

# The Times of Emperor Aurangzeb

(Reign: 1658 to 1707)

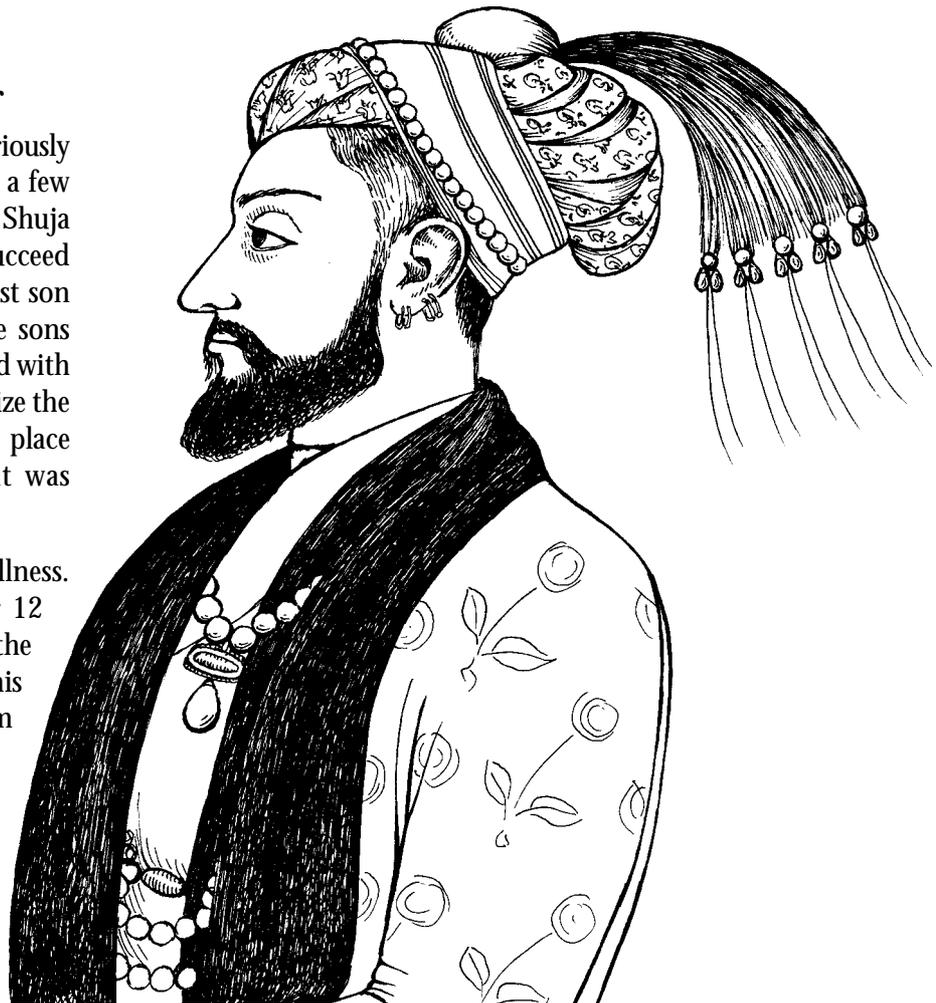
## Aurangzeb Becomes the Emperor

In the year 1658, Emperor Shahjahan fell seriously ill. Everyone thought that he would die in a few days. He had four sons - Dara, Aurangzeb, Shuja and Murad. All four brothers wanted to succeed to the throne. Shahjahan declared his eldest son Dara as his successor. But the other three sons refused to accept this. Each of them marched with their armies towards Agra, the capital, to seize the Mughal throne. A number of battles took place between the brothers and in the end it was Aurangzeb who emerged successful.

However, his father recovered from his illness. Although Shahjahan lived on for another 12 years, Aurangzeb declared himself to be the emperor and kept his father in prison till his death. Aurangzeb had to face a lot of criticism for doing this.

