Decline and Fall of the Mughal Dynasty

Descended from both Genghis Khan and Tamerlane, the Mughal dynasty originated in Central Asia. It became the strongest dynasty to rule India, lasting from 1526 to 1858. The Mughal dynasty reached its height under Akbar, who encouraged reconciliation among his subjects by encouraging intermarriage between Hindus and Muslims and appointed competent administrators. His empire stretched from the Himalayas to the Hindu Kush and included present-day India, Bangladesh, Afghanistan, and Pakistan. The Mughal Empire passed its zenith after Akbar.

Shah Jahan, although famous for the construction of the Taj Mahal, was an unsuccessful military leader. He launched three failed campaigns against the ruler of southern Afghanistan, was defeated in his attempt to regain the ancient Mughal patrimony in Central Asia, was repulsed four times in his efforts to extend rule from northern to southern Deccan, and lost an effort to oust the Portuguese from its coast. The cumulative effect of these campaigns was the imposition of higher taxes on the peasantry, whose loyalty to the Mughals began to diminish. This became more evident under Aurangzeb. The fortunes of both the empire and the dynasty decreased in the last half of Aurangzeb's reign. Overwhelmingly ambitious, he spent the last 28 years of his reign campaigning in the south to conquer and unite the subcontinent from the south tip to the northern Himalayas and Hindu Kush. Although initially successful, many areas quickly revolted.

Aurangzeb's wars took a toll on the empire's resources, which became strained. This led to peasant resistance and flight, thereby increasing the burden on the remaining peasants. Aurangzeb's strict Islam and intolerance toward other religions also roused opposition. He destroyed Hindu temples and schools, dismissed Hindu officials from government, and reimposed the tax on non-Muslims. These policies led to the rise of the greatest military opponents of the Mughals—the Marathas and the Sikhs. Under the leadership of Shivaji, the Marathas in the northwest Deccan carried out resistance and by 1750 controlled large sections of central and northern India. The Sikhs, originally a peaceful sect that attempted to synthesize Hindu and Muslim beliefs, became militarized by persecution and by 1750 controlled much of the Punjab in northeast India. The Hindu Rajputs in northcentral India, initially won over by Akbar's policies, became hostile and began to attack the Mughals. Even within the Delhi area, Hindu peasants called the Jats became radicalized and also revolted.

After Aurangzeb's death in 1707, most of the 10 Mughal emperors who followed him between 1707 and 1857 were little more than figureheads for one of the contending parties for power in India. Court feuds and civil wars also led to disintegration as Muslim dynasties arose in south Deccan, the eastern province of Oudh, and northeast Bengal between 1704 and 1720. One Mughal emperor, Muhammad Shah, attempted to repair some of the damage by placating the Hindus but with little success, partly due to his own indolence and foreign invasions. Mughal power never recovered from the invasion of the Persian ruler Nadir Shah, who sacked Delhi in 1739, carried away the fabled peacock throne, symbol of the dynasty, and plundered northern India. Even more devastating was the invasion of Ahmed Khan, ruler of eastern Persia, Afghanistan, Uzbekistan, and portions of northern India. He sacked Delhi, defeating the Marathas and Rajputs, but his empire disintegrated after his death in 1772.

Mughal power also suffered with the rise of European merchants, especially the British and French who replaced the earlier Portuguese and Dutch. In 1691 the British East India Company received a charter from the Mughal government not only to trade but to collect taxes in what is now Calcutta. In time, it became progressively more involved in politics; by 1765, the company controlled all Bengal, the richest province of India. By 1800 Britain had ousted the French from India. By 1818 the company either directly or indirectly ruled most of India. By the 19th century, Mughal emperors had become mere pensioners of the company. The last Mughal emperor was deposed and exiled to Burma after the Indian Mutiny in 1857.

There were many causes for the decline and fall of the Mughal dynasty. First, the lack of tolerance shown to the non-Islamic majority by later Mughal emperors; second, the imperial overreach by emperors in terms of military expeditions which strained resources after 1680; third, the diversity of India's ethnic and religious groups as well as strong traditions of regionalism which served to weaken the center; and fourth, the superior technological and financial expertise which the West, including England, enjoyed after 1500 gave it an advantage dealing with Islamic emperors who had fallen behind. Finally, and perhaps most important, the Mughal dynasty remained a minority in India, distinct in religion, culture, and language from the majority of subjects. Given the circumstances, its fall was perhaps inevitable.
Further Information


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