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THE MUGHAL EMPIRE



Ruling as large a territory as the Indian subcontinent with such a diversity of people and cultures was an extremely difficult task for any ruler to accomplish in the Middle Ages. Quite in contrast to their predecessors, the Mughals created an empire and accomplished what had hitherto seemed possible for only short periods of time. From the latter half of the sixteenth century they expanded their kingdom from Agra and Delhi, until in the seventeenth century they controlled nearly all of the subcontinent. They imposed structures of administration and ideas of governance that outlasted their rule, leaving a political legacy that succeeding rulers of the subcontinent could not ignore. 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.

Fig. 1
The Red Fort.



Who were the Mughals?

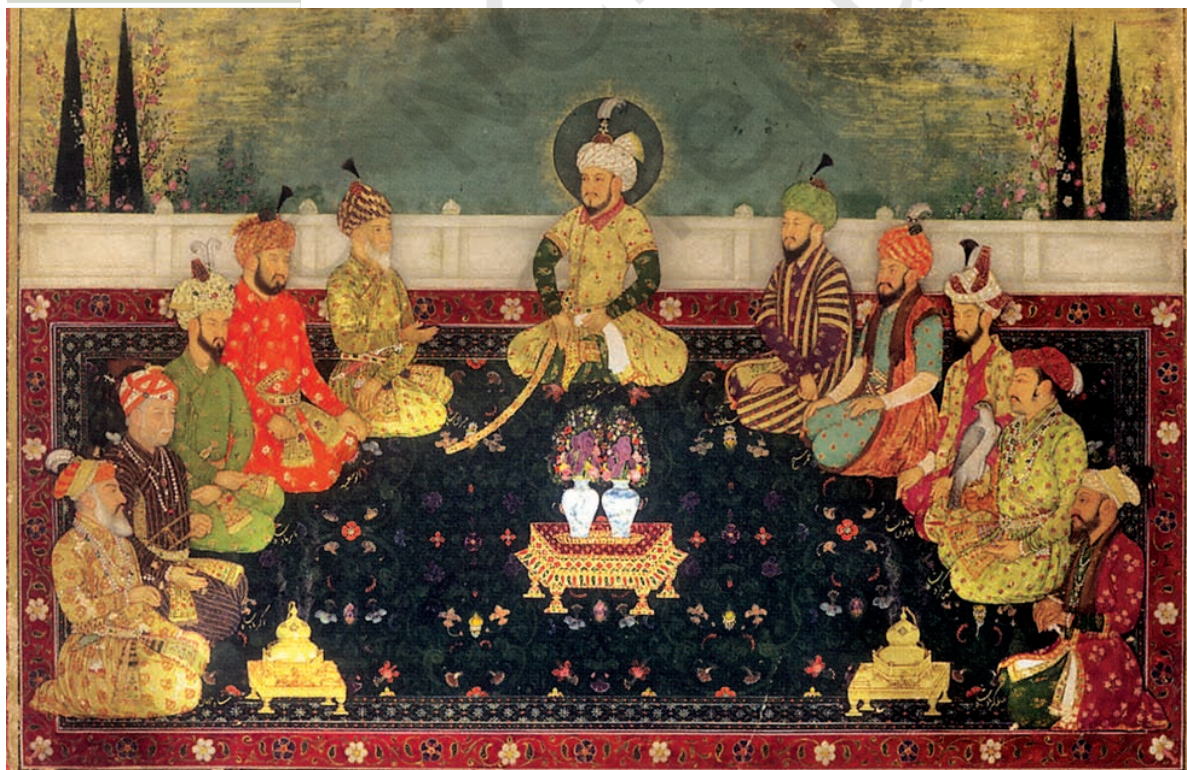
The Mughals were descendants of two great lineages of rulers. From their mother's side they were descendants of Genghis Khan (died 1227), the Mongol ruler who ruled over parts of China and Central Asia. From their father's side they were the successors of Timur (died 1404), the ruler of Iran, Iraq and modern-day Turkey. However, the Mughals did not like to be called Mughal or Mongol. This was because Genghis Khan's memory was associated with the massacre of innumerable people. It was also linked with the Uzbeks, their Mongol competitors. On the other hand, the Mughals were



Do you think this painting suggests that the Mughals claimed kingship as a birthright?

