

The Mughal Empire

In the early 1500's, Muslim Central Asians of mixed Mongol-Turkish descent ruled much of India. They were the **Mughals**, a name taken from their Mongol origins.



In 1526, Babur (a Muslim descendent of both Genghis Khan and Tamerlane) led 12,000 troops from Afghanistan and conquered most of northern India creating the Mughal dynasty. Babur became very rich from his conquest. It was to become one of the world's most magnificent societies.

Mughal India had few rivals in military strength, government efficiency, economic power, and royal patronage of the arts. Mughal society was diverse. The majority of the population were Hindus. Buddhism had somewhat died out in the sub-continent but it was still thriving in Ceylon (Sri Lanka) and Tibet which were part of the empire. The main rulers of the peninsula were Muslims by faith.



Babur

Indian society in part was divided between Hinduism and Islam but for everyday affairs, despite a caste system and hundreds of regional languages, the people coexisted in harmony. Despite Bengali being the language of the northeast and Tamil being the language of the southeast, the Mughals adopted **Urdu** as the language of administration. Urdu is a mixture of Hindi, Arabic, and Persian.

The Reign of Akbar (the “Very Great”)

He was the grandson of Babur and expanded the Mughal Empire to all of the north and deep into the south of the sub-continent. He recruited many Hindus, especially from the lower caste, into his army. He gave high positions within his government to Hindus. He granted them full religious toleration and even removed prior taxes on non-Muslims.

Akbar reformed the government and stopped bribery and corruption. He also changed the legal system and tried to abolish customs such as **sati**, child marriage, and enslavement of prisoners of war. Citizens had the right to appeal the ruler if they believed they were wrongly convicted of a crime or mistreated in the courts. Akbar’s reign was a time of great peace and prosperity, a **Golden Age**.



Akbar the “Very Great”

Akbar’s successors were not effective rulers. There were many heirs to the throne due to the Muslim tradition of many wives and concubines. Akbar was poisoned by a rebellious son who took his throne using the name of **Jahangir, the “World Seizer”**. Jahangir was greatly influenced by his Persian wife, Nur Jahan. She was the real leader while her husband drank and ate to be happy.

Jahangir followed the role of Akbar but the next ruler, his son Shah Jahan, promoted Islam while destroying Hindu temples. He raised taxes while living his own lavish lifestyle. His extensive building projects and his failed conquests in Afghanistan and Central Asia bankrupted the state. He ended up being jailed by his own son, Aurangzeb, who expanded the empire in the south but also undermined the Mughal state and its revenues.

Endless wars and overspending brought down the Mughal Empire. In the late 1600's the Mughal army consisted of over 1 million men, armed with gunpowder weapons (muskets and cannons) that matched any European army. However by the early 1700's, the Mughals lacked the money to match the oncoming European armies. Increasing taxes on merchants and peasants plus the ruthless rule of Aurangzeb alienated both Muslims and Hindus. Hindus and Sikhs were forced to pay religious taxes. The time was ripe for rebellions, which would be the downfall of the Mughal Empire.



Aurangzeb

The **Marathas** were a Hindu group from western India who began to raid the empire. The **Safavid** from Iran conquered Afghanistan in the late 1600's, with little or no resistance as the Mughal leaders were arguing amongst themselves. The Mughal leaders were finally removed by Hindu and Sikh insurgents, and all they had of their great area was an area by present day Delhi which they ruled until 1857.

The decline of the Mughal Empire allowed the Europeans, especially the British, to conquer India. The anti-Mughal forces could not unite against the British. The British used their "divide and conquer" system to encourage a Hindu-Muslim division within India, but they also had trouble subduing the Sikhs.

Overview of the Mughal Empire

By 1750, India still accounted for one quarter of the world's industrial output. Its iron industry produced superior quality steel and cannons. The textile industry served all of Eurasia. Improvements in agriculture from reservoirs and irrigation allowed the empire to grow surplus crops of wheat and rice as well as the cash crops cotton, indigo, pepper, sugarcane, and opium. The economic gains caused the population to double between 1500 and 1750. For all of its export products, India was paid in gold and silver bullion which greatly improved the treasury, especially with the influx of silver in the 1600's from the Americas via the European merchants.

Indian merchants and bankers created a maritime trade region that stretched from Arabia, Persia, northeast Africa and the Red Sea through Southeast Asia and into China. In addition, Indian land merchants traded across Central Asia as far as Russia in the west and into Tibet in the east.

Mughal society was divided by both caste and gender divisions. Women's influence depended upon their caste status and their family situation. In Northern India both Hindu and Muslim women were often kept in seclusion, expected to be chaste and obedient to husbands and fathers in a patriarchal, patrilineal society. Mughal women were allowed financial resources, which they often devoted to endow mosques and support religious scholars.



Mughal women in ritual dance

The Hindus and Muslims never united to form a single people. The early Mughals, especially Akbar, allowed religious freedom to Hindus but later rulers had less tolerant policies. **Sufi Mysticism** became increasingly popular among both Muslims and Hindus. [A practice within Islam that emphasizes personal spiritual experience, a personal bond existed between each believer and God or the gods].

The third major sect were **Sikhs** – members of an Indian religion founded in the Early Modern Era that adapted elements from both Hinduism and Islam, including mysticism. The men are prohibited from cutting their hair and wear beards. They cover their hair with a turban and wear steel bracelets. Sikh women have more freedom than traditional Hindu or Muslim women. Many are skilled farmers.



Sikh Gurus

Mughal Art and Architecture

Based on Persian styles, the Mughals developed form of art that was cross cultural from Hindu and Islamic beliefs and many were painted as miniatures. They built great tombs, mosques, forts, and palaces. Their Indian-Persian style, known as **Indo-Islamic**, is clearly evident by their lavish mosaics, domes, and gateways.

The Mughal elite lived in lavish homes with courtyards, trees, gardens and water basins. In the audience hall of his palace in East Delhi, Shah Jahan inscribed *"If on earth be an Eden of bliss, it is this, it is this, it is this!"*

To prove his grandeur, Shah Jahan had 22,000 workers toil for twenty-two years to build the **Taj Mahal**, a marble mausoleum with pools, archways, domes, and minarets. It was to be a final resting place for himself and his favorite wife.



Taj Mahal in Agra, India

The Mughals were the last rulers before the European colonials arrived seeking the "Indies" after Vasco da Gama sailed around Africa. They had superior technology, the motivation to convert many to Christianity and a drive to achieve great wealth. The Portuguese resorted to violence to acquire their colonial empire, especially around the port of Goa and then into Ceylon. The Portuguese were followed by the Dutch, French and then the British; who were to be the rulers of India until 1948. The once great empire that centered the Indian Ocean Trade Routes no longer controlled the region, it was now under the control of the Western Europeans. The Mughal Empire, still at unrest between Hindus and Muslims, was rapidly acquired as foreign territory. Due to their disunity, the Mughal rulers were not strong enough to repel the European invaders and by 1761 the Mughal Empire was taken over by foreigners.