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# Empire in decay: the Mughal journey from Aurangzeb to Zafar

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# Empire in Decay: The Mughal Journey from Aurangzeb to Zafar

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“The high point of imperial centralisation under Emperor Aurangzeb coincided with the start of the imperial downfall”. These are the words of Jos Gommans, a Dutch historian of Colonial History. During Aurangzeb’s reign, the Mughals contributed approximately 25% of the entire world’s GDP<sup>1</sup>. However, this achievement was to be short-lived. After the demise of Aurangzeb, the second-longest-reigning Mughal Emperor after Akbar, the Empire slowly began to crumble, particularly due to the incompetence of his own policies and successors that led to further erosion of power. This is why Emperor Aurangzeb is also referred to as the last ruler of the Great Mughal Empire.

One of the primary reasons for the growing incompetence amongst his own successors was the seeds that Aurangzeb himself had sown. For context, the Mughals did not follow any strict law of succession, such as the law of primogeniture. Like most of the Mughal Emperors, he was also one who did not name a single successor to his throne. Due to these reasons, wars broke out between Aurangzeb’s sons. The winner of these wars of succession would ultimately claim the peacock throne. In Aurangzeb’s case, the war broke out between three of his sons: Bahadur Shah I, Muhammad Azam Shah and Kam Bakhsh. Bahadur Shah I emerged as the winner in the Battle of Jajau in 1707 against Muhammad Azam Shah and later defeated his remaining brother Kam Bakhsh to end the war a year later. Shah was the one who eventually ascended the throne and ruled for less than five years. Aurangzeb fought against three of his brothers after his father, Shah Jahan, fell ill in 1657. Namely, Aurangzeb fought his brothers Dara Shikoh, Shah Shuja, and Murad Bakhsh. Interestingly enough, the scale at which these wars were fought was significantly bigger than those in which Bahadur Shah I and his brothers had fought, due to factors that can also be attributed to Aurangzeb himself.

In any Empire, especially in one as big as the Mughal Empire, being able to win over the support of your own *janta* (public) is of the utmost importance. Unlike Akbar The Great, the longest reigning Mughal Emperor, Aurangzeb failed to do so. Akbar followed the policy of Din-I Ilahi, which means the religion of God<sup>2</sup>. Using this policy, Akbar aimed to promote religious tolerance and balance the different religious beliefs that existed within the vast territory of his Empire. In fact, it was under Akbar’s reign that Maheshdas, more famously known as Birbal, thrived as a minister- all while being a Hindu. Birbal is talked about in numerous folktales that celebrate his clever problem-solving abilities and exceptional wit. Akbar had also enlisted non-Muslim warrior tribes, particularly the Hindu Rajput ones, which were considered the most fiery and brave, as reliable defenders of his throne. Even after marrying the daughters of Hindu rulers, Akbar allowed them to maintain their Hindu religious identity, which is contrary to the then-popular beliefs and what traditional Islamic rulers, including the Sultans of Delhi, did. It is also believed that Akbar’s Hindu wives significantly influenced his Hindu policies. Akbar also removed the *jizya* tax, which was a tax levied on non-muslims living under an Islamic ruler. He even went above and beyond by inviting religious scholars from all the different faiths, including Hindus, Jews, Buddhists and Jains, to debate with them personally

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1 Maddison, Angus (2003): Development Centre Studies The World Economy Historical Statistics: Historical Statistics, OECD Publishing, ISBN 92-64-10414-3, pp. 259–261

2 Sadiq, T. Umar. “Din-I Ilahi and Emperor Akbar’s Policy of Social Inclusiveness.” Jamal Academic Research Journal–An Interdisciplinary (JARJ) 6, no. 3 (May 2025): 13–20.

