

Interrogating the Politics of Historiography: A Critical Reading of Audrey Truschke's *Aurangzeb: The Man and the Myth*

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Abstract

From the New Historicists to Hayden White, theorists have insinuated history's inclination to fictionality. In the light of such claims, the primary objective of my paper is to probe into the controversial book *Aurangzeb: The Man and the Myth* by Audrey Truschke so as to underscore the way historical representation is often suspected to be inflected by political agenda. The backflap of the jacket of her book introduces Truschke as "assistant professor of South Asian history at Rutgers University in Newark, New Jersey." In her book on Aurangzeb, she problematizes the conventional monodimensional representation of the eponymous emperor as "a vile oppressor of Hindus" and, consequently, triggers a violent controversy in the subcontinent.

Keywords: historiography, ideology, textuality, fictionality, narrative, representation, objectivity.

Nowadays it is impossible to take history at face value. The pinch of salt, with which it is to be taken is provided by the New Historicists and thinkers like Hayden White. In such a sceptical academic world the reception of researches on a controversial figure like Aurangzeb is bound to be problematic. My paper intends to examine a book, namely *Aurangzeb: The Man and the Myth* by Audrey Truschke (published in 2017) which plunges headlong into such a whirlpool of academic debate. The debate is interesting all the more because its spills over the academic boundaries and muddies the political water as well.

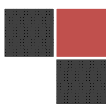
As mentioned in the abstract of my paper, the backflap of the jacket of her book introduces Truschke as an “assistant professor of South Asian history at Rutgers University in Newark, New Jersey.” In her book on Aurangzeb, she problematizes the conventional monodimensional representation of the eponymous emperor as “a vile oppressor of Hindus” and, consequently, triggers a violent controversy in the subcontinent. She points out how “Aurangzeb lives on as a vibrant figure in public memory in twenty-first-century India and Pakistan (Truschke 3)” and is comparable to “a live wire of history that sparks fires in the present day (Truschke 5)”.

While examining how Aurangzeb became one of the most hated figures in Indian history, Truschke claims to have found that “Current popular visions of Aurangzeb are more fiction than reality (Truschke 5).” She interrogates the way Akbar and Aurangzeb are often clamped together in a binary to suggest religious syncretism and bigotry respectively; and argues that the practice is rather simplistic because a disinterested examination of historical evidence makes such overarching generalisations impossible: “Aurangzeb was a *complex emperor* whose life was shaped by *an assortment of sometimes conflicting desires and motivations*, including power, justice, piety and the burden of Mughal kingship (Truschke 5, emphases added).” Apparently she warns us against reducing a powerful political figure to his religious identity. She even suggests that the reductionist representation of Aurangzeb was a colonial praxis so as to justify British imperialism.

British colonial thinkers had long impugned the Mughals on a range of charges, including that they were effeminate, oppressive and Muslims. ... For the British the solution to such an entrenched problem was clear: British rule over India. While Indian independence leaders rejected this final step of colonial logic, many swallowed the earlier parts wholesale. Such ideas filtered to society at large via textbooks and mass media, and several generations have continued to eat up and regurgitate the colonial notion that Aurangzeb was a tyrant driven by religious fanaticism. (Truschke 9)

This, according to Truschke, explains why even Jawaharlal Nehru thought that “Aurangzeb’s adherence to Islam crippled his ability to rule India (Truschke 9)” or why Shahid Nadeem, a Pakistani playwright, observed that the seeds of partition had been sown when Aurangzeb had defeated Dara Shikoh (Qtd in Truschke, 8). Such facile observations on history also lays the ground for “Recent political attempts to erase Aurangzeb from the face of modern India—such as by renaming Aurangzeb Road in Delhi ... (Truschke 3).” But Truschke asserts: “Precious little history surfaces in these modern visions (4).”