Fig. 2

A miniature painting (dated 1702-1712) of Timur, his descendants and the Mughal emperors. Timur is in the centre and on his right is his son Miran Shah (the first Mughal emperor Babur's great-great-grandfather) and then Abu Said (Babur's grandfather). To the left of Timur are Sultan Muhammad Mirza (Babur's great-grandfather) and Umar Shaikh (Babur's father). The Mughal emperors Babur, Akbar and Shah Jahan are the third, fourth and fifth individuals on Timur's right and on his left, in the same order, are Humayun, Jahangir and Aurangzeb.



proud of their Timurid ancestry, not least of all because their great ancestor had captured Delhi in 1398.

They celebrated their genealogy pictorially, each ruler getting a picture made of Timur and himself. Take a look at Figure 2, which is somewhat like a “group photograph”.

Mughal Military Campaigns

Babur, the first Mughal emperor (1526-1530), succeeded to the throne of Ferghana in 1494 when he was only 12 years old. He was forced to leave his ancestral throne due to the invasion of another Mongol group, the Uzbeks. After years of wandering he seized Kabul in 1504. In 1526 he defeated the Sultan of Delhi, Ibrahim Lodi, at Panipat and captured Delhi and Agra.

Table 1 charts some of the major campaigns of the Mughals. Study it carefully and see if you can notice any long-term patterns. You will notice, for example, that the Afghans were an immediate threat to Mughal authority.



Note the relationship between the Mughals and the Ahoms (see also Chapter 7), the Sikhs (see also Chapters 8 and 10), and Mewar and Marwar (see also Chapter 9). How was Humayun’s relationship with Safavid Iran different from Akbar’s? Did the annexation of Golconda and Bijapur in Aurangzeb’s reign end hostilities in the Deccan?

Fig. 3

Mughal army on campaign.



Fig. 4

Cannons were an important addition in sixteenth-century warfare. Babur used them effectively in the first battle of Panipat.

Gun powder technology was brought to India for warfare in the 14th century. Fire arms were used for the first time in regions such as Gujarat, Malwa and Deccan, and was used by Babur in early 16th century.

Table 1

MUGHAL EMPERORS

Major campaigns and events



BABUR 1526-1530

1526 – defeated Ibrahim Lodi and his Afghan supporters at Panipat.

1527 – defeated Rana Sanga, Rajput rulers and allies at Khanua.

1528 – defeated the Rajputs at Chanderi;

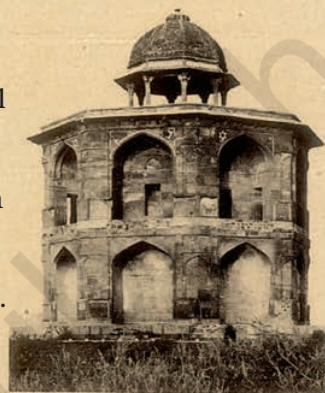
Established control over Agra and Delhi before his death.

HUMAYUN 1530-1540, 1555-1556

(1) Humayun divided his inheritance according to the will of his father. His brothers were each given a province.

The ambitions of his brother Mirza Kamran weakened Humayun's cause against Afghan competitors. Sher Khan defeated Humayun at Chausa (1539) and Kanauj (1540), forcing him to flee to Iran.

(2) In Iran Humayun received help from the Safavid Shah. He recaptured Delhi in 1555 but died the next year after an accident in this building.



AKBAR 1556-1605



Akbar was 13 years old when he became emperor. His reign can be divided into three periods.

(1) 1556-1570 – Akbar became independent of the regent Bairam Khan and other members of his domestic staff. Military campaigns were launched against the Suris and other Afghans, against the neighbouring kingdoms of Malwa and Gondwana, and to suppress the **revolt of his half-brother Mirza Hakim** and the Uzbeks. In 1568 the Sisodiya capital of Chittor was seized and in 1569 Ranthambhor.

(2) 1570-1585 – military campaigns in Gujarat were followed by campaigns in the east in Bihar, Bengal and Orissa. These campaigns were complicated by the **1579-1580 revolt in support of Mirza Hakim.**

(3) 1585-1605 – expansion of Akbar's empire. Campaigns were launched in the north-west. Gandahar was seized from the Safavids, Kashmir was annexed, as also Kabul, after the death of Mirza Hakim. Campaigns in the Deccan started and Berar, Khandesh and parts of Ahmadnagar were annexed. **In the last years of his reign Akbar was distracted by the rebellion of Prince Salim, the future Emperor Jahangir.**



Jahangir 1605-1627

Military campaigns started by Akbar continued. The Sisodiya ruler of Mewar, Amar Singh, accepted Mughal service. Less successful campaigns against the Sikhs, the Ahoms and Ahmadnagar followed.

