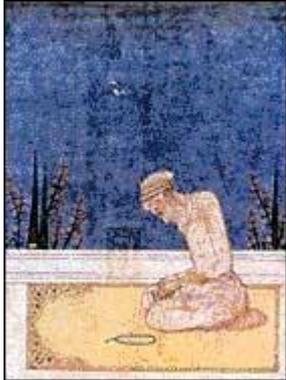


## UNIT 82 – UPSC - Emperor Aurangzeb

India's History : Medieval India : Coronation of Aurangzeb - 1658

### Prelude to Aurangzeb's Reign



Shah Jahan was a bigoted Muslim and a confirmed nepotist. He provided for the imperial princes before anyone else in the matter of administrative and judicial postings regardless of age, capability and talent. He also started the practice of conferring the cream of the offices on each prince; like Dara Shikoh was made the governor of Punjab and Multan, Aurangzeb was appointed governor of all the four provinces of the Deccan and so on. This might have been just a clever way to keep them occupied, but that was not how the nobility viewed it. The nobles saw this, and rightfully so, as an obstacle in the path of their promotions.

However, the end of Shah Jahan's reign did not live up to the beginning; it saw one of the messiest battles of succession (also see History in Delhi) that Indian history ever witnessed. In September 1657, Shah Jahan fell ill. The prognosis was so unoptimistic that the rumors had it that the emperor was dead. This was enough to spark off intense intrigue in the court. All the four claimants to Shah Jahan's throne were the children of the same mother ♦ although one would never have guessed that from their temperaments and their determination to make it to the throne.



In 1657, Dara Shikoh was 43, Shah Shuja 41, Aurangzeb 39 and Murad 33. All of them were governors of various provinces: Dara was the governor of Punjab, Murad of Gujrat, Aurangzeb of the Deccan and Shah Shuja of Bengal. Two of them emerged

clear frontrunners in the battle for the throne quite early: Dara Shikoh and Aurangzeb.

Aurangzeb was with doubt the ablest of Shah Jahan's sons and a clear favorite for the throne. His credentials both in battle and administration were legendary. He was also an orthodox Muslim of the oldest school possible, which made him a hot favorite with the clergy.

As stated earlier, the actual events, which unfolded around Shah Jahan's illness, were confused. Aiding and abetting the confusion with every word and gesture, for his own aims and purposes, was the favorite son Dara Shikoh. Aurangzeb did not waste much time. Acting on Dara Shikoh's behalf, Aurangzeb along with Murad met the Mughal armies twice in battle, and beat them each time while moving on relentlessly towards Agra, where Shah Jahan was convalescing.

When Shah Jahan heard of Aurangzeb's advance, he expressed a wish to meet Aurangzeb and talk to him. It was the emperor's belief that upon seeing him alive, his son would turn on his heels and go back. Clearly the old king had been ailing only in body and not in mind, for certainly the appearance of Shah Jahan himself would have laid to rest the whole issue of succession. Even the most ardent of Aurangzeb's supporters would have had second thoughts about defying the great Mughal's authority openly.

However, Dara Shikoh lacked the potentate's easy confidence in his son. He was not so convinced that Aurangzeb would meekly go back to where he had come from once the king had reassured him. In panic he also gave out that he was the heir-apparent.

So with suspicion and rumours ruling the day and power having the last laugh, Aurangzeb was the most amused of them all. Within a year he had all his brothers out of the way, father permanently in custody in the Agra Fort (where he hung on for eight years before dying in 1666) and was firmly entrenched on the Mughal throne.

If Shah Jahan has been over-romanticized by scholars, his son and successor Aurangzeb has been unduly denigrated. Aurangzeb, it seems, could do nothing right. Later writers were to contrast his bigotry with Akbar's tolerance, his failure against the Marathas rebels with Akbar's successes against the Rajputs; in fact he has been set up as the polar opposite of everything that earned one the Akbarian medal of genius. One writer has said about him, rather tongue-in-cheek, "His life would have been a blameless one, if he had no father to depose, no brothers to murder and no Hindu subjects to oppress."

This picture of him has left such an impact on popular imagination that even today he is regarded as the bad guy of the Mughal regime, the evil king who slayed all Hindus and Sikhs. Hardly anyone remembers that he governed India for nearly as long as Akbar did (over 48 years) and that he left the empire larger than he found it. In fact, Aurangzeb ruled the single largest state ever in Mughal history.

