



South Asia in World History

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Frontispiece: Mughal Emperor Akbar is shown in the midst of a theological discussion with Jesuit missionaries. © The Trustees of the Chester Beatty Library, Dublin

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in the name of Humayun's thirteen-year-old son, Akbar. Once again that battlefield proved pivotal, determining whether the fragile course of Hindu-Muslim accommodation, if continued, would be directed by a Hindu or a Muslim. The outcome, settled by the flight of a single arrow, would facilitate the ascent of what became one of the greatest empires in world history.



The Great Mughals, 1556–1757

On November 5, 1556, Samrat Hemu Chandra Vikramaditya, leading his army from atop one of his several hundred war elephants, was making good progress against rival Mughal forces, which his forces greatly outnumbered. With victory within his grasp, he fell victim to the oldest and most perfected weapon in the Mughal military arsenal: the bended bow. An arrow pierced his eye, its point emerging from the back of his head. His body fell from his mount, to the consternation of his troops, who soon fled the battlefield in the certain knowledge that dead rulers make poor paymasters. Bhairam Khan, an able Mughal general and regent to Jalal-ud-Din Muhammad Akbar, the thirteen-year-old son of the late Mughal emperor Humayun, had Hemu's body brought to the victorious Mughal camp. He directed Humayun's heir to cut off the fallen Hindu leader's head, so that Akbar could claim the title of Ghazi, or "warrior of God." Akbar declined, telling his guardian that had Hemu been alive, he might do so, but no credit could be acquired by dismembering a dead man. Bhairam Khan then ordered Akbar to slash Hemu's body with his sword, after which he himself cut off Hemu's head.

Over the next four years, relations soured between Akbar and Bhairam Khan, and even members of Akbar's family attempted to assassinate him to order to replace him with their own favorite as Babur's heir. Bhairam Khan eventually launched a failed revolt against Akbar's authority and was banished on the traditional, if thin, excuse that he was leaving on a pilgrimage to Mecca. In an effort to simultaneously break away from court politics and keep any disloyal elements within his army occupied, Akbar, now established as the *padishah*, or emperor, embarked on an eight-year war to reconquer the provinces lost to Hemu and the Afghans and thereby expand the Mughals' revenue base so as to provide his empire with greater stability. These goals were achieved through battles in which Akbar displayed utter fearlessness, brilliant

generalship, and a capacity to win the respect of ally and foe alike, through diplomacy or violence, as the situation required. He did not hesitate to wage a jihad against those Hindu Rajputs who defied his authority, but he also won them over as allies by including them in his administration, and bonded with them by taking as his first and favored wife a Rajput princess.

Despite his relative youth, Akbar had considerable life experience to guide the governance of his empire. He had been born in Sindh while his father was fleeing Hindustan because of the acts of Akbar's uncles, the first example of the intra-family warfare he came to loathe. His father's ensuing alliance with the Persians exposed him to the grandeur of Persian culture and engendered in Akbar a respect for Islamic Persia's Shi'a thought, which helped to broaden his own philosophical and spiritual horizons beyond the Sunni orthodoxy found in most Muslim courts. He also had before him Sher Shah Sur's experiments in efficient, innovative administration. Most important of all, the multiethnic origins of the Mughal line and the inclusiveness of Mughal policy in Central Asia predisposed him toward political and cultural accommodation when engaging the enormous diversity of South Asia's population.

Akbar's Rule

Whatever the strength of these possible formative influences, from the mid-1560s onward, Akbar sought not merely to win his diverse subjects' acquiescence to Mughal rule, but to bring them to identify their interests with it. Akbar tried to unify his subjects in ways that are more typical of modern states, with a level of success that many modern states have since failed to achieve.

Akbar's effort to create an inclusive state worthy of broad-based support began with his reformation of the bureaucracy and army. As much as possible, officials in both the Mughal military and administrative service were awarded the equivalent of a salary out of the general land revenue, rather than being directly assigned peasants' lands to fund their activities, as had been the case in the time of Ibn Battuta. Akbar directed that each administrator and high military officer be assigned a *mansab* (rank) whose value would amount to the normal cost of supporting a certain number of troops for state service, from five hundred men (a local commander) to five thousand men (a provincial governor). This *mansabdari* system included a separation of nawab (executive/military) functions and diwan (financial) responsibilities at the provincial level. By dividing these functions between these two offices, he sought to prevent the corruption that would be sure to follow otherwise. This idea, a separation of powers used to create checks

and balances, was not to be employed in the West for two hundred years. It was central to Akbar's parallel efforts to prevent officials from unjustly enriching themselves by overtaxing peasants and to stop them from building a local revenue base to fuel a breakaway from imperial authority.

To further address this problem, Akbar ensured that officials could be transferred from one post to another across the empire at any time, and he banned the common practice of allowing the transfer of their accumulated wealth to their offspring. The latter step had an unintended but positive result. Local centers of administration became great nodes of craft and artistic production because, since Mughal officials could not bequeath to heirs or take their wealth with them to their next post, they spent their funds on artists and craftsmen who built and decorated their local courts to the highest artistic standards.

Perhaps the most noteworthy of Akbar's attempts to prevent the financial oppression of the peasantry and thus further assure internal political stability was carried out by his Hindu finance minister, Todar Mal, who improved upon Sher Shah Sur's sliding-scale land revenue system based on seasonal crop estimates, so that, in the event of drought or other calamity causing a drop in crop yield, tax rates or collections could be reduced.

Akbar's most significant administrative innovations were directed at indigenizing his state. Hindus like Todar Mal occupied key official posts, which usually included the commander in chief of the army. Akbar also favored the appointment of South Asian-born Muslims over the foreign born and sought to place as much provincial administration as possible in the hands of local Hindu rulers, who pledged their loyalty to the Mughal state. Akbar allowed these rulers to retain their traditional authority by assigning them to high *mansab* rank, and by subtler forms of attachment: armed Hindus guarded Akbar's throne, a powerful gesture of trust that served to indicate that all who appeared before the emperor could expect to receive justice.

