

ANANTAM IAS · OPTIONAL NOTES

History Optional

The Mughal Empire in the Seventeenth Century

Paper 1 • Unit 21

Jahangir to Aurangzeb, the war of succession, Deccan policy and religious reversal: 65 marks in four years, and the century in which the empire peaked and cracked.

anantamias.com

UPSC SYLLABUS

The Mughal Empire in the seventeenth century: major administrative policies of Jahangir, Shahjahan and Aurangzeb; the empire and the zamindars; the nature of the Mughal state; late seventeenth century crisis; the revolts; the Ahom kingdom and Shivaji.

Jahangir and Shah Jahan

Two reigns often skipped between Akbar and Aurangzeb. Both carry administrative innovations named in the syllabus, so give each a paragraph.

- Accession in 1605 was followed by **Prince Khusrau's revolt**, whose suppression included the execution of **Guru Arjan** in 1606 and began the Mughal conflict with the Sikhs.
- Jahangir's **chain of justice** at Agra fort and the twelve ordinances of his accession were legitimating gestures, and the *Tuzuk-i-Jahangiri* records both with characteristic self-consciousness.
- Administratively his contribution was the **du-aspa sih-aspa** device, which allowed a noble's sawar obligation to be increased without disturbing his zat rank, adjusting military capacity without inflating the hierarchy.
- **Nur Jahan** married Jahangir in 1611 and exercised real power, issuing farmans, striking coin in her name and heading the junta with Itimad-ud-Daula and Asaf Khan, which the 2023 paper asked about directly.
- Historians divide on her: the older view of a **Nur Jahan junta** dominating a weak emperor has been questioned by **Ellison Banks Findly** and others who read her as an unusually capable political actor within normal court factionalism.
- Shah Jahan's reign from 1628 saw the empire at its greatest wealth, with revenue rising substantially and the building programme at Agra, Delhi and Lahore consuming a large share of it.
- Deccan policy hardened, with **Ahmadnagar annexed in 1633** and Bijapur and Golconda reduced to tributary status by the treaties of 1636, which Aurangzeb as viceroy would later seek to overturn.
- Failures abroad are examinable: the **Balkh and Badakhshan campaign of 1646 to 1647** was an expensive fiasco, and **Kandahar was lost to Persia in 1649** and never recovered despite three attempts.
- The **Bengal famine of 1630 to 1632** in Gujarat and the Deccan, described by Peter Mundy and by the Dutch factors, is the period's worst recorded subsistence crisis and a corrective to any picture of uniform prosperity.

The war of succession and Aurangzeb

Succession by armed contest is a structural feature of the Mughal system, not an accident, and the 1657 to 1659 war is its clearest illustration.

- Shah Jahan's illness in 1657 opened the contest between **Dara Shukoh, Shuja, Aurangzeb and Murad Bakhsh**, since the empire had no rule of primogeniture and no accepted mechanism of transfer.
- Aurangzeb won at **Dharmat and Samugarh in 1658**, imprisoned Shah Jahan at Agra, executed Dara in 1659 on a charge of apostasy, and eliminated his remaining brothers.

- Dara's execution matters intellectually as well as politically, since his **Majma-ul-Bahrain** and his Persian translation of the Upanishads as the *Sirr-i-Akbar* represented the Akbari synthesis at its most developed.
- **Satish Chandra's** reading treats the war as a contest between two conceptions of the state, a broad-based accommodation associated with Dara and a narrower orthodox one with Aurangzeb, while cautioning that noble factions followed calculation rather than ideology.
- Aurangzeb's reign of nearly fifty years falls into two halves, a northern phase to about 1681 and a **Deccan phase from 1681 to his death at Ahmadnagar in 1707**.
- Administrative style was personal and exhausting, with the emperor reading petitions himself, distrusting delegation, and outliving the generation of nobles who had begun with him.
- **Territorial peak** came with the annexation of **Bijapur in 1686 and Golconda in 1687**, which brought the empire to its greatest extent and simultaneously created the be-jagiri crisis by admitting Deccani nobles to an already crowded service.
- Twenty six years of Deccan war drained the treasury, tied down the army, and left the north under-governed, which is why most historians treat the Deccan as the empire's ulcer, borrowing Jadunath Sarkar's phrase.

Religious policy and its reversal

Asked in 2025 on whether Aurangzeb's religious policy reflected changed political realities. Answer it with evidence in both directions rather than with a verdict borrowed from either side.

