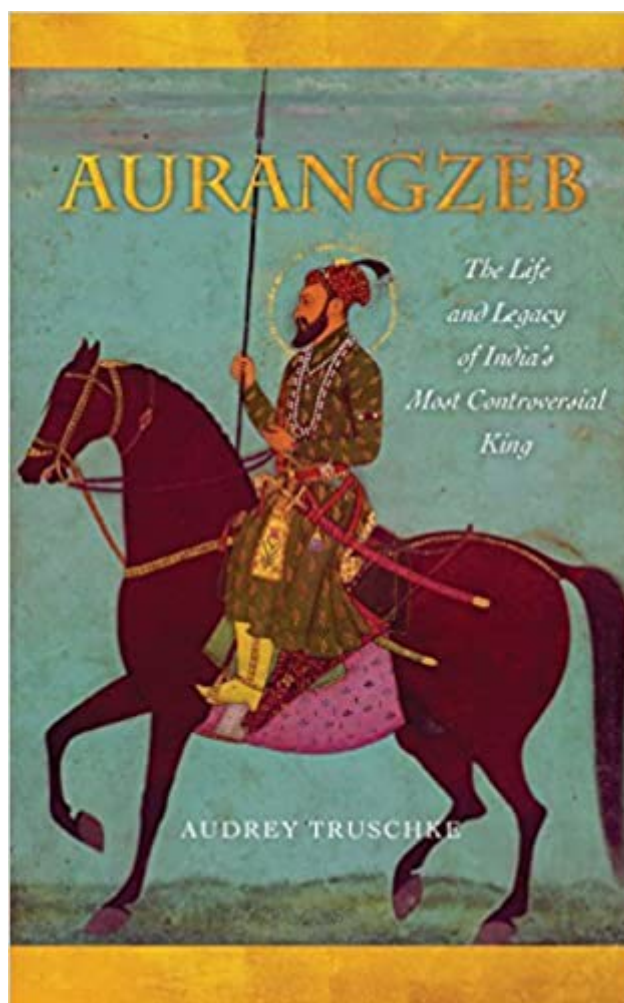


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# Aurangzeb: The Life And Legacy Of India's Most Controversial King



## Synopsis

The Mughal emperor Aurangzeb Alamgir is one of the most hated men in Indian history. Widely reviled as a religious fanatic who sought to violently oppress Hindus, he is even blamed by some for setting into motion conflicts that would result in the creation of a separate Muslim state in South Asia. In her lively overview of his life and influence, Audrey Truschke offers a clear-eyed perspective on the public debate over Aurangzeb and makes the case for why his often-maligned legacy deserves to be reassessed. Aurangzeb was arguably the most powerful and wealthiest ruler of his day. His nearly 50-year reign (1658–1707) had a profound influence on the political landscape of early modern India, and his legacy—real and imagined—continues to loom large in India and Pakistan today. Truschke evaluates Aurangzeb not by modern standards but according to the traditions and values of his own time, painting a picture of Aurangzeb as a complex figure whose relationship to Islam was dynamic, strategic, and sometimes contradictory. This book invites students of South Asian history and religion into the world of the Mughal Empire, framing the contemporary debate on Aurangzeb's impact and legacy in accessible and engaging terms.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Following British historians of the colonial era, Indian nationalists used the last and most controversial of the great Mughals in ways that simultaneously distorted Mughal history and served as a goad to Hindu cultural renewal. Audrey Truschke's project of looking at Emperor Aurangzeb afresh is thus a welcome and timely one and will interest readers in academia and beyond."

(Barbara D. Metcalf, University of California Davis)"Basing her judgments on a careful reading of contemporary Persian chronicles and European traveler accounts, Audrey Truschke presents a fresh, balanced, and much-needed survey of one of the most controversial figures in Indian history. Crucially, the author insists on evaluating the man in terms of the norms and traditions of his own day, and not those of later, more polarized times." (Richard M. Eaton University of Arizona)

Audrey Truschke is Assistant Professor of History at Rutgers University. She is the author of *Culture of Encounters: Sanskrit at the Mughal Court* (2016).

The irate attacks on this book by Hindutvavadins makes it a must read.

