Praise for the Book

"Faruqui offers a deep dive into the Mughal emperor Aurangzeb 'Alamgir, one of India's most influential and debated kings, based on impeccable archival work. His book is essential reading for anyone interested in how political power was cultivated and lost in early modern India." – **Audrey Truschke,** Professor, Rutgers University

"Faruqui's book engagingly advances an insightful and persuasive new interpretation of the life and career of Aurangzeb 'Alamgir, the highly controversial final 'great' Mughal emperor. Based on unique archival research, Faruqui's work will transform scholarly and popular understanding of this entire era and its subsequent historiography." – **Michael H. Fisher**, Emeritus Professor, Oberlin College

"Faruqui has written one of the most comprehensive books on the topic in almost a century. He changes our understanding of how the empire worked by highlighting the power and influence of the harem and the eunuchate. Also significant is the author's treatment of the changing legacy of the emperor in the centuries after his death." – **Ali Anooshahr**, Professor, UC Davis

"The first comprehensive study of the most controversial emperor of the Mughal dynasty to have appeared in over a century. Based on a trove of little-used documents – the *Akhbarat* – in addition to abundant chronicles and other contemporary evidence, Faruqui succeeds in humanizing a ruler demonized by many as a cardboard-cutout villain. The result is a balanced and much-needed corrective to the hysteria surrounding Aurangzeb's name." – **Richard Eaton**, Professor, University of Arizona

"A landmark of patient archival scholarship and an utterly remarkable book, the product of thirty years' hard labour in far-flung archives, dredging up a massive cache of previously unread and neglected primary sources. Munis Faruqui has written a calm, considered, and beautifully nuanced reassessment of the most controversial and polarizing figure in South Asian history, and he has succeeded in bringing a much-caricatured figure to life in a way no previous study has ever managed to do. It is ultimately a study in profound failure: by the end of his life, Aurangzeb 'Alamgir had undermined the military reputation of the Mughal Empire and brought the whole edifice to the point of political collapse. He regarded himself on his deathbed as abandoned by God. How a prince once known as a talented administrator, a pragmatic politician and remarkable general brought himself to this pass is made wonderfully clear by Faruqui's patient scholarship and the pellucid clarity of his writing. The result is a rich, learned and complex book, full of fresh insights. It is unquestionably one of the most important works of Indian history produced this century." – **William Dalrymple**

Aurangzeb ʻAlamgir and the Mughal Empire

A History Retold

Munis D. Faruqui

juggernaut

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For Clare,
Sivan, and Aynaz

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PREFACE

This book has been thirty years in the making. In fall 1995, my first semester in graduate school at Duke University, I had many thought-provoking conversations about Aurangzeb ʿAlamgir with my supervisor, John F. Richards (d. 2007). The following semester he surprised me with an invitation to co-present a conference paper with him in which we would talk about Aurangzeb ʿAlamgir in modern scholarship. Although that paper was never published, I ended up using parts of it for another seminar paper on the shifting depictions of Aurangzeb ʿAlamgir among colonial-era historians. This paper is still in my possession, marked up with the meticulous handwritten notes of my other mentor, David Gilmartin, who raised questions and encouraged me to think further about this last of the "great" Mughal emperors. Then my doctoral work gravitated elsewhere, to the role of princely rebellions and succession struggles in constituting the Mughal Empire. As my research developed, I came to see that a really good understanding of the Mughal princely institution was going to require a serious reexamination of ʿAlamgir's reign. But I was ambivalent. I simply did not like this emperor, whom I viewed as a religious bigot and responsible for the collapse of the Mughal Empire. I was also intimidated by the sheer size of the ʿAlamgir-era archive. In the end, my PhD dissertation began with the birth of Prince Salim (later Emperor Jahangir) in 1569 and ended in 1658 (the year that Prince Aurangzeb ascended the Mughal throne as Emperor ʿAlamgir).

Over the years that followed I was often reminded of this question of whether or not to return to ʿAlamgir's reign. For example, the historian of Rajasthan and the Deccan Cynthia Talbot, after reading my dissertation, told me that any future book on the princely institution had to include a chapter on Aurangzeb ʿAlamgir. I was also pushed by a historian of the early Mughal Empire, Stephen Dale, to rethink some of my negative opinions of Aurangzeb ʿAlamgir after he commissioned me to write an encyclopedia entry for the *Encyclopaedia of Islam* around 2004–2005. Then there were the times when I found myself reflecting on a memorable evening in November 1998 with my dear friend, the late Aligarh Muslim University professor Iqbal Ghani (I. G.) Khan. He took me to visit his friend the raja of Ghabana at his ancestral home, a fort outside the city of Aligarh. We returned to Aligarh after midnight, only to discover that my

hotel had been attacked and set on fire by a rampaging student mob angry at the then BJP government's interference in the university's functioning. My room held more than a year's worth of archival research notes. I panicked that I might lose all of it and that my graduate career would end that night. I groped through the darkened shell of the building to my room to discover that it had remained miraculously untouched by mob, fire, smoke, or water. I retrieved my belongings and fled the ravaged hotel where gas cylinders threatened to explode at any second. The next morning, I. G. Khan, a committed Marxist, pointed out that our excursion had taken place on Aurangzeb 'Alamgir's birthday and jokingly added that it must have been his ghost watching over my notes.

I finally committed to writing a book about Aurangzeb 'Alamgir in the mid-2010s. I was moved to do so by a growing horror at the falsifying and weaponizing of the history of the Mughal period in India. Some colleagues warned me it could damage my academic career. Yet, I came to feel this task as urgent. It has taken me eight years, between 2016 and 2024, to write this book. I often wish I had been quicker. But, for now, I am simply relieved that it is done.

