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Topic: Revisiting References to the Mughal Empire Aurangzeb in Urdu Writings

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Findings

The historiography of Mughal Emperor Aurangzēb has long been a topic of extensive academic debate and scholarly interest. Among the many sources that contribute to our understanding of his reign, Urdu writings hold a particularly significant place. Spanning over two centuries, these texts offer a unique perspective that reflects both the cultural and intellectual contexts of their times and the enduring legacy of Aurangzēb in South Asian consciousness. “Revisiting references to Mughal Emperor Aurangzēb in Urdu writings” is a meticulous study of historical narratives, poetry, and prose, revealing the evolving perceptions and interpretations of his policies, personality, and impact on the subcontinent. This exploration is not merely an academic exercise; it is a journey into the heart of South Asian historiography and cultural memory. It demonstrates the importance of literary sources in shaping historical narratives and invites a nuanced exploration of one of the most controversial figures in Mughal history.

At the heart of this inquiry lies the intersection of two interconnected themes: the evolution of the Urdu language and the characterization of Aurangzēb. While ostensibly distinct, both are deeply embedded within the socio-political currents of their respective eras. Urdu, as a linguistic medium, evolved alongside shifting power dynamics, while portrayals of Aurangzēb—whether as a pious ruler or a tyrant—were invariably shaped by contemporaneous ideologies and agendas. This research argues that neither theme can be fully understood in isolation; their development and representation were (and remain) contingent on the political imperatives, cultural anxieties, and identity politics of the communities that produced and consumed these narratives. By tracing how Urdu writings have appropriated, reinterpreted, or utilized Aurangzēb’s legacy across different periods, this study illuminates the symbiotic relationship between language, historiography, and power in South Asia.

Contrary to the perception that Urdu scholarship on Aurangzēb is a Muslim-dominated field biased in his favor, this research reveals a more complex and diverse landscape. Urdu historiography on Aurangzēb is not exclusive to Muslims; non-Muslim scholars, including Hindus, Christians, and Sikhs, have significantly contributed. Their perspectives enrich the discourse, challenging the assumption of uniformity in motivations or interpretations. Moreover, Urdu writings on Aurangzēb are far from monolithic, displaying a wide range of conflicting views. His actions, such as the war of succession and religious policies like the jizya tax, are variously interpreted as strategic, ideological, or flawed. This diversity reflects the dynamic nature of Urdu historiography, where Aurangzēb's legacy is continually reassessed in response to evolving historical and scholarly contexts.

The historiography of Mughal Emperor Aurangzēb in Urdu writings evolved through five distinct phases. These phases illustrate how Aurangzēb's portrayal in Urdu historiography evolved in response to changing historical and ideological currents. First Phase (1856–1895): Influenced by British colonial narratives, Urdu scholars depicted Aurangzēb as opportunistic and cynical, portraying his religious policies as tools for power consolidation rather than genuine devotion. Second Phase (1895–1920): Urdu writers cautiously challenged colonial narratives, with figures like Maulvī Zakā' Allāh and Lālā Lājpat Rā'e leading the shift. Shiblī Nu'mānī's *Aurangzēb 'Ālamgīr par Ek Naẓar* marked a more assertive engagement with Aurangzēb's legacy. Third Phase (1920–1947): Coinciding with the Khilafat Movement and India's independence struggle, Urdu historians emphasized Aurangzēb's role as a just ruler promoting communal coexistence, reflecting nationalist efforts to unify India's past. Fourth Phase (1947–1970): Post-independence, scholars like Sheikh Ikrām and Sayyid Ṣabāḥ al-Dīn introduced nuanced perspectives, exploring Aurangzēb's human qualities and administrative challenges. Fifth Phase (1970–2010): Supported by institutions like the National Council for Promotion of Urdu Language (NCPUL), this phase saw a surge in Urdu publications. Scholars often framed Aurangzēb through a religious lens, emphasizing his piety while overlooking controversial aspects of his reign, leading to repetitive and less critical narratives.