

## **Aurangzeb**

AURANGZEB, the third son of Shah Jahan, was born on October 24, 1618, at Dohad, on the frontier of Gujarat and Rajputana. Industrious and thorough, he had distinguished himself as an able administrator during the years that he spent in the Deccan and other provinces of the empire. He was also a fearless soldier and a skillful general, and because of the hostile influence at court of his brother Dara, he had had to learn all the tactics of diplomacy. As emperor, he ruled more of India than any previous monarch, but in a court that had become a byword for luxury, he lived a life of austere piety. Yet of all India's rulers, few pursued policies that have excited more controversy among successive generations. In large measure, this is the result of his religious policies, for it was these that have colored men's evaluation of his reign.

Even as a young man, Aurangzeb was known for his devotion to the Muslim religion and observance of Islamic injunctions, and in some of his letters written during the struggle for the succession he claimed that he was acting "for the sake of the true faith and the peace of the realm." As soon as he was securely on the throne, he introduced reforms which could make his dominion a genuine Muslim state. After his coronation on June 5, 1659, he issued orders which were calculated to satisfy orthodoxy. He appointed censors of public morals in all important cities to enforce Islamic law, and he tried to put down such practices as drinking, gambling, and prostitution. He forbade the cultivation of narcotics throughout the empire, and in 1664 he issued his first edict forbidding sati or the self-immolation of women on funeral pyres. He also repeatedly denounced the castration of children so they could be sold as eunuchs. In the economic sphere he showed a determined opposition to all illegal exactions and to all taxes which were not authorized by Islamic law. Immediately after his second coronation he abolished the inland transport duty, which amounted to ten percent of the value of goods, and the octroi on all articles of food and drink brought into the cities for sale.

Although these measures were partly responsible for Aurangzeb's later financial difficulties, they were popular with the people. But gradually the emperor's puritanism began to manifest itself, and steps were taken which were not so universally approved. In 1668 he forbade music at his court and, with the exception of the royal band, he pensioned off the large number of state musicians and singers. The festivities held on the emperor's birthday, including the custom of weighing him against gold and silver, were discontinued, and the mansabdars were forbidden to offer him the usual presents. The ceremony of darshan, or the public appearance of the emperor to the people, was abandoned in 1679.

During the long struggle for the throne, the central authority had tended to lose administrative control over the distant parts of the empire; and after he had defeated his rivals, Aurangzeb started to reorganize the civil government. He had used the need of revitalizing the instruments of imperial power as a justification for his seizure of the throne, and his intention of making good his promise was soon felt throughout the empire. The provincial governors began to expand the borders of the empire, and local authorities, who had grown accustomed to ignoring orders from Agra, the imperial capital, discovered that the new regime could act swiftly against them.

## **The Sikhs**

The Sikhs, who ultimately were to play an important part in the weakening of the empire, caused Aurangzeb some difficulties, but he dealt with them in an effective, though harsh, manner. The Sikh religion as founded by Guru Nanak (1469–1539) was a part of a general religious movement to bring Hinduism and Islam closer together. In the early years, the relations of the Sikhs with the Muslims had been friendly, especially since, as the Brahmans resented the growth of the new movement, the Sikhs had looked to the Muslims for support. Akbar himself had visited the third guru and made him a present of the land in Amritsar on which the Golden Temple was built.

Soon, however, there was conflict between the Sikhs and the Mughal authorities. Probably the basic reason was that the peasants of central Punjab had a militant tradition, and when new religious doctrines that emphasized the individual's relationship with God and society were adopted, a clash with established authority was inevitable. The first trouble came during Jahangir's reign when Guru Arjun had given assistance to the revolt led by Prince Khusrau. The guru died under torture, but one of his last instructions to his son, Guru Har Govind, was to maintain an army. This was the turning point in Sikh history. They now began to organize themselves on semi-military lines, and there were further conflicts with the Mughal government. Guru Har Govind had "so completely sunk the character of a religious reformer into that of a conquering general, that he had no scruple in enlisting large bands of Afghan mercenaries." In 1628 the Sikhs defeated a Mughal force which had been sent against them, but they were ultimately defeated, and Har Govind had to flee to the hills. The succession of gurus was maintained, however, through an agreement with the Mughals.

