

Shivaji vs Aurangzeb

A governorship from Delhi is like an enticing prostitute.
 Seeing her beauty, who doesn't long to possess her?
 Her manner is to conquer the world by the power of trickery.
 Whomever she approaches she immediately renders penniless.
 Bhushan says, spending time in her company brings no reward.
 —*Bhushan Tripathi, a Hindi poet working under Shivaji, 1673*

SHIVAJI BHONSLE MOUNTED THE MOST FAMOUS opposition to Aurangzeb's expansionist agenda. Shivaji was a Maratha warrior who became, eventually, a self-made king. He was born to a low-caste family and later underwent an elaborate Brahmin-led ritual to become a Rajput, a kshatriya who could legitimately lead an independent state (Shivaji's state propaganda pitched this as recovering his forgotten lineage). Shivaji created significant problems for Aurangzeb, and the Mughal king tried for decades, largely unsuccessfully, to quell the Maratha warrior's destructive assaults on imperial strongholds.

Shivaji was a thorn in Aurangzeb's side even before Aurangzeb ascended the throne. Shivaji spent the 1650s carving a state out of the rolling hills of the western Deccan, near modern-day Pune. He first resisted Aurangzeb directly in 1657 when the prince was directing Shah Jahan's Deccan campaigns. When Aurangzeb abruptly left central India in order to fight for the Mughal throne, Shivaji took the opportunity to seize further territory.

By the 1660s, Shivaji commanded a force of 10,000 cavalry and 50,000 infantry, which he deployed against Mughal targets. Shivaji was a master of guerilla warfare and raids, much more adept at nimble operations than the bulky Mughal army. I have already described, for instance, how in April of 1663 he infiltrated the house of Shaysta Khan, Aurangzeb's

maternal uncle, in Pune with only a few dozen men and killed several of Shaysta Khan's wives and his son. In January of 1664, Shivaji raided Surat, one of the busiest ports on the western coast, with a population of 200,000, and plundered the city for days while its Mughal governor cowered in a nearby fort.

Unable to bear such humiliations and breaches of state security, in early 1665 Aurangzeb ordered Mirza Raja Jai Singh to pursue Shivaji. Jai Singh, leader of the Kachhwaha Rajputs and a Hindu, was one of the chief Rajputs who supported Aurangzeb in the war of succession. After being besieged by Jai Singh in the Purandar hill fort for two months, Shivaji surrendered. He agreed to become a vassal of the Mughal state, turning over land and forts, paying tribute, and fighting for the Mughals. While he made a show of submission and cooperation, Shivaji's opposition to the Mughals was only beginning.

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Shivaji visited Aurangzeb's court at Agra in May of 1666. He offered the Mughal emperor gifts and bowed in submission, as was expected for a recent foe-turned-noble, but relations soon soured. Many historians of the period narrated this encounter, the only recorded face-to-face meeting between Aurangzeb and Shivaji, but they spun different versions of the tale. Most agreed that Shivaji was upset at some perceived slight—perhaps not being acknowledged by the emperor or being asked to stand with lower-ranked nobles—and caused a ruckus at open court. One historian, Khafi Khan, noted that Shivaji fell to the ground howling 'like a wounded animal', and another, Bhimsen Saxena, reported that he 'started shouting meaningless and nonsensical things and posed as if he was under the attack of madness'. Aurangzeb did not tolerate such

violations of protocol, so Shivaji was escorted out of court and placed under house arrest.

Not long after his outburst, Shivaji fled from Agra along with his nine-year-old son, Sambhaji. Most likely Shivaji bribed their guards to let them out, although more fanciful versions of the story imagine them slipping away in large baskets meant to contain alms for Brahmins. Shivaji masqueraded as a wandering ascetic until he was clear of Mughal territory, and his young son adopted a similar disguise or, according to one historian, dressed as a Brahmin's wife in order to travel undetected. In 1669, Shivaji renewed his flagrant denial of Mughal authority by launching fresh attacks to regain forts he had surrendered a few years earlier.

Whatever the precise details of how the relationship went wrong, Aurangzeb failed to incorporate Shivaji into the Mughal fold. At first glance this failure may seem puzzling because generations of Rajputs had responded well to integration within the Mughal nobility. In this instance, however, lumping all Hindus together prevents us from seeing crucial differences that explain why Shivaji balked at his reception by Aurangzeb. Many Rajputs of the day looked down on Shivaji as an uncouth upstart who, in Mughal terms, was deficient in *adab* (proper conduct). Indeed, unlike most Rajputs, Shivaji lacked exposure to Persianate court culture. His father was a noble under the Adil Shahi dynasty of Bijapur, but Shivaji had been raised by his mother, Jijabai, without access to courtly life. Perhaps because of his background, not to mention his justified faith in his own acumen on the battlefield, Shivaji did not ease into his role as a Mughal noble, as many Rajputs had, and instead chose to fight Aurangzeb.