I casually followed the conversation on this book about Aurangzeb on social media but resisted the urge to read the book since I have little expert knowledge on the subject matter. Finally, I ended up giving in - call it impulse buying - and finished it in one sitting. This book is explicitly written as a counterpoint to the view that Aurangzeb's many controversial actions were motivated by his religious beliefs. It is meant for someone who is already familiar with the main elements of conventional scholarship and has followed the controversies around it. For someone looking for an introduction to the man and his legacy, this is not the appropriate work to start out with. Jadunath Sarkar's view is described as "overly communal" and that scholarship has since recognized this and moved away from it. Accordingly, various alternative explanations are put forth to explain his decisions; some suggested justifications - such as the practices and traditions that existed in Mughal imperial life even prior to his ascent to the throne - are perhaps factual whereas others appear speculative - how persuasive they are is somewhat subjective and in any case, I am not knowledgeable enough to critique the claim. Aurangzeb's killing of his brothers is attributed to a Central Asian practice that was practiced all through the Mughal dynasty where all male children had equal right to the throne and were expected to fight it out to death for it. The book states that he became pious only about a decade after ascending the throne and suggests that this may have something to do with either personal guilt about imprisoning his father and/or the refusal to acknowledge his legitimacy by prominent figures in the Muslim world at the time. Various actions curtailing music in the royal court, withdrawing patronage to painters, Sanskrit scholars etc. are attributed to it but argues that its impact was limited as other Mughal courts (of his sons and nobles) continued to patronize them and the affected individuals simply moved there to continue with their activity. Compositions from the 1690s-1705 suggest at least a scaling back of this policy as

well. Tegh Bahadur's execution is attributed to his taking up arms against the Mughal state and his nephew having supported Dara Shukoh during the succession war. Another group, the Satnamis, who had taken up arms against the state were apparently also targeted by the Mughal state at around the same time. His opposition to the forcible conversion of Kashmiri brahmins is not elaborated in the earliest sources on the execution and its value debatable. The book makes the point that Hindu society was not monolithic and different segments supported or opposed Aurangzeb based on political considerations at different times. During the succession war, more Rajputs sided with Dara whereas more Marathas were with Aurangzeb. The Rajputs looked down on Shivaji as an "uncouth upstart" which is why Aurangzeb sent a Rajput, Jai Singh, to fight him. It claims that in the case of employment in higher administration too, Hindu numbers went up under Aurangzeb. Under Akbar, Hindus were 22.5% of nobles but between 1679-1707, that went up to 31.6% - still a minority but almost a third of the total. Regarding the most controversial aspect of the extent of temples destroyed/desecrated, she says that the total number destroyed is perhaps a few dozen at best and even there, quoting Richard Eaton, says "the evidence is almost always fragmentary, incomplete, or even contradictory". She quotes Richard Eaton approvingly that the total number is unknown and is not as useful as the particulars of individual (destructive) events. Some of his orders to destroy are acknowledged and he is stated to have overseen them. The numbers cited in the *Maasir-i-Alamgiri* are regarded as an exaggeration. The one point that stood out was that theological justifications cannot account for why some but not others were destroyed/desecrated indicating that was not a sufficient justification for undertaking the task. The order of 1659 stating that ancient temples are not to be torn down but new ones are not to be built is said to be restricted to Benares because "plenty of Hindu temples were built elsewhere in Mughal India during Aurangzeb's reign" (no example or reference stated). Another order of 1672 recalling all endowed lands given to Hindus and reserving all such future land grants to Muslims might have been a concession to the ulama is stated to have likely gone unenforced throughout the empire except in select areas of the Punjab. Particular instances of land grants which contradict this stance are also mentioned. Yet, the question often raised when this is expressed is how significant were these? How many Hindu individuals/institutions received them in comparison to Muslims? Absent any quantitative estimate, it is unclear whether such grants would negate this general (discriminatory) rule or represent only a few exceptions to it. The author argues that unlike today, temples at the time were perceived as linked to political action and were therefore considered legitimate targets of punitive state action. It notes that some Hindu rulers also have historically attacked the patron temples of their (Hindu) enemies. An instance of political action associated with

