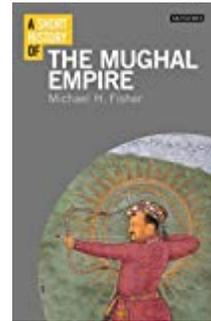




**Michael Herbert Fisher.** *A Short History of the Mughal Empire.* London: I.B.Tauris, 2015. 256 pp. \$15.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-84885-873-2.



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## Mughal History

Among all precolonial empires of South Asia, the Mughal Empire has received the most scholarly attention. The historiography is rich and diverse, as scholars have approached the empire from various perspectives. Many general histories of the Mughal Empire have been written in the past for students and nonspecialist readers. Michael Fisher's *A Short History of the Mughal Empire* is the latest and an important addition to the literature on the history of the Mughal Empire. Fisher does an excellent job by presenting the history of the Mughal Empire in a way that introduces the subject in its entirety and with all nuances to the reader without spilling much ink on detailing the complex nature of the administrative institutions or major historiographical debates and issues, in which nonspecialist readers may not necessarily be interested. While the book is a history of the political developments in Mughal India, the author delves into the social and cultural landscapes of India in which the Mughals played their imperial political and cultural roles and from which they immensely benefited. What also distinguishes this book from many previous general

histories of the Mughal Empire is the author's overall objective assessment of the historical processes and developments during that period. The book treats the history of the empire as a long process consisting of different phases in which the empire morphed from its origins in the early sixteenth century to its decline and disintegration in the eighteenth century.

The book contains an introduction and eleven well-written short chapters, which are divided into four parts. In the three chapters comprising part 1, the author outlines the political developments in Central Asia and India leading to the conquest of northern India by Babur in 1526 and describes the establishment of the Mughal Empire and its uneven trajectory in the first three decades. Chapter 1, on Babur's early career, is indeed intriguing. It provides the significant Central Asian background to Babur's advance into Afghanistan and his eventual conquest of northern India. The author lays out the political landscape that Babur as a young prince had to navigate through in the first quarter of the sixteenth century. He details the challenges of clan- and family-based

rivalry among the Timurid, Mongol, Uzbek, and Safavid aspirants of political power in Central Asia and Babur's responses to those challenges, which included creating a loyal band of warrior-soldiers and building strategic political and matrimonial alliances. In chapter 2, Fisher highlights the challenges that Babur faced in India after his military victory against Ibrahim Lodi in 1526. The author offers a broad overview of the environmental, social, cultural, economic, and political diversity in India and underscores the challenges and opportunities that this diversity presented to Babur and to the empire he was trying to build. The next chapter deals with the crisis that arose out of Babur's death in 1530 and his son Humayun's predicaments with the Sur Afghan rulers of Delhi and east of it and the rulers of Gujarat. It describes in detail some major political developments in north India which resulted in Humayun losing his kingdom to the Afghans in 1540 and regaining it fifteen years later. This part of the book is useful to understand the history of the Mughal Empire as it lays out the circumstances in which the empire was established and the challenges that the Mughals faced in the initial decades. With Humayun's sudden death in 1555, the nascent empire once again plunged into a major political crisis. His son, Jalaluddin, then a twelve-year-old prince, was installed on the Mughal throne. How the young emperor overcame the challenges during his early years of rule and how he was able to consolidate and expand the empire are questions that the author explores in part 2 of this book (chapters 4-6).

The main challenge to his sovereignty, according to Fisher, came from his half and foster brothers and clan factions led by powerful Central Asian nobles. Akbar used this faction-ridden nobility to his advantage and defeated all his rival claimants to the throne. He also entered into strategic intra-Timurid marriage alliances to consolidate his political power. Later, he married a few Rajput princesses and noblewomen, including the daughter of the ruler of Amber, which bound the Mughal and Rajput ruling families into a mutually beneficial political alliance. He awarded high ranks and offices to his Rajput in-laws, many of whom played a significant role in the administrative and military affairs of the empire. This alliance also had a major influence on Akbar's policies with regard to taxation and his views on religion. In chapter 5, the author describes the fiscal and administrative measures of Akbar and the vital role they played in the stability and expansion of the empire. Fisher discusses some innovative changes that Akbar introduced in the administration of revenue and in the military organi-

