

THE ECONOMIC POLICIES OF AURANGZEB: A CRITICAL REVIEW

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Abstract:

This study explores the economic policies of Aurangzeb, the sixth Mughal emperor, whose reign from 1658 to 1707 marked a significant shift in the Mughal Empire's economic landscape. Building on the foundations laid by his predecessors, Aurangzeb implemented a series of policies that aimed to centralize revenue collection and assert Islamic governance. The review highlights the reintroduction of the jizya tax on non-Muslims, which not only alienated large sections of the population but also disrupted trade networks and undermined economic stability. Aurangzeb's reliance on the **Zabt system**, which standardized tax collection based on agricultural productivity, often resulted in severe burdens on the peasantry. This rigidity exacerbated agrarian distress and contributed to widespread revolts, particularly from the Marathas. Additionally, his military campaigns drained imperial resources and diverted funds that could have been used for infrastructure and economic development.

The review further examines how Aurangzeb's focus on military expenditure and religious orthodoxy limited support for the arts and crafts that had previously flourished under Mughal patronage. As the emperor prioritized fortifications over cultural projects, the economic dynamism of the empire began to stagnate. Ultimately, the review argues that Aurangzeb's economic policies, rooted in an austere interpretation of Islam, contributed to the decline of the Mughal Empire. The combination of heavy taxation, military burdens, and religious discrimination fostered socio-economic fragmentation and unrest, paving the way for regional powers and colonial encroachment. This analysis offers insights into the complexities of Aurangzeb's governance and the long-lasting impacts of his policies on the Indian subcontinent.

Keywords: Economic Policies, Aurangzeb etc.

INTRODUCTION:

Aurangzeb, the sixth Mughal emperor, ruled from 1658 to 1707 and is often regarded as one of the most controversial figures in Indian history. Born on November 3, 1618, in Dohad, India, he was the third son of Shah Jahan and Mumtaz Mahal. Aurangzeb ascended the throne after a brutal struggle for power against his brothers, ultimately executing his rival, Dara Shikoh. His reign is characterized by a strict adherence to Islamic principles, which led to significant changes in governance. Aurangzeb reimposed the jizya tax on non-Muslims, reversing his grandfather Akbar's policy of religious tolerance. His military campaigns, especially against the Marathas, significantly strained the empire's resources and led to widespread discontent among various communities. Despite his focus on expansion, Aurangzeb's policies contributed to the decline of the Mughal Empire. His orthodox stance alienated Hindu subjects and intensified regional rivalries, fostering unrest. The economic

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burden of his military campaigns and rigid taxation policies fueled agrarian distress, leading to revolts and weakening central authority. Aurangzeb died on March 3, 1707, leaving behind a fragmented empire that struggled to maintain control over its vast territories. His legacy remains divisive; some view him as a defender of Islamic values, while others criticize his policies for sowing the seeds of communal discord and contributing to the empire's eventual decline.

OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY:

This study explores the economic policies of Aurangzeb.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY:

This study is based on secondary sources of data such as articles, books, journals, research papers, websites and other sources.

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Aurangzeb, the sixth Mughal emperor, ruled from 1658 to 1707, presiding over one of the largest empires in Indian history. His reign marked significant shifts in economic policies, which were shaped by his ideology, governance style, and responses to various internal and external pressures. While Aurangzeb is often remembered for his orthodox Islamic policies and military campaigns, his economic strategies have profound implications on the socio-economic fabric of the time. Aurangzeb inherited a robust economy from his predecessors, particularly from Akbar, who had established a centralized revenue system and encouraged trade and agriculture. However, Aurangzeb's approach to governance diverged sharply from his forebears. His reign was characterized by a focus on Islamic orthodoxy, which influenced his policies and administration. The economic framework under Aurangzeb can be broadly categorized into revenue collection, land revenue policies, trade regulations, and state expenditure.

One of Aurangzeb's first significant economic measures was the adjustment of land revenue policies. Under his reign, the Mughal administration implemented the **Zabt system**, which sought to standardize tax collection based on the productivity of land. While this system was initially designed to increase state revenues and facilitate efficient tax collection, it often led to harsh demands on peasants. The Zabt system required farmers to pay a fixed percentage of their harvest as tax, regardless of the agricultural yield or adverse weather conditions. Consequently, this rigidity placed immense pressure on the agrarian class, resulting in widespread agrarian distress.

The economic policies under Aurangzeb were also characterized by the **re-imposition of the jizya**, a tax levied on non-Muslims. This decision, rooted in his commitment to Islamic governance, had a profound economic impact. The reintroduction of the jizya not only alienated the Hindu population but also disrupted trade networks, as many merchants and traders began to feel the burden of the tax. This policy shift contradicted Akbar's inclusive approach and led to discontent among various communities, undermining the economic stability that had been fostered during the previous reigns. The re-imposition of jizya and its

effects reflected Aurangzeb's broader strategy of consolidating Islamic rule, but it came at a significant economic cost. Aurangzeb's military campaigns, especially against the Marathas, further strained the empire's resources. The prolonged military engagements drained the imperial treasury and diverted funds that could have been allocated to infrastructure development and economic initiatives. The heavy taxation required to fund these campaigns exacerbated the plight of the peasantry and led to widespread revolts. The Maratha resistance was fueled by not only regional aspirations but also by the economic disenfranchisement experienced by their communities. This period of military expenditure, coupled with the Zabt system's rigid tax structure, contributed to a cycle of poverty and agrarian unrest.