Akbar encouraged a literal melding of Mughal and indigenous elites by encouraging intermarriage. His youthful experience among Afghan and other Central Asian troops had taught him that these warriors had been assets in creating the empire, but they were accustomed to being kingmakers and thus their loyalties were inherently fragile. An indigenized ruling elite would pose much less of a danger to both the emperor and the empire. Akbar led by example, not merely marrying into the powerful Rajput house of Amber in 1563, but also ensuring that his heir would have a Hindu mother. His son Jahangir followed

suit, making such alliances a tool through which indigenous elites entered the court.

All of Akbar's reforms were meant to serve as a means to draw people into the orbit of the Mughal state in general and to the emperor as its head. All grants and awards, including *mansabdari* assignments, were gifts of the emperor, bestowed to create an intimate personal bond between the emperor and his officials that, if broken by either party without just cause, would lead to a serious loss of honor. These investitures at once centralized authority in the emperor, but were deliberately seen to be reciprocal: the empire's legitimacy was dependent on his just rule.

A further aspect of Akbar's indigenization policy was the giving of grants to Hindu and Muslim cultural and religious institutions, as well



Akbar's beloved Hindu wife, Jodha Bai, gives birth to their son, the future Emperor Jahangir. After this event, Akbar gave her the name of Maryam-uz-Zamani (Mary of the Age). She practiced her religion at court and was an excellent businesswoman, trading internationally in spices and silk, a living expression of early Mughal multiculturalism and the freedom granted to women of the royal court. Photograph © 2017 Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, 14.657

as to individual poets and artists, including Mian Tansen, now considered the font of modern Hindu music. He also supported the work of artists, architects, and stonemasons, who developed a syncretic style (today called *mughlai*) that blended Hindu and Muslim cultural forms. This style was most apparent in architecture, which mated the Persian dome with the elongated pillars of the Hindu *nata mandapa*, or temple dance hall, to form *chatri* (umbrella-like pavilions) that graced the sides and corners of Mughal palaces and fortress towers. During the sultanate, royal tombs were squat structures well suited to the Central Asian climate of high winds and brutal winters. The Mughals built their tombs on raised plinths pierced by arches, lending a lightness also found in their palace architecture, which featured balconies and *chatri*-topped towers, that captured the cooling breezes passing above the plains of semitropical South Asia.

Akbar also sought to make his empire popular by advancing general living conditions through public works, improvements in living quarters for the urban poor, and the regulation of alcohol. Moral laws such as the latter were typical of Muslim rulers keeping to shari'a, which mandated them, but to these regulations Akbar added prohibitions against the needless slaughter of animals, and restricted his own eating of meat to specific days of the week, which appealed to Hindus and Jains opposed to violence. Moreover, drawing on the active role women played in Mongol society, the emperor was not afraid to challenge the patriarchy of both South Asian Muslims and Hindus by seeking to improve the condition of women. He discouraged child marriages among all his subjects and permitted the remarriage of widows, which was against Hindu custom. He also sought to end the practice of sati among Hindus by requiring permission to be given by local police, who were expected to discourage the act. To keep women safe from molestation, Akbar encouraged merchants to establish separate market days for women.

Akbar intended all of his social reforms to support his larger object of not merely religious neutrality, but what was called *sulh-i-kul*, or universal harmony. He was convinced that most Hindus and Muslims would prefer such a policy to the periodic fracturing of society and state over social and religious issues. It would also reduce the impression that the Mughal regime was an alien one. To achieve these ends, he abolished most levies paid by non-Muslims, including the *jizya* (1564), and introduced an edict of religious toleration (1593).

Akbar's emphasis on religious tolerance, while politic, may have been rooted in personal convictions arising from his Chisti Sufi

orientation. He had been drawn to the teachings of Moinuddin Chishti of Ajmer, who earned the title of Benefactor of the Poor during the Delhi Sultanate. At Fatehpur Sikri, some miles from Agra, which, along with Lahore, was the preferred capital of the early Mughals, Akbar directly received the teachings of another Sufi master of the same school, Shaikh Salim Chisti. Shaikh Salim returned this act of piety by assuring Akbar that God would grant him the male heir for which Akbar devoutly prayed. Soon thereafter, Prince Selim, the future Emperor Jahangir, was born of Akbar's Hindu wife. This event fulfilled Akbar's prayers for a son and also his personal desire for the House of Timur to have roots in Hindustan. To mark this event, Akbar built a beautiful white marble shrine for the shaikh and a magnificent new capital at Fatehpur Sikri. A traveling Englishman, Ralph Fitch, visiting Agra and Fatehpur Sikri in 1584, found both cities "considerably larger than London and more populous." He observed:

Fathepur towne is greater than Agra, though it had the same compliment of 1,000 elephants, thirtie thousand horses, 1,400 tame Deere, 800 concubines, such store of Ounces [a big cat similar to a snow leopard], Tigers, Buffles [water buffaloes], Cocks & Haukes, that is very strange to see.¹

Contemporary Mughal historians described the new city as having become by 1596 "a rendezvous of merchants from all the known quarters of the globe."²

Akbar also built a hall of worship (Ibadat Khana) at Fatehpur Sikri where he hosted debates on religious topics, chiefly among learned Muslims, but these proved deeply disappointing. Akbar was sickened to find that most of these divines sought to belittle their opponents. Two of the most honored Muslim theologians at court engaged each other in bitter personal attacks as well as doctrinal differences. Both were great hypocrites. Each would later prove to be bent on preventing the other from amassing a personal fortune or allowing others to use his own office to do so. To Akbar, who had been drawn to Chisti Sufism because of its denial of the self as well as for its eclectic mysticism, orthodox Islam increasingly seemed desolate of true spirituality.