in his private chambers. Akbar also never claimed to be God, unlike Bahadur Shah I, who claimed to be a direct descendant of Prophet Muhammad from his maternal side. Making such big claims was not enough for him to justify his own authority for much longer, as can be seen by the duration for which he stayed in power. Through inclusion, not only did Akbar further solidify his own throne, but he also enabled his next three immediate successors, including Aurangzeb, to maintain their authority consistently, as evident in the stable leadership that prevailed over the next 100 years following Akbar's accession as the Emperor. Aurangzeb also fought in countless wars against the Marathas, the Jats, the Sikhs, and the Rajputs, all of which were growing as separate empires. While not all the wars against these separate empires were lost, however, constantly fighting with them on all different fronts had deeply strained the Empire's wealth in the long run. Further along the way, Aurangzeb had also ensured that no other ruler after him would have the level of authority as he did. It became evident that the balance of power had shifted, and the Nobles during this period became significantly strengthened to the extent that they were negotiating on behalf of the rulers for the

distribution of power. Zulfiqar Khan Nusraj Jung, for instance, who played a significant role in the Battle of Jajau, was able to get the governorship of the Deccan even though he had supported Azam in the war of succession. This meant unprecedented power for someone who was only a noble, making him one of the most influential people within the Mughal Empire. He was also able to negotiate partial control over the grant of *mansab* (rank) to nobles, which reduced the authority of the Emperor himself<sup>3</sup>. All of this shows how incompetence had begun to become central to the failure of the Mughls, whose effects would take several decades to showcase its full potential. As mentioned earlier, Bahadur Shah I's rule was short-lived, lasting less than five years. He faced many problems at that point of time, due to which during the last six months of his rule, he had totally given up on governance and mostly spent his time gardening. After his



Aurangzeb.

demise, Jung, who controlled the military, had now handed over the throne to his son Jahandar Shah, who was the least popular amongst all four brothers. Jung managed to ally with the three brothers against the most powerful one. Once defeated, he now helped Jahandar in killing all the remaining princes. While this succession of power ultimately landed the throne in the hands of Jahandar, the effective authoritative powers were now lying with Jung due to the prince's over-reliance on him. Jahandar was now only a puppet. While Jung did try to abolish the *jizya* and restore normalcy with the Marathas and the Sikhs, it was already too late.

Moving on to the 19th century, significant changes had occurred. A new power was emerging from Bengal: the British East India Company (EIC). The British EIC worked as a sovereign power on behalf of the British Crown. After winning the key Battle of Plassey (1757) against the Nawab of Bengal and the Battle of Buxar (1764), the British EIC ruled over a massive area of land in Eastern India on behalf of the British. Add to this the British conquests in the Anglo-Maratha (1775-1799), Anglo-Mysore (1767-1799), and Anglo-Sikh (1845-1849) wars, which expanded British control throughout the entire subcontinent.

3 Satish Chandra, *Parties and Politics at the Mughal Court, 1707-1740*, 4th ed. (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2002), 107-9.

Adding onto this further was the Mughal Empire that had already been on decline ever since the beginning of the 18th Century. Being in a constant state of decline was bad enough, but the rebellion of 1857 was the last straw. Some might argue that it was the final opportunity the Mughals had to try and regain the territories they had lost over the previous century, but more importantly, it was also the one chance they had to win back the people of United India<sup>4</sup>. The mutineers who led the rebellion were Hindus and Muslims both, since it was believed that the lubricated cartridges that were being used in the new Enfield Rifles were rumoured to be made of the skin of both cows and pigs. While there were other major factors involved as well, this particularly hurt the religious feelings of both Hindus and Muslims alike. This came to be seen as the single most important unifying factor between the two communities. The sepoys declared Bahadur Shah Zafar, the last Mughal ruler, as the Emperor of Hindustan to legitimize the uprising against the British. After almost two years of fighting, the rebellion came to an end with a victory for the British. This paved the way for the complete dismantling of the Mughal rule as the Bahadur Shah Zafar was sent into exile to Burma and power was transferred directly into the hands of the British Crown. This marked the end of the Mughal reign that lasted for more than three centuries.

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