The Mughal Empire and Historical Reputation: Crash Course World History #217

Crash Course: World History
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=====Introduction=====

John Green: Hi, I'm John Green, this is CrashCourse World History, and today, we're gonna talk about the Mughal Empire. And we're also going to talk about the two most important Mughal emperors, Akbar and Aurangzeb and how their historical reputations were made.

Me from the Past: Mr. Green, Mr. Green, don't you mean the Mongol empire?

John: Oh, me from the past, that reminds me of the time that you conflated the word 'fort' with the word 'forte', which, of course, you pronounced 'fort'. But on this occasion, you aren't entirely wrong. The Mughals were kind of the Mongols, but we'll get to that in a minute.

(Intro music plays)

=====Origins of the Mughals=====

So the Mughals were Muslims who created an empire in India that held power for roughly 200 years between the early 16th and early 18th centuries, although technically, the Mughal empire didn't come to an end until after the Indian rebellion against the British in 1857. Now the Mughals weren't the first Muslims in India -- those would have been merchants -- and they weren't even the first Muslims to rule significant parts of India -- that honor goes to the Delhi Sultanate, which began in 1206 in Northern India. But the Delhi Sultanate didn't last very long and was replaced by a bunch of regional kingdoms, and one of them, the Lodi Sultanate, had the misfortune of falling to the founder of the Mughal dynasty, Babur, in 1526. Not Babar, although that would have been awesome.

Babur was descended from Timur, the last great Central Asian conqueror in the Mongol tradition, and also from Chinghis Khan, which explains why Babur and his followers are called the Mughals - it's the Persian Arabic word for Mongols.

Now I know what you're saying, something like 12% of human beings currently living in the world are descended from Chinghis Khan, but Babur got in on the ground floor of it.

Anyway I think we have some footage of Babur raiding the Lodi Sultanate, don't we Stan?

Nah, I don't feel like that was actual file footage from 1206, I feel like that was a racist Hercules movie from Italy in the 1950s. So the Mughal Empire is really important in India's cultural history; I mean, the Taj Mahal was built during this time in architecture. In painting, we see a blending of Indian and Persian styles that demonstrate how cosmopolitan the empire was. But probably the most important aspect of the Mughals, at least as far as the contemporary world is concerned, is that they consolidated Muslim rule over much of India and they're largely the reason that today there are so many Indians who are also Muslims. And the Mughals were also a really interesting example of like, how to build and maintain an empire. All right, let's go to the ThoughtBubble.

=====Building and Maintaining the Empire=====

Muslims were a small minority ruling class vastly outnumbered by Hindus, and like many empires, they relied on military power and pursued expansionist policies. Like, most of the Mughal rulers, especially Akbar and Aurangzeb, spent a considerable amount of time trying to extend Mughal control over the entire Indian subcontinent, and they created a pretty effective empire. They were able to incorporate Indian princes into the ruling class while still retaining top positions for Muslims, they reorganized the bureaucracy and instituted an effective tax collection system, which was important because the empire was, of course, very expensive to run, as empires always are.

This meant that it was important to make accurate tax assessments, and taxes were usually collected by local leaders called Zamindars. Taxes had to be paid in cash, and this contributed to the growing commercialization of the Mughal empire. Reliance on Zamindars, who were important men in their communities, meant that the empire could collect revenue without being too disruptive to local village life, and although almost all of the revenue came from taxes on agriculture, the Mughals also taxed trade.

Another way that the Mughals were a typical empire is that their rulers engaged in building projects to enhance their prestige, from Persepolis to Rome to the Forbidden City, building monuments to one's greatness is what emperors do, and the Mughals were no exception. As Muslims, many of their building projects were mosques, but the Mughals also built forts and, most spectacularly, mausoleums. Thanks, ThoughtBubble.

=====Akbar=====

So, most history classes that mention the Mughals focus on the contrast between Akbar and Aurangzeb. Akbar comes off as a good ruler, and Aurangzeb is painted as the guy who ruined the empire. The typically positive historian's view of Akbar, who ruled from 1556 until 1605, can be summed up in this quote from Asher and Talbot's *India Before Europe*, "Through his reforms of administration and taxation, Akbar created a sound and enduring foundation for Mughal governance, while his tolerant attitude and inclusive policies toward Hindus and Jains helped create a state that was more Indian in character." That tolerance aspect is especially important. Like, Akbar rescinded the jizyah, the tax that non-Muslims had to pay. And in 1580 he gave all non-Muslims the same rights as Muslims, instituting a policy called Sulh-e-kul, which translates to "universal toleration".

Now, in part this policy was designed to lessen the power of Muslim religious scholars who might have been disturbed by the way that Akbar blended Islamic and Indian ideas of kingship, especially the idea that he was, you know, kind of a little bit divine. Slightly problematic idea to a lot of Muslim scholars, given that the foundation of the Islamic faith is the statement, "There is no God but God," but yeah... you know.

In addition to the Sulh-e-kul, Akbar built his reputation for toleration by sponsoring discussions of religion and philosophy. He even commissioned a building for religious discussions, the Ibadat Khana, where Muslims and Brahmins and Zoroastrians, Jains, Christians, all of them could talk theology. Akbar's support for intellectual pursuits are the kinds of things that modern historians like, and it's not all that surprising that he's remembered so favorably.