Prince Khurram, the future Emperor Shah Jahan, rebelled in the last years of his reign. The efforts of Nur Jahan, Jahangir's wife, to marginalise him were unsuccessful.

Shah Jahan 1627-1658

Mughal campaigns continued in the Deccan under Shah Jahan. The Afghan noble Khan Jahan Lodi rebelled and was defeated. Campaigns were launched against Ahmadnagar; the Bundelas were defeated and Orchha seized. In the north-west, the campaign to seize Balkh from the Uzbeks was unsuccessful and Qandahar was lost to the Safavids. In 1632 Ahmadnagar was finally annexed and the Bijapur forces sued for peace. In 1657-1658, there was conflict over succession amongst Shah Jahan's sons. Aurangzeb was victorious and his three brothers, including Dara Shukoh, were killed. Shah Jahan was imprisoned for the rest of his life in Agra.



Aurangzeb 1658-1707

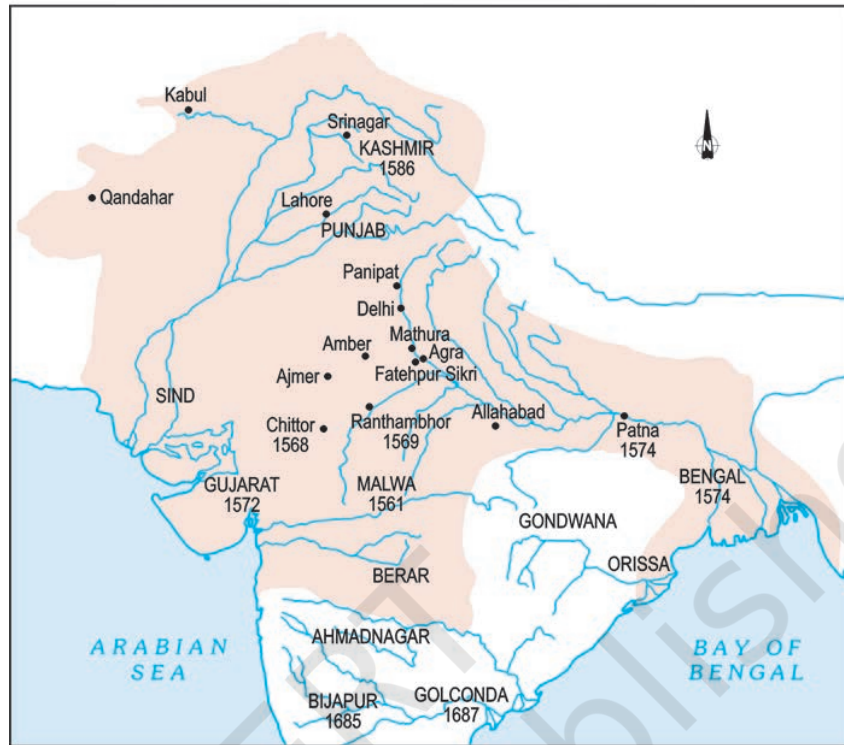
(1) In the north-east, the Ahoms were defeated in 1663, but rebelled again in the 1680s. Campaigns in the north-west against the Yusufzai and the Sikhs were temporarily successful. Mughal intervention in the succession and internal politics of the Rathor Rajputs of Marwar led to their rebellion. Campaigns against the Maratha chieftain Shivaji were initially successful. But Aurangzeb insulted Shivaji who escaped from Agra, declared himself an independent king and resumed his campaigns against the Mughals. Prince Akbar rebelled against Aurangzeb and received support from the Marathas and the Deccan Sultanate. He finally fled to Safavid Iran.

(2) After Akbar's rebellion Aurangzeb sent armies against the Deccan Sultanates. Bijapur was annexed in 1685 and Golconda in 1687. From 1698 Aurangzeb personally managed campaigns in the Deccan against the Marathas who started guerrilla warfare. Aurangzeb also had to face the rebellion in north India of the Sikhs, Jats and Satnamis, in the north-east of the Ahoms and in the Deccan of the Marathas. His death was followed by a succession conflict amongst his sons.



