

How to Build a Villain: Aurangzeb, Temple Destruction, and His Modern Reputation

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This paper is a study of the spatial relationship between temples destroyed in the reign of the Mughal Emperor Aurangzeb (1618–1707) and other significant spatial characteristics of the Mughal Empire in his time, including its southern border and the geographic distribution of religious groups. It also places these relationships in the context of the contemporary political narrative as well the current one. Using an ArcGIS project built to explore the spatial relationship, this paper tests the hypothesis that temple destruction under Aurangzeb was religiously motivated, and concludes that this hypothesis ought to be rejected. Work from other scholars in the field illustrates why this hypothesis is none the less deeply ingrained in India's modern political landscape, and how that came to pass.

IN THE HISTORY OF INDIAN KINGSHIP there is perhaps no one as controversial as the man named Mohi-ud-Din Muhammad Aurangzeb Alamgir I, Sixth Emperor of the Mughal Empire, and known to historians as simply Aurangzeb. Often considered the last effective Mughal Emperor, Aurangzeb was an iron-fisted authoritarian, gifted general, and wily political actor under whom the Mughal Empire reached its greatest geographic extent and saw the highest degree of state centralization. This complex individual is noted for his deep devotion to the religion of his ancestors: Islam. Somewhat breaking with the tradition of his immediate predecessors, he espoused a far more traditional approach to Islam and its place within the Mughal Empire. When his father, the illustrious Shah Jahan, became ill, it ignited a succession war between all four sons, with the final struggle coming down to Aurangzeb and his older brother Dara Shukoh. Dara, the eldest, had been the heir apparent and favorite child of his father, and was noted for his deep interest in the Hindu faith. He wrote extensively about it, kept the company of prominent brahmins and yogis, and considered the Upanishads to be the textual origin of monotheism. Upon his defeat and capture by Aurangzeb, he was summarily executed on charges of heresy. For the execution of his brother, among other reasons, Aurangzeb is often considered a religious zealot and backwards thinker because of the actions he ostensibly took on account of his devotion.¹

Nowhere is this sentiment stronger than in modern India herself, where decades of religious dogma have taken their toll on Aurangzeb's reputation, and his denouncement is just shy of being doctrine. So fervent are Aurangzeb's detractors that any author who suggests the accusations against Aurangzeb are blown out of proportion often faces calls for a ban, and can fall victim to retaliatory mob violence against the origin of the perceived slight.² The charges include forcing conversions, destroying temples, reinstating the jizya tax, and the wholesale murder of non-Muslims. But contrary to the rhetoric espoused by Bharatiya Janata Party pundits on the matter, examples of these actions are few and far between. This study demonstrates that these claims are in fact overstated and entirely misunderstood,

particularly the issue of temple destruction. Though contemporary government documents often place the number of ruined temples in the thousands, proper historical analysis puts the true number at only sixteen.

In this way, GIS becomes important to our understanding of one of the most revered and reviled figures in Indian history today. More complex methods of analysis are possible when historians add critical context to the source material in question. By adding clarity about the origin and contemporary interpretation of the sources, we end up asking more complex questions: in the case of Aurangzeb, we can explore not only whether the temple destruction claims have merit, but what relationship temple destruction had to other factors, such as mosque construction, changing political landscapes, and expanding borders.

These statistical methods are intended to supplement the existing historiography on the issue done primarily by Truschke and Eaton. In large part, the work these scholars have done has come to similar conclusions. Contrary to the simplified narrative traditionally espoused by conservative pundits in both India and Pakistan, the reality of Aurangzeb's reign and motivations is far more complex than is often recognized. Nevertheless, they find Aurangzeb's conservatism has been generally overstated.