zation. He discusses the main attributes of the key institutions, such as *mansab* (rank) and *jagir* (land assigned to imperial officials), as well as their significance for the empire. Akbar's extraordinary engagement with art, architecture, religion, and spirituality, which also contributed significantly to the long-term success of the empire, is given a fair treatment in chapter 6. In this fascinating chapter, Fisher walks us through half a century of Akbar's ideological and spiritual journey and his patronage of art, architecture, literature, and culture. The high point in Akbar's spiritual journey and the search for a universal basis for all religions was the promulgation of *sulh-i kul* (absolute or universal peace). Akbar gave up his strong identification with Sunni Islam in the 1580s and created an imperial spiritual cult known as *tauhid-i ilahi*. This chapter is a useful introduction to the nature of the relationship between state and religion in Mughal India. When Akbar died in 1605, stable revenue and military systems were in place and Bengal and Gujarat, the most industrious regions of the subcontinent with substantial maritime trade, had been incorporated into the empire.

The next three chapters (chapters 7-9), in part 3, cover the history of the Mughal Empire under emperors Jahangir, Shah Jahan, and Aurangzeb Alamgir respectively. The author highlights the major political developments, such as the wars of succession, and artistic, architectural, and cultural accomplishments during this period. Like Akbar, as Fisher describes in chapter 7, Jahangir's quest for a universal religious and political ideology led him to self-identify with the Chishti Sufi order and, at the same time, exchange ideas with Hindu and Jain scholars/ascetics and Jesuit missionaries. Jahangir also forged strategic matrimonial alliances for himself and his sons with various Timurid and Safavid noblewomen and Rajput princesses. The chapter also details the political ascendancy of Nur Jahan and the politics of patronage during her rule, which set the context for Shah Jahan's rebellion and his later accession to the throne after Jahangir's death in 1628. In the next chapter, Fisher describes Shah Jahan's major political and cultural achievements. He highlights the cultural refinement obtained during Shah Jahan's reign as manifested in the paintings he commissioned and in the construction of the Taj Mahal and the Shahjahanabad fort in Delhi. Fisher rightly notes that Shah Jahan's period marks a shift in the attributes of kingship and a turn toward religious orthodoxy, symbolized in the emperor's association with orthodox Sunni *ulama* (religious scholars) and the Naqshbandis. Shah Jahan's son and successor, Aurangzeb Alamgir, would use the Sunni Islamic orthodoxy

as a political ideology to pursue his imperial ambitions. In chapter 9, the author highlights the changes that Aurangzeb introduced in the court culture and rituals such as his personal piety and purging the courtâs culture and protocols of âalleged unorthodox and un-Islamic practicesâ (p. 188). This had some serious implications for the political stability of the empire and seemingly contributed to some strong resistance and rebellions by local zamindars (landholders) and ambitious nobles. During his half-century rule, Aurangzeb remained preoccupied with âwars of suppressionâ (p. 186) and wars in Rajasthan against the Rajputs, who had been alienated by his orthodox policies, and in the Deccan against the sultanates of Bijapur and Golkonda and then against the Marathas. These wars depleted the treasury, rendered the fiscal and military administrative institutions inefficient, and caused hardships to peasants and other producers and merchants. Aurangzeb had no time to address these challenges and the war of succession that followed his death in 1707 among his less capable sons and grandsons aggravated the crisis, leading to the disintegration of the Mughal Empire in the early eighteenth century. The war of succession and unprecedented short regimes that came in one after another form the theme of the penul-

timate chapter (chapter 10). The author provides a brief overview of the political developments from 1707 to 1857. In the last chapter (chapter 11), the author describes the historical and contemporary perspectives on the Mughal Empire. He shows how the people understood the empire and how its meanings have evolved over a period since the seventeenth century. It is here that we get glimpses of a long historiographical tradition in which historians and scholars have applied different approaches to the study of the Mughal Empire and come up with divergent interpretations.

The book under review is a perfect short introductory book for any student and nonspecialist who is interested in the history of the Mughal Empire in particular and of South Asia and the history of empire in general. As a prolific writer and an excellent teacher, Michael Fisher knows how to convey the subject to his audience in an effective and engaging way. This book is a fine example of his erudition, insightfulness, and effective and accessible writing.

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