

Aurangzeb and The Decline of the Mughals

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ABSTRACT: *Aurangzeb has been held responsible by many historians for hastening the decline of the Mughal Empire. The paper titled ‘Aurangzeb and the Decline of the Mughals’ is aimed at examining the role of Aurangzeb in the downfall of the Empire. The passage of Aurangzeb from being a prince to becoming Emperor Alamgir has been discussed. The character of Aurangzeb has been discussed with a mention of his letters. The alternate explanation about Aurangzeb being a just, impartial ruler has also been provided. It concludes with a little bit of discussion about the other causes and the aftermath of the decline.*

KEYWORDS: Aurangzeb, India, the Mughal Empire

Introduction

The Mughal Empire was established by Zahiruddin Babur in 1526, following his victory at the First Battle of Panipat. The word Mughal is derived from Mongol.

The Mughals rose under their third emperor, Jallaluddin Akbar (1556–1605), who was the main force behind the consolidation of the Empire. Akbar also succeeded at expanding the Empire to the Hindukush mountains, and checked the expansionist designs of Uzbeks of Turan (Central Asia) and Safavids of Iran. The Empire reached its zenith under the rule of the fifth Emperor, Shah Jahan (1628–58). Shah Jahan expanded the Empire in the Deccan. Shah Jahan is fondly remembered for his construction works like the Taj Mahal, Red Fort in Delhi, etc. each of which were an architectural marvel.

The Empire attained its greatest territorial extent under Shah Jahan's successor, Aurangzeb. The seeds of the decline of the empire were sowed during Aurangzeb's long reign of about 50 years, which later bore fruit. The Empire started to weaken and gradually decline with Aurangzeb's death in 1707. Unlike his predecessors Aurangzeb took many policy

decisions which hastened the decline of the Empire, the most prominent among them being alienation of the Rajput's, Afghans, Marathas, Sikhs and his ill will towards the Hindus, Shia Muslims and other minority groups. The Empire that at one time stretched from the Hindukush to the Deccan and from Gujarat to Bengal, became restricted to Delhi and surrounding areas as regional powers acquired greater autonomy. Yet the aura of the Empire continued to exist, though only symbolically till 1857, when the last ruler of the dynasty Bahadur Shah Zafar II was overthrown and exiled to Rangoon by the British.

Alamgir–The Birth of an Emperor

Aurangzeb (Figure 2) was born in 1618 at Dohad near Ujjain to Shah Jahan and Mumtaz Mahal. He was the third son of Shah Jahan after Dara Shikoh and Shuja. One event from the early life of Aurangzeb is pretty interesting. Aurangzeb was charged by an infuriated elephant outside the Agra Fort on the bank of the river Yamuna. Instead of fleeing, Aurangzeb courageously faced the beast and attacked it with a spear. Aurangzeb was thrown off his horse by the raging elephant. But Aurangzeb was saved as aid arrived just then and the elephant was tamed. Shah Jahan rewarded the young prince for his heroism with his weight in gold. This occasion gave a foresight into the events of greatness that lay in the future for Aurangzeb. However, Aurangzeb remarked, “If the fight had ended fatally for me it would not have been a matter of shame. Death drops curtain even on emperors; it is no dishonour; the shame lay in what my brothers did.”¹

In 1647, Aurangzeb was sent by Shah Jahan to Central Asia to recover Balkh and Badakhsan. The campaign was a failure leading to the wastage of crores of rupees of Imperial revenue for no gain. But during this campaign Aurangzeb did an act that spread his fame across the Islamic world. One day while the fight was going on in the battlefield, the time for evening prayer (*zuhr*) arrived. Aurangzeb got down from his elephant, knelt down on the ground and peacefully recited his evening prayers in full view of both the armies. On seeing this, Abdul Aziz, king of Bukhara suspended the battle.

