

## Aurangzeb | Emperor of Mughal India

By [Kallie Szczepanski](#), About.com Guide

Emperor Shah Jahan lay sick, confined to his palace. Outside, the armies of his four sons clashed in bloody battle. Although the emperor would recover, his own victorious third son killed off the other brothers, and held the emperor under house arrest for the remaining eight years of his life.

Emperor Aurangzeb of India's [Mughal Dynasty](#)<sup>1</sup> was a completely ruthless and guileful ruler, who evinced few qualms about assassinating his brothers or imprisoning his father. How did this merciless man spring from one of the most celebrated loving marriages in history?



Aurangzeb, emperor of Mughal India from 1658 to 1707  
via Wikipedia

### Aurangzeb's Early Life:

Aurangzeb was born on November 4, 1618, the third son of Prince Khurram (who would become Emperor Shah Jahan) and the Persian princess Arjumand Bano Begam. His mother is more commonly known as Mumtaz Mahal, "Beloved Jewel of the Palace." She later inspired Shah Jahan to build the [Taj Mahal](#)<sup>2</sup>.

During Aurangzeb's childhood, however, Mughal politics made life difficult for the family. Succession did not necessarily fall to the eldest son; instead, the sons built armies and competed militarily for the throne. Prince Khurram was the favorite to become the next emperor, and his father bestowed the title Shah Jahan Bahadur or "Brave King of the World" on the young man.

In 1622, however, when Aurangzeb was four years old, Prince Khurram learned that his step-mother was supporting a younger brother's claim to the throne. The prince revolted against his father, but was defeated after four years. Aurangzeb and a brother were sent to their grandfather's court as hostages.

When Shah Jahan's father died in 1627, the rebel prince became Emperor of the Mughal Empire. The nine-year-old Aurangzeb was reunited with his parents at Agra in 1628.

The young Aurangzeb studied statecraft and military tactics, the [Quran](#)<sup>3</sup> and languages, in preparation for his future role. Shah Jahan, however, favored his first son Dara Shikoh, and believed that he had the potential to become the next Mughal emperor.

### Aurangzeb, Military Leader:

The 15-year-old Aurangzeb proved his courage in 1633. All of Shah Jahan's court was arrayed in a pavilion, watching an elephant fight, when one of the elephants ran out of control. As it thundered towards the royal family, everyone scattered - except Aurangzeb, who ran forward and headed off the furious pachyderm.

This act of near-suicidal bravery raised Aurangzeb's status in the family. The following year, the teenager got command of an army of 10,000 cavalry and 4,000 infantry; he soon was dispatched to put down the Bundela rebellion. When he was 18, the young prince was appointed viceroy of the [Deccan region](#)<sup>4</sup>, south of the Mughal heartland.

When Aurangzeb's sister died in a fire in 1644, he took three weeks to return home to Agra rather than rushing back immediately. Shah Jahan was so angry about his tardiness that he stripped Aurangzeb of the Viceroyalty of Deccan.

Relations between the two deteriorated the following year, and Aurangzeb was banished from court. He bitterly accused the emperor of favoring Dara Shikoh.

Shah Jahan needed all of his sons in order to run his huge empire, however, so in 1646, he appointed Aurangzeb Governor of Gujarat. The following year, the 28-year-old Aurangzeb also took up the governorships of Balkh ([Afghanistan](#)<sup>5</sup>) and Badakhshan ([Tajikistan](#)<sup>6</sup>) on the empire's vulnerable northern flank.

Although Aurangzeb had a lot of success in extending Mughal rule north and westward, in 1652, he failed to take the city of Kandahar (Afghanistan) from the Safavids. His father again recalled him to the capital. Aurangzeb would not languish in Agra for long, though - that same year, he was sent south to govern the Deccan once more.

### Aurangzeb Fights for the Throne

In late 1657, Shah Jahan became ill. His beloved wife, Mumtaz Mahal, had died in 1631, and Shah Jahan never really got over her loss. As his condition worsened, his four sons by Mumtaz began to fight for the Peacock Throne.

Shah Jahan favored Dara, the eldest son, but many Muslims considered him too worldly and irreligious. Shuja, the second son, was a complete hedonist, who used his position as Governor of [Bengal](#)<sup>7</sup> as a platform for acquiring beautiful women and wine. Aurangzeb, a much more committed Muslim than either of the elder brothers, saw his chance to rally the faithful behind his own banner.

Aurangzeb craftily recruited his younger brother Murad, convincing him that together they could remove Dara and Shuja, and place Murad on the throne. Aurangzeb disavowed any plans to rule himself, claiming that his only ambition was to make the [hajj](#)<sup>8</sup> to Mecca.

Later in 1658, as the combined armies of Murad and Aurangzeb moved north toward the capital, Shah Jahan recovered his health. Dara, who had crowned himself regent, stepped aside. The three younger brothers refused to believe that Shah Jahan was well, though, and converged on Agra, where they defeated Dara's army.

Dara fled north, but was betrayed by a Baluchi chieftain and brought back to Agra in June of 1659. Aurangzeb had him executed for apostasy from Islam, and presented the head to their father.

Shuja also fled to Arakan ([Burma](#)<sup>9</sup>), and was executed there. Meanwhile, Aurangzeb had his former ally Murad executed on trumped-up murder charges in 1661. In addition to disposing of all of his rival brothers, the new Mughal Emperor placed his father under house arrest in Agra Fort. Shah Jahan lived there for eight years, until 1666. He spent most of his time in bed, gazing out the window at the Taj Mahal.