=====Aurangzeb=====

Historians are far less kind to Akbar's grandson, Aurangzeb, who ruled from 1658 until 1707. This is partly due to the work of J. N. Sarkar, who promoted the idea that Aurangzeb built an Islamic state

that discriminated against Hindus and other non-Muslims, which in turn led to a loss of unity across the Indian subcontinent, and eventually the decline of the empire.

And it's true that by the time of Aurangzeb's death in 1707, the Mughals were losing control over their empire. I mean, the stark reality of that decline came in 1757 when the British East India Company established itself permanently in Bengal and began its inexorable efforts to colonize all of India. But that was, you know, 50 years after Aurangzeb died. So maybe he shouldn't get all of the blame? In fact, whether these guys deserve their reputations really depends both on what aspects of their reign you look at and how you interpret them. As conquerors, Akbar and Aurangzeb had a lot in common.

Like, Akbar might have sponsored high-minded discussion but he was also willing to use extreme violence to keep his subjects in line. For example, he slaughtered thousands of inhabitants of the fort at Chittor and ordered his generals to pile up the skulls of Indian princes to frighten them into submission. That's not especially tolerant. And here's another detail of Akbar's rule that's meant to paint him as a modern enlightened ruler. Because he was interested in science, Akbar arranged an experiment: "...He had infants moved to a special house where no person was to talk to them, so that the natural language of mankind might be revealed. The experiment failed, but it is a reflection of Akbar's desire to explore in a scientific manner the nature of humans and what he believed to be their common condition." Now, you can read that as a leader trying to understand the underlying connections among all humans no matter their religious backgrounds. Or, you can read it as horrifying child abuse!

And then we have Aurangzeb who was a devout Muslim and did try to introduce Islamic principles into Mughal rule but the trend toward orthodoxy and away from Akbar's toleration had begun long before with his predecessor, Shah Jahan - he's best known for building the Taj Mahal, good work! Stan, he built it by himself? Oh, apparently he had some help. But the maintenance of the Taj Mahal took all the revenue from 30 villages. And maybe Aurangzeb's orthodoxy was less important than his desire to appear to be a sober and frugal leader. Aurangzeb was also accused of destroying temples in 1669 although, in fact, they were just damaged. And this was primarily done to send a political message to opponents, not as an act of religious orthodoxy.

He also tried to limit expenses in court by prohibiting the use of gold in men's garments, and he stopped the traditional practice of being weighed against gold on his birthday. Unlike Akbar, who is seen as being a patron of the arts, Aurangzeb is remembered for getting rid of court musicians and poets. But he got rid of them because of financial constraints. Well, and also because of his interpretation of Islamic law, and that last point interests me. For those who want to see him negatively, Aurangzeb's orthodox Islam had no room for musicians or poets. But it's also possible to see that decision as a prudent cost-saving measure.

Here's another detail from Aurangzeb's life that's been used to paint him as a zealot. "Aurangzeb, unlike his predecessors, was buried in a simple, outdoor grave, rather than an elaborate, and expensive, tomb." You could see that as a symbol of religious faith, or as a sign of humility, or an attempt by a thoughtful ruler to spare his subjects the expenses of, like, keeping up his tomb. That said, in the long run the Taj Mahal has done pretty well in terms of generating tourist money, whereas I don't think anyone's paying to see Aurangzeb's grave. But the thing is, Aurangzeb needed to save money. If he was a bad ruler it's mostly because he spent so much time and treasure fighting rebellions in the south of his empire and then neglected the north where unrest grew as well.

=====The Decline of the Mughal Empire=====

It's overly simplistic to say that the glory days of the Mughal Empire were about tolerance and the downfall was about intolerance. Really, there were lots of factors that played into the decline of the Mughal Empire, including growing factionalism at the Mughal court, the rise of regional powers, and the breakdown of the system of governance by local nobles.

Historians are in the business of making claims about what happened and supporting those claims with evidence. And often this evidence provides the details that make reading and learning about history so much fun. Now sometimes the details suggest only one interpretation but in many cases they can lead us to multiple conclusions. And the reigns of Akbar and Aurangzeb provide good examples of why we need to be careful with our details. It's possible that Aurangzeb was a terrible ruler because he tried impose Muslim orthodoxy on a Hindu majority. And no doubt many Hindus felt so, especially after he reinstituted the jizyah, and he did try to introduce Sharia law as the governing principle in the empire.

But it's also possible that Aurangzeb's bad reputation comes from a contemporary preference for tolerance over piety in our rulers. Or from a general feeling that states are better ruled by secular than religious laws. Or from the fact that it's just hard to rule a declining empire well - ask President Obama! Our experiences and biases make us more likely to see the dismissal or court musicians and poets as an example of religious fanaticism than as, like, a cost-saving measure. And maybe Akbar, who can be as brutal in his military conquests as any emperor, comes out in a good light because he did advocate religious toleration. But it wasn't totally, or even primarily, due to his religious tolerance that Akbar was able to win most of his wars. And the many rebellions against his reign suggest that he wasn't as popular with his subjects as he is today with historians.

=====Conclusion=====

One last note about the way that we look at the past can shape the present and vice versa. We need to be particularly careful here because the Mughals continued to play an important role in how Indians imagine themselves today. One of the roots of contemporary Hindu nationalism is pride at India's throwing off the shackles of imperialism. And for many Hindu nationalists, that history of imperialism starts not with the British, but with the Mughals. We often use history to define ourselves today and one of the most common ways to do that is to make negative claims about the people that we say we are not. And so when we look at historical figures we need to be conscious of the fact that *we* are looking at them. Thanks for watching, I'll see you next week.

=====Outro=====

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