

Historical Perspectives on the Mughal Emperors

Directions: Read about the varying historical perspectives on the emperors Akbar and Aurangzeb, circling any of their positive qualities and underlining any of their negative qualities. Keep in mind, though, that these are different opinions, so they are influenced by bias. After reading, discuss with your group whether you think Akbar or Aurangzeb was a better emperor, and as a group, write a statement supporting your position to be read aloud.

Akbar

So, most history classes that mention the Mughals focus on the contrast between Akbar and Aurangzeb. Akbar comes off as a good ruler, and Aurangzeb is painted as the guy who ruined the empire. The typically positive historian's view of Akbar, who ruled from 1556 until 1605, can be summed up in this quote from Asher and Talbot's *India Before Europe*, "Through his reforms of administration and taxation, Akbar created a sound and



enduring foundation for Mughal governance, while his tolerant attitude and inclusive policies toward Hindus and Jains helped create a state that was more Indian in character." That tolerance aspect is especially important. Like, Akbar rescinded the *jizya*, the tax that non-Muslims had to pay. And in 1580 he gave all non-Muslims the same rights as Muslims, instituting a policy called *Sulh-e-kul*, which translates to "universal toleration".

Now, in part this policy was designed to lessen the power of Muslim religious scholars who might have been disturbed by the way that Akbar blended Islamic and Indian ideas of kingship, especially the idea that he was, you know, kind of a little bit divine. Slightly problematic idea to a lot of Muslim scholars, given that the foundation of the Islamic faith is the statement, "There is no God but God," but yeah... you know.

In addition to the *Sulh-e-kul*, Akbar built his reputation for toleration by sponsoring discussions of religion and philosophy. He even commissioned a building for religious discussions, the *Ibadat Khana*, where Muslims and Brahmins and Zoroastrians, Jains, Christians, all of them could talk theology. Akbar's support for intellectual pursuits are the kinds of things that modern historians like, and it's not all that surprising that he's remembered so favorably.

Aurangzeb

Historians are far less kind to Akbar's grandson, Aurangzeb, who ruled from 1658 until 1707. This is partly due to the work of J. N. Sarkar, who promoted the idea that Aurangzeb built an Islamic state that discriminated against Hindus and other non-Muslims, which in turn led to a loss of unity across the Indian subcontinent, and eventually the decline of the empire.

And it's true that by the time of Aurangzeb's death in 1707, the Mughals were losing control over their empire. I mean, the stark reality of that decline came in 1757 when the British East India Company established itself permanently in Bengal and began its inexorable efforts to colonize all of India. But that was, you know, 50 years after Aurangzeb died. So maybe he shouldn't get all of the blame? In fact, whether these guys deserve their reputations really depends both on what aspects of their reign you look at and how you interpret them. As conquerors, Akbar and Aurangzeb had a lot in common.



Like, Akbar might have sponsored high-minded discussion but he was also willing to use extreme violence to keep his subjects in line. For example, he slaughtered thousands of inhabitants of the fort at Chittor and ordered his generals to pile up the skulls of Indian princes to frighten them into submission. That's not especially tolerant. And

here's another detail of Akbar's rule that's meant to paint him as a modern enlightened ruler. Because he was interested in science, Akbar arranged an experiment: "...He had infants moved to a special house where no person was to talk to them, so that the natural language of mankind might be revealed. The experiment failed, but it is a reflection of Akbar's desire to explore in a scientific manner the nature of humans and what he believed to be their common condition." Now, you can read that as a leader trying to understand the underlying connections among all humans no matter their religious backgrounds. Or, you can read it as horrifying child abuse!

And then we have Aurangzeb who was a devout Muslim and did try to introduce Islamic principles into Mughal rule but the trend toward orthodoxy and away from Akbar's toleration had begun long before with his predecessor, Shah Jahan - he's best known for building the Taj Mahal, good work! Stan, he built it by himself? Oh, apparently he had some help. But the maintenance of the Taj Mahal took all the revenue from 30 villages. And maybe Aurangzeb's orthodoxy was less important than his desire to appear to be a sober and frugal leader. Aurangzeb was also accused of destroying temples in 1669 although, in fact, they were just damaged. And this was primarily done to send a political message to opponents, not as an act of religious orthodoxy.

He also tried to limit expenses in court by prohibiting the use of gold in men's garments, and he stopped the traditional practice of being weighed against gold on his birthday. Unlike Akbar, who is seen as being a patron of the arts, Aurangzeb is remembered for getting rid of court musicians and poets. But he got rid of them because of financial constraints. Well, and also because of his interpretation of Islamic law, and that last point interests me. For those who want to see him negatively, Aurangzeb's orthodox Islam had no room for musicians or poets. But it's also possible to see that decision as a prudent cost-saving measure.

Here's another detail from Aurangzeb's life that's been used to paint him as a zealot. "Aurangzeb, unlike his predecessors, was buried in a simple, outdoor grave, rather than an elaborate, and expensive, tomb." You could see that as a symbol of religious faith, or as a sign of humility, or an attempt by a thoughtful ruler to spare his subjects the expenses of, like, keeping up his tomb. That said, in the long run the Taj Mahal has done pretty well in terms of generating tourist money, whereas I don't think anyone's paying to see Aurangzeb's grave. But the thing is, Aurangzeb needed to save money. If he was a bad ruler it's mostly because he spent so much time and treasure fighting rebellions in the south of his empire and then neglected the north where unrest grew as well.

The Decline of the Mughal Empire

It's overly simplistic to say that the glory days of the Mughal Empire were about tolerance and the downfall was about intolerance. Really, there were lots of factors that played into the decline of the Mughal Empire, including growing factionalism at the Mughal court, the rise of regional powers, and the breakdown of the system of governance by local nobles.

Historians are in the business of making claims about what happened and supporting those claims with evidence. And often this evidence provides the details that make reading and learning about history so much fun. Now sometimes the details suggest only one interpretation but in many cases they can lead us to multiple conclusions. And the reigns of Akbar and Aurangzeb provide good examples of why we need to be careful with our details. It's possible that Aurangzeb was a terrible ruler because he tried impose Muslim orthodoxy on a Hindu majority. And no doubt many Hindus felt so, especially after he reinstated the jizya, and he did try to introduce Sharia law as the governing principle in the empire.

But it's also possible that Aurangzeb's bad reputation comes from a contemporary preference for tolerance over piety in our rulers. Or from a general feeling that states are better ruled by secular than religious laws. Or from the fact that it's just hard to rule a declining empire well - ask President Obama! Our experiences and biases make us more likely to see the dismissal or court musicians and poets as an example of religious fanaticism than as, like, a cost-saving measure. And maybe Akbar, who can be as brutal in his military conquests as any emperor, comes out in a good light because he did advocate religious toleration. But it wasn't totally, or even primarily, due to his religious tolerance that Akbar was able to win most of his wars. And the many rebellions against his reign suggest that he wasn't as popular with his subjects as he is today with historians.

And so when we look at historical figures we need to be conscious of the fact that *we* are looking at them.