### **The Reign of Aurangzeb:**

Aurangzeb's 48-year reign is often cited as a "Golden Age" of the Mughal Empire, but it was rife with trouble and rebellions. Although Mughal rulers from [Akbar the Great](#)<sup>10</sup> through Shah Jahan practiced a remarkable degree of religious tolerance and were great patrons of the arts, Aurangzeb reversed both of these policies. He practiced a much more orthodox, even fundamentalist version of Islam, going so far as to outlaw music and other performances in 1668. Both Muslims and [Hindus](#)<sup>11</sup> were forbidden to sing, play musical instruments or to dance - a serious damper on the traditions of both faiths in [India](#)<sup>12</sup>.

Aurangzeb also ordered the destruction of Hindu temples, although the exact number is not known. Estimates range from under 100 to tens of thousands. In addition, he ordered the enslavement of Christian missionaries.

Aurangzeb expanded Mughal rule both north and south, but his constant military campaigns and religious intolerance rankled many of his subjects. He did not hesitate to torture and kill prisoners of war, political prisoners, and anyone he considered unIslamic. To make matters worse, the empire became over-extended, and Aurangzeb imposed ever-higher taxes in order to pay for his wars.

The Mughal army was never able to completely quash Hindu resistance in the Deccan, and the [Sikhs](#)<sup>13</sup> of the northern Punjab rose up against Aurangzeb repeatedly throughout his reign. Perhaps most worryingly for the Mughal emperor, he relied heavily on Rajput warriors, who by this time formed the backbone of his southern army, and were faithful Hindus. Although they were displeased with his policies, they did not abandon Aurangzeb during his lifetime, but they revolted against his son as soon as the emperor died.

Perhaps the most disastrous revolt of all was the [Pashtun](#)<sup>14</sup> Rebellion of 1672-74. The founder of the Mughal Dynasty, [Babur](#)<sup>15</sup>, came from Afghanistan to conquer India, and the family had always relied upon the fierce Pashtun tribesmen of Afghanistan and what is now [Pakistan](#)<sup>16</sup> to secure the northern borderlands. Charges that a Mughal governor was molesting tribal women sparked a revolt among the Pashtuns, which led to a complete break-down of control over the northern tier of the empire and its critical trade routes.

### **The Death of Aurangzeb:**

On February 20, 1707, the 88-year-old Aurangzeb died in central India. He left an empire stretched to the breaking point and riddled with rebellions. Under his son, Bahadur Shah I, the Mughal Dynasty began its long, slow decline into oblivion, which finally ended when the British sent the last emperor into exile in 1858, and established the [British Raj](#)<sup>17</sup> in India.

### **Aurangzeb's Legacy**

Emperor Aurangzeb is considered to be the last of the "Great Mughals." However, his ruthlessness, treachery and intolerance surely contributed to the weakening of the once-great empire.

Perhaps Aurangzeb's early experiences of being held hostage by his grandfather, and being constantly overlooked by his father warped the young prince's personality. Certainly, the lack of a specified line of succession cannot have made family life particularly easy. The brothers must have grown up knowing that one day they would have to fight one another for power.

In any case, Aurangzeb was a fearless man who knew what he had to do in order to survive. Unfortunately, his choices left the Mughal Empire itself far less able to fend off foreign imperialism in the end.

This About.com page has been optimized for print. To view this page in its original form, please visit: <http://asianhistory.about.com/od/india/p/Aurangzeb-Emperor-Of-Mughal-India.htm>  
©2012 About.com, Inc., a part of [The New York Times Company](#). All rights reserved.

**Links in this article:**

1. <http://asianhistory.about.com/od/india/p/mughalempireprof.htm>
2. <http://asianhistory.about.com/od/glossarytz/g/GlosTajMahal.htm>
3. <http://islam.about.com/library/glossary/bldef-quran.htm>
4. <http://asianhistory.about.com/od/glossaryae/g/DeccanGlos.htm>
5. <http://asianhistory.about.com/od/afghanista1/p/ProfAfghanistan.htm>
6. [http://asianhistory.about.com/od/Tajikistan\\_History\\_Culture/p/Tajikistan\\_Facts\\_History.htm](http://asianhistory.about.com/od/Tajikistan_History_Culture/p/Tajikistan_Facts_History.htm)
7. <http://asianhistory.about.com/od/glossaryfj/g/Who-Are-The-Hakka.htm>
8. <http://islam.about.com/od/hajj/tp/hajjinfo.htm>
9. <http://asianhistory.about.com/od/burmamyanmar/p/ProfileBurma.htm>
10. <http://asianhistory.about.com/od/india/p/akbarthegreatbio.htm>
11. <http://hinduism.about.com/>
12. <http://asianhistory.about.com/od/india/p/indiaprof.htm>
13. [http://sikhism.about.com/od/sikhism101/tp/Sikhism\\_for\\_Beginners.htm](http://sikhism.about.com/od/sikhism101/tp/Sikhism_for_Beginners.htm)
14. <http://asianhistory.about.com/od/glossaryps/g/Who-Are-The-Pashtun.htm>
15. <http://asianhistory.about.com/od/india/p/Babur-Founder-of-the-Mughal-Empire.htm>
16. <http://asianhistory.about.com/od/pakistan/p/PakistanProf.htm>
17. <http://asianhistory.about.com/od/colonialisminasia/p/profbritraj.htm>