a place of worship cited is of Ajit Singh, ruler of Marwar destroying mosques built during the Mughal occupation of Jodhpur when he drove the imperial forces out. Again, while that may be true in principle, how important it was in practice can only be answered with numbers. How many such instances are to be found throughout Indian history and how does that number fare relative to the damage that Muslim rulers inflicted? The attack on Benares' Vishvanatha temple is stated to be retribution for its patrons being implicated in Shivaji's escape. Likewise, the desecration of Mathura's Keshava Deva temple was sponsored by Aurangzeb on account of the death of a Mughal commander and a patron of a major mosque in Mathura, during the Jat rebellion. Another explanation for the action against the Benares temple, as per Sadi Mustaq Khan, written in 1669 was as punishment for fraud, namely, that "deviant Brahmins" were cheating those who traveled great distance to learn from them by teaching "false books". The book also states that the emperor saw himself as an even-handed ruler of all Indians prompting him to extend state security to temples. Yet, it does not point out a single instance of him destroying/desecrating a mosque though evidence of persecution of eclectic Muslim groups such as the Ismailis for theological reasons is mentioned. The Faatwa-i-Alamgiri is said to excuse certain punishments as a reward for converting to Islam but we also learn that no organized conversion campaign was run or supported by the state and the number who did so was limited. The main motivating factors were advancement in the administrative hierarchy and avoidance of jizya tax. The downside (unclear how impactful this actually was) is said to have been closer state scrutiny as the emperor was more concerned with the values and practices of the faithful. In conclusion, the author's case that Aurangzeb was a complex personality who was not defined solely by his religion is a reasonable one. It, however, does not take away from the fact that his actions and pronouncements were bigoted and religion played an important part in it. Facts brought out in the book indicate a willingness to temper those beliefs for pragmatic reasons. For a monarch ruling for 49 years wearing multiple hats as the defender of his faith and protector of the realm with supporters to be appeased, rivals to be accommodated, enemies to be vanquished or compelled into submission and other roles, such compromises to his principles are only to be expected. Inferences drawn contrary to conventional views appear somewhat speculative and while not implausible, nonetheless are not always more persuasive than better known positions. Thus, to what extent that alters one's judgement of the emperor is again subjective; to me, the answer is: not much.

The world always remembers the bravest — those who have the courage to bravely stand up against the despots of each age. When it comes to taking a stand against the

pseudo-history being created by India's ultra right wing Hindutva groups, the names of famous historians such as Romila Thapar, and Richard Eaton immediately come to mind. Now add the name of Audrey Truschke to this esteemed group of scholars. Over the ages, the fertile lands of India have constantly attracted wave after wave of peoples to migrate and settle on its vast lands. From the natives in the Mesolithic and Neolithic ages, followed by the Harappans, then the Aryans, the Achaemenids, the Greeks, the Magadhans, the Scythians, the Parthians, the Huns, and finally the Muslims made India its home and hearth. The two things common to all these groups was that they all made India their permanent home - living and dying here, and secondly, none of these groups transferred wealth out of India. Firaq Gorakhpuri, the great Urdu poet wrote about these successive waves of people that made India into the grand mosaic that it now is, as follows: Sar Zamin-e-Hind par aqwaam-e-alam ke firaq Qafile guzarte gae Hindusthan banta gaya (Translation: On the lands of Hind, caravans from around the world kept arriving; and India kept taking shape) Fast forward to the British colonial period, and we see an abrupt departure from the tradition to settle on this land. The British came not to settle here, but to steal and ship all the wealth out of the country; tombstones of British civil servants who died in India unexpectedly due to disease mention of the sadness in dying in an alien land. The Persian term "Hindu" is a geographical identifier, under which the colonial British lumped together all non-Muslim residents of India, to serve their nefarious divide-and-rule policy. The British created this myth that people of the sub-continent before the Muslims' arrival followed a single homogeneous, indigenous religion called Hinduism, which was always at loggerheads with an alien invading religion Islam. In this colonial narrative you had "good Muslims" like Akbar who had given up Islam and adopted "Hindu beliefs" such as daily worship of the Sun; and then you had the "terrible Muslims" like Aurangzeb who dared to follow his Islamic beliefs, although, he was overall a very good and just administrator to all his subjects. The ultra right wing Hindutva groups in India adopted the colonial narrative of history, as it helped them unite the diverse Indian religions into a single entity, based on a perceived common enemy - the Muslims. Audrey Truschke's book "Aurangzeb: The life and Legacy of India's most controversial king" removes the hate-lenses from our eyes, so that we could see Aurangzeb for what he actually was. Using original Persian sources, Dr. Truschke shows us an efficient ruler who cared deeply for all subjects regardless of their religious beliefs. He appointed 50% more Hindu Rajas to his court than did the much touted Akbar. He granted lands and money for the building of