Trade during Aurangzeb's reign was heavily regulated. While the Mughal Empire had previously benefitted from thriving trade routes and a flourishing economy, Aurangzeb's policies restricted many of these benefits. His focus on Islamic principles often manifested in trade regulations that favored Muslim traders over their Hindu counterparts. Additionally, the stringent enforcement of Islamic law in commercial transactions complicated trade relationships, leading to increased tension between different communities. This regulatory environment stifled entrepreneurship and inhibited the economic dynamism that had characterized earlier Mughal rule.

Aurangzeb's administration also witnessed a marked decline in support for the arts and cultural initiatives, which were vital to the economic landscape of the empire. Under Akbar, the arts had flourished, contributing to a vibrant economy through patronage that encouraged crafts and industry. However, Aurangzeb's austere and orthodox stance led to a decline in royal patronage for artisans and craftsmen, who had previously found support in the imperial court. This decline in patronage not only impacted the cultural landscape but also had economic ramifications, as the arts were integral to trade, tourism, and the overall economy.

The construction of monumental architecture, a hallmark of Mughal rule, also suffered during Aurangzeb's reign. While earlier emperors invested in grand projects that stimulated local economies, Aurangzeb's focus shifted toward fortifications and military architecture. This shift reflected his priorities in consolidating power rather than fostering economic prosperity through public works. The reduced investment in architecture and infrastructure development limited employment opportunities and economic growth, contributing to a stagnation that would have long-term consequences for the empire.

The implications of Aurangzeb's economic policies extended beyond immediate effects on the agrarian class and trade networks; they also contributed to the broader socio-political landscape of the time. Discontent among various communities, fueled by heavy taxation and discriminatory policies, fostered an environment ripe for rebellion. The Maratha Empire, which had been a significant regional power, capitalized on these sentiments, launching a series of revolts that would challenge Mughal authority. The socio-economic disenfranchisement experienced by various communities became a rallying point for anti-Mughal sentiment, ultimately leading to the fragmentation of the empire.

In addition to internal strife, Aurangzeb's policies also had significant international implications. The decline of the Mughal Empire's economic stability during his reign created

a power vacuum that attracted external powers, such as the British and the French. The weakened Mughal authority and diminishing economic influence made it easier for European colonial powers to establish footholds in India, altering the course of Indian history. The economic policies that Aurangzeb implemented, combined with his military focus, paved the way for colonial exploitation, setting the stage for centuries of foreign domination.

Furthermore, the economic distress that emerged during Aurangzeb's reign had long-lasting consequences for the Mughal Empire's legacy. The rigid tax structures, combined with oppressive policies against non-Muslims, sowed seeds of division that would manifest in communal tensions for generations. The socio-economic fragmentation that Aurangzeb's policies contributed to undermined the Mughal Empire's unity, leading to a decline in its authority and power.

Impact on Agricultural Productivity and Land Revenue System

Aurangzeb's economic policies profoundly impacted agricultural productivity and the overall agrarian landscape of the Mughal Empire. The Zabt system, while intended to streamline tax collection, often disregarded local agricultural practices and socio-economic realities. This rigidity resulted in the exploitation of farmers, who were subject to fixed tax rates that did not account for crop failures due to drought, floods, or pests. Unlike his predecessor, Akbar, who had adopted a more flexible and humane approach towards taxation, Aurangzeb's administration was characterized by a lack of sensitivity to the challenges faced by agrarian communities. As agricultural productivity declined, so did the ability of farmers to pay taxes. The increasing pressure from the state led many to resort to borrowing from moneylenders, who charged exorbitant interest rates. Consequently, many farmers fell into a cycle of debt, losing their lands and becoming tenants or laborers. This erosion of the peasant class not only reduced agricultural output but also undermined the economic base of the Mughal Empire. The resulting agrarian distress led to widespread uprisings, notably in regions like Bengal and the Deccan, further destabilizing the empire.

The economic implications of these agricultural policies were significant. The Mughal Empire, once a thriving agrarian economy, began to face food shortages and declining revenues. The lack of support for agricultural innovation or infrastructure, such as irrigation systems, further exacerbated these issues. While Akbar's policies had fostered agricultural growth and security, Aurangzeb's inflexible taxation and oppressive land revenue systems dismantled the socio-economic fabric of rural India, leading to long-term economic stagnation.

