How to Build a Villain

Aurangzeb, Temple Destruction, and his Modern Reputation

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ABSTRACT

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 lovingly 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 and 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 this among other reasons, and the actions he took ostensibly on account of his devotion, Aurangzeb is often considered a religious zealot and backwards thinker.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. Such is the degree of fervor that this belief is held in, that to suggest the accusations against Aurangzeb are blown out of proportion often leads to calls for a ban on the

¹ The most vocal critics of the emperor tend to come from the Hindu right, particularly the 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.
author entirely, and can even result in retaliatory mob violence against the origin of the perceived slight. The charges include forcing conversions, destroying temples, reinstituting the jizya tax, and the wholesale murder of non-Muslims. But contrary to the rhetoric espoused by BJP 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 state the number of ruined temples in the thousands, proper historical analysis puts the true number at only 16.

In this way, GIS becomes important to our understanding one of the most reviled and revered 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.

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. 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.

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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 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.
For this study, I utilized a dataset containing information about the destruction of 16 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. 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 'Muhammadan' 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. In this way it’s possible to confirm only 16 temple destructions.

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

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4 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.

5 Eaton 285-286

6 Truschke, *Aurangzeb*, 88
regional power player. As was the 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 camp 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 brought down.

It is possible to support this claim by rejecting the alternatives. 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.

For this study, the temporal scope 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 in different times, this study is only interested in investigating those carried out under Aurangzeb’s watch. The geographic scope is inclusive of the modern nations for which significant parts were within the borders of the Mughal Empire at its greatest extent. These include the countries of India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Afghanistan.

The data I am analyzing comes 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*. In the case of Eaton, he gives the dates, locations, and actors who carried out the destruction. The temples used in this study range in date from 1654 to 1698, and all fall within Aurangzeb’s reign, the first notwithstanding. 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 necessarily been ordered or carried out by Aurangzeb personally, but are a result of institutional practices within the Mughal state that derive their origins from Aurangzeb’s policies. For this reason I attribute 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.\(^7\)

These maps show the locations of each individual temple, with a ten miles 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 time between then and now, I cannot pinpoint the exact location of each of the temples in question with certainty beyond this degree. To liken the process to statistical methods, the buffer is similar to the rejection region of a confidence interval, in that I wish to shrink it 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 is 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

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\(^7\) Habib himself can be credited for the majority of these translations.
mosques as a means of fulfilling his duty to God as a religious ruler. As a result, at only three of the destroyed temple locations were mosques constructed following the ruination of the original structure, and their immediate proximity to the ruined temples makes redundant to plot them independently.

Temple destruction 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 conflict with Aurangzeb on political grounds.\(^8\) 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.\(^9\) Rebel chieftains patronized these temples, and 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.

The connection to religion as the motivating factor in destruction can be further examined by referencing the sites with modern maps of the distribution of Islam in India today. The Government of India publishes census data pertaining to religion in each of the states of India, and the results demonstrate that there is no real correlation to density of Hinduism in the places temples were destroyed. 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

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\(^8\) Eaton, “Temple Destruction,” 307-308
\(^9\) Eaton, “Temple Destruction,” 308
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 have been higher in Aurangzeb’s day, giving the religion argument less credence.

The conclusions that can be gathered from spatial analysis strongly suggest that the supposition of religious zeal as the 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 did not, instead being concentrated in mainly in one region, Rajasthan, which was already a politically insubordinate region prone to conflict with the Mughal state. 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 existence of a mosque being constructed immediately after in a handful.\textsuperscript{10} Aurangzeb only constructed a handful others besides.\textsuperscript{11} Combined with Eaton, Truschke, and Faruqui’s work on the matter, the picture now becomes clear: temple destruction was a result of political conflict, not religious, and the modern narrative of religious bigotry is just that: a modern narrative, and not true to the reality of the events. But why? What purpose does framing the Mughals and Aurangzeb in this way serve?

\textsuperscript{10} 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. Asher, \textit{Architecture of Mughal India}, 278.

\textsuperscript{11} 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, \textit{Aurangzeb}, 46
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 narrative 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: for them to be considered legitimate rulers would subvert the idea of India as Hindu, and weaken the modern national identity that has toyed 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 goes back long before the Partition, with its roots among the Mughals themselves. As part of the greater Muslim world, the Mughals had obligations to act in step with the other Muslim dominions from Central Asia to Southern Europe, which often espoused a traditional approach to Muslim rule. For many outside of it, the Mughal state brushed far to close with heresy to begin with. As a result of attempts to placate the wider Islamic community, Aurangzeb especially and his predecessors to a degree as well framed their actions as being motivated by religious devotion. In the case of Aurangzeb, this has resulted in the consistent modern misinterpretation of contemporary sources, in which he is often quoted as ordering the destruction of thousands of temples wholesale, 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 is the primary concern on the minds of those leaders tasked with building a national mythos. In the case of India, Jawaharlal Nehru inscribes the struggle between Aurangzeb and his brother Dara Shukoh as akin to the modern emerging struggle between India and Pakistan\(^\text{12}\). But an examination of both situations reveals the same thing: religion is being used as a blatant excuse to further political goals. Dara Shukoh and Aurangzeb didn’t war over religion, they warred over power. Dara was executed on charges of heresy, but the reality is that 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 been foolish in the extreme. Pakistan and India are not intractable enemies by necessity, but because it is convenient for those in power in order to entrench their own authority.

Then, as now, temple destruction is distinctly political. It was motivated by political dissent, framed because of political considerations, and is used to further political ends. But the fact of the matter is that the political narrative is false, and the reality of history does not change based on current needs. Aurangzeb was Muslim and destroyed Hindu temples, and though one must be careful not to suggest that things were truly roses and sunshine for non-Muslims under his rule, it is clear that Aurangzeb did not destroy temples with the intent of persecuting Hindus. By modern standards we would not have been a good person, but that doesn’t mean that it is fair

or accurate to paint him as an arch-villain. His reputation is earned not from his actions themselves, but from the fiction built around them by those who would come after.
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MAPS

Map 2.

Locations of destroyed temples in Aurangzeb’s reign, with percentages of Muslim citizens by state.

Compiled by: Maximilian Mudoch
Sources: Richard Eaton “Temple Desecration” and The Government of India, 2001 Census
Map 1.

Distribution of destroyed temples in Aurangzeb's reign, showing modern South Asian states

Compiled by: Maximilien Murdock  
Sources: Richard Eaton "Temple Desecration" and Irfan Habib "Atlas of the Mughal Empire"