Truschke denounces both facile and politically-motivated historiography since they are often found to be based on “cherry-picked episodes” (10). She foregrounds the



need in historical researches of a disinterested approach to the incidents of the past, perception of complexities or ambivalence inherent in a subject, and an awareness of the pitfalls involved in assessing the past with contemporary criteria:

Historians seek to comprehend people *on their own terms as products of particular times and places*, and explain their actions and impacts. *We need not absolve those we study of guilt, and we certainly do not need to like them.* But we strive to hold back judgement long enough so that the myth of Aurangzeb can fade into the background and allow room for a more nuanced and compelling story to be told. (Truschke 11, emphases added)

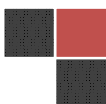
To straighten up matters, Truschke divides her book into eight chapters. They are as follows: “Introducing Aurangzeb”, “Early Years”, “The Grand Arc of Aurangzeb’s Reign”, “Administrator of Hindustan”, “Moral man and Leader”, “Overseer of Hindu Religious Communities”, “Later Years”, and “Aurangzeb’s Legacy”. Through these chapters she attempts not only to chart out the trajectory of Aurangzeb’s career but also to problematize the construction of a coherent narrative out of the complexities of a monarch’s engagement with idealism as well as real politik.

So far, my discussions were based mainly on the first chapter of the book. The subsequent chapters lead us to the core of Truschke’s polemics. For example, the second chapter (“Early Years”) deals with the birth of Aurangzeb, his education, his cultural grooming as well as training in martial arts, his participation in the war of succession, his killing of his brothers and his incarceration of Shah Jahan before seizing power. Besides the treatment of his father, Aurangzeb seems to have felt no compunctions regarding the way he handled the other issues relating to the attainment or retention of power. The way Truschke cites historical records proves that he could not have acted otherwise in the given circumstances. His racial traditions, volatile circumstances, his grooming as a Mughal prince in principles of religion or justice worked as the determinants of his course of action. His personal abilities—political, diplomatic and military— also contributed to the inevitable.

When Aurangzeb was born, his father (still known as Prince Khurram) hosted a birth celebration and gifted huge sums to the royal treasury; but, Truschke points out, “Despite such a propitious beginning, however, Aurangzeb would not find his father’s favour easy to secure (21).” Thus, at the very beginning of the second chapter, Truschke gives hints regarding the final souring of relationship between Aurangzeb and Shah Jahan. She also implies that Aurangzeb’s acumen or success as an administrator or military strategist was always undermined by Shah Jahan whose favourite was Dara Shukoh in spite of the latter’s lack of enthusiasm for active political life or military skill: “Shah Jahan openly favoured his eldest son. Dara Shukoh’s first wedding, for example, outshone all others in Mughal history (23).”

Truschke questions this partiality on the part of Shah Jahan, as she finds Aurangzeb to merit more appreciation than Dara. She goes on recounting an episode from the early days of Aurangzeb’s career when he was attacked by a rogue elephant during an elephant fight, a favourite royal pastime. Whereas Aurangzeb remained undaunted in the face of danger, and Shuja and Raja Jai Singh tried to ward off the rogue beast, “Dara Shukoh was nowhere to be seen during this life-threatening encounter (25).”

Truschke points out how, “For twenty-two long years, between 1635 and 1657, Aurangzeb shuttled across the reaches of the Mughal kingdom, fighting wars in Balkh,



Bundelkhand, and Qandahar and administering Gujarat, Multan and the Deccan (26).” Thus he “Proved adept at both administration and military expansion but was often frustrated by decisions from Delhi that seemed designed to undermine his success (26).” At that time “Dara Shukoh lived in leisure at court...and passed his days in erudite conversations with Hindu and Muslim ascetics (Truschke 27).” This makes Truschke conclude that “Dara Shukoh was ill-prepared to either win or rule the Mughal kingdom (27).”

