

Mughal Empire

A new age begins with the unification of India under the Mughals. The Mughals created an empire between 1550 and 1700 AD and expanded their empire from around Delhi to almost the entire subcontinent. Their administrative arrangements, ideas of governance and architecture continued to influence rulers long after the decline of their empire. Today the Prime Minister of India addresses the nation on Independence Day from the ramparts of the Red Fort in Delhi, the residence of the Mughal emperors.



*Coin showing
Jahangir*

Who were the Mughals?

The Mughals were from ruling families of Central Asian countries like Uzbekistan and Mongolia. Babur, the first Mughal emperor (1526 - 1530 AD), was forced to

leave his ancestral throne due to the invasion of another ruler. After years of wandering he seized Kabul in 1504 AD. In 1526 AD he defeated the Sultan of Delhi, Ibrahim Lodi and captured Delhi and Agra.

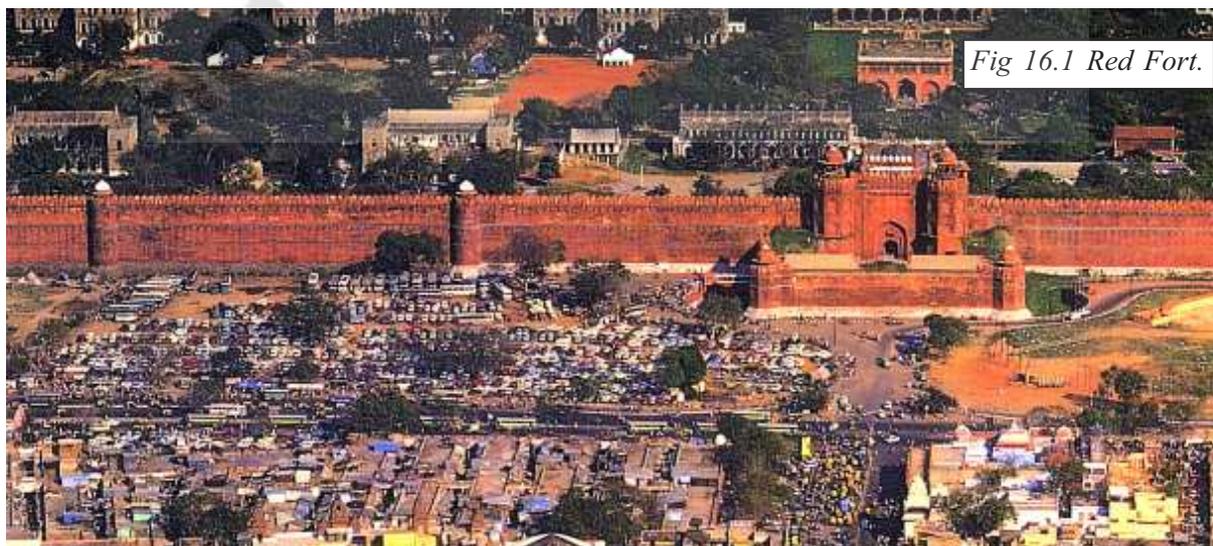


Fig 16.1 Red Fort.

Important Mughal emperors - Major campaigns and events



Babur 1526-1530 AD

1526 AD – defeated Ibrahim Lodi and established control over Agra and Delhi.

He introduced cannons and guns in Indian warfare.

Humayun 1530-1556 AD

Sher Khan defeated Humayun forcing him to flee to Iran. In Iran Humayun received help from the Safavid Shah. He recaptured Delhi in 1555 AD but died in an accident the following year.



Akbar 1556-1605 AD

Akbar was 13 years old when he became emperor. He rapidly conquered Bengal, Central India, Rajasthan and Gujarat. Thereafter he also conquered Afghanistan, Kashmir and portions of the Deccan.

Look at his empire in Map 1.

Jahangir 1605-1627 AD

Military campaigns started by Akbar continued. No major conquests.





Shah Jahan 1627-1658 AD

Mughal campaigns continued in the Deccan. He faced many revolts by nobles and chiefs of his empire. In 1657-1658 AD, there was conflict over succession amongst Shah Jahan's sons. Aurangzeb was victorious and his three brothers were killed. Shah Jahan was imprisoned for the rest of his life in Agra.

Aurangzeb 1658-1707 AD

Conquered Assam but faced a large number of revolts all over his kingdom from Afghanistan, Assam, Rajasthan, Punjab, Deccan, etc. Guru Tegh Bahadur, Govind Singh, Shivaji and his own son Akbar revolted against him. Shivaji succeeded in establishing an independent Maratha kingdom. Aurangzeb conquered Bijapur in 1685 AD and Golconda in 1687 AD. His death was followed by a succession conflict amongst his sons.