*Explain the meaning of these words:*

- (a) successor
- (b) seizing the throne
- (c) criticism



## Uprisings of Peasants and Zamindars and Decline in Revenue

Like all other emperors Aurangzeb too had his share of problems. One big problem was from the

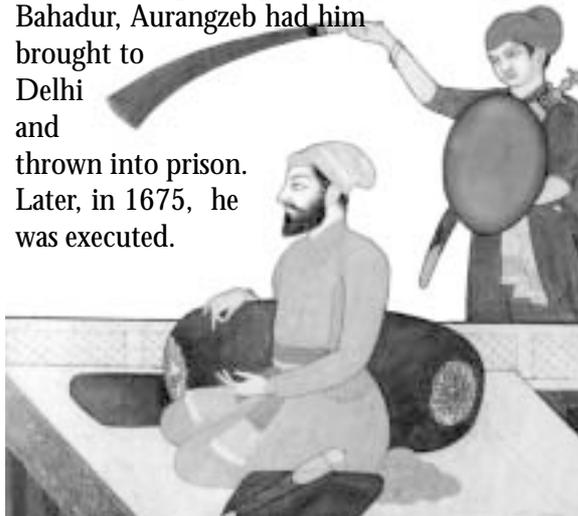
peasants and zamindars. As you know, the Jat peasants and zamindars around Agra and Bayana had started rebelling. Such uprisings were now taking place in many parts of the empire.



Muslim religious scholars in the court

In Punjab there were many peasants, craftsmen and traders who followed the teachings of Guru Nanak, who had taught that all human beings are equal. Guru Teg Bahadur, who was a follower of Guru Nanak's teachings, would travel from village to village to preach. This created an atmosphere that encouraged peasants to stand up to the jagirdars and rajas. The rulers became anxious about the increasing possibility of peasants' revolts.

To check the growing impact of Guru Teg Bahadur, Aurangzeb had him brought to Delhi and thrown into prison. Later, in 1675, he was executed.



Guru Teg Bahadur

Subsequently, his son Guru Govind Singh organised the followers of Guru Nanak and called them Sikhs. He formed an army of Sikhs and went to battle with the rajas of Punjab. As these rajas were under Mughal suzerainty, Aurangzeb gave them all the help they needed to keep the Sikhs under check. But the Sikhs gathered a large army and began clashing with the Mughals time and again.

Another problem that Aurangzeb faced was from Afghan tribes who believed in the Roshania sect of Islam. They lived in the northwestern part of the Mughal empire, and they wanted to set up

their own separate kingdom, free from the Mughals. In 1665 they started revolting against the Mughals. Aurangzeb suppressed the Roshanias with the help of the Rajputs.

These were some of the bigger revolts to take place during the time of Aurangzeb. Apart from these, many other smaller rebellions took place. As a result of these rebellions, the jagirdars began getting less revenue from their jagirs.

### A Shortage of Jagirs

The number of officials and amirs in the service of Mughal emperors was increasing year by year. But as time went by, there were not enough jagirs for them. The state was running out of villages and towns to give as big jagirs for salaries to so many amirs. Besides, the jagirs that did exist were not yielding the revenue that was due from them.

Due to this shortage, discontent and tension was growing among the jagirdars. Aurangzeb would say, "My position is like that of a doctor, who has one pomegranate (Anaar) and a hundred patients. To how many patients can he give that one pomegranate?" (The pomegranate fruit was considered to be an effective tonic.)

One way out of this situation was to expand the area under cultivation within the jagirs. This way the income of the jagirdars could increase. But the jagirdars had little interest in developing the agriculture of their jagirs, since the jagirs kept getting changed and transferred between different jagirdars.

*How do you think the transfer of jagirs would discourage jagirdars from developing cultivation?*