The poor performance of Muslim clerics at the Ibadat Khana encouraged Akbar to open it to Hindus, Jains, and others so that he might explore other avenues of religious knowledge more closely. This caused much distress to one of the most orthodox of Akbar's court historians, Abdul Qadir Badauni. Badauni noted that Akbar spent his life exploring the "most diverse phases and through all sorts of religious



A section of the main courtyard of the royal city at Fatehpur Sikri, built at the orders of the Mughal emperor Akbar in 1570. The platform in the center of the photograph was the site of musical and dance performances. Note the chatri, or umbrella-like towers, at top left that are characteristic of Mughal borrowings from Hindu architecture. Photo by Nickolay Stanev/Shutterstock 84457321

practices and sectarian beliefs, and collected everything which people can find in books, with a talent of selection peculiar to him and a spirit of inquiry," all of which were "opposed to every Islamic principle."

The result of all the influences which were brought to bear upon him, [there] grew as gradually as [moss] upon a stone the conviction in his heart that there were sensible men in all religions . . . among all nations.³

Akbar was aware of Badauni's criticism, and bristled at Badauni's illiberal ideas, but believed that there was no point in having historians if they were not free to record what their intellect dictated.

In pursuit of his quest for religious knowledge, Akbar began what was to be a long Mughal association with Jesuits, a Catholic order that had become famous in Mongol circles for its devotion to scholarship as well as missionary work. Arriving in the Portuguese settlement of Goa in 1541, the Jesuits hoped to convert local princes and other political elites, who would then lead their subjects to convert. A lack of results forced them to realize that the Muslims were impervious to their call and that Hindu elites feared loss of social status as a result of close contact with foreigners (who were considered *mleccha*, or among the lowest of the low). Moreover, high-caste Hindus refused to worship side

by side with those from inferior castes, as Christians did. Thereafter, the Jesuits largely rested content with making converts from the lower orders, with limited but better success. They never quite abandoned their dream of converting a Mughal prince, though from the first, Akbar informed them that the quest for religious truth was not a contest, as is reflected in his request of the Catholic King Philip II of Spain to send Jesuits to reside at his court. Akbar wrote:

Most men are so fettered by the bonds of tradition that they never investigate . . . the religion in which he was born, excluding [themselves] from the possibility of ascertaining the truth which is the noblest aim of the human intellect. Therefore, we associate . . . with learned men of all religions, and thus derive profit from their exquisite discourses and exalted aspirations.⁴

Unfortunately, many of the Christians who participated in Akbar's discussions were not only as petty and argumentative as the Muslim scholars at his court, but also stooped to insult the religion of Islam. This collective rancor may have helped propel Akbar to create the Din-i-Ilahi.

The Din-i-Ilahi, or divine discipleship, has often been interpreted as an attempt by Akbar to create a universal religion suitable for his multicultural state. Initially, that may have been on his mind when he announced his wish to create a community of seekers devoted to exploration of religious truth with Akbar himself at its head. However, some of his most devoted officials had come before him to assure him that, while their personal bonds to him were unbreakable, they preferred Akbar to take their lives rather than ask them to leave the religion of their birth. In response, Akbar assured them that there was no obligation upon anyone to join with him in what he described as a purely voluntary association. He also informed his courtiers that he would never depart from what was the Qur'an's injunction as well as his own conviction: there could be no coercion in religion.

Some orthodox Muslims, like Badauni, found it intolerable that the emperor seemed to countenance the criticism of Islam by Christians, and they disliked his apparent cultic behavior. In 1580, a revolt was launched to overthrow him. Badauni was not among the rebels. He held aloof from the conservative clerics and administrators opposed to Akbar's perceived departure from the traditionally close relationship between religion and the state, largely because he was true to much of Akbar's vision for the Mughal state. Badauni praised Akbar's commitment to intermarriage among the empire's elite ethnic groups and,

although he was a strong critic of many of Akbar's Hindu officials, Badauni respected those who served the empire well. He also had no love for holy war, or even rebellion against a straying emperor like Akbar. It is likely that many conservatives shared those views. In any event, the 1580 revolt was easily quashed by Akbar's increasingly indigenized army, confirming Akbar's conviction that the legitimacy of the Mughal regime resided in its broad appeal.

Despite Akbar's acumen as a ruler and the popular support he enjoyed during his very long reign as Mughal emperor, he failed to achieve the fuller unification of Muslim and Hindu culture he desired. But he did succeed in establishing a multicultural and often syncretic governing ethos, which became a hallmark of Mughal rule down the generations. It is thus somewhat tragic that toward the end of his long life, he caught a glimpse of one cause of the instability and ultimate downfall of his empire as well as those of the Ottomans and Safavids to the west. This was the problem of succession. Akbar's God-granted son, Prince Selim, grew impatient for power during the long years of Akbar's reign. He waged an unsuccessful revolt that weighed heavily on Akbar's mind, but they reconciled; Akbar rose from his deathbed to place the royal turban on his son's head.

Ironically, Prince Selim's eagerness for power passed not long after his accession to the throne as Emperor Jahangir (ruled 1605–1627). Thereafter, he left many of the day-to-day affairs of the empire to his able wife, Nur Jahan (Light of the World), the daughter of a religiously conservative, politically astute Persian immigrant family. She conducted ministerial meetings and Jahangir directed that her name appear on imperial coins. However, Jahangir was not wholly absent from Mughal administration. He dealt effectively with the pretensions of the Portuguese, the first European state to project its power into the region in search of souls as well as spices.

Portuguese Trading

The Portuguese sought a direct sea route that would allow them to gain a monopoly of the rich Indian Ocean trade system that was then in the hands of Venetians, Muslim Arabs, and Turks. These merchants acted as middlemen between Europe and Asia, trading in Indian pepper and cotton as well as the spices of Southeast Asia, which, while essential to preserving meat, also constituted the bulk of Western medicines (oil of cloves was the only anesthetic known to Europeans). This effort began with the rounding of the Cape of Good Hope in southern Africa in 1488 by the Portuguese Bartholomew Diaz. To exploit that achievement, an experienced Portuguese commander, Vasco da Gama, was given a small fleet that passed the Cape of Good Hope in 1497–1498.

