

The Mughals

In the early sixteenth century, descendants of the Mongol, Turkish, Iranian, and Afghan invaders of South Asia--the Mughals--invaded India under the leadership of Zahir-ud-Din Babur. Babur was the great-grandson of Timur Lenk (Timur the Lame, from which the Western name Tamerlane is derived), who had invaded India and plundered Delhi in 1398 and then led a short-lived empire based in Samarkand (in modern-day Uzbekistan) that united Persian-based Mongols (Babur's maternal ancestors) and other West Asian peoples. Babur was driven from Samarkand and initially established his rule in Kabul in 1504; he later became the first Mughal ruler (1526-30). His determination was to expand eastward into Punjab, where he had made a number of forays. Then an invitation from an opportunistic Afghan chief in Punjab brought him to the very heart of the Delhi Sultanate, ruled by Ibrahim Lodi (1517-26). Babur, a seasoned military commander, entered India in 1526 with his well-trained veteran army of 12,000 to meet the sultan's huge but unwieldy and disunited force of more than 100,000 men. Babur defeated the Lodi sultan decisively at Panipat (in modern-day Haryana, about ninety kilometers north of Delhi). Employing gun carts, moveable artillery, and superior cavalry tactics, Babur achieved a resounding victory. A year later, he decisively defeated a Rajput confederacy led by Rana Sangha. In 1529 Babur routed the joint forces of Afghans and the sultan of Bengal but died in 1530 before he could consolidate his military gains. He left behind as legacies his memoirs (*Babur Namah*), several beautiful gardens in Kabul, Lahore, and Agra, and descendants who would fulfill his dream of establishing an empire in Hindustan.

When Babur died, his son Humayun (1530-56), also a soldier, inherited a difficult task. He was pressed from all sides by a reassertion of Afghan claims to the Delhi throne, by disputes over his own succession, and by the Afghan-Rajput march into Delhi in 1540. He fled to Persia, where he spent nearly ten years as an embarrassed guest at the Safavid court. In 1545 he gained a foothold in Kabul, reasserted his Indian claim, defeated Sher Khan Sur, the most powerful Afghan ruler, and took control of Delhi in 1555.

Humayun's untimely death in 1556 left the task of further imperial conquest and consolidation to his thirteen-year-old son, Jalal-ud-Din Akbar (r. 1556-1605). Following a decisive military victory at the Second Battle of Panipat in 1556, the regent Bayram Khan pursued a vigorous policy of expansion on Akbar's behalf. As soon as Akbar came of age, he began to free himself from the influences of overbearing ministers, court factions, and harem intrigues, and demonstrated his own capacity for judgment and leadership. A "workaholic" who seldom slept more than three hours a night, he personally oversaw the implementation of his administrative policies, which were to form the backbone of the Mughal Empire for more than 200 years. He continued to conquer, annex, and consolidate a far-flung territory bounded by Kabul in the northwest, Kashmir in the north, Bengal in the east, and beyond the Narmada River in the south--an area comparable in size to the Mauryan territory some 1,800 years earlier (see fig. 3).

Akbar built a walled capital called Fatehpur Sikri (Fatehpur means Fortress of Victory) near Agra, starting in 1571. Palaces for each of Akbar's senior queens, a huge artificial lake, and sumptuous water-filled courtyards were built there. The city, however, proved

short-lived, perhaps because the water supply was insufficient or of poor quality, or, as some historians believe, Akbar had to attend to the northwest areas of his empire and simply moved his capital for political reasons. Whatever the reason, in 1585 the capital was relocated to Lahore and in 1599 to Agra.

Akbar adopted two distinct but effective approaches in administering a large territory and incorporating various ethnic groups into the service of his realm. In 1580 he obtained local revenue statistics for the previous decade in order to understand details of productivity and price fluctuation of different crops. Aided by Todar Mal, a Rajput king, Akbar issued a revenue schedule that the peasantry could tolerate while providing maximum profit for the state. Revenue demands, fixed according to local conventions of cultivation and quality of soil, ranged from one-third to one-half of the crop and were paid in cash. Akbar relied heavily on land-holding zamindars (see Glossary). They used their considerable local knowledge and influence to collect revenue and to transfer it to the treasury, keeping a portion in return for services rendered. Within his administrative system, the warrior aristocracy (*mansabdars*) held ranks (*mansabs*) expressed in numbers of troops, and indicating pay, armed contingents, and obligations. The warrior aristocracy was generally paid from revenues of nonhereditary and transferrable *jagirs* (revenue villages).

