The Mughal Empire in India was founded by Babur, also known as Zahir-ud-din Mohammed, born in 1482 in Ferghana in Central Asia, a descendant of Timurlane. With Central Asia in turmoil in 1501, Babur fled his native Ferghana and gained the great city of Samarkand, but he could not hold it. He next captured Kabul in 1504, with the intention of creating his own kingdom in Afghanistan.

However, for Babur, Afghanistan was only the stepping stone to the greatest conquest of all: India. For seven centuries, India had been the ultimate prize for all Muslim conquerors from Central Asia, and Babur shared that dream. In 1505, Babur staged his first raid into northern India, then controlled by Sikander, one of the Lodi dynasty of Muslim sultans in Delhi. The Lodi dynasty had also come to India from Afghanistan. Surprisingly, Sikander took no real action against Babur's incursion, a fact that was not lost on Babur in the future.

The troublesome Afghan tribes delayed Babur's plans until 1526, when he invaded India in force. He met the Lodi sultan Ibrahim outside Delhi at the Battle of Panipat. Although Babur commanded only 12,000 men and Ibrahim about 100,000 and 1,000 elephants, Babur used his men well, armed with matchlock muskets and cannon, and won the battle. The Lodi forces were defeated and Ibrahim killed. Establishing his capital in Delhi, Babur then conquered most of northern India, establishing the Mughal (Mogul, Moghul) Empire.

Babur died in 1530 and his son Humayun succeeded him as the second Mughal emperor. However within 10 years Humayun lost his empire. He fled to Persia, then ruled by the Safavid dynasty. This time of exile instilled in Humayun and his son a profound respect for Persian ways so that when they conquered India again their rule was influenced by Persian culture. Persian would become the official language for Mughal India.

In 1555, Humayun raised another army in Persia with the support of Persian shah Tahmasp I and set out to reconquer his kingdom from Sher Shah, who now ruled in northern India. By August 1555, he had reentered Delhi in triumph but died in 1556. His son Akbar, then only 13, took power in 1556. But Akbar won a decisive victory at the Second Battle of Panipat and became the padishah and undisputed ruler of the realm. Having crushed his Afghan and Hindu foes at Panipat, Akbar moved to consolidate his rule of Afghanistan and northern India.

Akbar began to implement a program of cooption with his Hindu subjects to neutralize the threat of a Hindu uprising against his rule. He married a Hindu princess and his son and successor Jahangir was born of this marriage. Hindus were invited to join the bureaucracy that governed his empire and became an important part of Mughal administration. Akbar wisely allowed the Indian princely states a large degree of autonomy so long as they recognized him as their padishah.

Religious Tolerance

Akbar did not impose the shariah, or Muslim law, upon his Hindu subjects. Instead, he limited the application of the shariah to the Muslim community within his kingdom and let the Hindus retain their own laws.

Exposed to a different religious tradition, including Zoroastrianism and Jainism, Akbar began perhaps the greatest intellectual exploration in Indian history. Studying all the faiths, including the Roman Catholicism that had been brought to Goa by the Portuguese, Akbar created a new religion named Din-i Ilahi, or "the Religion of God." It was nothing less than an effort to draw together all the religions in his empire into one faith, which he hoped all would accept under his leadership. However this endeavor failed.

In 1605, Akbar died, leaving a legacy of stability to his son, Jahangir. Jahangir did not pursue a military policy but did cement his position in Bengal in the east, probably to gain control of the maritime trade. In 1614, the Rajput king, Man Singh, who had fought Akbar to a stalemate at Haldhigati in 1576, made his submission to Jahangir. Toward the end of his reign, Jahangir's son, who would reign as Shah Jahan, rose in rebellion against his father, a trend that would weaken the Mughal dynasty.
When Shah Jahan became emperor in 1628, he attempted to return to the days of military glory of Akbar and engaged in campaigns in the south. In 1658, Jahan's son Aurangzeb seized power and imprisoned his father, who would live in captivity until his death in 1666. During a reign that would last until 1707, Aurangzeb waged many wars, driving the Mughals to conquer much of the Indian subcontinent. He conquered the rest of the Deccan region, seizing the sultanates of Bijapur and Golconda, which had achieved virtual independence during the reigns of Jahangir and Shah Jahan. Aurangzeb turned his armies against the martial Hindu called Mavalhas and conquered their lands after an exhaustive campaign.

While Aurangzeb was extending the Mughal domains to their greatest territorial extent, he was also fatally changing the unified society that Akbar had tried to create. Aurangzeb was a pious, extremist Muslim and returned to the traditional Muslim doctrine that Muslim shariah law should extend to all subjects of an Islamic realm. He persecuted Hindus. As a result, rebellions started to break out. Aurangzeb's religious intolerance also made mortal enemies out of the Sikhs, who had peacefully followed the teachings of Guru Nanak from the 16th century. Their ninth guru, Tegh Bahadur, was brought before Aurangzeb on a charge of blasphemy for preaching a non-Muslim faith and put to death. Sikhs under their 10th guru Govind would retreat to the Punjab to form their own martial kingdom to defend themselves against Aurangzeb's holy war.

At the same time, the French and British East India Companies had established trading posts in India. Taking advantage of the growing unrest in the Mughal Empire, they would make their first inroads into the Indian subcontinent. When Aurangzeb died in 1707, another succession crisis would further weaken the great Mughal Empire, already in decline, largely the result of his policy decisions.

Toward the end of his life, Aurangzeb wrote, "I am forlorn and destitute, and misery is my ultimate lot." In a very real sense, he had also penned the obituary for the Mughal Empire.

Further Information


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