Map 1

Military campaigns under Akbar and Aurangzeb.



Mughal marriages with the Rajputs

The mother of Jahangir was a Kachhwaha princess, daughter of the Rajput ruler of Amber (modern-day Jaipur). The mother of Shah Jahan was a Rathor princess, daughter of the Rajput ruler of Marwar (Jodhpur).

Mughal Traditions of Succession

The Mughals did not believe in the rule of primogeniture, where the eldest son inherited his father's estate. Instead they followed the Mughal and Timurid custom of coparcenary inheritance, or a division of the inheritance amongst all the sons. Follow the highlighted passages in Table 1, and note the evidence for rebellions by Mughal princes. Which do you think is a fairer division of inheritance: primogeniture or coparcenary?

Mughal Relations with Other Rulers

Take a look at Table 1 once again. You will notice that the 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 Mewar refused to accept Mughal authority for a long time. Once defeated, however, they were honourably treated by the Mughals, given their lands (*watan*) back as assignments (*watan jagir*). The careful balance between defeating but not humiliating their opponents enabled the Mughals to extend their influence over many kings and chieftains. But it was difficult to keep this balance all the time. Look at Table 1 again – note that Aurangzeb insulted Shivaji when he came to accept Mughal authority. What was the consequence of this insult?

Mansabdars and Jagirdars

As the empire expanded to encompass different regions the Mughals recruited diverse bodies of people. From a small nucleus of Turkish nobles (Turanis) they expanded to include Iranians, Indian Muslims, Afghans, Rajputs, Marathas and other groups. Those who joined Mughal service were enrolled as *mansabdars*.

The term *mansabdar* refers to an individual who holds a *mansab*, meaning a position or rank. It was a grading system used by the Mughals to fix (1) rank, (2) salary and (3) military responsibilities. Rank and salary were determined by a numerical value called *zat*. The higher the *zat*, the more prestigious was the noble's position in court and the larger his salary.

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

Mansabdars received their salaries as revenue assignments called *jagirs* which were somewhat like *iqtas*. But unlike *muqtis*, most *mansabdars* did not actually reside in or administer their *jagirs*. They only had rights to the revenue of their assignments which was collected for them by their servants while the

Zat ranking

Nobles with a *zat* of 5,000 were ranked higher than those of 1,000. In Akbar's reign there were 29 *mansabdars* with a rank of 5,000 *zat*; by Aurangzeb's reign the number of *mansabdars* had increased to 79. Would this have meant more expenditure for the state?

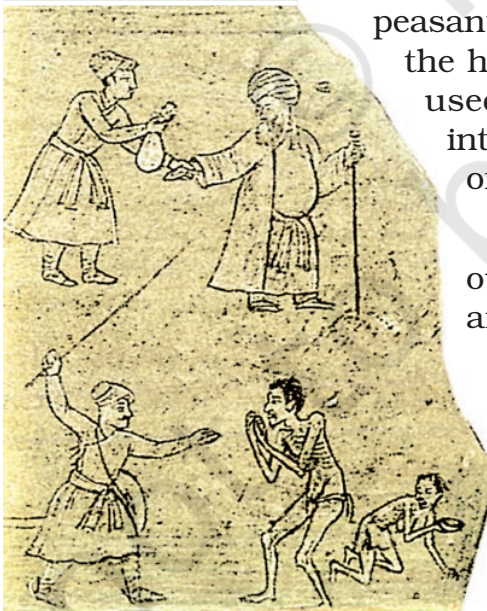


Fig. 5

A mansabdar on march with his sawars.

Fig. 6

Details from a miniature from Shah Jahan's reign depicting corruption in his father's administration: (1) a corrupt officer receiving a bribe and (2) a tax-collector punishing poor peasants.



mansabdars themselves served in some other part of the country.

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 this was no longer the case and the actual revenue

collected was often less than the granted sum. There was also 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 peasantry therefore suffered tremendously.

Zabt and Zamindars

The main source of income available to Mughal rulers was tax on the produce of the peasantry. In most places, peasants paid taxes through the rural elites, that is, the headman or the local chieftain. The Mughals used one term – *zamindars* – to describe all intermediaries, whether they were local headmen of villages or powerful chieftains.