The ninth guru, Tegh Bahadur, who came to the gaddi in 1664, served in the Mughal army on the Assam frontier for some years, but later returned to eastern Punjab and settled down at Anandpur. He called himself Sacha Badshah (True King), and started levying tribute from the local population. The imperial forces defeated him, and he was taken to Delhi and put to death by Aurangzeb in 1675. His successor was Guru Govind Singh, who concentrated his energies on establishing a Sikh kingdom in the hilly areas of east Punjab.

It was Govind Singh who gave the Sikhs their very distinctive symbols—the uncut hair, the steel bangle, the sword—that established their identity as a separate people. The real sufferers from the growing military strength of the Sikhs, who had enrolled a large number of Pathans in their ranks, were the Hindu rajas of the Punjab hills. Many bloody battles were fought between them and the guru. At last they complained to the Mughal governor, who passed on the complaint to Aurangzeb. On the rajas' undertaking to bear the cost of an expedition, Aurangzeb agreed to send forces to assist them in besieging Govind Singh in his stronghold at Anandpur. The guru himself escaped, but his children were executed.

During his flight from the Mughal forces, Guru Govind Singh addressed Aurangzeb in a long Persian poem, known as Zafar Nama. This poem contained bitter complaints against the Mughal emperor, but as its appeal was in the name of humanity and of Islam, it provided a basis for mutual understanding. According to certain Sikh accounts, Aurangzeb invited the guru to visit him in the Deccan. Evidence on this point is not conclusive, but it is certain that after this Guru Govind Singh was allowed to live in peace. After Aurangzeb's death his son Bahadur Shah, who was the viceroy

of the Punjab before ascending the throne, was on excellent terms with the guru. Later the relations of the Mughals with the Sikhs sharply deteriorated owing to the emergence of Banda, a Hindu religious mendicant, as the leader of the Sikhs.

## **The Marathas**

Far more serious opposition to Aurangzeb came from the Deccan, where the Marathas were beginning their long struggle with the Mughal empire. A people of whose earliest history little is known, the Marathas as a dynamic force in Indian history owe much to the Bhakti movement. By giving birth to a new literature, enriching the local language, and popularizing a religious cult which made a powerful emotional appeal to all sections of the people, the movement had infused a new life in this society. The growing self-awareness of the Marathas was also helped by the fact that the Muslim conquest of the Deccan was far less complete than that of northern India. Hindus held many offices in the revenue and finance departments of the Muslim rulers of Golkunda and Bijapur, and at times even the highest ministerial appointments were filled by Deccani Brahmans. Life in the hill forts of the Western Ghats, never easily accessible and practically cut off from the world during the monsoon, did not appeal to the Muslim officers, and Maratha chiefs and soldiers were employed in large numbers in garrisoning these forts.

Since Maratha statesmen and warriors controlled various departments of the Muslim states of Ahmadnagar, Golkunda, and Bijapur, the conflicts of the Mughals with these states provided them with an opportunity to advance their sectional interests. Amongst Maratha statesmen who rose to prominence during the days of Shah Jahan was Shahji, who served under the sultans of Ahmadnagar and Bijapur and had large estates at Poona. His importance may be judged by the fact that in 1635 he set up a Nizam Shahi boy as the nominal sultan of the kingdom of Ahmadnagar, and reoccupied in his name the whole of the western portion of the old dominion as far as the sea. Shah Jahan was able to deal with him, and Shahji, after making his submission to the Mughals, sought service with the ruler of Bijapur. Shahji's son, Shivaji, more than fulfilled the dreams of his father. Shivaji's mother lived at Poona, and he spent his early days in the spurs and valleys of the Ghats, which were to be his battlefield. He attached to himself a number of young men, and in the disturbed conditions of the Deccan started taking control of hill fortresses. For a long time these aggressive proceedings were ignored at Bijapur, but in 1659 a strong contingent of ten thousand cavalry was sent against him under Afzal Khan. Shivaji lured Afzal to a private conference and then killed him with his dagger. The leaderless troops of Bijapur were routed by Shivaji's soldiers, who lay in ambush.