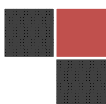
In such circumstances, when rumours about Shah Jahan’s failing health sparked a succession war, Aurangzeb’s rise to power was inevitable. His political and military acumen helped him outmanoeuvre his brothers in the power-hunt. According to Truschke, Aurangzeb was not exceptional in fighting his own brothers for the crown. He only followed a time-honoured tradition among the Mughal princes. In pitting himself against his siblings he was behaving in the same way as his brothers. Truschke observes, “Beyond education, a Mughal prince’s childhood was characterised by brotherly rivalry, and Aurangzeb’s upbringing proved no exception (23).”

And such rivalry could not be avoided as “The Mughals inherited a Central Asian custom that all male family members had equal claims to political power. Emperor Akbar had managed to narrow the list of legitimate contenders to sons (thus cutting out nephews and male cousins), but birth order was largely irrelevant. In the absence of primogeniture, Shah Jahan’s lustrous Peacock Throne could one day belong to Aurangzeb, if he managed to outmanoeuvre his sibling contenders (Truschke 23).” So, what Aurangzeb did to seize power was not any violation of order. It was just an expectable course for a Mughal prince to follow. Like all his brothers he wanted to grab power “according to time-honoured Mughal practices of force and trickery (Truschke 28).” Even his brutal extermination of his brothers was unavoidable. This might appear to be cruel in our eyes; but in contemporary standards, it merely followed traditional templates of political behaviour.

Mughal kingship had long been guided by the blunt Persian expression ‘*Yatakhtyatabut*’ (either the throne or the grave). Shah Jahan ordered the murder of two of his brothers, Khusrau in 1622 and Shahriyar in 1628, and, for good measure, also executed two nephews and two male cousins upon seizing the throne in 1628. Circumstantial evidence suggests that Shah Jahan’s father, Jahangir, bore responsibility for the death of Danyal, Jahangir’s youngest brother (the ostensible cause was alcohol poisoning). Even the early days of Mughal rule under Babur and Humayun were characterised by violent clashes that pitted brother against brother and son against father. (Truschke 30)

Truschke tries to prove that Aurangzeb meted out to his brothers the same treatment that he himself would suffer at their hands if he had been defeated. She refers to the historical account left by Niccoli Manucci, according to which Dara Shukoh was asked by Aurangzeb what he would do if their roles were reversed. “Dara sneered that he would have Aurangzeb’s body quartered and displayed on Delhi’s four main gates (Truschke 41).” Truschke considers Aurangzeb to be more considerate than his brother, since he “ordered Dara Shukoh’s corpse to be buried at Humayun’s tomb in Delhi, where it rests today (41).”

Truschke’s take on Aurangzeb’s religiosity is rather interesting as she also accommodates the emperor’s occasional deviation from the Islamic principles in the face



of political imperatives. She traces it back to Aurangzeb's ill-treatment of his father Shah Jahan whom he had to put under house arrest during the fraternal rivalry for power. This remarkable ambiguity growing out of the tension between religion and political aspirations questions the simplistic representation of Aurangzeb as an outright fanatic obsessed with religion.

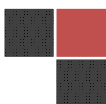
Aurangzeb never fully came to terms with his unjust handling of his father. This rocky start haunted him throughout his rule and even shaped his piety, as we will see. This early moment also marked a key characteristic of Aurangzeb's commitment to justice, namely, that it was limited by ambition. During his long reign Aurangzeb faced numerous conflicts between his principles and his politics, and the former rarely won out. (Truschke 45)

Truschke implies that if Aurangzeb was obsessed with anything at all, it was with power, and with maintaining the unity of his empire. And in this regard he was hardly different from his predecessors. So, the common notion that he can be contrasted with emperors like Akbar in a sort of black and white binary is rather facile. His violence was a political necessity, and probably the last resort, coming in the wake of the failure of diplomacy, with a view to expanding the empire. And once his political goal was achieved, his focus was more on efficient administration than indulging in gratuitous atrocities.