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This book could not have been written without the hundreds of years-worth of archival materials focused on Aurangzeb ʿAlamgir and his times. It rides on the shoulders of countless individuals, many of them unknown: scribes, administrative officials, recorders, scholars, artists, archivists, and collectors. My first debt therefore goes out to those contemporaries and near-contemporaries of that period, who spent time and effort recording, commenting on, collecting, or saving. I am also deeply grateful for the work of modern scholars of Aurangzeb ʿAlamgir. Without their contributions this book would have been left unconceived and unwritten. None more so than Jadunath Sarkar. Although I profoundly disagree with him on many issues and regret the harmful impact he has had on modern opinions of Aurangzeb ʿAlamgir, I nonetheless marvel at the depth and meticulousness of his scholarship, his energy and drive to collect, decipher and interpret archival materials, and his ability to do all this in the face of great personal tragedies and other sadnesses.

At a time when all sorts of political litmus tests are being used to determine whether or not to fund scholarly work, I feel fortunate that I have never lacked financial support for my research and writing. I am deeply grateful to all who have funded me over the past thirty years. For this specific project, my thanks to the American Institute of Indian Studies (which granted me a senior research fellowship) and my beloved institutional home of the past twenty-plus years: the University of California, Berkeley (which has afforded me two year-long sabbatical breaks, access to research funds, a Hellman award to conduct work in Pakistan, and, most recently, a subvention to defray some of the costs associated with this book).

I could have never written this book without access to libraries and archives, both in person and online. I am especially grateful to the National Library of India (Kolkata), the now defunct Sayyid Barkat Ali Library (Karachi), the Library of the Asiatic Society (Kolkata), the Center for Advanced Study Library (Department of History, Aligarh Muslim University), Maulana Azad Library (Aligarh Muslim University), the Royal Asiatic Society Library (London), the Rajasthan State Archives (Bikaner), and the National Archives of India (Delhi). Across these institutions certain individuals have stood above all others in their support and friendly professionalism.

They include the late Mazhar Husain (in Aligarh), Nageswara Rao and Shabbir Ahmad (both in Kolkata), and Sayyid Ghulam Haider Ali (in Karachi). I am also grateful to Adnan Malik, the cataloger and curator of the South Asia Collections at Berkeley, for acquiring many a manuscript and book on my behalf over the years.

I have incurred many debts to people in my professional caste of scholars. I am grateful for their generosity in sharing materials with me, readiness to act as sounding boards, for invitations to present at their home institutions or join them on panels, or for their general well wishes and good cheer. They include: Muzaffar Alam, Manan Ahmad Asif, the late Allison Busch, Fatih Calisir, Zeynep Cavusoglu-Yildirim, Dipesh Chakrabarty, the late Kumkum Chatterjee, Stephen Dale, Suraiya Faroqhi, Jorge Flores, Supriya Gandhi, Irfan Habib, Najaf Haider, Ruquia Hussain, Akbar Hyder, Rajeev Kinra, Tilmann Kulke, the late Sunil Kumar, Brendan LaRocque, Eva Orthmann, Sunil Sharma, Sudev Sheth, Jvala Singh, and Kamala Visweswaran. A special thanks to Ali Anooshahr, Richard Eaton, Michael Fisher, Sandria Freitag, David Gilmartin, Will Glover, the late I. G. Khan, Katherine Schofield, Cynthia Talbot, and Audrey Truschke for their enduring encouragement and friendship. Around this book specifically, my warmest thanks to Hannah Archambault, Abhishek Kaicker, and the anonymous reviewers for suggesting ways to improve this manuscript and for catching mistakes. I am deeply grateful to Philip Schwartzberg for bringing decades of cartographic experience and knowledge of Mughal South Asia to the four maps in this volume. It has been a delight to work with artist Abdul Qadir Jhatial – a master of the chrome and camouflage form – on the cover of this book. Finally, to Farina Mir, my dearest *dost* for three decades now, gratitude for her friendship, equanimity, and many happy memories.

I am deeply indebted to Lucy Rhymer for encouraging the idea of this book from the very first time we met in 2012 and then agreeing to publish it many years later. Many thanks too to her colleagues: Rosa Martin, Susan Prozesky, and Nishanth Uthrikumar. But I am especially grateful to Martha Schulman and Mary Starkey for their extraordinarily careful editorial work on various drafts of this book. Many mistakes were averted because of them.

This book would be nowhere without the input of generations of brilliant graduate students at UC Berkeley. I am deeply appreciative to them for listening to me talk about Aurangzeb ʻAlamgir and the Mughal Empire between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries, for arguing and challenging me to think through ideas, and for their general *joie de vivre* that has sustained me through many a bleak period when I was overwhelmed with departmental responsibilities and administrative work and thought that I would never complete this project. I am especially grateful to Anurag Advani, Hannah Archambault, Gaurav Banerjee, Subhobroto Banerjee, Aparajita Das, Aria Fani, Nicole Ferreira, Sourav Ghosh, Emma Kalb, Brent Otto, Sohini Pillai,

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I am also very grateful to current and former departmental colleagues Edith Anaya-Perla, Lisandro Claudio, Jake Dalton, Linda Eason, Penny Edwards, Sally Goldman, Vasugi Kailasam, Nora Koa, Jan Johnson, Kristen McLeod, Luther Obrock, Vasudha Paramasivan, Rahul Parson, Raka Ray, Alex von Rospatt, Jvala Singh, Sylvia Tiwon, and Paula Varsano for creating a congenial academic home that has allowed me to thrive over the years. I am especially beholden to Vasudha Dalmia for her camaraderie and mentorship, Robert Goldman for his consistent kindness and good humor, and the late Jeff Hadler, my irreplaceable department soulmate, and the brother I never had. He would have loved to see this completed book. I wish I could have seen his. Although not in my department, another friend whose loss still hurts: the late Saba Mahmood.

