



The Mughal Empire

By Whitney Howarth

The religiously diverse Mughal Empire is partly responsible for what's in your spice rack. This was one of the wealthiest and most peaceful empires the world has ever known. Until it wasn't.

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An empire in fragments

The South Asian subcontinent—modern India, Afghanistan, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, and Pakistan— is part of the Eurasian landmass. Like Europe, it has a long history of big empires and small states. In 1750, it was mostly governed through a loose confederation of powerful princely states¹ and rich port cities. Once upon a time, the subcontinent had been dominated by the mighty Mughal Empire. But in the eighteenth century, the control held by the Mughals had begun to change for two reasons. First, growing internal divisions led to rival groups challenging the central government of the declining empire. Second, European merchants and governments started looking for ways to get some of the empire's wealth. Technically, the empire would survive until 1858. In reality, these two changes amplified each other and had already created a major crisis for the Mughal rulers in 1750.



This map details the growth of the Mughal Empire under three of its rulers, Babur, Akbar, and Aurangzeb. By Santosh.mbahrm, CC BY-SA 3.0.

Networks of trade and bureaucracy

The Mughals were a Muslim dynasty who ruled over a majority Hindu population. By 1750, they had dominated much of South Asia for several centuries. Muslims were already living in India when the Mughals first arrived. During Mughal rule, Muslims averaged only about 15 percent of the population. For most of their era of dominance, however, Mughal rule was generally tolerant of all of the religions of the region. That policy created enough social stability to ensure healthy business, investment, and trade.

¹ A princely state, is simply a state where the authority is a prince.

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The Mughals had built their empire by making good use of India's resources, developing its production capacity, and supporting a very rich Muslim-dominated trade system in the Indian Ocean. India was at the center of a global market for goods in which Muslims, from many backgrounds and regions, were the principal dealers. Muslims across the Indian Ocean benefitted by having a common language (Arabic), a common set of ethical codes, and a shared tradition of commercial practices.

South Asia had an important place in this system. While most of the population farmed foods such as rice, Mughal India had a thriving manufacturing industry, producing a massive quantity of hand-loom textiles for the Indian Ocean economy. The trade in cotton and silk fabrics had brought great wealth to India as early as the fifth century BCE (during the Roman Empire). High demand for these items had attracted traders from as far as China in the East and Persia in the West. Yet this wealth made the region a target for competitive rivals.

By the fifteenth century, Indians had taken advantage of growing global markets to expand textile production and distribution. And trade was really spiced up by the nutmeg, mace, cloves, cardamom and cinnamon coming out of Indonesia's "spice islands". Other than black pepper, India didn't grow many spices of its own, but it was the world's trans-shipment center for spices. Columbus had sailed on behalf of the King and Queen of Spain in 1492 to get easier access to that flavorful wealth. By 1750, almost every household in London and Lisbon had a pepper pot!

Building the Mughal state

The Mughal state was established by the Sultan Babur in the sixteenth century, with his legendary victory over the Lodhi Sultan in 1526. Babur used 20 cannons to defeat an army twice the size of his own. But he died two years later, so it wasn't really Babur's leadership that sustained his dynasty. That success belonged to his grandson, who managed to expand Mughal territories and establish a highly efficient governance structure. Extensive commercial activity, both in trade and textile production, created great wealth. By the early seventeenth century, Mughals governed one of the world's most populous and affluent empires in world history.



Portrait of navigator Vasco da Gama, from the c.1565 compendium, Livro de Lisuarte de Abreu (Pierpont Morgan Library, M.525). Public domain.

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This wealth was ensured by a wide-spread, efficient government. The Mughal rulers established a complex bureaucracy. Both Hindu rajas and Muslim sultans could become officers of the state, called mansabdars, when the emperors awarded them land grants. These military and civil leaders maintained cavalry (armed horsemen) ready for battle, and they collected taxes on behalf of the empire. In return, they got land rights, payment, and status.

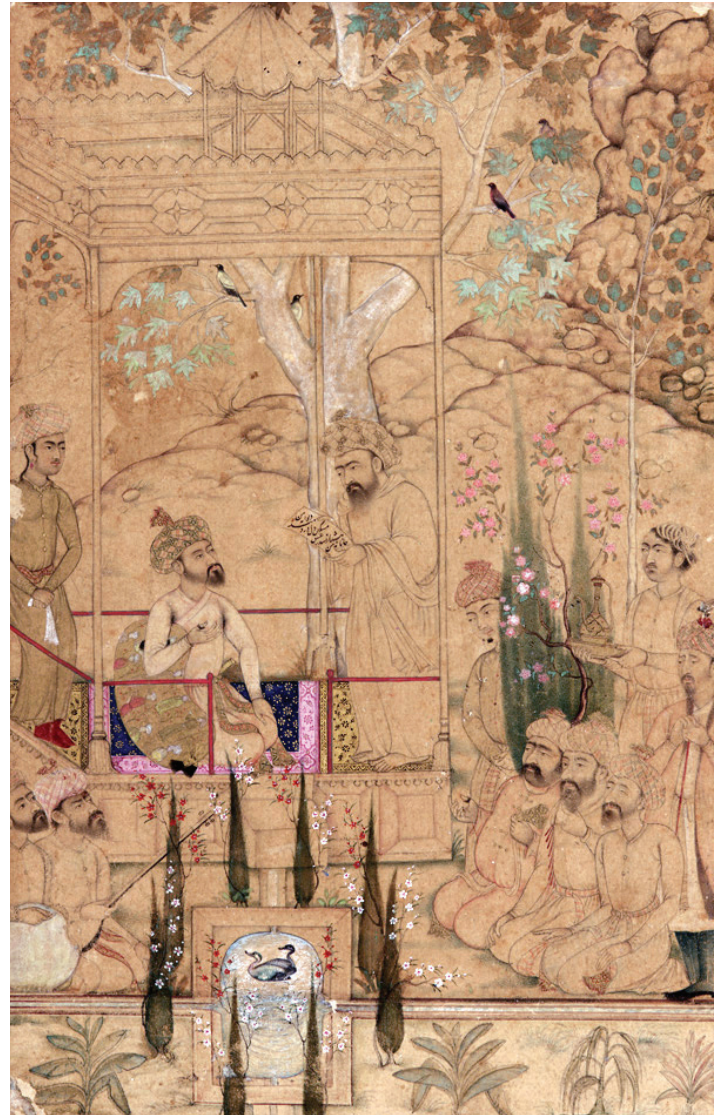
Mansabdars were similar to European nobles, but also differed in key respects. In the Mughal system, noble titles were not inherited and could be taken away by the emperor. Also, unlike European nobles, mansabdars did not own the land but only held the right to collect taxes. This meant that they were quite weak compared to the power of the emperor. At first.