An astute ruler who genuinely appreciated the challenges of administering so vast an empire, Akbar introduced a policy of reconciliation and assimilation of Hindus (including Maryam al-Zamani, the Hindu Rajput mother of his son and heir, Jahangir), who represented the majority of the population. He recruited and rewarded Hindu chiefs with the highest ranks in government; encouraged intermarriages between Mughal and Rajput aristocracy; allowed new temples to be built; personally participated in celebrating Hindu festivals such as Dipavali, or Diwali, the festival of lights; and abolished the *jizya* (poll tax) imposed on non-Muslims. Akbar came up with his own theory of "rulership as a divine illumination," enshrined in his new religion Din-i-Ilahi (Divine Faith), incorporating the principle of acceptance of all religions and sects. He encouraged widow marriage, discouraged child marriage, outlawed the practice of sati, and persuaded Delhi merchants to set up special market days for women, who otherwise were secluded at home (see Veiling and the Seclusion of Women, ch. 5). By the end of Akbar's reign, the Mughal Empire extended throughout most of India north of the Godavari River. The exceptions were Gondwana in central India, which paid tribute to the Mughals, and Assam, in the northeast.

Mughal rule under Jahangir (1605-27) and Shah Jahan (1628-58) was noted for political stability, brisk economic activity, beautiful paintings, and monumental buildings. Jahangir married the Persian princess whom he renamed Nur Jahan (Light of the World), who emerged as the most powerful individual in the court besides the emperor. As a result, Persian poets, artists, scholars, and officers--including her own family members--lured by the Mughal court's brilliance and luxury, found asylum in India. The number of unproductive, time-serving officers mushroomed, as did corruption, while the excessive Persian representation upset the delicate balance of impartiality at the court. Jahangir liked Hindu festivals but promoted mass conversion to Islam; he persecuted the followers of Jainism and even executed Guru (see Glossary) Arjun Das, the fifth saint-teacher of the

Sikhs (see Sikhism, ch. 3). Nur Jahan's abortive schemes to secure the throne for the prince of her choice led Shah Jahan to rebel in 1622. In that same year, the Persians took over Kandahar in southern Afghanistan, an event that struck a serious blow to Mughal prestige.

Between 1636 and 1646, Shah Jahan sent Mughal armies to conquer the Deccan and the northwest beyond the Khyber Pass. Even though they demonstrated Mughal military strength, these campaigns consumed the imperial treasury. As the state became a huge military machine, whose nobles and their contingents multiplied almost fourfold, so did its demands for more revenue from the peasantry. Political unification and maintenance of law and order over wide areas encouraged the emergence of large centers of commerce and crafts--such as Lahore, Delhi, Agra, and Ahmadabad--linked by roads and waterways to distant places and ports. The world-famous Taj Mahal was built in Agra during Shah Jahan's reign as a tomb for his beloved wife, Mumtaz Mahal. It symbolizes both Mughal artistic achievement and excessive financial expenditures when resources were shrinking. The economic position of peasants and artisans did not improve because the administration failed to produce any lasting change in the existing social structure. There was no incentive for the revenue officials, whose concerns primarily were personal or familial gain, to generate resources independent of dominant Hindu zamindars and village leaders, whose self-interest and local dominance prevented them from handing over the full amount of revenue to the imperial treasury. In their ever-greater dependence on land revenue, the Mughals unwittingly nurtured forces that eventually led to the break-up of their empire.

The last of the great Mughals was Aurangzeb (r. 1658-1707), who seized the throne by killing all his brothers and imprisoning his own father. During his fifty-year reign, the empire reached its utmost physical limit but also witnessed the unmistakable symptoms of decline. The bureaucracy had grown bloated and excessively corrupt, and the huge and unwieldy army demonstrated outdated weaponry and tactics. Aurangzeb was not the ruler to restore the dynasty's declining fortunes or glory. Awe-inspiring but lacking in the charisma needed to attract outstanding lieutenants, he was driven to extend Mughal rule over most of South Asia and to reestablish Islamic orthodoxy by adopting a reactionary attitude toward those Muslims whom he had suspected of compromising their faith.

Aurangzeb was involved in a series of protracted wars--against the Pathans in Afghanistan, the sultans of Bijapur and Golkonda in the Deccan, and the Marathas in Maharashtra. Peasant uprisings and revolts by local leaders became all too common, as did the conniving of the nobles to preserve their own status at the expense of a steadily weakening empire. The increasing association of his government with Islam further drove a wedge between the ruler and his Hindu subjects. Aurangzeb forbade the building of new temples, destroyed a number of them, and reimposed the *jizya*. A puritan and a censor of morals, he banned music at court, abolished ceremonies, and persecuted the Sikhs in Punjab. These measures alienated so many that even before he died challenges for power had already begun to escalate. Contenders for the Mughal throne fought each other, and the short-lived reigns of Aurangzeb's successors were strife-filled. The Mughal Empire experienced dramatic reverses as regional governors broke away and founded independent kingdoms. The Mughals had to make peace with Maratha rebels, and Persian and Afghan armies

invaded Delhi, carrying away many treasures, including the Peacock Throne in 1739.

Source: *U.S. Library of Congress*