The following year Shivaji came in conflict with the Mughal rulers. In 1660 Aurangzeb appointed Shayista Khan, his maternal uncle and a veteran general, viceroy of the Deccan, with instructions to suppress the activities of Shivaji. He gained a few victories and recaptured several forts, but on April 5, 1663, the Marathas made a night attack on his encampment at Poona, and although the viceroy escaped, his son was killed. Shayista Khan was recalled by Aurangzeb, who then sent Diler Khan and Raja Jai Singh, with his son, Prince Muazzam, to the Deccan. The imperial generals forced Shivaji to sue for peace. In 1666 he attended the court at Agra, but insulted at being given the rank of mansabdar of only five thousand horsemen, he made his displeasure public. He was kept under surveillance, but he escaped and reached the Deccan. On his return Shivaji formally assumed the title of maharaja in June, 1674, and as Aurangzeb was busy in the

northwest, he was not disturbed. After his death in 1680, the mad cruelty of his unworthy son Shambhuji forcibly attracted the attention of the Mughal ruler. In 1682 Shambhuji raided Burhanpur and perpetrated such cruelties on the Muslim population that the qazis there sent a manifesto to Aurangzeb upbraiding him. The Mughal emperor, who was concerned about the developments in the Deccan since his rebel son, Prince Akbar, had taken refuge at Shambhuji's court, decided to go south. He reached Aurangabad in the third week of March, 1682, and the last twenty-five years of his life were to be spent in that part of the subcontinent.

Bijapur and Golkunda, which often gave shelter to the Maratha raiders, were annexed in 1686 and 1687, and Shambhuji was captured and executed in early 1689, but this did not mean the end of Aurangzeb's troubles in the Deccan. Aurangzeb brought up Shambhuji's son, Shahu, at the court and treated him with great consideration, but his younger brother, Rajaram, took over the Maratha leadership. On his death in April, 1700, his widow, Tara Bai, carried on the struggle.

The Mughals achieved many successes against the Marathas, but these proved temporary. Often the forts won at great cost and after prolonged effort, would be lost through the treachery or the incompetence of the Muslim commanders. But even though Aurangzeb had conquered most of the Maratha forts, he was unable to suppress the powerful roving Maratha bands which challenged Mughal authority whenever they got an opportunity. In 1699, they carried their first raid in Malwa. Four years later they disrupted the communications between northern and southern India, and in 1706 they sacked Baroda. After Aurangzeb's death, the Marathas became a major factor in the downfall of the Mughal empire.

## **Religious Policy**

While Aurangzeb was extending the empire in the east and south, and consolidating his position on the northwest marches, he was also concerned with the strengthening of Islam throughout the kingdom. His attempt to conduct the affairs of state according to traditional Islamic policy brought to the fore the problem that had confronted every ruler who had attempted to make Islam the guiding force: the position of the Hindu majority in relation to the government. In 1688, when he forbade music at the royal court and took other puritanical steps in conformity with strict injunctions of Muslim law, he affected both Hindus and Muslims. When jizya, abolished for nearly a century, was reimposed in 1679, it was the Hindus alone who suffered.

By now Aurangzeb had accepted the policy of regulating his government in accordance with strict Islamic law, and many orders implementing this policy were issued. A large number of taxes were abolished which had been levied in India for centuries but which were not authorized by Islamic law. Possibly it was the unfavorable effect of these remissions on the state exchequer which led to the exploration of other lawful sources of revenue. The fact that, according to the most responsible account, the reimposition of jizya was suggested by an officer of the finance department would seem to show that it was primarily a fiscal measure. The theologians, who were becoming dominant at the court, naturally endorsed the proposal, and Aurangzeb carried it out with his customary thoroughness.