¹ Jadunath Sarkar, *A History of Aurangzeb-Volume I*, (Calcutta: Kuntaline Press,1912), Pgs. 11-12

Aurangzeb was then made the Viceroy of Deccan in 1652. Many Letters preserved in *Adab-i Alamgiri*, give us an information about the next six years of Aurangzeb's life. Jadunath Sarkar remarks, "What Gaul was to Julius Caesar as a training ground for the coming contest for empire, the Deccan was to Aurangzib."² During his viceroyalty Aurangzeb invaded both Golkonda and Bijapur. While in case of Golkonda, Aurangzeb could successfully capture it by bringing the wazir of Golkonda, Mir Jumla to his side. In Bijapur, Aurangzeb's campaign was halted midway when Emperor Shah Jahan ordered him to stop the invasion and forced Aurangzeb to come to terms of peace with Bijapur in exchange of a sizeable territory. This decision of Emperor Shah Jahan, made Aurangzeb angry with his father.

In 1657, Emperor Shah Jahan became seriously ill and the war of succession started among his four sons. Dara Shikoh stayed back at Agra and looked after the frail Emperor, and prevented his brothers from getting any news about the Emperor's health. Murad and Shuja crowned themselves as rulers in their respective provinces, Gujarat and Bengal respectively. Aurangzeb joined in alliance with Murad, in order to free Shah Jahan from Dara's domination, whom he declared as an apostate of Islam. Dara gathered two armies to fight his three brothers. The first army successfully routed Shuja and forced him to flee to Bengal. The second army however was defeated by Aurangzeb and Murad. The victorious brothers marched onto Agra, forcing Dara to flee to Delhi and then Punjab. Aurangzeb then forced Shah Jahan to abdicate the throne by cutting off the supply of water to Agra Fort from the river Yamuna. Then he imprisoned his father, who was restricted to the prison till his death in 1666. Then Aurangzeb got Murad beheaded in Gwalior. Dara was caught near Bolan pass, while trying to flee India. Dara was brought to Delhi and murdered by some slaves of Aurangzeb. Dara's son Suleiman was also killed by Aurangzeb in Delhi. Meanwhile Shuja gathered an army in a bid for capturing the throne. But Shuja was defeated at Khwaja and forced to flee to Bengal, and later Arrakan. In Arrakan he was massacred with his whole family for taking part in a plot to murder the king of Arrakan.

² Jadunath Sarkar, *Studies in Aurangzib's Reign*, (Calcutta: Orient Longman ,1989), Pg.3

Thus, with all his rivals removed, Aurangzeb became the undisputed ruler of India. Aurangzeb crowned himself Emperor at Delhi on 21 July 1658. He took the title Alamgir or the Conqueror of the World.

The Indian Puritan - Alamgir

Aurangzeb was a pious Muslim. He took some bigoted measures, that alienated a large part of his subjects – Hindus, Sikhs, even Shia Muslims, which led to large scale discontent in the Empire. Aurangzeb banned *sajda* or prostration before the Emperor, which the clerics maintained was reserved for Gods. He forbade the *kalma* being inscribed on the coins - since coins could be defiled while passing hand to hand. He also banned the Zoroastrian festival of *Nauroz*, celebrated by the Shias. Public display of Holi and Muharram processions were also stopped.

In 1699, the eleventh year of his reign, Aurangzeb banned singing and drinking in the court. However, singing continued to be patronized by ladies in the Mughal harem and the nobles. Aurangzeb also discontinued the practice of weighing the emperor against gold on his birthdays. He also banned *jharoka darshan* or showing himself to the public from the balcony, which he considered superstitious. In simple words, Aurangzeb banned all the practices that he considered superstitious or against the laws of Islam, i.e. un-Islamic.