At the Institute for South Asia Studies, my huge thanks to Puneeta Kala, Anirban Gupta-Nigam, and Sanchita Saxena for years of warm friendship and painstaking institution building. Elsewhere in UC Berkeley, warmest thanks to Janaki Bakhle, Paul Fine, Atreyee Gupta, Kumi Hadler, and Sugata Ray. A special shoutout to Abhishek Kaicker for his academic fellowship and endless good cheer.

Beyond UC Berkeley, I am very grateful to Martin Lewis and Kären Wigen for encouragement and friendship going back to graduate school. Similar sentiments apply to my friends away from campus who have humored me throughout the writing of this book: Kia Afcari, Geeta Anand, Cyrus and Shernaz Boga, the Empress Market 8 Greg Kroitzsh, Umair Khan, Alice Morgan, Rafat Pirzada, John Prosise, John Remick, Sheheryar Salim, and Naila Siddique. Thanks too to various members of my family, but especially Mariam Hundsdorfer, Carsten Schmidt, and Saira and Rohit Shahani for their continuous interest and best wishes. I am also grateful to my mother and late father, Erna and Faseeh Faruqui, for always believing in me, for trying to smooth my academic path whenever possible, and – in my father's case – being gentle, reflective, and always curious about my work.

My greatest debts, however, are to my children, Aynaz and Sivan, and my wife, Clare Talwalker. They have waited years for this book to be completed. While doing so they gave me plenty of space to work, they indulged my highs and lows, refused to take me too seriously, mostly humored my idiosyncrasies, shared the challenges of life under Covid, kept me anchored and interested in our shared world, and refused to wait any longer to get our much loved boxer, Mila. I particularly want to thank Clare, my companion of thirty years and counting, for years of love, understanding, and a willingness to push me to be a better person. As well as being my most important and incisive intellectual

interlocutor, this manuscript would have been so much weaker without her willingness to read multiple drafts and offer constructive advice that always improved its clarity and organization, and sharpened its arguments. More than that, I am grateful to Clare for teaching me that fun is not something to be endlessly deferred, and that nothing is beyond questioning. This book is rightfully dedicated to my awesome threesome.

NOTE ON TRANSLATIONS, TRANSLITERATIONS, AND DATES

I have generally followed the transliterations offered by Francis Steingass in *A Comprehensive Persian–English Dictionary* (Delhi, 1981 [repr.]). But, for simplicity's sake, I avoid all diacritics barring [ʿ] to indicate the Arabic *ayn*. I do this for all primary book titles and authors' names. I adhere to the authors' wishes for secondary materials. I do not mark the unpronounced "*he*" at the end of Persian words with [h]. I pluralize non-standard terms by adding a non-italicized [s] as suffix. The possessive *ezafe* construction is written with [-i] or – in the case of words that end with long vowels or the silent [he] – [-yi]. Where applicable, I keep the Arabic prefix [al-] for names. Quotations from seventeenth- and eighteenth-century European materials retain their original spelling. For most, but not all, place names I follow the spelling used by Irfan Habib in *An Atlas of the Mughal Empire* (Delhi, 1982). I have used www.islamicity.org/hijri-gregorian-converter to covert lunar Hijri dates to solar Gregorian or Common Era dates.

Introduction

A century ago, in 1924, Sir Jadunath Sarkar (1870–1958) completed the fifth and final volume of his magisterial *History of Aurangzib*.[1] These five volumes still stand as the most detailed and authoritative work on the last of the so-called great Mughal emperors, Aurangzeb ʿAlamgir (b. 1618, r. 1658–1707).[2] Scholars widely admire the scale and breadth of Sarkar's knowledge of the man and the period, particularly its political history, and his careful attention to details and sources, most of which had been unused for centuries. Sarkar wrote in a crisp and readable style, offering clear analytical insights. However, those insights became progressively more polarizing with each volume.

In Sarkar's early estimation ʿAlamgir was

> free from vice, stupidity, or sloth. His intellectual keenness was proverbial, and at the same time he took to the business of governing with all the ardour which men usually display in the pursuit of pleasure. … He faced the privations of a campaign or a forced march as uncomplainingly as the most seasoned private. … Of the wisdom of the ancients which can be gathered from ethical books, he was a master.

Although Sarkar noted that ʿAlamgir's reign ended in failure, he provided little commentary beyond a vague faulting of the emperor's "policy

[1] Jadunath Sarkar, *History of Aurangzib*, vols. 1–5 (Calcutta, 1912–1924). For more on Sarkar and his place in three centuries of scholarship on Aurangzeb ʿAlamgir, see Appendix A.

[2] Throughout this book Aurangzeb/ʿAlamgir is referred to by his regnal name, ʿAlamgir for events following his accession in 1658, and as Aurangzeb for the period between 1618 and 1658 when he was still a prince. This achieves greater consistency in the nomenclature of Mughal emperors, as secondary sources routinely refer to them by their regnal names. For example, Jahangir (d. 1627), Shah Jahan (d. 1666), Bahadur Shah I/Shah ʿAlam I (d. 1712) or even the very short-reigned Jahandar Shah (d. 1713) are known by these regnal names, not by their princely names (Salim, Khurram, Muʿazzam, and Muʿiz al-Din). I follow Michael H. Fisher and Richard M. Eaton, who first offered this important corrective. See Michael Fisher, *A Short History of the Mughal Empire* (London, 2015), p. 187; Richard M. Eaton, "The A'in and Modernity: Should We Reconsider the Akbar–ʿAlamgir Binary?" *Journal of Asian and African Studies Supplement* 3 (2024): pp. 19–31, at pp. 19–20. It is strange that ʿAlamgir was treated differently; it may be a result of a widespread belief that Aurangzeb's accession to the Mughal throne was not fully legitimate.

and conduct."[3] But Sarkar's opinion had shifted dramatically by the time he published the fifth volume.[4] The rising Hindu–Muslim religious tensions of the early 1920s as well as Sarkar's distaste for Muslim nationalist politics had taken their toll, and in the final chapters of his magnum opus Sarkar condemned 'Alamgir's reign for enabling "utter dissolution and misery," economic impoverishment, natural disasters, the "decay of Indian civilization," vice and popular superstitions, corruption, and a system of Islamic governance that rendered "a fusion between Hindus and Muslims impossible."[5] He condemned 'Alamgir for forcing Hindus to live "deprived of the light of knowledge, deprived of the consolations of religion, deprived of social union and public rejoicing, of wealth and the self-confidence that is begotten by the free exercise of natural activities and use of opportunities, in short, a life exposed to constant public humiliation and political disabilities."[6] Although Sarkar's subsequent rhetoric about the Mughal Empire was less overwrought, in the remaining decades of his prolific scholarly life he was consistent in framing Hindus as victims of a hostile Muslim empire, and 'Alamgir in particular.