## Attempts to Expand the Empire

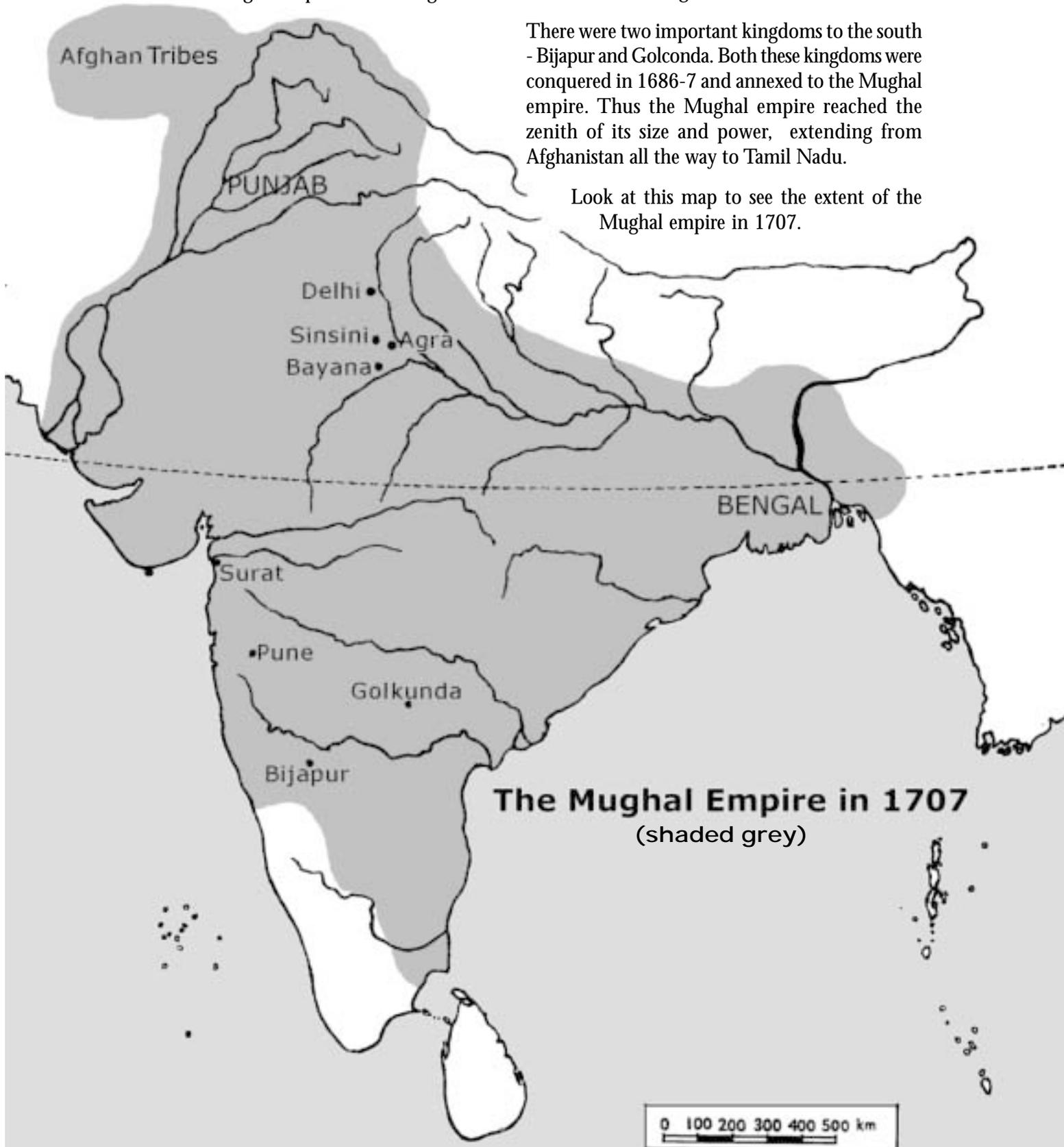
Aurangzeb had one other alternative way to tackle the problem of scarcity of jagirs. That was to expand his empire and annex other kingdoms into his own.

To the east of the Mughal empire was the kingdom

of Ahom. This was in the present-day Assam. In 1663 an amir of Aurangzeb, Mir Jumla, defeated the Ahom king and annexed his kingdom into the Mughal empire. But in just a few years, the Ahom king was able to drive the Mughal army away and become free once again.

There were two important kingdoms to the south - Bijapur and Golconda. Both these kingdoms were conquered in 1686-7 and annexed to the Mughal empire. Thus the Mughal empire reached the zenith of its size and power, extending from Afghanistan all the way to Tamil Nadu.

Look at this map to see the extent of the Mughal empire in 1707.



**The Mughal Empire in 1707**  
(shaded grey)



Aurangzeb hunting, using pets as decoys

Bijapur and Golconda were too powerful to be conquered just by military force. To defeat them the chief commanders and officials of those kingdoms were given high posts and jagirs by the Mughal emperor. The amirs switched sides and enabled Aurangzeb to defeat Bijapur and Golconda. But the revenue that came from these two kingdoms was spent on paying the amirs from these areas and other new amirs. Thus, winning these kingdoms did not prove to be of great help to the Mughals and jagirs continued to be scarce for the old amirs.

Both the attempts to spread agriculture and increase the size of the empire did not solve the problem of the scarcity of jagirs. During the time of Aurangzeb and later on too, there continued to be a shortage of jagirs to give to the Mughal amirs.