In examining how his reputation fails to reflect historical reality, these scholars have noted the continued religious pluralism under Aurangzeb's Mughal Empire, in addition to his conflicts with Islamic religious authorities. Despite pressures from the international Islamic community to adhere to more traditional forms of Islam in line with the wishes of the *ulama*, the imperial state filled its official positions not only with Muslims, but with substantial numbers of Hindus as well, and often clashed directly with religious authorities over matters of state. The sheer size of the Mughal imperial state made it impossible to staff exclusively with Muslims, and the Mughal nobility had no desire to do so either. Though Muslims dominated numerically, Hindus occupied positions at all levels of the bureaucracy, had opportunities for advancement, and shared the goals of their Muslim colleagues in expanding the power and authority of the state.³ Truschke also reports on conflicts with several subsequent *qazis* (Muslim judges) that refused to officially sanction different activities, including when Aurangzeb overthrew his father Shah Jahan and made war against the Muslim kingdoms of Bijapur and Golconda.⁴ These conflicts resulted in their removal from office and replacement with individuals more willing to take their lead from the emperor.

The one action that most clearly demonstrates Aurangzeb's conservatism is his reinstatement of the *jizya* tax on non-Muslims in the empire. Although the tax had fallen out of use for over a hundred years, Aurangzeb began to levy it once more, perhaps in an attempt to increase his control over the *ulama* (Islamic scholars) who were responsible for collecting it. Additionally, the *jizya* would demonstrate that the Mughal Empire was a proper Islamic state to an international community suspicious of Aurangzeb's and his predecessor's intentions.

On the matter of temple destruction, Truschke is explicit in correcting the misunderstandings around how contemporaries represented the intent of the action. “This Islamic proclivity was perhaps rooted in the idea that government interests do not justify harming religious institutions under Islamic law, whereas such acts were arguably permissible for spreading Islam. This logic was culturally appropriate, but it is not historically persuasive for explaining temple demolitions in Aurangzeb’s India.”⁵ In short, the contemporary contextualization was intentionally misleading, and continues to mislead until this day.



Aurangzeb’s motivation for temple destruction was not primarily religious; political considerations were the determining factor.

The overarching question I am interested in answering is which parts of the modern narrative about Aurangzeb are factually accurate and interpreted correctly. A key part of the modern narrative is that temple destruction was religiously motivated.⁶ This study analyzes the spatial patterns of primary sources to uncover the motivation behind temple destruction, incorporating analysis of the patterns between temples, imperial borders, and the distribution of religious groups.

For this study, I utilized a dataset containing information about the destruction of sixteen temples destroyed during the reign of Aurangzeb. The primary reason for the wide disparity in the common numbers and those found in the data is a consistent failure to contextualize the primary sources and cross reference their claims.⁷ The majority of the translations of the original Persian sources recent scholars have used as evidence comes from *History of India as Told by its Own Historians*, edited by Sir Henry M. Elliot in 1849. According to Richard Eaton, Elliot was “keen to contrast what he understood as the justice and efficiency of British rule with the cruelty and despotism of the Muslim rulers who had preceded that rule, [and] was anything but sympathetic to the ‘Muhammadian’ period of Indian history,” resulting in exaggerated and unfounded claims that supported the existence of the Raj. This, Eaton claims, is merely one instance in a now long tradition of using selective translations of Persian sources to establish a trend in the behavior of Muslim conquerors, Aurangzeb being no exception. Evidence that may seem explicit on the matter is often suspect due to dating: in some cases, the first written record of an instance of temple destruction does not appear until 400 years after the events described.⁸ Because of the lack of contemporary sources and physical evidence, it is possible to confirm only sixteen temple destructions.

Aurangzeb’s motivation for temple destruction was not primarily religious; political considerations were the determining factor.⁹ In India especially during this time, temples had a political as well as religious bent. Though they served as places of worship, their patronage was usually associated quite strongly with a particular individual, usually a member of the court or regional power player. As was Mughal tradition, these people would, on occasion,

go into rebellion in attempts to force policy decisions by the emperor. Armed conflict accompanied periods of civic unrest, but there were no successful challenges to Aurangzeb's authority from within the Mughal empire while he lived. After suppressing a rebellion, Aurangzeb punished the leaders by erasing the markers of their authority. With armies vanquished and leaders imprisoned or dead, what remained were their sites of patronage. It would have been unacceptable to allow anything associated with traitors in a positive way to remain, so temples, as markers of their involvement in the community, were torn down.