In 1679, Aurangzeb revived the *jizya* or poll tax on non-Muslims. He also dismissed many non-Muslim clerks. All Hindus except the Rajput, were forbidden to carry weapons. Aurangzeb also ordered the demolition many temples both big and small. The Vishwanath Temple at Benaras was pulled down in 1669. Many temples in Benaras, were disguised as houses in order to protect them from Aurangzeb's wrath. The Krishna Janmabhoomi temple at Mathura was replaced by a mosque and the idols were brought to Agra and buried under the steps of Jahanara's mosque, to be trampled by people going into the mosque. During the Rajput War of 1679-80 about 240 temples were destroyed in Mewar, including the famous Someshwar Temple and three grand temples at Udaipur. In Jaipur, sixty-seven temples were demolished on Aurangzeb's order.

Aurangzeb also tortured and executed the ninth Sikh guru (leader of the Sikhs), Guru Tegh Bahadur. This led to large scale revolt by the Sikhs, who organized under Guru Gobind Singh. He also antagonized the Rajputs by depriving Maharaja Jaswant Singh's (King of Jodhpur) minor son Ajit

Singh the throne of Jodhpur in 1679. Ultimately a truce was reached in 1681. Henceforth, the Rajputs ceased to be the supporters of the Mughal Empire.

Aurangzeb embroiled himself in a war with the Marathas, which ruined his health. This war destroyed the morale of the army and the finances of the state. The conflict led to the decline of the Empire in the long run. Aurangzeb's fierce hatred towards the Hindus was only matched by his aversion towards the Shias. He considered the Shias as heretics (*rafizi*).

Stanley Lane-Poole states, "Aurangzib was, first and last, a stern Puritan. Nothing in life- neither throne, nor love, nor ease- weighed for an instant in his mind against his fealty to the principles of Islam." ³

Character of Alamgir Aurangzeb

Aurangzeb was both a 'master of pen' and a 'master of sword'. The character of Aurangzeb is a complex one. There are two extreme views regarding his character. On one side, there are historians who consider Aurangzeb to be extremely intolerant, bigoted in his outlook, and wanted to establish an Islamic Empire in India. The other side consists of historians who consider Aurangzeb's policies and measures were influenced by the situation and circumstances prevailing at that time.

Aurangzeb's passion for doing everything himself and centralizing all the powers in his own hands led to incompetence of the generals and governors in the long run. They failed to act efficiently when faced with an emergency. Aurangzeb had overthrown and imprisoned his father Shah Jahan in his old age. Aurangzeb feared a similar fate from his sons during his old age. Hence, Aurangzeb became suspicious of his sons. He forced his son Akbar to flee to Persia when he tried to organize a rebellion against his rule. He also imprisoned his sons Bahadur Shah I and Azam Shah. He was only lenient towards his youngest and favourite son Kam Baksh. These kinds of steps crushed the latent ability of his sons. As a consequence, at the time of Aurangzeb's death all his sons were no better than children in spite of being about fifty years of age.

During the reign of Aurangzeb, the Mughal state suffered many crises like the Jagirdari crisis, followed by agrarian crisis and many revolts in various

³ Stanley Lane-Poole, *Aurangzib and the Decay of the Mughal Empire*, (Delhi: S. Chand and Co., 1964), Pg.- 64 & 65

parts of the empire. Instead of identifying and eliminating, the root cause of these rebellions, Aurangzeb crushed the rebellions with brute force, which only solved the problems partially. But the seeds for future discontent against Mughal authority were sown.

Aurangzeb lacked the warmth of the heart and chivalry to fallen foes that made his great grandfather Emperor Jallaluddin Akbar win the love of subjects, friends and foes alike. Aurangzeb also devoid of sympathy, imagination, long term vision and elasticity in his decisions. These limitations of his character undermined the Mughal Empire, so on his death the Empire fell into a ruinous decline, never to rise up again.