*Why did the expansion of the empire not solve the problem of jagirs? Explain in your own words.*

## Shivaji and the Marathas

You read how the Afghan tribes, the Jat zamindars and the Ahom kings wanted to establish their own separate kingdoms and did not want to accept the rule of the Mughals. In the southern part of India Aurangzeb had to confront another power that was not easy to overcome.



Shivaji

These were the Marathas living in the areas of what is now Maharashtra and Karnataka. They had good warriors who used to be enrolled in the armies of the Bijapur, Golconda and Mughal kingdoms.

Shahji Bhonsle was one of the Maratha chiefs who had many jagirs. He gave his jagir in Pune to his son Shivaji. Shivaji was a bold and courageous man and wondered why he should serve other kings. Why should he not build his own kingdom? From the young age of 18, he started collecting an army with the objective of setting up a separate kingdom of the Marathas.

He would attack the forts of the zamindars nearby and plunder them. Slowly, he captured many forts.

As Mughal rule spread in southern India, Shivaji also had to fight the Mughal army. On the strength of his small army, Shivaji defeated the huge and mighty armies of the Mughals many times.

He had a unique way of fighting against large armies. Instead of just engaging the enemy in a direct battle, he would attack suddenly, damage them and then withdraw quickly to hide in the hills. His small army could move swiftly from one place to another, while the immense Mughal army would lumber along more slowly. With repeated sudden small attacks, Shivaji would tire the Mughal army and then finally defeat it in a direct battle. This way of fighting is known as guerrilla warfare.

## The Maratha Kingdom

Shivaji was successful in establishing his kingdom in Maharashtra. But in order to enlarge it, he had to keep attacking other neighbouring kingdoms. He needed to maintain a powerful army and for this it was necessary to have money. He organised a system for collecting taxes from the peasants in his kingdom. In order to mobilise more funds, he extracted money from the peasants and traders of other kingdoms as well. He demanded that the people of other kingdoms pay him one-fourth of the tax they paid to their own king. This tax was known as the 'chauth' (चाउथा). People of many villages and towns in other kingdoms were compelled to pay chauth for they feared the attacks of the Maratha soldiers. Those who did not pay the chauth had to face the attacks of Maratha soldiers each year.

The money collected from the chauth would be distributed among the Maratha generals or sardars. These sardars ruled over different parts of Shivaji's kingdom on his behalf.