As he continued his voyage northward along the coast of East Africa, he encountered multiethnic city-states managed by Africans and Muslim Arabs, who had created a hybridized language and culture known as Swahili (meaning “of the coast”). He was welcomed at the Swahili port of Mozambique because he disguised himself as a Muslim trader, but the poor gifts he offered to the local rulers betrayed the relative poverty of Europe and revealed him to be a Christian. When forced to flee the port, da Gama turned his guns on the city, setting it afire. He thereafter gained knowledge of the monsoon from local sailors and used its winds to cross the Indian Ocean to Calicut, south of today’s Mumbai.

Calicut was a well-known port of call. It had been visited several times between 1409 and 1430 by the Chinese admiral and official envoy Zheng He (alternatively romanized as Cheng Ho), who offered rich presents and association with China.⁵ At the time of da Gama’s arrival, Calicut was ruled by a Hindu prince, called the Zamorin, who managed the affairs of local and transregional traders. Most of these were Arab Muslims, but among them were Jews, some who had settled on the western coast of the subcontinent from five hundred to one thousand years earlier and others who conducted trade there from their community in what is now modern Cairo. The Zamorin, like his Swahili counterpart, was unimpressed with the presents da Gama offered as an inducement to trade, especially as they included no gold, silver, or ivory (as was customary.) He directed da Gama to pay the same customs duty in gold as all other traders paid and refused da Gama’s request to set up a warehouse to store goods. However, the Zamorin also denied Muslim requests to drive da Gama off (they contended he was a mere pirate) and permitted da Gama to trade in the port. Da Gama departed richer for the trade he did conduct—though, he kidnapped some local fisherman to serve as crew for his ships on their return to Portugal.

The Portuguese sent larger forces that eventually set up a network of fortress settlements from west of the mouth of the Indus River in Gujarat (Dui and Daman) down to the towns of Goa and Cochin. Others were set up on the eastern side of the subcontinent, just south of today’s Chennai (formerly Madras) and in Bengal. They also set up pepper plantations in Sri Lanka. Touching on all corners of the subcontinent, these settlements were well placed to capture the region’s oceanic trade. To make sure they did, the Portuguese established a pass system called the *cartaz* and began seizing all vessels traveling without evidence of license fees paid to them. Portuguese trade had one immediate, apolitical impact: they brought chilies from the Americas, which,

within decades of their arrival, became a staple of South Asian cuisine and remain so to this day.

Though the Mughals were land-oriented, they took notice of Portuguese ambitions to control the seaborne trade of southern Asia. Akbar wished to curtail these ambitions, but found it more politic to secure compromises that, for example, gave free passage to ships leaving the Mughal’s main international port at Surat in Gujarat (south of the long-lost port at Lothal), which were filled with pilgrims on their way to Mecca. The security of this passage was perhaps not a small thing to an emperor who needed to be seen protecting essential Muslim religious practices.

A few years before Akbar’s death in 1605, captains of ships sailing from Protestant Britain and Holland began entering the Indian Ocean, seeking gold—but not souls, as had the Portuguese. They contested the Portuguese *cartaz* system both by force and by lodging appeals at the Mughal Court. The Dutch and English (“British” only after the union of Scotland and Ireland with England in 1707 created Great Britain) were no less troublesome than the Portuguese in interfering with international shipping in the Indian Ocean, but the Portuguese made the mistake of taking such aggressive actions in defense of their threatened monopoly that they lost any favor with Jahangir. Among those actions was the seizure of a ship owned by a former Rajput princess and still-practicing Hindu, Maryam-uz-Zamani, Jahangir’s mother.⁶ After the governor of Gujarat lodged a formal complaint that showed that this was no isolated action, Jahangir ordered an end to the Portuguese trade at Surat, the seizure of the Portuguese settlement at Daman in Gujarat, the shutting of the Jesuit church in Agra, and the suspension of all allowances to Portuguese religious leaders in Mughal India, even though a Portuguese friar was one of Jahangir’s personal advisors.

Further, the Mughals and other local regimes in South Asia granted trade and other privileges to the English and Dutch merchant companies so that they might serve as a check on the Portuguese and stimulate competition for their own spices and fabrics. Both the English and the Dutch soon established strategically located coastal trading settlements on the Portuguese model. For the English, the opportunity to compete in South Asia was something of a lifesaver, as the Dutch had driven them out of the more lucrative trade of the spice-rich islands of Southeast Asia.⁷ With the Portuguese in decline and the Dutch focused on their trade in Southeast Asia, the English were well placed to dominate Europe’s trade with India. The French, latecomers whose trading

company was subordinate to the French throne, proved unable to out-compete English merchants.

Jahangir believed that his response to Portuguese aggression would be sufficient to defuse open warfare between Catholic and Protestant traders and preserve Mughal seaborne interests without a serious breach in his relations with Westerners, which he greatly enjoyed. To impress such visitors, and his own people, he lost no chance to incorporate Christian symbolism as part of his employment of the decorative arts to express Mughal eclecticism as well as to enhance his legitimacy as ruler. He ordered images of a crucifix, the Virgin Mary, and Saint Ignatius Loyola, the founder of the Jesuits, to be painted at the entrance to his father's tomb near Agra. His court produced a painting of a royal scene showing the Virgin Mary floating above the emperor's head in benediction, with *putti* (winged baby angels) decorating the edges of the image, as was then in vogue in the West. Perhaps inspired by European artistic style, Jahangir, like all the Mughal emperors, encouraged artists to create lifelike portraits of the members of the court as well as its emperors. Jahangir preferred to decorate existing courts rather than build new ones, so he was able to spend lavishly on such sumptuous paintings, as well as jewel-encrusted weapons, splendid court robes, and glorious gardens. European visitors were so impressed by the grandeur of Jahangir's Mughal imperial style that the term "mogul" became a synonym in English for an important or powerful person.

Western visitors, perhaps because of the repressive sexual environment in their own lands, were also impressed, if not always favorably, with the emperor's harem (from *harim*, "forbidden"). The harem was the private section of the emperor's apartments, which Westerners understood to be filled with hundreds of women ready at a moment's notice to serve him at his pleasure. In reality, while the harem was where the emperor sought to continue his line with his wives and concubines, it was also where aunts, female family members of his in-laws, widowed female relatives, and all the children of the palace also lived—and, under Jahangir, lived well.

