

## Snapshot of an Empire: The Mughals

### Relevant Key Concepts:

Land Empires expand with gunpowder: Mughals (4.3.II.B.)  
Cotton textile production in India, increased peasant labor (4.2.I.A.)  
Spice trade with Europeans benefits Mughal leaders: Shan Jahan (4.3.I.A.)  
Power of existing elites fluctuated, zamindars (4.2.II.B.)  
Rulers used art to display power, Taj Mahal (4.3.I.A.)  
Religion in the Mughal Empire: Islam and Sikhism (4.1.VI.A. and D.)  
Rulers used religion of justify rule, Akbar (4.3.I.B.)

The Mughals were another Turkish group of people. They claimed descent from Genghis Khan (Mughal is a Persian term for Mongol). Like the Ottomans, they relied on a military elite armed with firearms and created a strong centralized empire organized with a bureaucracy. They expanded into the south and unified much of the India subcontinent where they ruled an empire comprised mainly of Hindus. Thus the rulers and the ruled were divided along religious lines. The most famous Mughal leader, Akbar, attempted to bridge this divide through a policy of toleration. He married Hindu princesses but did not require them to convert. Hindus were given positions in the government. He invited Christian, Hindu and Muslim scholars to peaceful open debates about the merits of their religions. He removed the religious tax on non-Muslims. Akbar created his own syncretic religion called “the divine faith” which drew on Islamic, Hindu and Zoroastrian beliefs. This religion pointed to the emperor as the leader of all faiths in the empire. All this drew the anger of conservative Muslim teachers. Subsequent Mughal leaders fell under the sway of these conservatives and Akbar’s policy of toleration was later abandoned. Hindu temples were destroyed. Religious tension reemerged as a central problem of the Empire.

During his reign Akbar significantly reformed the Mughal bureaucracy. Previously, the Mughal emperors collected taxes by relying upon a decentralized network of local administrators called *zamindars*. Acting as local aristocratic landlords, they collected taxes from peasants and sent a set quota to the state. But much of this revenue never made it to the emperor. As profits from the Indian Ocean pepper trade increased, Akbar monetized the tax system (required taxes paid in currency rather than in kind) and required the peasants to sell their grain in market towns and ports for cash where oversight of taxation could be more controlled. Having been bypassed in the taxation process, the role of the zamindars as tax-collecting landlords decreased; political control was also centralized. State profits poured directly into the government’s purse. This windfall of revenue was used to fund military expeditions and to embellish the

imperial courts. With the decrease role of the zamindars, Akbar began the process of political centralization.

The most important beautification of the imperial courts was by emperor Shah Jahan. Jahan ruled during the commercial boom of the Mughal Empire and was flush with silver from the New World used to purchase tons of Indian pepper. He constructed the Taj Mahal in memory of his favorite wife. This architectural wonder of the world was a monument to enormous wealth of the Mughal state and displayed the power of the emperor.

During the Mughal empire, the price of spices declined. To maintain their profits, joint-stock companies such as the British East India Company and the Dutch VOC encouraged Mughal leaders to supplement pepper exports with cotton textiles. Cotton, which was softer than many fabrics and could be dyed and printed with elaborate patterns, became an extremely popular fad in Europe. To meet this demand, the Mughal government forced a vast number of peasants to work cotton fields and textile operations. As in Russia, state mandates and incentives led to the mass mobilization of peasants to aid state objectives.