- Measures usually cited are the **reimposition of jizya in 1679**, the abolition of many non-sharia taxes, the appointment of **muhtasibs** to enforce moral regulation, the ending of the jharokha darshan and of court music, and the demolition of certain temples.
- Temple destruction is documented at **Kashi Vishwanath in 1669 and Keshava Deva at Mathura in 1670**, and **Richard Eaton's** research established that the number of temples destroyed is in the tens rather than the thousands of popular claim.
- Eaton's further finding is that destruction was concentrated on temples associated with **rebellious or defecting political patrons**, which supports a political rather than a purely theological reading.
- Counter-evidence is substantial and belongs in any honest answer: Aurangzeb issued **farmans protecting and endowing temples** including Someshwar Nath Mahadev and the Balaji temple at Chitrakoot, and Hindu presence in the nobility actually rose.
- **Athar Ali's** figures show the proportion of Hindu, largely Maratha and Rajput, mansabdars increasing to roughly a third under Aurangzeb, which is difficult to reconcile with a simple communal reading.
- For the 2025 question, the political reading runs: jizya in 1679 came amid the Rajput crisis and the Maratha war and served to mobilise a constituency and raise revenue at a moment of strain, so it reflected changed realities rather than a lifelong programme.
- Consequences were real regardless of motive, since the **Rajput war from 1679** over the Marwar succession broke the alliance Akbar had built, and Mewar and Marwar were lost as props of the empire.
- **Satnami, Jat and Sikh revolts**, and the execution of **Guru Tegh Bahadur in 1675**, together produced armed resistance across the Gangetic and Punjab heartland at the moment the army was committed in the Deccan.

- Aurangzeb also **abolished around eighty non-sharia cesses** including rahdari transit duties and pandari market taxes, which lightened the burden on trade even as jizya raised it on non-Muslims, and the two measures together show fiscal calculation rather than a single religious logic.
- Modern scholarship, from **Eaton, Audrey Truschke and Munis Faruqi**, resists both the nationalist bigot and the apologist reformer, and the strongest answer works from documented acts and their political context.

The empire and the zamindars

Named explicitly in the syllabus and central to the crisis question. Zamindars were the hinge on which imperial revenue turned.

- Zamindars were **hereditary intermediaries with a customary claim on the produce**, ordinarily about a tenth, and they were not proprietors in the later legal sense of the word.
- **Nurul Hasan** classified them into primary zamindars holding proprietary rights in land, secondary zamindars holding revenue collection rights, and autonomous chieftains, and that classification is the standard citation.
- Their function was indispensable, since the empire lacked the staff to collect from millions of cultivators directly, so the state contracted the task to men with local armed followings.
- Their **armed strength** was considerable, and Abul Fazl's figures in the Ain suggest zamindari retainers across the empire outnumbered the imperial cavalry many times over.
- **Irfan Habib** argued that intensified revenue demand pushed zamindars into rebellion and peasants into flight, so the agrarian crisis and the zamindari problem are two aspects of one process.
- **Muzaffar Alam's** counter-reading from Awadh and Punjab holds that zamindars rebelled from strength rather than desperation, using rising regional prosperity to bargain for autonomy.
- That disagreement matters for the crisis question, since Habib's peasantry is being crushed while Alam's local elites are getting richer, and the two produce different accounts of what went wrong.
- **Madad-i-maash** grants of revenue-free land to scholars and religious figures ran alongside the zamindari structure, and their expansion under Aurangzeb further reduced the pool of assignable revenue.
- Caste and community mattered, with **Jat, Rajput, Bundela, Maratha and Sikh** zamindari groups converting local revenue power into regional political power across the seventeenth century.

KEY TERMS

Zamindar — A hereditary holder of a customary claim on produce with local armed following, contracted by the state to collect revenue.

The late seventeenth century crisis and the revolts

Named in the syllabus, and this is where Paper 1 hands over to the Eighteenth Century unit. Present the crisis structurally and use the revolts as evidence.

- **Jagirdari crisis** in Satish Chandra's formulation is the core mechanism: claimants to jagirs multiplied faster than assignable revenue, so nobles received paper assignments worth far less than their nominal jama.

- **Be-jagiri**, the condition of holding rank without a productive assignment, worsened sharply after the Deccan annexations added Bijapuri and Golconda nobles to the service.
- **Agrarian crisis** in Habib's account followed, since jagirdars holding short-term transferable assignments had every incentive to extract the maximum before transfer and none to invest.
- **Jat revolts** under Gokla in 1669 and Rajaram in 1685 in the Mathura region, and the **Satnami rising of 1672** near Narnaul, are the Gangetic evidence of the strain.
- **Sikh resistance** hardened after 1675, and Guru Gobind Singh's founding of the **Khalsa in 1699** created a disciplined community whose struggle continued under Banda Bahadur after 1708.
- **Ahom resistance** in the northeast defeated Mughal forces decisively at **Saraighat in 1671** under Lachit Barphukan, and Assam was never absorbed, which is a useful corrective to any picture of unstoppable expansion.
- **Shivaji** built the Maratha state from the 1650s, sacked Surat in 1664 and 1670, escaped from Agra in 1666, and crowned himself **chhatrapati at Raigad in 1674**, establishing an independent sovereignty rather than a rebellion.
- Maratha administration under Shivaji rested on the **ashtapradhan** council, on forts, on a paid army rather than jagirs where possible, and on **chaauth and sardeshmukhi** levied outside his territory.
- **Surat**, sacked twice, mattered because it was the empire's principal port and the pilgrim gateway to Mecca, so the raids were an attack on Mughal prestige as much as on its revenue.
- After Shivaji's death in 1680 and Sambhaji's execution in 1689, Maratha resistance became a **decentralised guerrilla war** that the Mughal army could not end, and it is this rather than any single battle that broke the empire's finances.

