

The Mughal Dynasty, Muslim Rulers of India

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Shah Jahan (second from right), who ruled the Mughal Empire at its peak, enjoys a performance with his four sons. Image from the public domain.



The Mughal, or Mogul, dynasty, was a Muslim dynasty. A dynasty is a single family that rules a country for some time. When the ruler of a dynasty dies or passes on power, a relative usually takes over.

The Mughal dynasty was of Turkic-Mongol origin. It ruled most of northern India from the early 16th to the mid-18th century. It existed after that time until the mid-19th century, but it didn't have much power then. The Mughal dynasty was known for having brilliant, capable rulers for almost 200 years over much of India. The rulers of the dynasty showed a great deal of ability. Through seven generations the dynasty's rulers maintained a record of unusual talent. The dynasty was also notable for its well-run government. A further distinction was the attempt of the Mughals, who were Muslims, to integrate Hindus and Muslims into a united Indian state.

The descendants of Tamerlane build an empire



The dynasty was founded by a Turkic prince named Bābur (reigned 1526–30). He was descended from the Turkic conqueror Timur (Tamerlane to Europeans) on his father's side. On his mother's side, he was descended from Mongol ruler Genghis Khan.

Ousted from his ancestral domain in Central Asia, Bābur turned to India to satisfy his appetite for conquest. From his base in Kabul (Afghanistan) he was able to secure control of the Punjab region of India. In 1526 he entered India and defeated the forces of the sultan of the city of Delhi, Ibrāhīm Lodī, at the First Battle of Panipat. The following year he beat the Rajput

confederacy under Rana Sanga of Mewar. In 1529 he defeated the Afghans of what are now eastern Uttar Pradesh and Bihar states. At his death in 1530, he controlled all of northern India.

Warfare and religious tolerance



Bābur's son was Humāyūn (reigned 1530–40 and 1555–56). He lost control of the empire to Afghan rebels. But Humāyūn's son Akbar (reigned 1556–1605) defeated the Hindu usurper Hemu at the Second Battle of Panipat (1556). That victory reestablished his dynasty in Hindustan.

Akbar became the greatest of the Mughal emperors, and is even called Akbar the Great. He re-established the Mughal Empire. Through constant warfare, he was able to take over all of northern India and part of central India. But he also changed laws to make his Hindu subjects' lives better. Akbar ended the taxes on Hindus and tried to get them to join his armies and government service. The political, administrative and military structures that he created to govern the empire allowed it to survive for another century and a half. At Akbar's death in 1605, the empire extended from Afghanistan to the Bay of Bengal and southward to what is now Gujarat state and the northern Deccan region (peninsular India).

Rise and fall

Akbar's son was Jahāngīr (reigned 1605–27). He continued both his father's government style and his tolerant policy toward Hinduism. He proved to be a fairly successful ruler. His son, Shah Jahān (reigned 1628–58), had an insatiable passion for building, and under his rule the Taj Mahal and the Great Mosque of Delhi, among other monuments, were erected. His reign marked the cultural zenith of Mughal rule. But his military expeditions were expensive and caused the empire to nearly run out of money.



The tolerant and enlightened rule of the Mughal emperors ended with the Muslim religious bigotry displayed by Shah Jahān's son, Aurangzeb (reigned 1658–1707).

Aurangzeb invaded and took over the Muslim Deccan kingdoms of Vijayapura (Bijapur) and Golconda. He thereby brought the empire to its greatest extent. But his political and religious intolerance laid the seeds of its decline. He excluded Hindus from holding government jobs and destroyed their schools and temples.

Also, a new religion had recently started called Sikhism, which blended parts of Hinduism and Islam. Aurangzeb persecuted the Sikhs. Soon, the Sikhs turned against Muslim rule and started rebellions that were joined by the Rajputs and Marathas, both Hindu kingdoms. The heavy taxes he charged on farmers made them terribly poor. The steady decay in the quality of Mughal government was matched by a corresponding economic decline. When Aurangzeb died in 1707, he had failed to crush the Marathas of the Deccan. His authority was disputed throughout his dominions.

During the reign of Muḥammad Shah (1719–48), the empire began to break up. Why? Several factors sped the process up: war between dynasties, rivalries and the Iranian conqueror Nādir Shah's brief but disruptive invasion of northern India in 1739. After the death of Muḥammad Shah in 1748, the Marathas overran almost all of northern India. Mughal rule was reduced to only a small area around Delhi. This area then fell under Maratha rule in 1785. All of the fighting and chaos gave European colonial powers a way to take over, and the British took control in 1803. The last Mughal was Bahādur Shah II (reigned 1837–57). He was exiled by the British after his involvement with the Indian Mutiny of 1857–58, also called the Sepoy Mutiny, against British rule.