Aurangzeb's rise to the throne has been criticised as being ruthless. However, he was no crueller than others of his family. He succeeded not because he was crueller but because he was more efficient and more skilled in the game of statecraft with its background of dissimulation; and if it's any consolation, he never shed unnecessary blood. Once established, he showed himself a firm and capable administrator who retained his grip of power until his death at the age of 88. True, he lacked the magnetism of his father and great-grandfather, but commanded an awe of his own. In private life he was simple and even austere, in sharp contrast to the rest of the great Mughals. He was an orthodox Sunni Muslim who thought himself a model Muslim ruler.

## Aurangzeb's Reign



Aurangzeb's reign really divides into two almost equal portions.

The first twenty-three years were largely a continuation of Shah Jahan's administration with an added footnote of austerity. The emperor sat in pomp in Delhi or progressed in state to Kashmir for the summer. From 1681 he virtually transferred his capital to the Deccan where he spent the rest of his life in camp, superintending the overthrow of the two remaining Deccan kingdoms in 1686-7 and trying fruitlessly to crush the Maratha rebellion. The assured administrator of the first period became the embattled, embittered old man of the second. Along with the change of occupation came a dramatic metamorphosis of character. The scheming and subtle politician became an ascetic; spending long hours in prayer, fasting and copying the Quran, and pouring out his soul in tortured letters. It was in the second or the Deccan phase of his career that Aurangzeb began to drift towards complete intolerance of Hindus. Earlier his devotion towards Islam had very rarely taken the form of any religious bigotry. Now all that changed ♦ the very king who had ordered in February 1659 that "It has been decided according to our cannon law that long standing temples should not be demolished ♦ our Royal Command is that you should direct that in future no person shall in unlawful ways interfere with or disturb the Brahmins and other Hindu residents in those places" became a total fanatic.

In this zealousness to promote the cause of Islam, Aurangzeb made many fatal blunders and needless enemies. He alienated the Rajputs, whose valuable and trusted loyalty had been so hard won by his predecessors, so totally that they revolted against him. Eventually he managed to make peace with them, but he could never be easy in his mind about Rajputana again, a fact that hampered his Deccan conquest severely.

Then, he made bitter enemies in the Sikhs and the Marathas. Things came to such a head that Guru Teg Bahadur, the 9th Guru of the Sikhs was at first tortured and then executed by Aurangzeb for not accepting Islam; a martyrdom which is mourned to this day by the Sikh community. The 10th Guru of the Sikhs, Guru Govind Singh then raised an open banner of revolt against Aurangzeb.

No, Great-grandfather Akbar would certainly not have approved or been amused. He would have raised his imperial eyebrows at such a royal mess and sharply rebuked Aurangzeb for squandering away what he had worked so hard to achieve. Deccan or no Deccan.

Aurangzeb ended his lonely embittered life in Aurangabad in 1707. Perhaps with relief, but surely with much grief too for surely he knew that with him set the glorious sun that was the Mughal dynasty.

Many directly blame Aurangzeb and his destructive policies, which eroded the faith of the subjects in the Mughals for this. However, this is by far an overstatement. Whatever might have been Aurangzeb's policies, he remained very much the emperor till his dying breath in 1707. True, his policies did lead to resentment; even at the end of Shah Jahan's reign the rot had set in. Aurangzeb in fact tried to stop it and did a good band-aid job for a little while, but then things just went haywire with his persistent Deccan devil.

Deccan wrung Aurangzeb the man, the king, the father and the believer out of all softer emotions and decorum. He simply lost all sense of balance. He alienated a sizeable portion of his subjects along with allies and employees and made completely unnecessary enemies, which cost his successors dearly. He tried during his lifetime to put down rebellions all over his empire (the Marathas, the Sikhs, the Satnamis and the Rajputs) by one hand while trying to take Deccan with the other. However, it was like trying to put out a wild fire. Ultimately, it was these alternative power blocs, which were cropping up all over the country that sped up the fall of the Mughals. Not to mention the foreign powers who were already among those present: the British stretching their legs in Calcutta, the Portuguese in Goa and the French testing waters in the South.

Of course, it did not help matters that the successors of the great Mughals were weak and unworthy of their forefathers. But that was bound to happen some time or the other, wasn't it? So, from the late-18th century the field was wide open for any new power that wanted to try to set up shop in India.

This was the time when a certain East India Company suddenly realized that they had stumbled upon a gold mine.