Map 1: Akbar's Reign 1605AD

Mughal Relations with other Rulers

In India of those times there were several kings and chiefs in all parts of the country. The Mughals sought to bring them under their control. They allowed the older rulers and chiefs to continue to rule over large parts of their old kingdoms and collect revenues from them. But they could not wage wars against each other and had to keep an army ready for the use of the Emperor.

Mughal rulers campaigned constantly against rulers who refused to accept their authority. But as the Mughals became powerful many other rulers also joined them voluntarily. The Rajputs are a good example of this. Many of them married their daughters into Mughal families and received high positions. But many resisted as well. The Sisodiya Rajputs of Chittor refused to accept Mughal authority for a long time. Once defeated, however, they were given their lands back as assignments.

The careful balance between defeating but not removing their opponents enabled the Mughals to extend their influence over many kings and chieftains. The Mughals married princesses of many of the local rulers as a mark of friendship. The mother of Jahangir was the daughter of the Rajput ruler of Amber (modern Jaipur). The mother of Shah Jahan was a daughter of the Rajput ruler of Jodhpur.

Mansabdars and Jagirdars

As the empire expanded to encompass different regions, the Mughals recruited diverse kinds of people. From a small nucleus of Turkish nobles they expanded to include Iranians, Indian Muslims, Afghans, Rajputs, Marathas and other groups. Those who joined Mughal service were enrolled as *mansabdars* (or rank holder). They were directly under the control of the emperor who could allocate any work for them to do – like guarding his palace, governing a province, conquering a new kingdom or suppressing a rebellion.



Fig 16.2 A mansabdar on march with his sawars.

The Mughals developed a political system in which the *mansabdars* would not act independently but only as per the wishes of the emperor. You may remember that the Nayakas in Vijayanagara empire could become independent and powerful enough to declare themselves the kings. The Mughals prevented this by constantly transferring the *mansabdars* from one place to another every two or three years. Thus a *mansabdar* could not become settled and powerful in any one place.

The *mansabdar's* military responsibilities required him to maintain a specified number of horse riders or cavalymen. The *mansabdar* brought his cavalymen for review, got them registered, their horses branded and then received money to pay them as salary.

A *mansabdar's* son could not become a *mansabdar* automatically. That is, it was not hereditary. The emperor decided whether or not to appoint the son as a *mansabdar*. In fact he even took over all the property of the *mansabdar* on his death.

Mansabdars received their salaries as revenue assignments called *jagirs* which were somewhat like Vijayangara Nayankaras. But unlike the *Nayakas*, most *mansabdars* did not actually reside in or administer their *jagirs*. They could only collect the revenue due from their *jagir* villages and send to the emperor. This was collected for them by their servants while the *mansabdars* themselves served in some other part of the country. The *jagir* was administered by other officials directly under the emperor. These officials tried to ensure that the *jagirdars'* agents did not

collect more from the farmers than permitted. The *jagirs* too were constantly transferred every two or three years.

In Akbar's reign these *jagirs* were carefully assessed so that their revenues were roughly equal to the salary of the *mansabdar*. By Aurangzeb's reign there was a huge increase in the number of *mansabdars* which meant a long wait before they received a *jagir*. These and other factors created a shortage in the number of *jagirs*. As a result, many *jagirdars* tried to extract as much revenue as possible while they had a *jagir*. Aurangzeb was unable to control these developments in the last years of his reign and the farmers therefore suffered tremendously.

Zabt and Zamindars

The main source of income available to Mughal rulers was tax on the produce of the peasantry. Akbar's revenue minister, Todar Mal, carried out a careful survey of crop yields, prices and areas cultivated for a ten-year period, 1570-1580 AD. On the basis of this data, tax was fixed in cash for each crop. Each province was divided into revenue circles with its own schedule of revenue rates for individual crops. This revenue system was known as *zabt*. It was prevalent in those areas where Mughal administrators could survey the land and keep very careful accounts. This was not possible in provinces such as Gujarat and Bengal.

In most places, peasants paid taxes through the rural elites, i.e., the headman or the local chieftain. The Mughals used one term – *zamindars* – to describe all



Fig 16.3 Details in a miniature from Shah Jahan's reign showing corruption during his father's administration 1. A corrupt officer receives a bribe and 2. A tax collector punishes poor peasants.

intermediaries, whether they were local headmen of villages or powerful chieftains. The *zamindars* were not appointed by the Mughal Emperors but existed on hereditary basis, that is, sons succeeded when the fathers died. They too had contingents of armed followers. They received from the *jagirdars* a share of the revenue collected from the area and also some dues from the farmers and others. They often acted as representatives of the local people in dealing with the Mughal officials.