Hindu temples. Truschke writes, "In reality Aurangzeb pursued no overarching agenda vis-à-vis Hindus within his state. Hindus of the day often did not even label themselves as such and rather prioritized a medley of regional, sectarian, and caste identities (e.g. Rajput, Maratha, Brahmin, Vaishnava). As many scholars have pointed out, the word Hindu is Persian, not Sanskrit, and only became commonly used self-referentially during British colonialism. Truschke points out that Aurangzeb was fluent in Hindi from childhood, and quotes the Italian traveler Niccoli Manucci about Aurangzeb "He was of a melancholy temperament, always busy at something or another, wishing to execute justice and arrive at appropriate decisions. She also quotes Ishvaradasa, a Hindu astrologer, who wrote about Aurangzeb in Sanskrit in 1663 calling the king righteous (dharma) and even noted that the King's tax policies were lawful (vidhiyat). She also quotes the following stanza authored by Chandar Bhan Brahman, a Hindu, Persian-medium poet in Aurangzeb's employ: O King may the world bow to your command; May lips drip with expressions of thanks and salutations; Since it is your spirit that watches over the people, Wherever you are, may God watch over you! She continues "Hindus fared well in Aurangzeb's massive bureaucracy, finding employment and advancement opportunities. Since Akbar's time, Rajputs and other Hindus had served as full members of the Mughal administration. Like their Muslim counterparts, they received formal ranks known as mansabs that marked their status in the imperial hierarchy and fought to expand the empire. Truschke quotes Aurangzeb's February 1659 farman "You must see that nobody unlawfully disturbs the Brahmins or other Hindus of that region, so that they might remain in their place and pray for the continuance of the Empire. Truschke concludes "I have argued that Aurangzeb acted according to his ideals of justice, commitment to political and ethical conduct (adaab and akhlaq), and the necessities of politics. Aurangzeb's worldview was also shaped by his piety and the Mughal culture he inherited. He was not interested in fomenting Hindu-Muslim conflict as a modern obsession with modern stakes- but he was fixated on dispensing his brand of justice, upholding Mughal traditions, and expanding his grip across the subcontinent. A spellbinding, fascinating, absolute must read!

Piece of trash written by someone who has neither research skills nor respect for truth.

When authors like Kevin MacDonald deny the holocaust then they are rightly berated as anti-semites, but when authors deny genocidal crimes against Hindus, they still expect to be respected by the establishment and main stream media. This book was written with an agenda. It systematically whitewashes Aurangzeb and tries to minimize his atrocities. Unfortunately, Truschke comes too late, as Hindus nowadays see clearly through the lies and don't believe anymore any of the lies that they are dishing out. As can be seen even here, no one with an IQ over 50 gave this book any good reviews. Another reviewer has said that she comes from the Frankfurt School of Marxist historiography, and the author is indeed repeating the history rewritings and negationism of Marxist Indian historians like Irfan Habib. But unfortunately this book comes too late, as Hindus nowadays see clearly through such distortions, propaganda and rewritings. For a more truthful picture of Aurangzeb, read Jadunath Sarkar's "history of Aurangzeb", K.S. Lal or RC Majumdar, and for more about genocide denial, read Koenraad Elst's "Negationism in India: Concealing the Record of Islam", Arun Shourie's "Eminent Historians: Their Technology, Their Line, Their Fraud", Sita Ram Goel (Calcutta Quran Petition) or Harsh Narain.

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