Unfortunately, Jahangir's love of pleasure and beauty led him away from more active pursuits and, eventually, to dependency on alcohol and opium. Jahangir even allowed his state to drift away from his father's policy of religious toleration, though he continued it in his personal life, such as by joining in festivities of the Hindu spring festival of Holi. His wife Nur Jahan, however, sought to dispose of such eclecticism entirely. As his health declined, Nur Jahan began to arrange for Jahangir's successor to be a much more observant Muslim. This path

was made easier by the revolt of Jahangir's eldest son, Khusrau Mizra. As punishment for his rebellion, Mizra, the treasure of his grandfather Akbar's heart, who had grown to share Akbar's openness to all religious philosophy, was blinded, making him ineligible to be a ruler by Muslim tradition. He was also exiled for his attempt to usurp Jahangir's authority. Also exiled was another brother who had become a hopeless alcoholic. Jahangir's two remaining sons held more orthodox views than Khusrau Mizra. Of these two, Shah Jahan was the tougher warrior and more able administrator, but Nur Jahan supported Shah Jahan's less able but more malleable brother, Shahryar, as heir. This gambit failed, as upon Jahangir's death, Shah Jahan was able to seize power and execute Shahryar. Nur Jahan was forced to withdraw from public life, a fate easier to bear because she had earlier arranged for the new emperor to fall deeply in love with her niece, assuring that her family, and their orthodox views, remained influential.

Shah Jahan

Shah Jahan, like his father, led a brilliant court in which women exercised a great deal of authority. But beyond the palace walls, the position of women in both Muslim and Hindu society declined. Akbar's policy of raising the status of women by encouraging widow remarriage was in retreat, while child marriages and sati, which Akbar had virtually banned, grew in popularity. More women were secluded within the family home.

All Mughal rulers sought to expand their domains, but Shah Jahan (ruled 1628–1658) was more aggressive than most in pursuit of the Timurid lands in Central Asia and Afghanistan, lost during Mughal wars of secession to opportunistic Uzbeks and Persians. He was also determined to complete the conquest of the Deccan. Yet the enormously expensive northern campaigns he launched failed to achieve their objectives, and the Deccan was won only as a result of two costly campaigns by his third son, Prince Aurangzeb. These campaigns gave Aurangzeb an edge over Shah Jahan's eldest son and chosen successor, Dara Shikoh, whose activities at court were devoted to building upon the syncretic values and indigenizing precedents established by Akbar.

Despite these demands on the empire's finances, Shah Jahan reveled in new construction. He rebuilt the interior halls of Akbar's Red Fort at Agra in marble, but was not wholly satisfied with the result, so he then built an entirely new capital in Delhi, known as Shahjahanabad. This new city included the world's largest mosque at the time, the Jama Masjid, and a palace so opulent as to justify the inscription above its private chambers, "If on earth there be a paradise of bliss, it is this."

Shah Jahan then considered a suitable tomb for his beloved wife, Mumtaz, who perished while giving birth to her fourteenth child. This became one of the world's most recognizable buildings, the Taj Mahal. It took twenty-two years to build. It was made of the emperor's preferred white marble, inlaid with precious and semi-precious stones, and inscribed with verses from the Qur'an. The entire tomb complex was set among lush gardens bisected by four watercourses meant to represent the Four Rivers of Paradise. These orthodox features were combined with *mughlai* elements such as an archway-pierced pediment or main floor, elongated domes, and umbrella-like *chatri*.

The graceful effect achieved by the Taj Mahal's melding of the subcontinent's diverse cultures was initially not much apparent in Shah Jahan's religious policy. Upon assuming the throne, Shah Jahan adopted a more orthodox view of the role of religion in an Islamic state. In 1632 he ordered Christian churches at Agra and Lahore to be demolished and all Hindu temples recently built or still under construction to be torn down. He also passed laws governing the marriage of Muslims to Hindus, mandating the conversion of the non-Muslim spouse. However, as he aged, Shah Jahan resumed the Mughal practice of giving Hindu scholars and artisans grants and stipends. This change may have been an expression of a growing awareness of his own indigenous status: he had a Hindu mother and a Hindu grandmother. His most favored poet, Abu Talib Khan, noted the custom of writing in praise of the cool, fresh, fruited valleys of Mughulistan, but wrote of Hindustan: "One can say it is a second paradise [after Heaven] in this respect; whoever leaves this garden is filled with regret."⁷ Another factor in Shah Jahan's turn toward the values of indigenization may have been the influence of his eldest son, Dara Shikoh, who often acted as his deputy and exhibited Akbar's passion for exploring religious philosophy.

Dara Shikoh sponsored Persian translations of Hindu texts, including the Upanishads, and wrote "Majma ul-Bahrain" ("The Mingling of the Two Oceans"), in which he sought to comprehend and reconcile the monism inherent in Sufi thought with that of the Upanishads. For these acts, and his willingness, like his grandfather, to favor Rajputs and indigenous Muslims over Persian Muslims and other foreigners at court, Dara Shikoh gained considerable personal popularity. Naturally enough, foreign-born *mansabdars* (Persians, Central Asians, and Afghans) and orthodox Muslims disliked him, but he was seen by his foremost Sufi associate, Shah Muhibullah, as Rahmat-ul-lil-Alimin, "a blessing to all people." In what may be the

highest expression of the spiritual message of Akbar as well as Dara Shikoh, Shah Muhibullah wrote:

It does not matter if one is a believer or a non-believer. All human beings are the creatures of God. If one has such a feeling, he will not differentiate between a believer and non-believer and will show sympathy and consideration towards both. It is in the Qur'an . . . that the Prophet was sent as a mercy unto all mankind.⁸

Dara Shikoh brought Sufis into court, and may have convinced Shah Jahan to see the value of diverse views, enough at least to remove the last vestige of taxes on non-Muslims: the payment of the *jizya* by Hindu pilgrims to the holy Hindu city Prayaga, renamed Allahabad by its Muslim rulers. Fatefully, Shah Jahan also came to favor Dara Shikoh above his other sons. This may be the source of the softening of the tenor of his religious policy, but such royal favor also may have stirred resentment among Dara Shikoh's brothers. Shah Jahan's liberal shift in his religious policy did not immediately play a role in the course of his empire, but subsequent military adventures and building projects were so costly as to force a fateful reconsideration of the fiscal arrangements between the Mughal court and its vast network of alliances that sustained the empire and in which the tolerant Mughal religious policy played a key role. The man destined to preside over this reconsideration was not Dara Shikoh but Shah Jahan's third son, the supremely able, but self-admittedly unloved and puritanical Prince Aurangzeb.