*Underline six important sentences about the Marathas.*

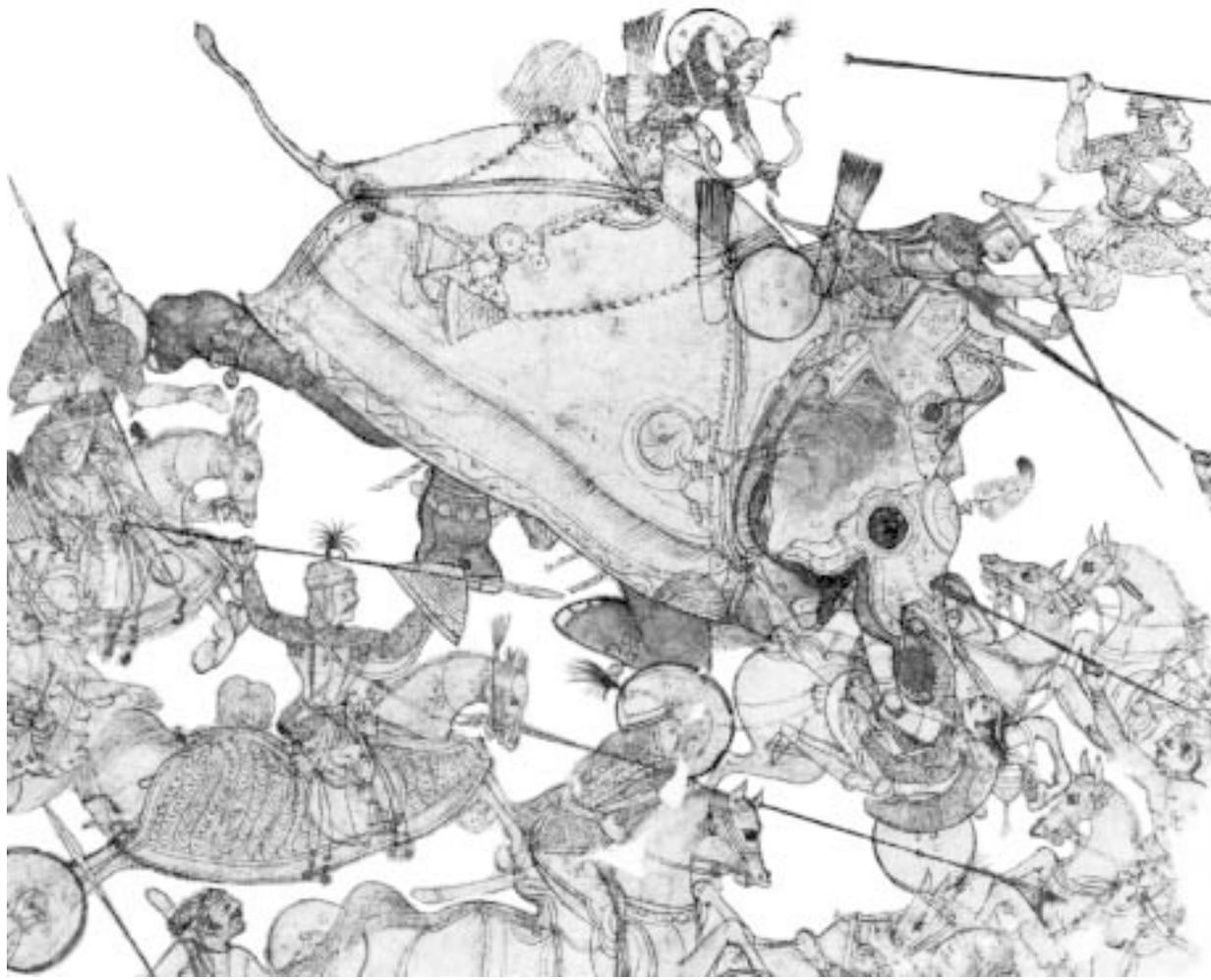
*What was chauth?*

- (a) tax that was taken from the peasants of one's own kingdom*
- (b) tax that was taken from the peasants of other kingdoms.*

*List the problems that Aurangzeb was struggling with.*

## Crisis in the Mughal Empire and Aurangzeb's Policies

Ten years after he became the emperor, Aurangzeb issued an order to destroy all the temples that had recently been built, and allow only the older temples to remain standing. He also ordered the destruction of the temples where Muslims came to study Hinduism, so that they may not be able to do this any more. Thus during the reign of Aurangzeb many temples were razed to the ground.



In 1679, twenty-one years after he became the emperor, Aurangzeb reimposed the *jeziya* on the Hindus. Peasants, traders and craftsmen strongly opposed this.

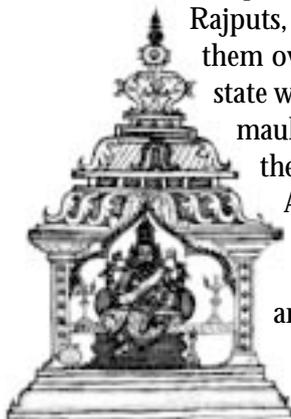
Many of his amirs, including Muslim amirs, were not happy with these policies of Aurangzeb. From time to time they would try to persuade Aurangzeb that his religious policy would not be good for the empire. Among the more prominent of Aurangzeb's amirs was Mahabat Khan. He wrote a letter to the emperor expressing his opposition. In it he wrote that the policies of Aurangzeb were good neither for religion nor for the empire.

However, Aurangzeb refused to budge. It was only after his death that the *jeziya* was again removed.

What could have been the reason behind Aurangzeb's policy? Some historians say that he was a fanatic and this is why he destroyed temples and imposed the *jeziya*. But if this was really so, why did he not take these steps as soon as he became the emperor? Why was it that he felt the need to adopt such rigid policies against the Hindus only 10-20 years after he had already been on the throne?

With the passage of time Aurangzeb was slowly getting overwhelmed by problems. You have come to know of these problems in the beginning of the chapter itself. Rebellions in many places, the scarcity of jagirs, discontent among the amirs, trouble from the Marathas - all these were problems that Aurangzeb was having difficulty solving.

In this time of crisis, Aurangzeb made attempts to get support and cooperation from as many people in his empire as possible. The Marathas, the Rajputs, the Muslims - he tried to win all of them over to his side. Many people in the state were orthodox Muslims - such as the maulvis, some amirs and others. To win them over during this critical period, Aurangzeb decided to take some steps against the Hindus. Perhaps that's why he reimposed the *jeziya* and had temples destroyed.