In some areas the *zamindars* exercised a great deal of power. The exploitation by Mughal administrators could drive them to rebellion. Sometimes *zamindars* and peasants allied in rebelling against Mughal authority. These *zamindar*-peasant revolts challenged the stability of the Mughal Empire from the end of the seventeenth century.

- ◆ What was the difference between a *mansabdar* and a *zamindar*?
- ◆ Who was under the greater control of the emperor?
- ◆ Compare the position of a *Nayaka* and a *mansabdar*.

A Closer Look at Akbar's Policies

The broad features of administration were laid down by Akbar and were elaborately discussed by his friend and member of his court, Abul Fazl in his book the *Akbar Nama*.

While Akbar was at Fatehpur Sikri (near Agra) during the 1570s he started discussions on religion with the Muslim scholars, Brahmins, Jesuit priests who were Roman Catholics, and Zoroastrians. He was interested in the religion and social customs of different people. Akbar wanted to bring together people of diverse faiths. This eventually led Akbar to the idea of *sulh-i kul* or "universal peace". This idea of tolerance did not discriminate among people of different religions in his realm. Instead it focused on a system of ethics – honesty, justice, peace – that was universally applicable. Abul Fazl helped Akbar in framing a vision of governance around this idea of *sulh-i kul*. The Emperor would work for the welfare of all subjects irrespective of their religion or social status. This principle of governance was followed by Jahangir and Shah Jahan as well. Aurangzeb deviated from this policy and tried to project himself as favouring only *Sunni* Muslims. People of other religions felt anguished by this policy of Aurangzeb.



Fig 16.4 Akbar holding discussions with learned individuals of different faiths in his ibadat khana.

Sulh-i kul

Jahangir, Akbar's son, described his father's policy of *sulh-i kul* in the following words:

"As in the wide expanse of the divine compassion there is room for all classes and the followers of all creeds, so... in his Imperial dominions, which on all sides were limited only by the sea, there was room for the professors of opposite religions, and for beliefs, good and bad, and the road to intolerance was closed. Sunnis and Shias met in one mosque and Christians and Jews in one church to pray. He consistently followed the principle of 'universal peace' (sulh-i kul)."

The Mughal Empire in the 17th Century and after

The administrative and military efficiency of the Mughal Empire led to economic and commercial prosperity. International travellers described it as the fabled land of wealth. But these same visitors were also appalled at the state of poverty that existed side by side with the greatest opulence. The inequalities were glaring. Documents from the twentieth year of Shah Jahan's reign inform us that the highest ranking *mansabdars* were only 445 in number out of a total of 8,000. This small number –

a mere 5.6 per cent of the total number of *mansabdars* – received 61.5 per cent of the total estimated revenue of the empire as salaries for themselves and their troopers.

The Mughal emperors and their *mansabdars* spent a great deal of their income on salaries and goods. The scale of revenue collection left very little for investment in the hands of the primary producers – the peasant and the artisans. The poorest amongst them lived from hand to mouth and they could hardly consider investing in additional resources – tools and supplies – to increase productivity. The wealthier peasantry and artisanal groups, the merchants and bankers profited in this period.

The enormous wealth and resources commanded by the Mughal nobility (elite) made them an extremely powerful group of people in the late seventeenth century. As the authority of the Mughal emperor slowly declined, his servants emerged as powerful centres of power in the regions. They constituted new dynasties and held command of provinces like Hyderabad and Awadh. Although they continued to recognise the Mughal emperor in Delhi as their master, by the eighteenth century the provinces of the empire had consolidated their independent political identities.

Key words :

1. *Mansabdar*
2. *Jagirdar*
3. *Jagir*
4. *Zabt*
5. Elite

Improve your learning

1. Match the following
 - i) Mansab () a) Marwar
 - ii) Zamindar () b) Revenue assignment
 - iii) Sisodiya Rajput () c) Hereditary chiefs
 - iv) Rathor Rajput () d) sulh-i kul
 - v) Akbar () e) Mewar
 - vi) Jagirdar () f) rank
2. What was the relationship between the *mansabdar* and his *jagir*?
3. What was the role of the *zamindar* in Mughal administration?
4. How were the debates with religious scholars important in the formation of Akbar's ideas on governance?
5. How do you think the Mughals were able to build a system where the emperor's will was supreme?
6. Why do you think the Mughals allowed earlier rulers to continue in their old kingdoms as before?
7. Why was the policy of *sulh-i kul* important for the Mughals to control their vast empire?