Shivaji's return to insurgency was devastating for the Mughals. Beginning in 1670, Shivaji plundered Surat and other places repeatedly. For the next four years he raided Mughal strongholds north of Maharashtra, such as Khandesh, Berar, and Baglan, and met opposition from imperial and Bijapuri troops alike. During this time Aurangzeb was largely occupied with putting down Pathan tribal revolts in the northwest mountainous regions of the empire.

In June of 1674, while Aurangzeb was leading an army into the mountains near the Khyber Pass in pursuit of the Afridi tribe, Shivaji crowned himself monarch or *chhatrapati* of an independent Maratha kingdom that stretched across parts of the Western Ghats and the Konkan coast. The full ceremonies took weeks to perform, and the coronation itself lasted nine days. There was little immediate precedent for such a rite, which included Shivaji 'reclaiming' his alleged *kshatriya* ancestry. Gagabhatta, a prominent Brahmin from Benares, wrote much of the manual from scratch.

Shivaji spent the next six years expanding Maratha domains. He also directed projects that sought to replace Indo-Persian political norms with Sanskrit-based ones. For instance, in 1677 he sponsored a Sanskrit text known as *Rajavyavaharakosha* (Lexicon of Royal Institutes), which provided Sanskrit synonyms for 1,500 Indo-Persian administrative terms. Such a work may seem pedantic, but it helped Shivaji in his quest to subvert Mughal ruling culture. The later years of Shivaji's reign were marked by a significant increase in Sanskrit terms in official Maratha documents.

Shivaji began experiencing bouts of illness in 1678 and died, in his bed, two years later in 1680. Rumours flew about regarding Shivaji's demise, including that his second wife, Sorayabai, poisoned her husband so that she could put her ten-year-old son, Rajaram, on the throne in lieu of Sambhaji, Shivaji's son by his first wife. The poisoning story is likely

untrue, but a brief succession struggle ensued between Rajaram and Sambhaji. Sambhaji won and succeeded his father in continuing to plague Mughal interests in the Deccan.

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Although Shivaji and Aurangzeb met in person only once, at court in 1666, they despised each other. Bhushan, one of Shivaji's court poets, defamed Aurangzeb as Kumbhakarna, the gigantic, gluttonous demon from the *Ramayana*. Aurangzeb called Shivaji a 'mountain rat', and Mughal sources give his name as Shiva, often accompanied by a curse but never with the honorific *ji*. One early eighteenth-century historian of Aurangzeb's reign recorded the brusque chronogram for Shivaji's death date: 'The infidel went to hell' (*kafir bi jahannum raft*).

The Mughal-Maratha conflict was shaped by a craving for raw power that demanded strategic, shifting alliances. Shivaji allied with numerous Islamic states, including Bijapur, Golconda, and even the Mughals when it suited him (sometimes against Hindu powers in south India). Shivaji welcomed Muslims within his army; he had qazis (Muslim judges) on his payroll, and Muslims ranked among some of his top commanders. Mughal alliances and the imperial army were similarly diverse, and (as mentioned earlier) Aurangzeb sent a Hindu, Jai Singh, to besiege Shivaji at Purandar. Modern suggestions that Marathas who resisted Mughal rule thought of themselves as 'Hindus' defying 'Muslim' tyranny are just that: modern. Neither Mughal nor Maratha writers shied away from religiously tinged rhetoric in narrating this clash, especially in later accounts. But, on the ground, a thirst for political power drove both the opposition to Aurangzeb's rule and the Mughal response.

Chapter 5

Moral Man and Leader

Piety and Power

The Emperor [Aurangzeb] wrote a prayer and threw [it] into the [flooded] water. Immediately the water began to subside. The prayer of the God-devoted Emperor was accepted by God, and the world became composed again.

—*Bhimsen Saxena, a Hindu soldier in Aurangzeb's employ, writing in Persian*

LIKE EVERY OTHER MUGHAL RULER, AURANGZEB WAS BORN a Muslim and practised his inherited religion throughout his life. It is impossible to know the inner thoughts of long-dead kings, but, based on actions, it appears that Aurangzeb was more pious than his imperial predecessors. He prayed with greater regularity than his forefathers, and he abstained from drink and opium, indulgences that had killed several male members of the Mughal family. In the 1660s, Aurangzeb memorized the Quran. In his later years, he sewed prayer caps and copied the Quran by hand, both pious pursuits.

But Aurangzeb's approach to religion was hardly puritanical. On the contrary, he consulted with prominent Hindu religious figures throughout his life, as had earlier Mughal kings. For example, in the 1680s, Aurangzeb conducted a religious discussion with the Bairagi Hindu Shiv Mangaldas Maharaj and showered the saint with gifts. The king had strong links with Islamic Sufi communities, another time-honoured

AURANGZEB

The Man and The Myth

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