Letters of Aurangzeb

Letters give us a glimpse into the true self of a person. Hence, they act as an important source of history. Most of the Letters written by Aurangzeb have perished. The remaining letters of Aurangzeb have been arranged in five volumes that vary in their contents and often overlap. These are *Adab-i Alamgiri*, *Kalimat-i Tayyibat*, *Akham-i Alamgiri*, *Raqaim-i Karaim* and *Akham-i Alamgiri*. These sources only illuminate the beginning and the end of Alamgir's reign, leaving the remaining years from 1660 to 1702 in darkness. Besides these five, the letters written by Aurangzeb to his brother Murad, his rebel son Muhammad Akbar and the imperial *firman*s and *sanads* are also important sources.

Adab-i Alamgiri was composed by Aurangzeb's secretary Abul Fath, who was given the title Qabil Khan. There are 628 letters in this volume mostly written under the name of Aurangzeb to his father Shah Jahan and other persons during the early years of his reign between 1649 and 1659. The main characteristic of these letters is that they directly convey the meaning using simple words, instead of using ornate language and taking the help of rhetoric.

Kalimat-i Tayyibat and *Akham-i Alamgiri* are attributed to a favourite disciple of Aurangzeb, Inayatullah Khan Kashmiri. These collections provide an insight into the ending years of Aurangzeb's reign. Inayatullah idolized Aurangzeb and considered his administrative, fiscal and religious policies necessary for restoring the glory of the Mughal Empire. *Kalimat-i Tayyibat* contains short notes for 676 letters, and *Akham-i Alamgiri* contains 609 pages of 15 lines each with about one and a half letters on each page. These letters mainly idolize Aurangzeb as a 'just sovereign.'

The letters written to Aurangzeb by different persons, act as a complement to the letters written by Aurangzeb as these help us in understanding the larger context in which the letters were composed.

Mughal Decline - Was Aurangzeb Responsible?

Following Aurangzeb's death in 1707, the Empire started to fall apart. Aurangzeb ruled for about fifty years. His successor Bahadur Shah I ascended the throne at the old age of sixty-five, lacked the vigour of an energetic leader and hence could not rule efficiently. This trend more or less continued with old princes ascending the throne till Bahadur Shah II, the last Emperor. The excessive centralization of power done by Aurangzeb led to the downfall of the provincial administration.

The war with the Marathas, led to an unnecessary drain on the resources of the Empire. Aurangzeb's religious policies led to the alienation of the majority of his subjects. Under Aurangzeb, the Mughal army and administration started to deteriorate. The soldiers got more interested in the pleasantries of life rather than keeping themselves well trained. Hence when faced with the guerrilla tactics of Marathas, the army failed to cope. The Rajput princes also refused to provide any further help to the cause of the Mughals.

Aurangzeb expanded the empire, beyond a sustainable limit. It was not possible to successfully rule such a vast territory from one place. This problem was aggravated by the lack of fast, modern communication methods.

In the Mughal Empire, the death of an Emperor was always followed by a war of succession among the princes. Salim (later Emperor Jahangir) revolted against his father Emperor Akbar but was pardoned. Similarly, Khurram (later Emperor Shah Jahan) also tried to seize the throne from his father Emperor Jahangir, but failed. But Aurangzeb was perhaps the first person to dethrone his father Shah Jahan and imprison him. Fearing a similar fate for himself, Aurangzeb sent all his sons away, while he lay all alone on his deathbed. He also asked his sons to divide the Empire amongst themselves peacefully and respect each other's territorial sovereignty.

The fact that Aurangzeb was averse to music can be counter argued that He was himself an accomplished veena player. Moreover, many texts on Indian music were composed during his time.

Many evidences have been provided against the religious bigotry of Aurangzeb which provide him as a liberal ruler. Rekha Joshi has collected a few remarks of Aurangzeb, "Government post ought to be filled up according to ability and no other considerations. What connection have earthly affairs with religion? And what right have administrative works to meddle with bigotry? For you is your religion for me is mine."⁴

These remarks clearly establish Aurangzeb as an impartial person. Aurangzeb's policies were influenced by the conditions prevailing at that time, with the hostile spirit of defiance brewing among Sikhs, Marathas, Rajputs, he had to turn to his own co-religionists for support. Hence in order to appease the orthodox Muslims he had to take such drastic steps. Aurangzeb became the protector of the *Jangambadi Math* of the *Lingayats* (Shaivites) in Benaras and granted the *Math* (similar to monastery) tax free lands. Aurangzeb also granted money to *Jogi* (ascetic) Anand Nath, for the worship of Shiva.