Shah Jahan enjoyed the support of a multicultural court which favored Dara Shikoh's adherence to Chisti-style Sufi cultural openness, while Aurangzeb identified himself with the orthodox Naqshbandi Sufi order that, in the person of Imam Rabbani Shaykh Ahmad al-Faruqi al-Sirhindi, had long opposed Akbar's liberal view of the Islamic state. Naqshbandi influence grew in the Mughal court during the reigns of both Jahangir and Shah Jahan and, under Naqshbandi tutelage, Aurangzeb developed a deep respect for its version of Islamic orthodoxy, as well as an austere personality and a preference for the field of action over court life, which was dominated by Dara Shikoh. He spent much of his life fighting under his father's orders, and later under his own authority, expanding the empire in the south. During his reign as emperor, the empire reached its greatest territorial extent, occupying by direct rule or through traditional Mughal local alliances virtually the entire subcontinent.

Aurangzeb earned his subsequent formal title of Emperor Alamgir (World Burner) with all the ruthlessness that Mughal wars of succession

had come to acquire. When Shah Jahan seemed to be near death in 1658, a struggle for the throne erupted during which Aurangzeb's military and diplomatic experience in the south stood him in good stead. He imprisoned his father and politically outmaneuvered, as well as outfought, his brothers until only a captured Dara Shikoh and his older brother Murad remained to be dealt with. Aurangzeb deliberately humiliated Shah Jahan's favorite son by marching Dara Shikoh and his son in dirty clothes through the streets of Delhi and convening a kangaroo court of nobles and orthodox clerics who had opposed Dara Shikoh's policies to serve as judges at his trial. They promptly declared Dara Shikoh an apostate to Islam for his intellectual engagement with the non-Muslim "other." Dara Shikoh was beheaded in front of his son; the head was sent to Shah Jahan, who had largely recovered his health but was condemned by Aurangzeb to spend the rest of his life as a prisoner in the Red Fort at Agra. The remaining brother, Murad, was executed after trying to escape from prison in 1661. Shah Jahan died in 1666, but not before forgiving Aurangzeb, much as Jahangir was forgiven by Akbar.

Aurangzeb rule

Aurangzeb then addressed the larger issue represented by Dara's alleged apostasy. Aurangzeb's interpretation of the precepts of political Islam followed the orthodox Naqshbandi religio-political outlook that may have inhibited the Delhi Sultanate from constructively addressing the essential question of diversity that confronted Muslim rulers of Hindustan before Akbar. Aurangzeb recognized that his empire was rooted in its diversity. He regarded Hindus as *dhimmi* and continued to appoint Hindu *mansabdars*. However, his zealotry as an orthodox Muslim overrode his understanding of the limits to which the empire could endure his imposition of Islamic political principles in their orthodox form.

Aurangzeb's break with customary Mughal multiculturalism began with banning music and dance in his court. This ban drew some praise from the devout, but little public criticism because it was limited to the court itself. However, Aurangzeb next sought to enforce Islamic codes of public conduct via *mustasibs* (public censors). Aurangzeb also moved to halt construction of new Hindu temples, and then to attack established structures, even Somnath, once the target of the "Breaker of Idols," Mahmud of Ghazni. As in that case, it is necessary to consider Aurangzeb's actions in light of similar actions taken by Hindu rajas, who often destroyed the royal temples of rival Hindu rulers and rebels. However, Aurangzeb seems to have gone beyond Hindu and certainly common Muslim practice. Even the most orthodox of Delhi sultans, Firuz Shah Tughluq, had followed the practice of leaving unmolested

existing houses of worship of all those enjoying the protection of the Islamic state as enjoined by the Qur'an, which the Delhi sultans applied to Christians and Hindus as *dhimmi*. With only a few initial exceptions, so had Shah Jahan, who went so far as to rescind an order by Prince Aurangzeb to destroy an existing Jain temple that had given no offense.

Of greater significance, Aurangzeb reimposed the *jizya* that had been abolished by Akbar and that was again rejected, perhaps tellingly, by Shah Jahan under Dara Shikoh's influence. Sibling rivalry aside, Aurangzeb may have merely wished to observe a passage in the Qur'an which referred generally to the need for non-Muslims to humble themselves before the supremacy of the revelation of Islam, as well as the *jizya* payment in lieu of state service, which was demanded of non-Muslims alone. Aurangzeb, however, took this "humbling" to an extreme level by ordering the *jizya* fees to be paid in person while standing before a seated collector of the tax and chanting the verse in the Qur'an referring to their inferior status as non-Muslims. While Aurangzeb exempted Hindu *mansabdars* from the tax because they were engaged in service to the state, he also made it known that, in the future, he intended to oppose appointing Hindus to the highest ranks, which would be reserved for Muslims. Whatever the cause or actual extent of these actions, Aurangzeb was making enemies the empire could ill afford.

The emperor's subjects did not miss the negative implications of the reimposition of the *jizya*: throngs of people blocked Aurangzeb's movements through the streets of Delhi, begging him to reconsider his decision. Hindu courtiers and some court poets lamented that this act constituted a break in religious forbearance that could herald the demise of the empire itself. Hindu concerns deepened with developments arising from the rapid expansion of the empire. The huge weight of the expenses incurred by their wars of conquest forced first Shah Jahan and then Aurangzeb to take fiscal as well as political steps (the reimposition of the *jizya* was both) that may have fatally undermined the delicate web of personal, religious, ethnic, and economic ties that held the empire together.