And herein lies the rub. Although negative views of Aurangzeb 'Alamgir existed long before Sarkar put pen to paper, it was the *History of Aurangzib* that established the dominant framework through which the emperor has been understood and judged in the modern period. Anyone wishing to contest Sarkar's views had to go back into a dense archive[7] and be willing to enter the

[3] Jadunath Sarkar, *History of Aurangzib*, vol. 1 (London, 1920 [repr.]), pp. xiv–xv.

[4] Sarkar's shift is already evident in 1919 when in another work he asserted that 'Alamgir "would have made a successful general, minister, theologian, or school master, and an ideal department head [*sic*!]. But the critical eminence of a throne on which he was placed by a freak of Fortune, led to the failure of his life and the blighting of his fame." More follows over the next few pages, ending with this assessment: "Aurangzib utterly lacked sympathy, imagination, breadth of vision, elasticity in the choice of means, and that warmth of the heart which atones for a hundred faults of the head": Jadunath Sarkar, *Studies in Mughal India* (Calcutta, 1919), pp. 60–63.

[5] Jadunath Sarkar, *History of Aurangzib*, vol. 5 (Calcutta, 1924), pp. 436–482. The ultimate reason Hindus and Muslims could not get along, according to Sarkar, was that Hindus are "solitary, passive, other-worldly" and Muslims are militant soldiers for Islam, committed to jihad and proselytizing: Sarkar, *History*, vol. 5, p. 483.

[6] Sarkar, *History*, vol. 5, pp. 485–486. Ultimately, "Indian people" (read Hindus) only survived because "domestic life was pure and not without its simple colour and joy. This virtue alone saved the people from the doom of extinction which overtook the degenerate Romans of the later empire": Sarkar, *History*, vol. 5, p. 469.

[7] 'Alamgir's reign has by far the most resource-rich archive of any Mughal emperor (c. 1526–1857). Where the entire archive for Babur or Humayun's reign extends to a handful of histories (*tarikh*s) and a few miscellaneous poetic, religious, and scientific texts that are only now beginning to be seriously studied, we still have no administrative records from the period (c. 1526–1556). Though progressively richer in terms of *tarikh*s and other textual sources, the reigns of Akbar, Jahangir, and Shah Jahan are similarly marked by

increasingly bitter polemic around ʿAlamgir, which has only grown more contentious in recent decades. Most post-Sarkar scholars of the Mughal Empire have tended to tiptoe gingerly around this last Mughal king (see Appendix A), reinforcing Sarkar's stranglehold over the study of Aurangzeb ʿAlamgir and his reign and essentially abandoning it to popular historians and untrained laypeople who often simply recirculate Sarkar's views. My aim in writing this book is to offer the reader a fresh interpretation of Aurangzeb ʿAlamgir and the Mughal Empire in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. The book is grounded in a rereading of historical sources, some well known, others barely or never utilized. It also incorporates and builds upon other recent scholarship focused on the general period.

A Thumbnail Sketch of the Mughal Dynasty and Aurangzeb ʿAlamgir

The Mughal Empire was founded by Emperor Babur (r. 1526–1530) after he invaded northern India from Kabul and defeated various Afghan and Rajput opponents. Despite a rocky start, including the collapse of the empire in the 1540s and early 1550s, Babur's grandson Akbar consolidated the empire's hold over northern and central South Asia through extensive military campaigns and transformative administrative reforms. Akbar was succeeded by his sole surviving son, Emperor Jahangir (r. 1605–1628), who built on many of his father's achievements. Jahangir was followed by his third son, Emperor Shah Jahan (r. 1628–1658). At the end of Shah Jahan's reign the empire was secure and prosperous, with a rich political and cultural milieu that was the envy of the eastern Islamic world. Aurangzeb ʿAlamgir was born to Prince Khurram (later Shah Jahan) and his wife Arjumand Banu (later Mumtaz Mahal, d. 1631) in 1618. Like his father, he was a third son. ʿAlamgir became the sixth emperor of the Mughal dynasty.[8]

In 1634, when he turned sixteen, Prince Aurangzeb was granted adult status; a few years later he contracted his first marriage. Three more marriages and

a striking paucity of surviving administrative records – even though, starting in the late 1500s, the Mughal Empire experienced a revolution in terms of a rising use of paper for administrative purposes. This lack of sources can be explained by many factors, including conflict, deliberate and inadvertent mishandling, fire, weather, insects, vermin, light, dust, etc. Although the ʿAlamgir archive may be deficient – certainly compared to South Asia's colonial period or even its Ottoman, Chinese, Japanese, or European contemporaries – it nonetheless offers extraordinary resources that have barely, if ever, been considered by modern historians. Two that helped shape this book are the subject of Appendix B.