Akbar's revenue minister, Todar Mal, carried out a careful survey of crop yields, prices and areas cultivated for a 10-year period, 1570-1580. On the basis of this data, tax was fixed on each crop in cash. 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 some areas the zamindars exercised a great deal of power. The exploitation by Mughal administrators could drive them to rebellion. Sometimes zamindars and peasants of the same caste allied in rebelling against Mughal authority. These peasant revolts challenged the stability of the Mughal Empire from the end of the seventeenth century.

Akbar Nama and Ain-i Akbari

Akbar ordered one of his close friends and courtiers, Abul Fazl, to write a history of his reign. Abul Fazl wrote a three-volume history of Akbar's reign, titled *Akbar Nama*. The first volume dealt with Akbar's ancestors and the second volume recorded the events of Akbar's reign. The third volume is the *Ain-i Akbari*. It deals with Akbar's administration, household, army, the revenues and the geography of his empire. It also provides rich details about the traditions and culture of the people living in India. The most interesting aspect about the *Ain-i Akbari* is its rich statistical details about things as diverse as crops, yields, prices, wages and revenues.



Fig. 7
Akbar receiving the Akbar Nama from Abul Fazl.

A Closer Look: Akbar's Policies

The broad features of administration were laid down by Akbar and were elaborately discussed by Abul Fazl in his book, the *Akbar Nama*, in particular in its last volume, the *Ain-i Akbari*.

Abul Fazl explained that the empire was divided into provinces called *subas*, governed by a *subadar* who carried out both political and military functions. Each province also had a financial officer or *diwan*. For the maintenance of peace and order in his province, the *subadar* was supported by other officers

such as the military paymaster (*bakhshi*), the minister in charge of religious and charitable patronage (*sadr*), military commanders (*faujders*) and the town police commander (*kotwal*).

Nur Jahan's influence in Jahangir's court

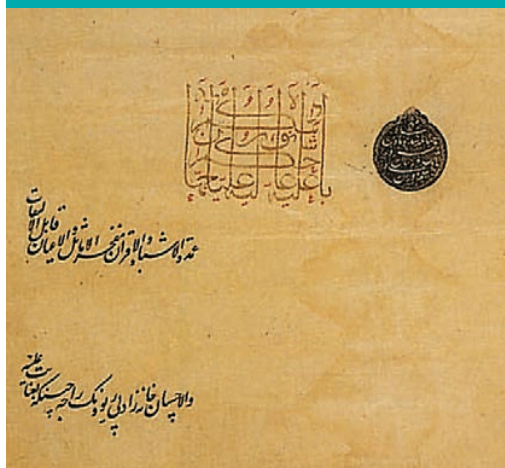


Fig. 8
Nur Jahan's farman.

Mehrunnisa married the Emperor Jahangir in 1611 and received the title Nur Jahan. She remained extremely loyal and supportive to the monarch. As a mark of honour, Jahangir struck silver coins bearing his own titles on one side and on the other the inscription "struck in the name of the Queen Begum, Nur Jahan".

The adjoining document is an order (*farman*) of Nur Jahan. The square seal states, "Command of her most Sublime and Elevated Majesty Nur Jahan Padshah Begum".

The round seal states, "by the sun of Shah Jahangir she became as brilliant as the moon; may Nur Jahan Padshah be the lady of the age".

Dogma

A statement or an interpretation declared as authoritative with the expectation that it would be followed without question.

Bigot

An individual who is intolerant of another person's religious beliefs or culture.

Akbar's nobles commanded large armies and had access to large amounts of revenue. While they were loyal the empire functioned efficiently but by the end of the seventeenth century many nobles had built independent networks of their own. Their loyalties to the empire were weakened by their own self-interest.

While Akbar was at Fatehpur Sikri during the 1570s he started discussions on religion with the *ulama*, Brahmanas, Jesuit priests who were Roman Catholics, and Zoroastrians. These discussions took place in the *ibadat khana*. He was interested in the religion and social customs of different people. Akbar's interaction with people of different faiths made him realise that religious scholars who emphasised ritual and **dogma** were often **bigots**. Their teachings created divisions and disharmony amongst his subjects. This eventually



Fig. 9

Akbar holding discussions with learned individuals of different faiths in the ibadat khana.