Beginning with the assumption that temple destruction was religiously motivated, this study examines the whereabouts of the destruction to test the spatial distribution of newly conquered Hindu states compared to Hindu dominated areas of the Mughal heartland such as Rajasthan. If we believe the theories of the most vocal proponents of the religiously motivated temple destruction, then we would expect to see a uniform distribution of ruined temples across the Hindu dominated areas of the Mughal Empire

The temporal scope of this study encompasses the years 1636-1707, the years of Aurangzeb's reign as Emperor and Governor of the Deccan. Though there are more recorded instances of temple destruction, this study is only interested in investigating those carried out under Aurangzeb's watch. The geographic scope includes the modern nations which were within the borders of the Mughal Empire at its greatest extent. These include the countries of India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Afghanistan.

I analyzed data primarily from Richard Eaton's "Temple Desecration and Indo-Muslim States," with the locations he gives referenced against modern maps of India, as well as georeferenced maps of Mughal India in 1601 and 1707. These historical maps are the work of Irfan Habib of the Aligarh Muslim University, from his 1982 publication *An Atlas of the Mughal Empire*. Eaton provides the dates, locations, and actors who carried out the destruction. The temples used in this study range in date of destruction from 1654 to 1698, all falling within Aurangzeb's reign except for the first; Temple No. 1 was destroyed by Aurangzeb personally during his governorship of the Deccan. For this reason, I felt it appropriate to include it in the final count. Other temples destroyed in the count may not have been ordered or carried out by Aurangzeb personally, but are a result of institutional practices within the Mughal state that derived their origins from Aurangzeb's policies. Because of this, I attributed their destructions to him, even if he did not order it explicitly. The maps from Habib that I used are based on translations of Persian language primary sources referenced with modern mapping technologies and places.¹⁰

These maps show the locations of each individual temple, with a ten-mile buffer around each point on the map (Map 1). The reason for this buffer is due to the age of the maps used as reference and the inherent inaccuracy of the placement given the passage of time. I cannot pinpoint the exact location of each of the temples in question with certainty beyond this degree. Like the rejection region of a confidence interval, I wish to shrink the buffer in order to increase my confidence in the location of the temple. Additionally, the construction of

new mosques under Aurangzeb's reign was not prolific in any sense of the word, with only a handful of examples to note. This stands in contrast to his predecessors, especially his father Shah Jahan, who were prolific monument builders in their times. Instead, Aurangzeb appears to have favored the maintenance and renovation of existing mosques as a means of fulfilling his duty to God. As a result, mosques were constructed at only three of the destroyed temple locations following the ruin of the original structure. Their immediate proximity to the ruined temples makes it redundant to plot them independently.