In his bent for war and power, Aurangzeb differed little from his forbears ... The weight of upholding a unified Mughal Empire and, where possible, expanding its borders rested heavy on Aurangzeb's shoulders and moulded his aggressive military ventures. But inhabiting the Mughal throne involved far more than shedding blood and drawing ever-widening lines on a map. For Aurangzeb, a preoccupation with dispensing justice (adl), existed alongside his thirst for earthly power. (Truschke 49-50, emphases added)

To preserve the integrity of his empire, Aurangzeb, according to Truschke, would not spare even his kinsmen, if they were found involved in conspiracies. So, it is hardly surprising that he meted out severe punishments to similar other offenders: "Aurangzeb faced numerous ... armed threats to the integrity of the Mughal Empire in the first half of his rule and showed little clemency (Truschke 48)." He did not single out the Sikh guru Tegh Bahadur (executed in 1675) or the Rathor and Sisodia Rajputs (subjugated in the late 1670s) for administering harsh retribution. He also "struck hard against family members who compromised state interests. For instance, Aurangzeb's son, Prince Akbar, rebelled in 1681 and was chased to the Deccan and soon forced to flee to Iran—where he died in 1704—in order to escape his father's wrath (Truschke 48-9)."

Truschke makes an earnest attempt to subvert another notion, rife not only among the commonalty in India but also the academic world, that Aurangzeb was to the Hindus what Hitler was to the Jews. Such entrenched ideas, according to Truschke, are not based on historical evidence and are often inflected by political agenda. She insists that Aurangzeb's relationship with the people of other religious affiliations than Islam was much complex and nuanced. It belies all overarching or sweeping generalisations. Often real politik had a vital role to play in regulating the dynamics of this relationship. While portraying the illustrious and efficient emperor as a persecutor of the Hindus one



becomes susceptible to a parochial vision, leading to oversimplification of complex issues.

To aid one's political agenda one deliberately turns a blind eye to the fact that "...Aurangzeb upheld many Mughal imperial practices *borrowed or derived from Hindu customs* (Truschke 53, emphasis added)", or that he "...maintained personal contacts with Hindu religious figures. For instance, he penned a letter to Mahant Anand Nath in 1661, requesting a medical preparation from the yogi. In the 1660s he increased Anand Nath's landholdings in a village in the Punjab (Truschke 53)."

Truschke wants to substantiate her claim that Aurangzeb's reign was more tolerant than his detractors are ready to admit. Even contemporary Hindu documents contain references to his ideal kingship. It is quite interesting to note that his reign was often compared by Hindu or non-Hindu writers, albeit tacitly, to 'Ram-rajya'.

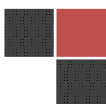
[I]n the early 1690s a poet by the name of Chandraman dedicated his *Nargisistan* (Narcissus Garden), a Persian poetic retelling of the Ramayana, to Aurangzeb. In 1705 Amar Singh followed suit, dedicating his prose Persian Ramayana (titled *Amar Prakash*) to Aurangzeb.... Even at the end of his reign, Aurangzeb had not moved so far afield from Mughal cultural practices as to break the perceived association between Mughal royalty and the epic Hindu tale of Ram. (Truschke 61)

Truschke also finds it hard to accept that the battles Aurangzeb fought with some of the Hindu states were clear-cut Hindu-Muslim conflicts. She does not find any historical ground to believe that all the Hindus shared a sense of solidarity against Aurangzeb and wanted to oust him from power. History betrays many loopholes and fissures in such narratives, as these simplistic tales do not accommodate nuances and ambiguities. Such events are –

...framed by modern historians as the 'Rajput rebellion' and cast as Hindu hostility to Muslim rule. This communal reading is belied by the decision of both the Rathors and the Sisodias to support Prince Akbar, a Muslim, not to mention their divergent reactions to the Treaty of Rajsamudra. Mewar accepted peace with Aurangzeb, whereas Marwar continued to buck under the Mughal yoke. This event was, in actuality, a power struggle, akin to numerous other rebellions—by Hindu and Muslim rulers alike — against Mughal rule over the centuries. (Truschke 68-9)