At the beginning of Shah Jahan's reign, the finances of the empire were secured by the spread of cash-cropping (food for sale rather than local consumption) and continuing improvement in roads that stimulated commercial activity. This encouraged the Mughals to double their demand for revenue. Unfortunately for the empire, Shah Jahan's campaigns in the north and in the Deccan so surpassed those revenues that the empire had to economize. Shah Jahan slowly lifted Akbar's restraints on the *jagirdar* system to allow officials to gain income and

thereby retain their loyalty, but with the same evil result that Akbar had sought to avoid by his reforms. The nobility were again free to rack-rent farmers and use the revenue to build independent bases of power—the very behavior that had aided in the disintegration of the Delhi Sultanate. The empire was also driven to give revenue-enhancing privileges to a host of local elites, such as zamindars (Mughal tax collectors), who faced off against local *mansabdars*, both of whom were acting in their own interests rather than the state's.

Aurangzeb ordered increases in land-tax revenue to meet expenditures so as to avoid internal political unrest among officials and merchant elites, but the increases fell heavily on the Hindu agricultural population in the north, particularly the Hindu Jats, a key productive group. Further, the financially strapped Aurangzeb had to keep the income from the richest of the newly conquered lands for the Mughal treasury, which reduced the quality of land granted to the local nobility, Muslim and non-Muslim, whom Aurangzeb had brought into the Mughal fold as a reward for their role in the empire's conquests. For the Hindu nobility among this group, things now looked bleak. With their incomes from grants of lesser value, and the Mughal court seemingly bent on reducing them to second-class status, the new recruits in the Deccan and in the south, numbering nearly 20 percent of all *mansabdars*, wondered why they had allied themselves to its cause.

One of the most able and most disaffected among these newly minted Hindu nobles in the south was Raja Shivaji Bhonsle. Shivaji had long been a chief in his own right among the Maratha people of the west-central section of the subcontinent before he had fought in support of Aurangzeb's conquest of the Muslim sultanates in the Deccan. The combination of anti-Hindu policy and sentiment at court and the reduction in the value of subsidies or land grants to Maratha *mansabdars* turned Shivaji into not merely a rebel but a rival. Upon escaping the court just ahead of orders for his arrest for criticizing Aurangzeb's policies, Shivaji purportedly sent the emperor a letter contrasting the excellent condition of the country under the rule of Akbar, Jahangir, and Shah Jahan with that of Aurangzeb, "where poverty and beggary" had become commonplace, and "the army in ferment." Why would Aurangzeb, he asked, sully the honor of Timurid rule by adding "the hardship of the *jizya* to this grievous state of things?"⁹

Upon fleeing the Mughal court, Shivaji was invested by the Marathas with the title of Chatrapati, a rank akin to the ancient *chakravartin*. From 1674 to 1680, he confronted the Mughals with one of the most sustained guerrilla campaigns in world history. This struggle

forced Aurangzeb to squander more of the empire's dwindling wealth, which the emperor complained of even on his deathbed. Aurangzeb's campaigns against Shivaji spurred the Marathas to create an empire of their own in the south. Aurangzeb's own son, Prince Muhammad Akbar, opposed what he believed to be his father's misguided policies and aided the Marathas. After Shivaji's death (of natural causes) in 1680, Aurangzeb was able to capture Shivaji's able son Sambhaji (but not his own son, Prince Akbar, who fled to Arabia). Aurangzeb executed Sambhaji in 1689 after he refused to convert to Islam under torture, then set about laying claim to all the Maratha lands.

The following year, Aurangzeb had to address a dispute between agents of what would later be known as the British East India Company (hereafter referred to as the Company) and the cash-strapped Mughal governors at Surat and in Bengal over taxes that local officials were trying to impose on international merchants. Even though non-Company English merchants paid these local taxes willingly, in 1686 the Company's directors tired of what they saw as illegal exactions. They interpreted their Mughal firman (license to trade) to mean they only paid taxes to imperial officials at the main international port of Surat in Gujarat and nowhere else. In defense of this principle, the Company declared war on the Mughal Empire and sent ships and infantry to both Bengal and Surat to cut off the empire's trade until the local taxes were withdrawn. Aurangzeb, who had expected his provincial officials and the Company's agents to negotiate a settlement, retaliated by defeating the English forces on land, laying waste to or seizing the Company's factories and stopping its trade. The Company was subsequently able to force the Mughals to open peace negotiations by employing its naval forces to sink unarmed Muslim pilgrim ships bound for Mecca. The result of these negotiations was that the Company was forced to pay an enormous fine (£15,000) in return for being allowed to continue their exemption from the unwanted taxes. The war "seriously demoralized" the aggressive Company directors at home, while the members of the embassy they sent to arrange a peace agreement in 1691 were humiliated when ushered into the Mughal court "with their hands tied in front of them with sashes."¹⁰ This experience forced the Company to realize that it lacked the strength to impose its will on Asian powers, a lesson driven home by the Chinese manipulation of their trade and the disastrous results of Company aggression in Borneo and Vietnam.¹¹

By then, Aurangzeb was facing a perfect storm of revolt that ultimately helped alter the balance of power between Europe and South Asia. The north was ablaze. Most of the Mughal Empire's once most

stalwart allies, the Rajputs, broke into open rebellion alongside the tax-resisting Jats. The Rajputs and Jats were joined by the Sikhs, whose ninth guru, Tej Bahadur, was executed for calling for a Sikh state if Mughal persecution of non-Muslims led to the forced conversion of Sikhs. Under his successor, Guru Gobind Singh, the Sikh community became an army of the KHalsa (pure) determined to free themselves from Mughal rule. In the South, Marathas slowly recovered from the death of Shivaji's son, Sambhaji, and their forces marched north to menace Delhi.