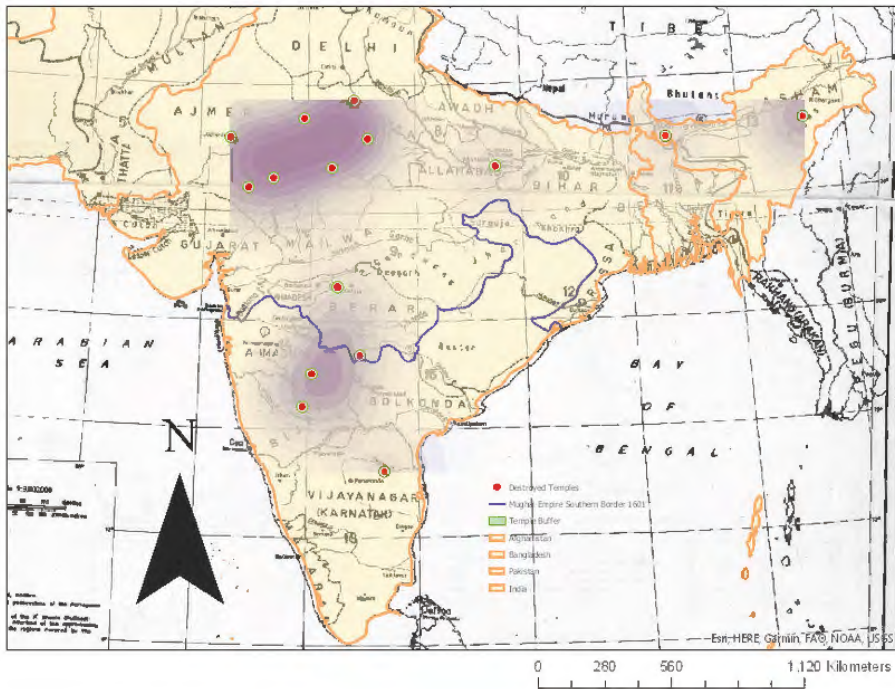
Temple destruction was concentrated in specific areas of the Mughal Empire. The KD Function uncovers the concentration of the temples and identifies the regions strongly associated with temple destruction. The results show only three temples located in Hindu-dominated regions of the southern peninsula that came into the Mughal fold under Aurangzeb. The majority are concentrated in historic Rajasthan (Map 1), where the legacy of relative autonomy from the Mughal state put the Rajput leaders in frequent political conflict with Aurangzeb.¹¹ Though these polities were controlled by Hindus, there was a significant Muslim presence and the Hindus employed Muslims in offices at all levels. Temples No. 10-13 had become associated with enemies of the imperial state for various reasons.¹² Rebel chieftains patronized these temples—the temple destroyed in Jodhpur was associated with an individual who had supported Aurangzeb's brother Dara Shikoh in the war of succession in which Aurangzeb triumphed.



Compiled by: Maximilian Murdoch

Sources: Richard Eaton "Temple Desecration" and Irfan Habib "Atlas of the Mughal Empire"

Map 1a. Distribution of Destroyed Temples in Aurangzeb's reign, showing modern South Asian states



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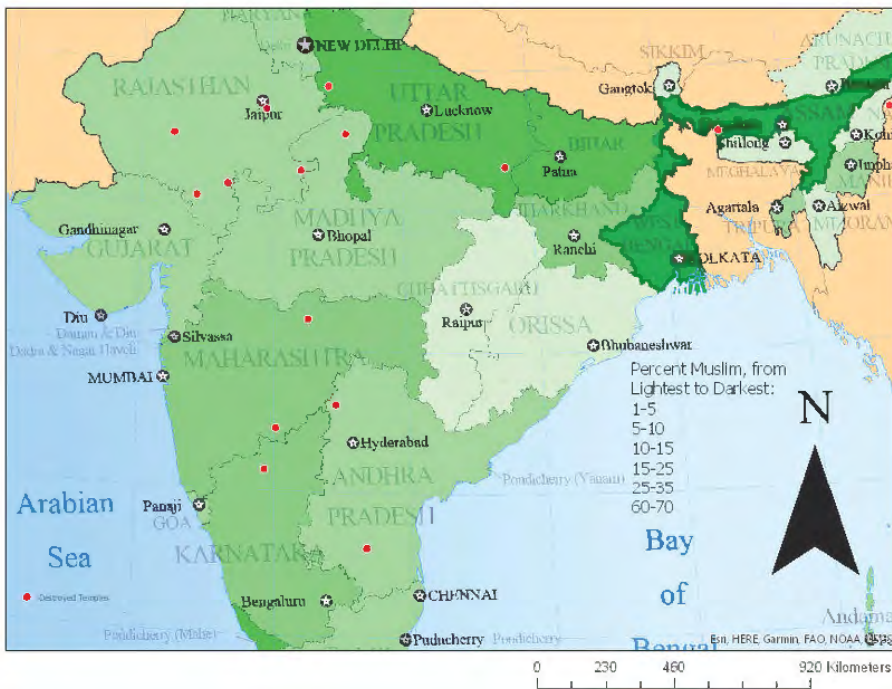
Map 1b. Distribution of Destroyed Temples in Aurangzeb's reign, showing modern South Asian states