Truschke slyly draws the reader's attention to the fact that the Mughal officer who was ordered to pursue Shivaji was a "leader of the Kachhwaha Rajputs and a Hindu (77)". One of the reasons as to why Shivaji felt slighted at the Mughal court was that "Many Rajputs of the day looked down on Shivaji as an uncouth upstart who, in Mughal terms, was deficient in adab (proper conduct) (79)", as being raised by his mother Jijabai, without access to courtly life, "Shivaji lacked exposure to Persianate court culture (79)." So, during Aurangzeb's reign the Hindu-Muslim divide was not as neat as modern historians with their hidden communal/ political agenda would have us believe,

Rather, Truschke observes that "Hindus fared well in Aurangzeb's massive bureaucracy (71)." Citing the career of Raja Raghunatha, who was "one of Aurangzeb's most cherished state officers (73)", she argues that "...in many cases, Aurangzeb was



unconcerned with the religious identity of his state officials, whom he selected primarily for their administrative skills (72).”

It is also foregrounded by Truschke, in the chapter titled “Moral Man and Leader”, that Aurangzeb’s approach to religion was hardly puritanical. His links with Sufi communities (let alone his interest in Hindu ascetics like Shiv Mangaldas Maharaj), his desire to be buried at a Chishti shrine in Maharashtra, his belief in the talismanic aspects of religion and his aggression against the Muslim states of Bijapur and Golkonda prove how facile it is to reduce the man to his Muslimness. Truschke, therefore, privileges Aurangzeb’s identity as an administrator over his allegiance to Islam.

...[T]he emperor ran into repeated problems regarding his public relationship with Islam. When the two conflicted, Aurangzeb generally sacrificed religious obligations on the altar of state interests, although such decisions weighed heavily on his heart. (Truschke 85)

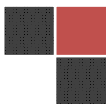
Truschke contends that Aurangzeb launched no official mission to wipe Hinduism out from his empire, neither did he order any project of forced conversion or wholesale temple demolition; rather the number of temples demolished in his regime is negligible, compared to how many temples survived it. And the few temples that were demolished, Truschke argues, represented to Aurangzeb those who were implicated in seditious activities.

Hindu and Jain temples dotted the landscape of Aurangzeb’s kingdom. These religious institutions were entitled to Mughal state protection, and Aurangzeb generally endeavoured to ensure their well-being. By the same token, from a Mughal perspective, that goodwill could be revoked when specific temples or their associates acted against imperial interests. Accordingly, Emperor Aurangzeb authorised targeted temple destructions and desecrations throughout his rule. (Truschke 99-100)

But such punitive measures were not reserved for non-Muslim delinquents only. In case of political opposition Aurangzeb was also harsh against Muslims. “At times, Aurangzeb persecuted specific Muslim groups whose doctrines ran afoul of his vision of Islam (96)”; for example, in the 1640s his troops massacred a few dozen members of the Mahdavi community since they had political ambitions. He even “targeted the Ismaili Bohras (96)” and “imperial soldiers periodically arrested members of this community (96).”

Imposition of the *jizya* tax on the non-Muslims, in exchange of military service, was one of Aurangzeb’s failed projects, according to Truschke. Apart from mentioning that the Rajputs, Marathas and leading Brammins were exempted from the tax, she posits the theory that Aurangzeb revived the discriminatory tax not so much to persecute non-Muslims as to ensure the supports of the powerful ulama—who “were a key component in the balance of Mughal power (88).” But it was lampooned by members of the royal family, like Jahanara, Aurangzeb’s eldest sister, as a poor administrative decision and it also upset many Hindus. According to a contemporary letter addressed to Aurangzeb, the tax “went against the notion of *sulh-ikull* (peace for all), which had been a bedrock of Mughal policy since Akbar’s time (89).”

It was also discordant with Aurangzeb’s general administrative policies. But the book under discussion, by Audrey Truschke, proves that such instances of ambivalence



are common in history and shows the pitfalls of churning out a coherent myth out of the complexities of human experiences.

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