[8] The best broad histories of the Mughal Empire are Catherine B. Asher and Cynthia Talbot, *India before Europe* (Cambridge, 2022); Fisher, *Short History*; Richard M. Eaton, *India in the Persianate Age, 1000–1765* (Oakland, 2019); and John F. Richards, *The Mughal Empire* (Cambridge, 1993).

a total of nine children – five sons, four daughters – followed. Between 1635 and 1657 Aurangzeb was an actively rotated governor-prince. He served in the Deccan twice, in Gujarat, and in Multan. He also led some of the biggest military campaigns of his father's reign, in Bundelkhand, Balkh, against the Safavid-held fortress of Qandahar (twice), and the Deccan. After 1635, barring a short period in 1644–1645 (when he was under house arrest), Aurangzeb mostly lived away from the Mughal court, largely because of growing political rivalries, first with his oldest brother Dara Shukoh (d. 1659), Shah Jahan's favorite son, and then, in the 1650s, with his father as well.

In 1657 rumors reached Aurangzeb in the Deccan that Shah Jahan had died, or was already dead, or was too ill to rule and had passed the imperial torch to Dara Shukoh. Aurangzeb (along with his brothers, Shujaʿ and Murad, then governors of Bengal and Gujarat, respectively) sprang into action, marching north to Agra to fight for the throne. The now-recovered Shah Jahan sent several armies to crush his rebellious sons. Aurangzeb, at first operating jointly with Murad, defeated these armies, then turned on Murad and imprisoned him. Aurangzeb then forced his father to abdicate and crowned himself Emperor ʿAlamgir. Over the next few years he defeated his remaining princely rivals, Dara Shukoh and Shujaʿ, and slowly consolidated his hold on the empire. In the subsequent decades ʿAlamgir was an industrious emperor who enacted wide-ranging administrative reforms and engaged in active military expansionism. The empire he presided over grew richer, thanks both to his efforts and to South Asia's central place in an emerging late seventeenth-century global economy.

In the early 1680s ʿAlamgir set his sights on absorbing the Deccan into the Mughal Empire. It was a region the Mughals had long coveted and had been an object of his military ambitions in the 1650s. In 1686 and 1687 he conquered Bijapur and Golkonda, the last of the Deccan's independent kingdoms, but these conquests were never fully secured, and he faced continued rebellion from the region's population for the remainder of his reign. By 1707, when ʿAlamgir died at eighty-eight, he had strained the imperial treasury, presided over the near collapse of the Mughal war machine, witnessed a precipitous decline in imperial morale, brought untold misery to both friends and foes, and allowed political and administrative conditions in the empire's northern heartlands to deteriorate. The severity of what ʿAlamgir unleashed on the Mughal Empire is apparent in his heirs' inability to turn the empire's fortunes around. Within two decades of his death, large chunks of the empire had broken away, and what remained was only barely controlled. The sack of Shahjahanabad in 1739 by the Iranian invader Nadir Shah and the carting away of huge amounts of wealth (including the famed Peacock Throne) marked the point of no return for the once-great empire. Although the Mughals clung to power in Delhi for over a century, they did so at the sufferance of others, despite claiming the mantle of imperial rulership. The British finally dispensed with this fiction in 1857

after crushing a bloody revolt that used the last Mughal emperor, Bahadur Shah II, who was suffering from age-related dementia at the time, as its figurehead.

The Arguments of the Book

This book aims to dislodge the most entrenched scholarly and popular views of ʿAlamgir, which either write him off as a hopeless bigot or extol him as a Muslim hero. I offer a fresh perspective on the role of Islam in ʿAlamgir's life and reign (Chapter 2), arguing that he drew on Islam-inspired solutions to run the Mughal Empire, not because he aimed at wholesale conversion or religious cleansing of non-Muslims, but because they offered him a moral framework for rulership. ʿAlamgir's personal devotion to Islam underpinned his long decades of rule over a large and diverse empire, supporting him into old age and a deepening military quagmire in the Deccan. He hoped that Islamic values and regulations would help combat rising social disorder, improve imperial administration, overcome financial weakness, and inspire his subjects to share the devotion to imperial service that he modeled. Success in integrating Islamic values, ʿAlamgir believed, would benefit all his subjects, regardless of religion, and place the empire on firmer foundations. At once pious and pragmatic – a fact often lost in doctrinaire and dogmatic depictions – he changed course and adjusted when confronted with evidence that Islam-inspired solutions hobbled his ability to rule. Moreover, as a Mughal ruler he was as much shaped by and loyal to Timurid and Universal–Indic sovereign expressions as to Islam (Chapter 2). A hyperfocus on Islam ignores all these other facts about Aurangzeb ʿAlamgir, casts a veil over our historical understanding of him, and plays into modern polemics about religion.

This book counters another persistent belief: that Aurangzeb did not deserve the Mughal throne, but stole it either from his aging and unsuspecting father Shah Jahan or his hapless humanist older brother Dara Shukoh (see Chapter 1). This conviction has perpetuated a portrayal, both scholarly and popular, of Aurangzeb ʿAlamgir as a devious, cunning, and bloodthirsty regicide and fratricide. By contrast, I lay out the decades-long backdrop of efforts by Prince Aurangzeb to prepare for an anticipated future war of succession. It is a theme I first explored in my 2012 book, *Princes of the Mughal Empire*, in which I argued that Akbar's decision in the 1580s to move away from an appanage system (giving princes fixed territories to rule, often for life) created an expectation that princes would fight each other to be the next emperor of an undivided empire. In the dog-eat-dog world of post-1580s Mughal succession politics, therefore, Aurangzeb's actions were unexceptional and reflected similar maneuvers by his own father Shah Jahan and grandfather Jahangir. The first chapter of this book offers a detailed account of how Aurangzeb ʿAlamgir attained the throne, showing a meritocratic system of succession that valued stamina and strong leadership in the face of constant challenges. As a prince,

Aurangzeb built support networks across the empire, constructed powerful households that could administer regions and be mobilized to fight on his command, raised money to support his undertakings, and – in this still-expanding empire – established a reputation for administrative expertise and military competence. Aurangzeb had an acute sense of what it took to mount a successful bid for the Mughal throne, and worked to succeed at these tasks in the face of considerable odds.