The connection to religion as the motivating factor in destruction can be further investigated by referencing sites with modern maps of the distribution of Islam in India. The government of India publishes census data on religion in each of its states, and the results demonstrate that there is no strong correlation between the sites of temple destruction and the size of the Hindu population in those provinces. Rajasthan, where the most significant density of temples can be found, is no less Muslim than Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, or parts of Tamil Nadu, which were all incorporated into the empire in Aurangzeb's reign (Map 2). In fact, the Partition of India in 1947 resulted in a large demographic shift of Muslims out of areas bordering Pakistan and into Pakistan itself, with the reverse being true for Hindus. This means that the concentration of Muslims in Rajasthan would likely have been higher in Aurangzeb's day, contradicting the established hypothesis.

The conclusions that can be gathered from spatial analysis strongly suggest that the supposition of religious zeal as the primary motivating factor in temple destruction is false.

There is no uniform distribution in Hindu areas of temple destruction that would support the claim that temple destruction had a primarily religious motivation. If that had been the case, then regions with higher concentrations of Hindus would be expected to see equal distribution of destroyed temples. They were instead concentrated mainly in

Rajasthan, which was a politically insubordinate region even before Aurangzeb's ascension to the Peacock Throne. Had religion truly been the motivator, we would expect to see the construction of mosques widespread in the stead of these temples and on the ruins of those that were destroyed. Instead, of the temples destroyed, it is only possible to confirm the construction of a mosque immediately after in a handful.¹³ Aurangzeb only constructed a handful others besides.¹⁴ Combined with the existing historiography, the spatial analysis clarifies the picture. Temple destruction was a result of political, not religious, conflict and the modern narrative is just that: a narrative, untrue to the reality of the events. But why? What purpose does framing the Mughals and Aurangzeb in this way serve?



Compiled by: Maximilian Murdoch

Sources: Richard Eaton "Temple Desecration" and The Government of India, 2001 Census

Map 2. Locations of Destroyed Temples during Aurangzeb's reign, with percentages of Muslim citizens by state

The short answer is political expediency. The modern states of India and Pakistan are defined in opposition to each other along lines of religious identity. The tarnishing of Aurangzeb's reputation comes as part of a much larger trend within Indian society that is in keeping with the modern depiction of India as a secular, but Hindu, state. The portrayal of the Muslim rulers of pre-colonial India is to some degree as colonialists themselves: to consider them legitimate rulers would subvert the idea of India as Hindu and weaken the modern national identity that has toed the line between civic and ethnic nationalism for some time. As a result, there is an entrenchment of conservative thought on the place of Islam in Indian society and government, especially among those in power.

While a relatively recent development, this is not a new phenomenon. The legacy of communalism started long before the Partition, with its roots among the Mughals themselves. As part of the greater Muslim world, the Mughals were obligated to act in solidarity with the other Muslim dominions from Central Asia to Southern Europe, many of whom espoused a traditional approach to Muslim rule. For many outside of its borders, the Mughal state brushed far too close with heresy in the first place. As a result of attempts to placate the wider Islamic community, Aurangzeb and his predecessors framed their actions as being motivated by religious devotion. In the case of Aurangzeb, this has resulted in the consistent misinterpretation of contemporary sources, as noted by Truschke. In these sources, he is often quoted as ordering the destruction of thousands of temples and demanding the conversion of his Hindu subjects. In actuality, this amounted to little more than bluster, and his subordinates infrequently, if ever, did anything to act on or even acknowledge the decrees. This came about in part because of the contemporary interpretation of Aurangzeb's orders, but also due to plausibility: to undertake the conversion of some 200 million people would have brought the Mughal state to a swift and brutal end at the hands of a peasant revolt.