Decline of Trade and Economic Isolationism

Another critical aspect of Aurangzeb's economic policies was the decline in trade and the move towards economic isolationism. During the Mughal Empire's height, particularly under Akbar, India was a hub of trade, connecting East and West through various routes. The Mughal administration encouraged commerce, which not only bolstered the economy but also facilitated cultural exchanges. However, Aurangzeb's reign marked a notable shift towards isolationism, largely driven by his religious policies and military engagements. Aurangzeb

imposed strict regulations on trade, which affected the previously flourishing markets. The re-imposition of the jizya and other taxes on non-Muslims created an environment of economic discrimination that discouraged trade. Merchants faced additional burdens due to increased taxation and bureaucratic red tape, leading to reduced commercial activity. The emphasis on Islamic purity led to suspicions against Hindu traders and artisans, which fostered a climate of distrust and reluctance to engage in trade across religious lines.

Moreover, the continued military campaigns, particularly against the Marathas and the Deccan kingdoms, further disrupted trade routes and local economies. These conflicts diverted attention and resources from economic development, as the state prioritized military expenditure over fostering trade and commerce. The decline of trade during Aurangzeb's reign not only limited the Mughal Empire's economic growth but also diminished its international standing, making it less competitive against European powers that were expanding their trade networks in the region. The consequences of this isolationist approach were severe. By the time of Aurangzeb's death in 1707, the Mughal Empire was no longer the vibrant economic entity it had once been. The shift from an open, trade-oriented economy to one characterized by restrictions and discrimination weakened India's economic position in global trade, making it more vulnerable to external powers seeking to establish trade dominance.

Effects on Regional Economies and Rise of Regional Powers

The economic policies of Aurangzeb also significantly impacted regional economies and contributed to the rise of local powers that eventually challenged Mughal authority. As central revenue systems became increasingly oppressive, many regions experienced economic distress, leading to the emergence of regional leaders and autonomous states. The Marathas, Sikhs, and Rajputs, among others, began to assert their independence, fueled by resentment against Aurangzeb's heavy-handed taxation and religious policies. The Marathas, under the leadership of figures like Shivaji, capitalized on the agrarian distress and discontent among the peasantry. They employed guerrilla tactics and rallied support from local populations who were adversely affected by Mughal policies. The Maratha Empire's rise during Aurangzeb's reign was a direct response to the economic policies that alienated significant sections of society. The Marathas were able to establish a decentralized system of governance, providing relief to agrarian communities by adopting more flexible taxation policies that were sympathetic to local needs.

Similarly, in Punjab, the rise of the Sikh Confederacy can be traced back to discontent with Aurangzeb's policies. The economic pressures faced by rural populations led to the mobilization of various groups that sought to assert their autonomy and challenge Mughal authority. The regional powers that emerged during and after Aurangzeb's reign filled the power vacuum left by a weakened Mughal state, leading to a fragmentation of authority that the empire struggled to control. The emergence of these regional powers not only weakened the central Mughal authority but also set the stage for the eventual decline of the empire. As local leaders consolidated power, they implemented their own economic policies, often reversing the oppressive measures imposed by Aurangzeb. This shift created a more

decentralized economic landscape, further diminishing the Mughal Empire's influence and control over its territories.

Critics of Aurangzeb's economic policies argue that his orthodox Islamic approach and prioritization of military campaigns led to a neglect of economic governance. While the emperor aimed to strengthen the Mughal state through strict adherence to Islamic law, the implementation of these policies often had adverse effects on the economy and society. The rigid tax structures, the imposition of discriminatory taxes, and the focus on military expenditure overshadowed the need for economic development and social cohesion. In retrospect, Aurangzeb's economic policies illustrate the complexities of governance in a diverse and expansive empire. His reign, marked by religious orthodoxy and military expansionism, diverged significantly from the inclusive and economically vibrant policies of his predecessors. The consequences of these policies, including agrarian distress, trade disruptions, and social fragmentation, had far-reaching implications for the Mughal Empire's stability and legacy.

CONCLUSION:

Aurangzeb's economic policies significantly shaped the trajectory of the Mughal Empire during his reign from 1658 to 1707. His emphasis on Islamic orthodoxy and military expansion altered the inclusive economic framework established by his predecessors. The reintroduction of the jizya tax and the rigid implementation of the Zabt system imposed heavy burdens on the agrarian population, leading to widespread discontent and revolts. These policies not only alienated non-Muslim communities but also disrupted trade networks and economic stability. Furthermore, Aurangzeb's focus on military campaigns drained the empire's resources, diverting funds from vital infrastructure and cultural initiatives that had previously bolstered the economy. As a result, the vibrant arts and crafts that characterized earlier Mughal rule experienced decline, stifling economic dynamism. Aurangzeb's reign is marked by a complex interplay of economic challenges and socio-political fragmentation, which contributed to the decline of the Mughal Empire. His policies fostered an environment of unrest that paved the way for the rise of regional powers and colonial interests, leaving a lasting impact on the Indian subcontinent's historical landscape. The consequences of his economic decisions continue to resonate in contemporary discussions about governance, identity, and community relations in India.

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