This book's third major argument is that ʿAlamgir depended heavily, and significantly more than previous emperors, on the Mughal institutions of the imperial harem (Chapter 3) and the eunuchate (Chapter 4) to buttress his power and influence, thus marking his own reign and also transforming these institutions. The harem and eunuchate played especially important roles in the final years of ʿAlamgir's long reign. These institutions have been largely overlooked, especially in ʿAlamgir's reign, because they are barely evident in the archival sources that historians have relied on, mainly contemporary Persian-language histories written by individuals either connected to Mughal power or close to the court. These sources reproduced the patriarchal mores of the times, ignoring or dismissing evidence of ʿAlamgir's reliance on women and eunuchs. For their part, women and eunuchs rarely put into print their activities, opinions, and roles, as that would go against social norms and etiquette. Between the blindness of the contemporary chroniclers and the self-effacement of women and eunuchs, these groups and the institutions they peopled and built appear only fleetingly in Persian historical narratives. Furthermore, the full story of how entwined the harem and eunuchate were with ʿAlamgir's rulership does not resonate at all with misplaced modern-day expectations of him. He is remembered as a devout Muslim and thus unlikely to see women as crucial political allies. Nor would this paper-Muslim ʿAlamgir have embraced eunuchs, given Islamic law's disapproval of them. Yet the historical record (especially the period's administrative archives) suggests otherwise. It would be going too far to claim that the harem and eunuchate became co-rulers with ʿAlamgir, but his dependence on them certainly increased as he aged. This enabled their power and influence to survive him into the first decades of the eighteenth century.

A thread that runs through the entire book is the suggestion that Aurangzeb ʿAlamgir represented a departure from previous emperors in areas that have been overlooked, and that he resembled previous emperors in areas where he was thought to have been different. This book highlights four ways in which his divergence from previous emperors has been overlooked: his undermining of the princely institution; his undermining of the empire's military reputation and administrative effectiveness (despite his own earlier successes); his enabling of and reliance on the imperial harem and eunuchate; and his empowering of nobles. The book also demonstrates two important areas in which he continued in the manner of previous emperors, despite the popular

impression that he departed from them: the role afforded Islam during his reign; and the style and character of Mughal courtly culture. What happened to the emperor's princely heirs offers an excellent starting point. Where every Mughal emperor after Akbar had to deal with rebellious sons in the final years of his reign, 'Alamgir successfully contained the political ambitions of his sons after an abortive 1681 rebellion by his fourth son, Prince Akbar. What makes 'Alamgir's achievement so striking is that he accomplished this despite extreme old age and military failure. How did he manage it? I argue that he did so by playing off sons against sons, sons against grandsons, bolstering loyalists within the Mughal nobility, strengthening the imperial harem and eunuchate, forging an ascetic–renunciate sovereignty that none of his sons could compete with, and mostly leaving his male heirs to their own devices when they began to experience cash-flow problems toward the end of his reign (see Chapters 2, 3, 4, and 5). The Mughal princely institution never recovered its pre-1658 dynamism or its capacity to cause a sitting emperor serious trouble. As Mughal princes became less powerful, the opposite happened to the imperial harem and eunuchate (Chapters 3 and 4), and sections of the Mughal nobility (Chapters 2 and 3). Although the history of the nobility in 'Alamgir's reign and the post-1707 period has been well documented,[9] the same is not true for the imperial harem or the eunuchate that worked to protect the empire, often in opposition to emboldened factions of imperial nobles. To best understand this eighteenth-century story, one must go back to the tectonic shifts unleashed during 'Alamgir's reign.

Another area in which 'Alamgir had a transformative impact was his nonstop campaigning in the Deccan (c. 1682–1707), which eventually also compromised Mughal control over northern India. Although 'Alamgir enjoyed some important initial victories, the Mughals ultimately failed to consolidate their control over the region. From the point of view of military campaigns, Aurangzeb was a triumphant Mughal prince; but as 'Alamgir, he was a failed imperialist: where previous emperors' military setbacks did not compromise the empire, 'Alamgir's military setbacks ultimately collapsed it (an outcome partly his own doing, and partly the effect of broader political and economic currents). 'Alamgir's ultimate impact on the empire was disastrous both in terms of men and *matériel* expended and the collapse of imperial prestige, morale, governance, and finances. Although the Mughals had faced challenges stabilizing the empire's southern frontiers since the 1590s, at no point did these raise questions about their ability to rule their North Indian heartlands.

[9] See Abhishek Kaicker, *The King and the People: Sovereignty and Popular Politics in Mughal India* (New York, 2020); Muzaffar Alam, *The Crisis of Empire in Mughal North India: Awadh and the Punjab, 1707–48* (Delhi, 1986); M. Athar Ali, *The Mughal Nobility under Aurangzeb* (Bombay, 1966); Satish Chandra, *Parties and Politics at the Mughal Court, 1707–1740* (Bombay, 1959).

This was not true after the 1680s. Like a spreading cancer, the failed Deccan campaigns had a negative impact on the entire empire (see Chapters 2 and 5). ʿAlamgir's desperation to win in the Deccan not only distracted him from adequately administering northern India, but it also led him to bend longstanding administrative norms – especially around the *mansabdari* and *jagirdari* systems – to support the war effort in the south. This ended up corroding imperial authority everywhere, to catastrophic effect (Chapter 2). ʿAlamgir's successors found it impossible to stop the rot and reconstitute the empire as it had existed prior to the 1680s. Mughal failure in the Deccan had another key consequence: it strengthened the empire's opponents, particularly the Marathas (see Chapter 5), who played a leading role in the destruction of the empire following ʿAlamgir's death.