The nature of the Mughal state

Named in the syllabus and asked in 2023 for Akbar's reign, so the debate is examinable in either unit. Learn four positions and pick one.

- **Centralised bureaucratic empire** is the Aligarh position, argued by **Irfan Habib and M. Athar Ali**, resting on the uniform mansab and revenue systems and on a salaried transferable service class.
- **Patrimonial-bureaucratic** is **Stephen Blake's** Weberian reading, in which the empire is an extension of the imperial household and personal loyalty to the emperor is the organising principle.
- **Segmentary or negotiated sovereignty** appears in **Muzaffar Alam and Sanjay Subrahmanyam**, who emphasise that Mughal authority operated through continuous bargaining with zamindars and regional elites rather than through command.
- **J. F. Richards** occupies the middle ground, describing a genuinely effective centralised system that nonetheless depended on the cooperation of local intermediaries it could not replace.
- Evidence for centralisation includes standardised **mansab, zabt, dam accounting, the news writers or waqia navis** and the transferability of jagirs, all of which imply real institutional reach.
- Evidence against includes the persistence of **nasaq assessment outside the core**, the autonomy of chieftains, the scale of zamindari armed strength, and the speed of eighteenth century fragmentation.
- **Legitimacy** deserves a line, since Mughal sovereignty rested on Timurid descent, on the Persianate ideal of the just king, and after Akbar on sulh-i-kul, and it outlived actual power by a century.

- The position to argue: the Mughal state was more centralised than any Indian predecessor and less centralised than its own documents claim, and its stability depended on a bargain with intermediaries that the late seventeenth century fiscal squeeze broke.

Writing the answer

Four questions in four years, on Nur Jahan, gunpowder, Aurangzeb's religious policy and Mughal imperial authority. Notice that three of the four are about ideology or legitimacy.

- Where a question names **imperial authority**, as the 2026 one did on Akbar to Aurangzeb, structure it as Timurid descent, Persianate kingship, sulh-i-kul and its reversal, and the material machinery beneath.
- On Aurangzeb, always separate **documented acts** from **motive**, give Eaton's finding on the scale and pattern of temple destruction, and note the rise in Hindu mansabdars.
- Use **Satish Chandra for the jagirdari crisis**, **Habib for the agrarian one**, **Alam for the regional counter-reading**, and say which you find persuasive.
- Bring the **Ahoms and Shivaji** into any question on the late seventeenth century, since the syllabus names both and most scripts mention neither.
- Resist the temptation to write Aurangzeb as the sole cause of decline; the structural mechanisms were operating before him and the empire survived him by decades in form.

Last-mile revision

- Jahangir 1605, Khusrau's revolt and Guru Arjan's execution 1606, du-aspa sih-aspa, Nur Jahan from 1611.
- Shah Jahan 1628, Ahmadnagar annexed 1633, Balkh 1646-47, Kandahar lost 1649, famine 1630-32.
- War of succession 1657-59: Dharmat and Samugarh 1658, Dara executed 1659; Dara's Sirr-i-Akbar and Majma-ul-Bahrain.
- Aurangzeb to 1707; Deccan phase from 1681; Bijapur 1686, Golconda 1687; jizya reimposed 1679.
- Eaton on temple destruction: tens not thousands, concentrated on politically disloyal patrons; Athar Ali on rising Hindu mansabdars.
- Nurul Hasan's three zamindar types; Habib on agrarian crisis; Alam on rebellion from strength.
- Revolts: Jat 1669 and 1685, Satnami 1672, Guru Tegh Bahadur 1675, Khalsa 1699, Saraighat 1671, Shivaji crowned 1674.
- State models: Habib and Athar Ali centralised, Blake patrimonial-bureaucratic, Alam and Subrahmanyam negotiated, Richards in between.

Common errors to avoid

- Treating Aurangzeb as the sole cause of decline. The jagirdari and agrarian mechanisms predate him and the empire survived him in form for a century.
- Repeating the claim of thousands of temples destroyed. Eaton's documented figure is in the tens and the pattern is political.

- Omitting that Hindu mansabdars increased under Aurangzeb. Athar Ali's numbers complicate the simple reading and examiners know it.
- Presenting Nur Jahan through the junta thesis alone. Findly and others read her as a capable actor in ordinary factional politics.
- Forgetting the Ahoms. Saraighat in 1671 is named in the syllabus and almost never appears in scripts.
- Calling Shivaji a rebel. The 1674 coronation was a deliberate assertion of independent sovereignty with its own ritual and administration.

Mains Practice

Trace the formulation of Mughal imperial authority from Akbar to Aurangzeb, focusing on Persian ideas of kingship.

20 marks · 250 words · 2026

Discuss the role of Nur Jahan in Mughal court politics during Jahangir's reign.

20 marks · 250 words · 2023

“Aurangzeb's religious policy was a reflection of the changed political realities of the Mughal Empire.” Elucidate.

15 marks · 200 words · 2025

Gunpowder changed the character of warfare in India during the Mughal era. Elucidate.

10 marks · 150 words · 2025