But he also needed the support of the Hindus. In particular, he wanted the Marathas and the Rajputs to be with him. He gave positions in his government to a large number of Marathas. He also did a lot to promote the Rajput amirs. He gave them important positions in the empire. Raja Jai Singh and Maharaja Jaswant Singh were among his closest advisers. Throughout Aurangzeb's reign the number of Hindu amirs kept increasing. During Akbar's time there were in all 22 Hindu amirs, in the time of Shah Jahan 98, whereas in the time of Aurangzeb there were 182 Hindu amirs who remained with him despite his religious policies.

Perhaps for similar political reasons, Aurangzeb also donated money and land to many temples and Hindu monasteries. Firmans of such donations can be seen even today in the Mahakal temple of Ujjain and the Ram temple of Chitrakoot.

*Do you see any similarity between Akbar and Aurangzeb? Explain.*

## **The Crisis of Jagirs and the Break-up of the Mughal Empire**

You read earlier that peasants were in great distress under Mughal rule and in many places they had started revolting. Fuelled by the desire to set up their own kingdoms, the zamindars had also begun rising up against the empire. Because of this resistance the jagirdars were not able to collect sufficient taxes. Thus, their income had started decreasing.

As their income decreased, they kept fewer cavalry. And, when they had fewer cavalry they were not able to suppress the rebellions of the zamindars.

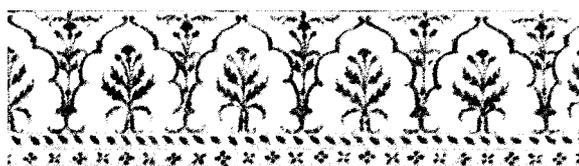
This was the case with those jagirdars who had jagirs to begin with. But there were many other amirs who were not getting their jagirs. Many of the amirs spent time trying to obtain a jagir somehow or the other, and that too in a place where they would not have to face the revolt of peasants and zamindars. To lay their hands on such

good jagirs the amirs started fighting each other. Once they got a jagir, the amirs would try to squeeze as much tax as they could from the peasants. They stopped following the rules and regulations of the emperor on tax collection.

As already mentioned, all the amirs were transferred once every two-three years. Whenever they were transferred their jagirs would be redistributed among others. But it would take a long time before they got new jagirs. For this reason the amirs would try to stay in one place and avoid being transferred. Even if the emperor transferred them they would refuse to move.

Thus, the amirs gradually began disobeying the orders of the emperor. Many subedars now began their own free rule in their subas. In this way, the subedars of Bengal, Avadh and Hyderabad broke free from Mughal rule.

Many of the zamindars who had revolted formed their own separate kingdoms. A separate Maratha kingdom was formed. The descendants of Raja Ram Jat established a separate kingdom in Bharatpur. The Sikhs of Punjab also formed their own kingdom. All these kingdoms considered themselves only nominally under the suzerainty of the Mughal emperor. Actually they had begun their own independent rule. Only in Delhi and its nearby areas did the word of the Mughal emperor hold real authority. Thus, the vast Mughal empire, which was once ruled by a single emperor, slowly crumbled and split into many smaller, independent kingdoms.



## Exercises

- 1 *Aurangzeb faced two major problems - the revolt of the peasants and zamindars, and the shortage of jagirs. Explain these problems in a few sentences.*
- 2 *What steps did Aurangzeb take to solve the problem of scarcity of jagirs? Why were his solutions not successful?*
- 3 *How was Shivaji's small army able to defeat the Mughal army?*
- 4 *The income of Shivaji's kingdom came from many sources:*
  - (a) *Tax collected from the people of his own state.*
  - (b) \_\_\_\_\_
  - (c) \_\_\_\_\_
- 5 *Aurangzeb took some steps against the Hindus and some in their favour too. Give two examples of each.*
- 6 *State whether true or false:*
  - (a) *All the Muslims supported the steps that Aurangzeb took against the Hindus.*
  - (b) *Because of the steps that Aurangzeb took against the Hindus, the Hindu officials parted company with him.*
- 7 *Why and in what way did the jagirdars violate Aurangzeb's orders towards the end of his rule?*
- 8 *After the death of Aurangzeb the Mughal empire broke into many separate, independent kingdoms. Explain how and why this happened.*