Significantly, in one area where many readers might expect ʿAlamgir to have had a transformative impact – namely, around religious issues and Islam's role in the empire – this was not so. Although he made serious efforts to infuse an Islam-inflected ethos and morality into his personal presentation and that of his family, the imperial court, and ways in which the empire was governed (see Chapter 2), this mostly dissipated after his death. His imperial successors turned their backs on this idiosyncratic and highly personalized reformist project, which they could not or did not want to adopt (see Chapter 6). Similarly, many of ʿAlamgir's attempts to change Mughal courtly culture – by, for example, discouraging certain forms of financial ostentation and "inappropriate" dressing styles or encouraging better etiquette or greater personal discipline – had no lasting impact. ʿAlamgir is far less exceptional than mainstream portrayals tend to portray him. Like his predecessors he was intolerant of sectarianism, uninterested in forcing Islam on his subjects, focused on protecting his imperial prerogatives, committed to upholding social status and lineage, and invested in military expansionism, good governance, law and justice, and sacred kingship (see Chapter 2). These were all longstanding features of Mughal rulership and the Mughal sovereign tradition. Even when ʿAlamgir distanced himself from previous behaviors – such as in his choice to dress more austerely, shut down certain kinds of cultural patronage, and stop participating in imperial rituals such as *jharoka darshan* (royal presentation) and *wazn/tuladan* (royal weighing) and celebrating non-Islamic holidays such as Nawruz – his heirs continued all these longstanding Mughal customs. In most instances he made no efforts to prohibit them from doing so (see Chapter 2). In sum, ʿAlamgir's reign did not strike the discordant note for his contemporaries that generations of modern historians have assumed it did.

A second and final thread running through this book is the claim that ʿAlamgir's reign is most usefully and accurately understood as transitional in the chronological record. Although historians always place it in the Mughal "high period" (1526–1707) rather than the era of Mughal decline/decentralization/collapse (1707–1857), it shares important characteristics with both. Indeed,

it has more in common with the latter than has been appreciated. Prior to the onset of the Deccan campaigns (1682) the empire was relatively well ordered; its rules and regulations were followed more often than not; it was at the center of the political imagination of most politically ambitious individuals and groups in North India; and was generally able to impose its writ on its opponents. But all of these characteristics receded in the final decades of ʻAlamgir's reign.[10] By the end of his life the empire more closely resembled that of the 1710s than it did the empire pre-1682, let alone pre-1658. A key feature shaping this transitional nature of ʻAlamgir's reign is the impact on the Mughal Empire of new, rapidly rising forms of wealth due to the influx of New World gold and silver and the emergence of a truly global economy in the seventeenth century. Starting in the 1630s and 1640s, under Emperor Shah Jahan, the empire began to see the first signs of empowered merchant and banking classes, the commercialization of religious life, vibrant commercial towns, emergent public spheres, and expectations among the population of improved justice and better governance. These trends intensified across ʻAlamgir's reign.[11] However, instead of strengthening the empire (by fortifying its tax base, for example), some of these forces, particularly the rise of regional contenders supported by increasingly globally connected and post-Mughal bankers and merchants, contributed to its destruction in the post-1707 period.[12]

Note on Sources

This book draws on a large, mostly Persian-language, archive. It includes officially sanctioned and privately written histories, administrative records, traveler accounts, hagiographies, biographical dictionaries, local and regional histories, collections of imperial and noble correspondence, and miniatures.

[10] When scholars and others consider Aurangzeb ʻAlamgir's life, certain key dates always come up: his birth year (1618), his accession to the Mughal throne (1658), and his death (1707). Far less attention is paid to other, almost equally important, pivotal dates in his life and reign. One such date is 1690. At the start of the year ʻAlamgir was riding high. He had captured and executed Sambhaji, the son of and successor to the great Maratha leader Shivaji (d. 1680), the previous year. With this triumph, the Mughals seemed to have vanquished their last major opponent in the Deccan. The region's final pacification seemed a foregone conclusion. But in May 1690 the Mughal nobleman and general Rustam Khan was unexpectedly defeated, captured, and then ransomed by a Maratha army. His loss marked the first of many Mughal losses to the resurgent Marathas. If ʻAlamgir was widely perceived as a relatively effective and successful Mughal emperor before 1690, the years that followed tarnished his reputation and marked the beginning of the slow collapse of the Mughal Empire. Thinking about dates such as 1690 lets us move away from considering 1707, the year of ʻAlamgir's death, as the end of the high period of empire.

[11] Kaicker, *King and People*.

[12] See Sudev Sheth, *Bankrolling Empire: Family Fortunes and Political Transformation in Mughal India* (Cambridge, 2024).

But it owes a special debt to two and, to date, barely utilized Persian-language collections: the *Akhbarat-i Darbar-i Mu'alla* (News Bulletins of the Exalted Court or, as S. R. Sharma preferred to call them, Minutes of the Proceedings of the Mughal Emperor in Court[13]), and the now defunct *Dastawizat (Az 'Ahd-i Mughaliya)* (Documents from the Mughal Era). Without them, this book would have been unable to challenge many of the overcomplicated and mistaken plotlines that dominate our understanding of Aurangzeb 'Alamgir and the Mughal Empire in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries or to offer fresh lines of inquiry around, among others, the imperial harem or the eunuchate. For more about these extraordinary collections, see Appendix B.

Structure of the Book

This book has three parts, each with two chapters. Part I – offering a fresh assessment of Aurangzeb 'Alamgir's career as a prince and then emperor – follows a broadly chronological format. Part II – which deals with two key institutions of 'Alamgir's reign, the imperial harem and the eunuchate – is thematically structured. Part III focuses on the final weeks of 'Alamgir's life and then on posthumous efforts to memorialize him. I use this hybrid format so that this book is not mistaken for a conventional biography: it does not recount all known details of Aurangzeb 'Alamgir's life, nor does it delve into his psychology. I also use it to allow the reader to select whichever chapter they wish to read first. Each chapter stands alone. The intended effect is to retell the story of Aurangzeb 'Alamgir, offering new understandings and challenging stale and misguided misconceptions, while also highlighting little-known areas of research and foregrounding new archives (especially the *Akhbarat*).

