksgiving, therefore, according to the lights of our reason, let us investigate the mysteries of his creations, and, according to our knowledge, pour out the praises of his benefits.

2. Description of Akbar's religion by Abd ul-Qadir Baudani

Samanas [Hindu or Buddhist ascetics] and Brahmans ... gained the advantage over every one in attaining the honor of interviews with His Majesty ... And he made his courtiers listen to those revilings and attacks against our pure and easy, bright and holy faith ... And at one time a Brahman, named Debi, who was one of the interpreters of the Mahabharata, was pulled up the wall of the castle sitting on a bedstead till he arrived near a balcony, which the emperor had made his bedchamber. Whilst thus suspended he instructed His Majesty in the secrets and legends of Hinduism, in the manner of worshipping idols, the fire, the sun and stars, and of revering the chief gods of these unbelievers ... His Majesty, on hearing further how much the people of the country prized their institutions, began to look upon them with affection.

3. Charles II extends the Charter of English East India Company, 1661

'Charles the Second, by the Grace of God, King of England, Scotland, France, and Ireland, Defender of the Faith, etc. To all to whom these Presents shall come, Greeting. Whereas Our Well-beloved Subjects, *The Governor and Company of Merchants, Trading into the East-Indies*, have been of time to time a Corporation to the Honour and Profit of this Nation, and have enjoyed and do enjoy divers Liberties, Privileges and Immunities, by Force of several Letters, Patents and Charters heretofore granted to them by our late Royal Progenitors, Queen Elizabeth and King James, of blessed Memory...Whereupon they have humbly besought Us to grant and confirm their said Charters, with some alterations and additions, tending to the benefit and Advance of their Trade and Traffick...We do give, grant, ratify and confirm, unto our said Trusty and well-beloved Subjects, the Governor and Company of Merchants of London, Trading in the East-Indies, that they from henceforth for ever be and shall be One Body Corporate and Politick, in Deed and in Name...'