In an effort to forestall challenges to their own authority, the British actively worked to divide their Indian Empire along existing religious lines, in effect framing competition between Hindus and Muslims for British favor and cooperation as a zero-sum game. Fast forward to Indian Partition, and religion was the primary concern on the minds of those leaders tasked with building a national mythos. In the case of India, Jawaharlal Nehru compared the struggle between Aurangzeb and his brother Dara Shukoh to the emerging struggle between India and Pakistan.¹⁵ But an examination of both situations reveals that now, as then, religion is being used as a pretext to further political goals. Dara Shukoh and Aurangzeb did not fight over religion, they warred over power. Dara was executed on charges of heresy, but in reality he had spent the past two years in open conflict with his brother, soliciting the support of many powerful individuals. Letting him live would have risked continuous resistance to Aurangzeb's rule. Pakistan and India are not intractable enemies by necessity, but because it is expedient for those in power to entrench their own authority.

Temple destruction was motivated by political dissent, framed because of political considerations, and is used to further political ends. But this political narrative is undeniably and demonstrably false; history does not change based on the needs of the powerful. Aurangzeb was Muslim and destroyed Hindu temples, and though one must be careful not to suggest that life was easy for non-Muslims under his rule, it is clear that Aurangzeb did not destroy temples with the intent of persecuting Hindus. His reputation is earned not from his actions themselves, but from the fiction built around them by those who would succeed him a few centuries later.

NOTES

1. The most vocal critics of the emperor tend to come from the Hindu right, particularly the Indian ruling party, the BJP. In these circles, the question of his guilt is such a closed matter that his name is used somewhat as an adjective to describe a blatantly anti-Hindu condition.
2. Audrey Truschke, author of a recent work on the life of Aurangzeb, spoke out about the calls for a ban on her travel to India and how violence has broken out before after the publication of works dealing with similarly close held beliefs.
3. Audrey Trushke, *Aurangzeb: The Life and Legacy of India's Most Controversial King* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2017).
4. *Ibid.*, 70
5. *Ibid.*, 87
6. Serious independent scholars on the matter rarely conclude that Aurangzeb was religiously motivated. Those individuals that do tend to be writing propaganda, not historical research, and are typically associated with the BJP or far right Hindu nationalist groups.
7. South Asianist Richard Eaton at the University of Arizona has done the most work translating and analyzing the primary sources to develop a comprehensive list of the temples destroyed in Aurangzeb's reign. This list, while ranging in place from Agra to Assam, ranges in number only from 1 to 16. In his article "Temple Desecration and Indo-Muslim States," Eaton cites the history of Hindu and Muslim interactions in the recent decades as responsible in part for this willful oversight.
8. Richard Eaton, "Temple Destruction and Indo-Muslim States," *Journal of Islamic Studies* 11, no.3 (2000): 285-286.
9. Truschke, *Aurangzeb*, 88
10. Habib himself can be credited for the majority of these translations.
11. Eaton, "Temple Destruction," 307-308
12. Eaton, "Temple Destruction," 308
13. The destruction of the Kashi Vishvanath Temple in Varanasi is perhaps the most prominent example of this. Its destruction was motivated by its patrons aiding rebels, possibly assisting Shivaji in his escape. Catherine Ella Blanshard Asher, *Architecture of Mughal India, Part 1*, Vol. 4 (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 2008), 278.
14. The most well known mosque he constructed the is the Badshahi Mosque in Lahore, which was the largest in the world at the time, and though damaged in the 19th Century, continues to impress with its size and grandeur. Truschke, *Aurangzeb*, 46
15. Vasudha Dalmia and Munis Daniyal Farqui, *Religious Interactions in Mughal India*, (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2015), 31-32.

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