Aurangzeb was so great a field commander that he was able to stave off the enemies of his empire until his illness and death in 1707 at the age of ninety. In his last will and testament, he blamed his letting Shivaji escape from his court as the cause of much misery, but offered no remarks as to why he had lost the Maratha leader's support. He seemed to feel that his campaigns of conquest, particularly the twenty-six years he spent exhausting his army and treasury in the Deccan, had led him away, rather than toward, the divinely guided life he sought, but gave no sign he understood how this happened. If he sought to renew his faith through the Islamicization of his empire, whose religious pluralism he viewed as an offense against God, that purpose escaped him as death approached. To his son, he wrote, "I do not know who I am, nor what I have been doing."¹²

During the reigns of Aurangzeb's successors, wars of imperial succession and the resultant rise of regional states in much of South Asia hastened the empire's decline. The Marathas won control of so much Mughal territory that the empire's rulers were forced to pay them tribute. The Sikhs carved out an empire in the Punjab, taking the lands to the west of the Indus River from the Afghans and gaining influence over Kashmir. Mughal provincial governors in Bengal and in the hard-won Deccan took up the reins of power, though such was the remaining prestige of the Mughal Empire that they acknowledged the titular supremacy of the emperor by offering largely symbolic tribute.

As has often been the case in South Asian history, the subcontinent flourished in this less centralized condition. Regional empires, like that of the Marathas, redistributed wealth through their local courts. Entrepreneurial market towns flourished as industry was stimulated by the end of Mughal royal monopolies in the manufacturing sector. In the absence of a centralized court setting religious policy, new approaches to Muslim and non-Muslim relations could be advanced. The globally influential eighteenth-century Salafist Sunni philosopher Shah Waliullah, himself deeply influenced by the teachings of the Naqshbandi

Sufi Sirhindi, wished to purify Islam of all Hindu, Sufi, and Shi'a influences with an eye to internal reform. He denounced the then current craze among the wealthy for "jewelry, costly garments and the like," and opposed, on chiefly economic grounds, "expensive and un-Islamic ceremonies . . . except for . . . the post-wedding meal for guests."¹³

In the political and commercial arena, the decline of the Mughal court forced emerging or breakaway regional rulers to construct new relationships with local producers, administrators, and bankers. Bankers and merchants along the subcontinent's coastlines enlisted English, Dutch, French, and American trading companies as partners in extracting wealth from the interior and taking South Asian products, from cotton to opium, into an expanding global international market.

Several events then intervened to forestall South Asia's independent religious, political, and economic development. In 1739, the Persian emperor Nadir Shah, recognizing that South Asia was as rich in resources as its political cohesion was poor, launched an invasion of the northwest. The treasure lost to his raid included Shah Jahan's jewel-encrusted peacock throne. Other invaders to the northwest inflicted a serious blow to the prestige of the growing Hindu Maratha Empire. In 1761, Maratha forces rose to defend the subcontinent from an assault by Ahmed Shah Durrani, a former lieutenant of Nadir Shah's and the founder of modern Afghanistan, only to be crushed by Afghans allied with what remained of the Mughal nobility.

With the Marathas thus weakened, and the Mughal Empire a shadow of its former self, South Asia was vulnerable to the ambitions of the Europeans who had thus far been held at bay. In Bengal, where memories of the Anglo-Mughal War of 1686–1691 remained fresh, concern about European aggression was high, but there and among South Asia's other coastal regimes, local rulers were distracted by competition from their opportunistic neighbors and were threatened by internal rivals, both political (disgruntled relatives and heirs) and economic (opportunistic bankers and merchants). As a result, many South Asian princes entered into agreements with European merchants allowing them to profit from European trade in exchange for what seemed to be a marginal loss of sovereignty over small coastal enclaves, where they allowed Europeans to build fortress-warehouses to secure their goods against local unrest. In fact, Europeans were realizing that levying taxes on the inhabitants of these settlements and their surrounding lands might be as profitable as trade.

When local rulers saw the first signs heralding the transformation of these European settlements into bridgeheads for conquest, their

response was fierce but blunted by their internal disunity and poor relations with their neighbors. Local rulers betrayed each other via what they thought would be limited alliances with the Europeans in order to gain the upper hand in their own regions. A lack of capital that a united polity might have made available to them rendered this disunity all the more dangerous. By the time a full-blown European threat materialized, Hindu, Muslim, and Sikh rulers were unable to acquire the number of advanced weapons necessary to turn it back.

But they did try. In the late 1700s, the Muslim ruler of much of the southern tip of the subcontinent, Tipu Sultan, had just enough funds to employ European military equipment and advisors to great effect against the Company. However, he raised that capital from revenues squeezed from Hindu cultivators, which undermined his legitimacy, while leaving him just short of enough weapons to ensure victory over the Company, whose hands were strengthened by their skillful turning of some of his Muslim and Hindu neighbors against him.



From Company State to Crown Rule, 1757–1877

On his ascension to the Mughal imperial throne in 1658, Aurangzeb took to task his boyhood tutor, Mullah Shah, for failing to inform him adequately about the world beyond his borders. Why, he asked, had his teacher dismissed the study of distant powers such as England on the mere assumption that foreign non-Muslim states could only be inferior to his own? Why had Mullah Shah failed to distinguish even between any of his empire's nearer neighbors?

Was it not incumbent upon my preceptor to make me acquainted with the distinguishing features of every nation of the earth; its resources and strength; its mode of warfare; its manners, religion, form of government, and wherein its interests principally consist; and, by a regular course of historical reading, to render me familiar with the origin of States, their progress and decline; the events, accidents, or errors, owing to which such great changes and mighty revolutions, have been effected.¹

That Aurangzeb had a command of world history and found his traditional education inadequate lends an air of tragedy to his troubled rule. As for the English, he was fortunate as emperor in being able to manage his relations with them to his own satisfaction. Yet these foreigners, of whom he recognized he knew too little, moved quickly to exploit the political divisions that followed his death. Most of South Asia became “British India” for almost two centuries, though the English began their conquest not as a nation but as a joint-stock company, the root of all modern corporations.²

In 1600, Queen Elizabeth granted a royal charter to the Governor and Company of Merchants of London Trading into the East Indies, which gave it a monopoly over England’s trade with India (“India,” after the region’s age-old Greek designation “Indos”), China, and the lands of Southeast Asia lying between them. The queen had earlier paved the way