Finally, it can be said that Aurangzeb was indeed responsible for the fall of the Mughal Empire, but only partially, as he tried to expand the Empire without firmly consolidating the conquered areas. Aurangzeb cannot be blamed for the incompetence of the successors of his son Bahadur Shah I, who failed to hold on to the territories. Moreover, Aurangzeb was not so intolerant as shown by various historians, as under Aurangzeb maximum number of non-Muslim, mainly Hindus were inducted in the various positions of Mughal court, administration and the army.

Conclusion

No Empire lasts forever. The same became true for the Mughal Empire also. The grand empire consolidated by Akbar and extended by his successors Jahangir, Shah Jahan and Aurangzeb, started to disintegrate from 1707. In 1757, after the Battle of Plassey, the English East India Company virtually became the rulers of India. The Mughal Emperor at Delhi was reduced to a mere figurehead. Most of the Emperors who succeeded Aurangzeb were old and frail ones who lacked the energy and charisma of a young ruler. Although the Empire continued to exist in name till 1857, it was restricted to areas around Delhi. But the aura of the

⁴ Rekha Joshi, *Aurangzeb- Attitudes and Inclinations*, (Delhi, Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers, 1979), Pg. – 23

Emperor as a father figure continued. Thus, during the revolt of 1857, the rebel leaders elected the Mughal Emperor Bahadur Shah II or Bahadur Shah Zafar to be the titular figurehead of the rebels. After the rebellion was crushed, Bahadur Shah II surrendered to the British forces at Humayun's Tomb in Delhi. His sons were killed. He was banished to Rangoon, where he died in 1862.

In 1876, British monarch Queen Victoria, declared herself the 'Empress of India', the same being proclaimed at the Delhi durbar of 1877. Thus, the Empire established by Babur in 1626 ended in 1857. The Empire gave a new fabric to the syncretic society and culture of India. Many factors were responsible for the Empire's downfall, and blaming Aurangzeb's policies primarily would be an exaggeration. But it is sure, that the forces which gradually led to the decline of the Empire, were let loose during the reign of Alamgir Aurangzeb- the Last of the Great Mughals.

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Illustrations

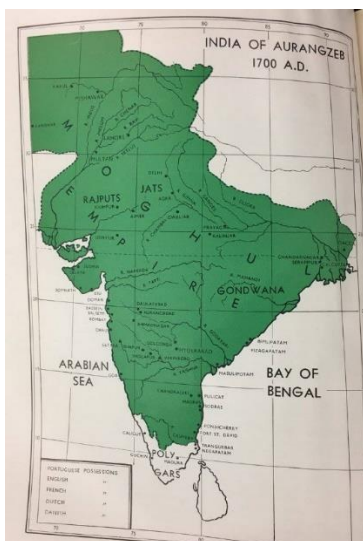


Figure 1: Mughal Empire under Aurangzeb
(Courtesy: Google Image)

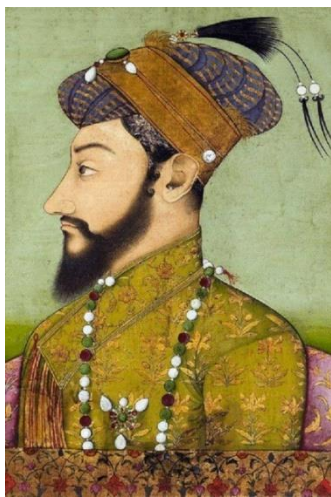


Figure 2: Emperor Alamgir Aurangzeb
(Courtesy: Google Image)