Can you identify the Jesuit priests in this picture?

led Akbar to the idea of *sulh-i kul* or “universal peace”. This idea of tolerance did not discriminate between 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*. This principle of governance was followed by Jahangir and Shah Jahan as well.

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).

Akbar commissioned the translation of many Sanskrit works into Persian. A Maktab Khana or translation bureau was also established at Fatehpur Sikri for this purpose. The Mahabharata, Ramayana, Lilavati and Yogavashisht were some of the notable Sanskrit works that were taken up for translation. The Razmnamah, Persian translation of the Mahabharata contains lavish illustrations of the events of Mahabharata.

The Mughal Empire in the Seventeenth Century and After

The administrative and military efficiency of the Mughal Empire led to great 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. This expenditure benefited the artisans and peasantry who supplied them with goods and produce. But the scale of revenue collection left very little for investment in the hands of the primary producers – the peasant and the artisan. 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 economic world.

The enormous wealth and resources commanded by the Mughal 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. We will read more about them in Chapter 10.

Kings and queens

There were several great monarchs – all near-contemporaries – in different parts of the world in the sixteenth century.

These included the ruler of Ottoman Turkey, Sultan Suleyman 1520-1566. During his rule the Ottoman state expanded into Europe, seizing Hungary and besieging Austria. His armies also seized Baghdad and Iraq. Much of north Africa, all the way into Morocco, acknowledged Ottoman authority. Suleyman also reconstructed the Ottoman navy. Its domination over the eastern Mediterranean brought the navy into competition with Spain. In the Arabian Sea it challenged the Portuguese. The monarch was given the title of “al-Qanuni” (the “lawgiver”) because of the large number of regulations (*qanun*) passed during his reign. These were aimed to standardise administrative procedures throughout the expanding domains of the empire and specifically to protect the peasantry from forced labour and extraordinary taxes. Later, in the seventeenth century, when public order declined in the Ottoman domains, the reign of Suleyman Qanuni was remembered as a period of ideal governance.

 Find out more about Akbar’s other contemporaries – the ruler of England, Queen Elizabeth I (1558-1603); the Safavid ruler of Iran, Shah Abbas (1588-1629); and the more controversial Russian ruler, Czar Ivan IV Vasilyevich, also called “Ivan the Terrible” (1530-1584).



Imagine

You have inherited a kingdom. (Remember Babur and Akbar were about your age when they became rulers). How would you make your kingdom stable and prosperous?

Let’s recall

1. Match the following:

mansab

Mongol

Sisodiya Rajput

Rathor Rajput

Nur Jahan

subadar

Marwar

governor

Uzbeg

Mewar

rank

Jahangir

KEYWORDS



Mughal

mansab

jagir

zat

sawar

sulh-i kul

primogeniture

coparcenary

zabt

zamindar



2. Fill in the blanks:

- (a) The capital of Mirza Hakim, Akbar's half-brother, was _____.
- (b) The five Deccan Sultanates were Berar, Khandesh, Ahmadnagar, _____ and _____.
- (c) If *zat* determined a *mansabdar*'s rank and salary, *sawar* indicated his _____.
- (d) Abul Fazl, Akbar's friend and counsellor, helped him frame the idea of _____ so that he could govern a society composed of many religions, cultures and castes.

3. What were the central provinces under the control of the Mughals?

4. What was the relationship between the *mansabdar* and the *jagir*?

Let's understand

- 5. What was the role of the zamindar in Mughal administration?
- 6. How were the debates with religious scholars important in the formation of Akbar's ideas on governance?
- 7. Why did the Mughals emphasise their Timurid and not their Mongol descent?

Let's discuss

8. How important was the income from land revenue to the stability of the Mughal Empire?
9. Why was it important for the Mughals to recruit *mansabdars* from diverse backgrounds and not just Turanis and Iranis?
10. Like the Mughal Empire, India today is also made up of many social and cultural units. Does this pose a challenge to national integration?
11. Peasants were vital for the economy of the Mughal Empire. Do you think that they are as important today? Has the gap in the income between the rich and the poor in India changed a great deal from the period of the Mughals?

Let's do

12. The Mughal Empire left its impact on the different regions of the subcontinent in a variety of ways. Find out if it had any impact in the city, village or region in which you live.