Internal problems emerge

After the first 150 years of Mughal rule, under Emperors Jahangir and Shah Jahan, nobles became increasingly rich, emboldened by larger armies, and able to challenge the weak center in Delhi. Then, around 1700, the Mughal state reached the limits of territorial growth. When the state ran out of land, it was a lot like running out of money, since awarding land was how they bought the mansabdars' loyalty. Meanwhile, the mansabdars had grown extremely powerful. Imagine feeding your pet tiger kitten delicious meat until it grows to 500 pounds, then running out of meat. As the number of nobles, bureaucrats, and military commanders grew, the state feared those elites, some of whom could now maintain massive armies of 40,000 to 60,000. Factions rose and battles over succession for the imperial throne created political instability.

Two more problems that emerged were the decline of religious tolerance and an era of continuous war in the late seventeenth century. The vast Mughal state had benefitted, both financially and culturally, from generations of leaders who were practical and tolerant with their diverse subjects. Then came Emperor Aurangzeb, a religious and military zealot.² After taking power in 1658, he spent most of his 49 years of rule conquering territories, amassing armies, violently suppressing rebellions, and brutally punishing his enemies, both Hindu and Muslim. Peace was rare in these times. Millions died in combat, and millions more civilians died from drought, plague, and famine during these wars.

It was unfortunate timing for the Mughals, but this was right when some well-armed foreign powers began to put increased pressure on the state.



Detail from Babur with attendants in a garden pavilion, c. 1605.
Public domain.

² A zealot is someone who is excessively focused on what they believe in.

External rivals for power

Many different Europeans were aggressively seeking bits of land in South Asia in the eighteenth century, including the Dutch, French, and Portuguese. But it was the British who emerged dominant. They were represented by something they called the East India Company, a British private joint stock trading company that rose to prominence in the northeast province of Bengal in the mid-eighteenth century. Initially, they were content to be just like a mansabdar, working within the Mughal bureaucracy and acknowledging the emperor's authority—while making money, of course. Through treaty agreements, the Mughal state gave the Company the right to collect taxes on the lands they won by political and military intervention. The Company then began to expand beyond Bengal. The plan wasn't so much to conquer India as it was to slowly expand their commercial interests. Through carefully calculated maneuverings, they went province by province and made nice with different local factions. By allying with the various local power players who didn't like the Mughals and other Europeans, the British gradually beat out all other European rivals.

Europeans weren't the only outsiders challenging Mughal supremacy. By 1750, neighboring Afghan, Uzbek, and Persian states had pushed against the empire, often furiously. In 1759, the Persians even briefly occupied the capital in Delhi, claiming the famed gem-encrusted Peacock Throne. Meanwhile, internal division continued to crack the empire. Contests over the throne created particular challenges for the state, eating up all of the empire's budget with war costs.

Aurangzeb's cruelty produced a high death toll, and he destroyed many Hindu temples and Muslim holy places during military invasions. However, his failures cannot completely explain the decline of the empire. Personal bigotry aside, Aurangzeb also built Hindu temples and hired more Hindus into his bureaucracy than any previous Mughal ruler. Religious zealotry does not explain the end of the empire, which lingered on for another 150 years. But we might be able to trace the reasons for this empire's slow decline to the general costs of maintaining a medieval war state in modern times. At the same time, India's changing role in the global economy now introduced new Indian bankers, financiers, foreign traders and investors of every kind, and that diverted money from the state. The system had evolved into something they simply could not afford. As Mughal power diminished, Europeans—especially British merchants—stepped in to reap the profits.



How many peacocks can you find in this picture? Although [the original Peacock Throne](#) was lost by the time of painting was created around 1800, it depicts what was either a replica, or was painted from memories and descriptions. By Khairullah, public domain.

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Whitney Howarth, is an Associate Professor of History at Plymouth State University where she specializes in modern world history and the history of India. Dr. Howarth has taught world history at the college level since 1999 and was, for nearly a decade, a research fellow at Northeastern's World History Center, where she assisted in the research, design and creation of professional development programs for high school world history teachers, hosted seminars by top world historical scholars, and produced multi-media publications (1995-2004).

Image credits

Cover: Wazir Khan masjid, Known as Mole on the cheek of Lahore, The mosque was made during the era of Mughal Empire in subcontinent India. © Iqbal Khatri / Getty Images

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Detail from Babur with attendants in a garden pavilion, c. 1605. Public domain. <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Babur-garden.jpg>

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