Chapter 1 examines how the intense political competition linked to Mughal succession practices framed 'Alamgir's princely life. The central assertion is that Prince Aurangzeb engaged in decades-long efforts to build empire-wide support networks, construct a princely household, gather wealth, and prove himself a formidable administrator and general. Although he faced many challenges along the way, including occasional military and administrative setbacks and rising tensions with Shah Jahan and Dara Shukoh, he was a formidable opponent. At the heart of his success – this chapter argues – was an inclusive leadership style that cultivated loyalty in his personal household, the spaces around him, and across the empire. Ultimately, he was well positioned to mount a bid for the Mughal throne in September 1657 when he first heard that his father was seriously ill and might even be dead.

Chapter 2 uses the twin rubrics of "state" and "sovereignty" to understand many of the most important or controversial aspects of 'Alamgir's forty-nine-year reign. It foregrounds the ways the empire sought to recalibrate itself in the

[13] S. R. Sharma, *A Bibliography of Mughal India (1526–1707 A.D.)* (Bombay, 1938), p. 8.

decades following ʿAlamgir's accession in 1658. Although he mostly positioned himself as a typical Mughal emperor in terms of his sovereign self-expression, he also articulated an innovative ascetic–renunciate sovereignty that radiated from his person to the court and empire in distinctive ways. Ultimately, his decision to invade the Deccan in the early 1680s proved his and the Mughal Empire's undoing. Not only did he fail to anchor Mughal rule in peninsular India, but he also could not stop the gradual degradation of imperial institutions in the northern imperial heartlands. Against this backdrop, and for the duration of what is still a Methuselah-like lifespan, ʿAlamgir held on to his throne. How did he do so? This chapter ends by arguing that his emergence as a particular kind of Mughal "saint–emperor" was one of the key factors in his political survival.

Part II concentrates on two key imperial institutions that deepen our understanding of ʿAlamgir's reign and the period. The emergence of Prince Aurangzeb's princely harem and his relationship, as emperor, with the imperial harem is the subject of Chapter 3. In evaluating the former, I examine Aurangzeb's marriages, rivalries between his senior wives, and the ways his harem was buffeted by his shifting political fortunes. Post-1658, the focus shifts to how ʿAlamgir asserted his control over the imperial harem, his dependence on his sisters (first Roshanara, then Jahanara), the harem's role in safeguarding the biological continuity of the dynasty and healing old political wounds, the rise of dissent within the harem in the late 1670s and early 1680s, and the remarkable career of ʿAlamgir's daughter Zinat al-Nisa. By the end of her father's reign Zinat al-Nisa was likely the second-most-powerful person in the empire and a key political and financial buttress of ʿAlamgir's power. The final section examines an extraordinary moment in Mughal history, the only time the imperial harem was split, with one section in the Deccan with ʿAlamgir and the other in Shahjahanabad/Delhi, where it anchored imperial authority in the city, contributed to a lively cultural scene, and acted as a beacon for a possible return of the imperial court to northern India once ʿAlamgir passed away.

The imperial eunuchate is the subject of the fourth chapter. I begin by looking at the place of eunuchs in the life of the empire prior to 1658, then examine the rising presence of eunuchs in Aurangzeb's princely household and their central role in helping ʿAlamgir consolidate his power post-1658. Despite ʿAlamgir's concerns about the creation of and trade in eunuchs, he appreciated the strength and usefulness of the imperial eunuchate and encouraged its growing power. This chapter also evaluates Khidmatgar Khan III, possibly the most powerful eunuch in Mughal history and the head of the imperial eunuchate from the early 1690s to his death in 1704. Such power did not come without resistance from uncastrated men jealous of the eunuchate's wealth and power. This included ʿAlamgir himself, who, despite heavy dependence on imperial eunuchs, tried to maintain some checks on them, even if these weakened toward the end of his life.

Part III focuses on the end of ʿAlamgir's reign and its aftermath. Chapter 5 uses the *Akhbarat* to explore the final two weeks of ʿAlamgir's life, highlighting various topics and characters (some important, others minor) to illustrate daily life at court and to offer longer perspectives on ʿAlamgir's life and reign. There are sections devoted to the relationship between ʿAlamgir and his three surviving sons; the tensions between his sons and grandsons; the impoverishment of the Mughal nobility; the biographies of some of his favorite nobles as well as of his last surviving wife (Udaipuri Mahal); conversion to Islam at the Mughal court; and the struggle against the Marathas. Other sections highlight ʿAlamgir's physical and mental frailties; his work ethic; his interest in intelligence gathering; and the deep sense of personal failure and recrimination that hung over his final decade. Together these stories offer insights into ʿAlamgir, the court, and the empire on the cusp of a new era that everyone feared might be even less settled than the one that was ending.

Chapter 6 examines a remarkable effort to memorialize ʿAlamgir in the decades after his death. This was an unprecedented effort in Mughal history: no other emperor, not even Akbar, was eulogized with the same intensity and for as long. In its early stages this project was led by a small group of noble ʿAlamgir loyalists mostly based at the Mughal court. In time, however, the effort extended to other parts of the former empire as well as, unexpectedly, to groups that had either been only nominally under Mughal rule or had actively opposed it. The end product was a rich trove of histories, administrative manuals, collections of orders and letters, and miniatures depicting ʿAlamgir. Although the participants' motivations varied, the results point to a broad consensus about his greatness across much of northern and central India. As we contemplate ʿAlamgir's vilification today, it is worth remembering the widely divergent views of many of his contemporaries or near contemporaries. As we ask why, it becomes imperative to recall and reflect on this forgotten story. Ultimately, this book does not seek to excoriate or to exonerate Aurangzeb ʿAlamgir. Rather, it seeks to reconsider existing stories and tell new ones, thus intervening in ways that might allow us to probe and, perhaps, transcend the polarization that inevitably accompanies any conversation about this important historical figure and his times.

PART I