Another measure which has caused adverse comment is the issue of orders at various stages regarding the destruction of Hindu temples. Originally these orders applied to a few specific

cases—such as the temple at Mathura built by Abul Fazl's murderer, to which a railing had been added by Aurangzeb's rival, Dara Shukoh. More far-reaching is the claim that when it was reported to him that Hindus were teaching Muslims their "wicked science," Aurangzeb issued orders to all governors "ordering the destruction of temples and schools and totally prohibiting the teaching and infidel practices of the unbelievers." That such an order was actually given is doubtful; certainly it was never carried out with any thoroughness. However, it is incontestable that at a certain stage Aurangzeb tried to enforce strict Islamic law by ordering the destruction of newly built Hindu temples. Later, the procedure was adopted of closing down rather than destroying the newly built temples in Hindu localities. It is also true that very often the orders of destruction remained a dead letter, but Aurangzeb was too deeply committed to the ordering of his government according to Islamic law to omit its implementation in so significant a matter. The fact that a total ban on the construction of new temples was adopted only by later jurists, and was a departure from the earlier Muslim practice as laid down by Muhammad ibn Qasim in Sind, was no concern of the correct, conscientious, and legal-minded Aurangzeb.

As a part of general policy of ordering the affairs of the state in accordance with the views of the ulama, certain discriminatory orders against the Hindus were issued: for example, imposition of higher customs duties, 5 percent on the goods of the Hindus as against 2 percent on those of Muslims. These were generally in accordance with the practice of the times, but they marked a departure not only from the political philosophy governing Mughal government, but also from the policy followed hitherto by most Muslim rulers in India.

Aurangzeb has often been accused of closing the doors of official employment on the Hindus, but a study of the list of his officers shows this is not so. Actually there were more Hindu officers under him than under any other Mughal emperor. Though this was primarily due to a general increase in the number of officers, it shows that there was no ban on the employment of the Hindus.

That Aurangzeb's religious policy was unpopular at the time is true, but that it was an important factor, as usually charged, in the downfall of the empire, is doubtful. The Hindu uprisings of his reign seem to have had no wide religious appeal, and they were suppressed with the help of Hindu leaders. Their significance comes in the following reigns, when the rulers were no longer able to meet opposition as effectively—and as ruthlessly—as had Aurangzeb. His religious policy aimed at strengthening an empire already overextended in Shah Jahan's time; that it failed in its objective is probably true, but the mistake should not be made of assuming that the attempt was a major element in the later political decay. It should be seen, rather, as part of an unsuccessful attempt to stave off disaster. Seen in this light, his religious policy is one element, but not a causal one, save in its failure to achieve its intended goal, among the many that have to be considered in seeking an understanding of Aurangzeb's difficulties.

### **The East India Company**

The behavior of the English East India Company was another element that has to be added to the complex situation created by internal rebellion, the activities of the Sikhs, and the long-drawn-out war with the Marathas. The East India Company opened its first factory, or trading post, at Surat on the west coast in 1612, and in the next half century established a chain along the coast. Trouble first arose in Bengal, where Shayista Khan was trying to introduce some order and regard

for the Mughal government in place of the lax administration of his predecessor, Shah Shuja. The foreign settlements of the Portuguese, the Dutch, and the British, emboldened by their superiority on the sea, had become truculent, and in distant regions considered themselves subject to no checks from the Mughal government. Shah Shuja, partly out of his general indifference to financial considerations and partly to gain support in the coming struggle for the throne, was particularly generous to the foreign traders. To the English factory which was opened at Hugli in 1651, he gave an order in 1652 permitting open trade in Bengal on a payment of three thousand rupees annually in lieu of customs dues. In the succeeding years the Company's trade multiplied many times, but, insisting on the authority of Shuja's order, it refused to increase its contribution or pay any of the normal taxes. When Shayista Khan objected, difficulties arose between him and the English. The attitude of the Company's officers may be judged from a letter addressed to London in 1665:

Your Worship must consider that these people are grown more powerful than formerly, and will not be so subject to us as they have been, unless they be a little beaten by us, that they may understand, if they impede us by land, it lieth in our power to requite them by sea. ... In fine ... your affairs will be quite ruined if this Nabob [Shayista Khan] lives and reigneth long.

The first attempt by the English to wage war against the Mughals was made in 1686 when Sir Josiah Child, the powerful governor of the East India Company, persuaded the government to send a small fleet to India to seize and fortify Chittagong. The expedition was an utter failure; and far from gaining any territory, English traders were expelled from all their factories in Bengal. Meanwhile on the west coast, the English had also angered Aurangzeb. English pirates operating out of Bombay were seizing ships taking pilgrims to Mecca; among them was the Ganj-i-Sawai owned by the emperor himself. They were also minting coins in Bombay with a superscription containing their own king's name. Aurangzeb ordered the seizure of the Surat factory and the expulsion of all Englishmen from his dominions. He relented because of the English control of the pilgrim trade in the Arabian Sea, and also, it appears, because they had a powerful advocate at court in the wazir, Asad Khan. After levying a fine of one and a half lakhs of rupees Aurangzeb allowed them to return to their factories; and for the next fifty years, the English merchants refrained from any further attempts to establish themselves as a territorial power.

### The Enigma of Aurangzeb's Purposes

In the background of all these events—the struggle for the throne, the annexations of great territories in the South, the wasting struggle with the Marathas, the pacification of the northwest frontier, the consolidation of Mughal power in Bengal, the contemptuous treatment of the East India Company—stands the enigmatic figure of Aurangzeb, surely the most controversial personality in the history of Islamic rule in India. Held responsible by some for the downfall of the Mughal empire, by others he is praised for maintaining as long as he did the unity of his vast realm.

So far as Aurangzeb's personal qualities are concerned, however, there is general admiration. R. C. Majumdar writes: "Undaunted bravery, grim tenacity of purpose, and ceaseless activity were some of his prominent qualities. His military campaigns gave sufficient proof of his unusual courage, and the manner in which he baffled the intrigues of his enemies shows him to have been a past master of diplomacy and statecraft. His memory was wonderful, and his industry indefatigable." "He never forgot a face he had once seen or a word that he had once heard." Apart

from his devotion to duty, his life was remarkable for its simplicity and purity. His dress, food, and recreations were all extremely simple. He died at the age of ninety, but all his faculties (except his hearing) remained unimpaired.

A well-read man, he kept up his love of books till the end. He wrote beautiful Persian prose. A selection of his letters (*Ruq'at-i-Alamgiri*) has long been a standard model of simple but elegant prose. According to Bakhtawar Khan, he had acquired proficiency in versification, but agreeable to the word of God that "Poets deal in falsehoods," he abstained from practicing the art. He understood music well but he gave up this amusement in accordance with Islamic injunctions.

It is his general attitude to culture that explains why the Mughal court, which under Shah Jahan had been the great center of patronage for the arts, ceased to be so in Aurangzeb's reign. He disbanded the court musicians, abolished the office of the poet-laureate, discontinued the work of the court chronicler, and offered little encouragement to painters. On grounds of both economy and fidelity to the Islamic law he criticized the Taj Mahal, the tomb of his mother, remarking: "The lawfulness of a solid construction over a grave is doubtful, and there can be no doubt about the extravagance involved."

Although Aurangzeb's attitude toward the arts was one of disapproval, his reign was not culturally barren. Large-scale building activity ceased, but this was as much a reflection of a treasury depleted by war as deliberate policy.