

## THE MUGHAL EMPIRE OF INDIA

While the Europeans were attempting to gain control of the Indian Ocean, a different group—the Mughals—began establishing their authority over the Indian subcontinent, where centralized rule had not been seen for nearly a thousand years. The Timurids had gravely weakened the Delhi Sultanate of northern India in the late 1300s. A Timurid, Babur, swept into India from Central Asia, displaced the last sultan of Delhi in 1526, founding the Mughal Empire. (While *Mughal* means *Mongol* in Persian, the Timurids, and hence Babur, were primarily of Turkic rather than Mongol descent.) However, it was Babur's grandson Akbar who would establish truly centralized rule over the growing empire. He and his three successors would unite all of India (save the southernmost tip) before the end of the seventeenth century.

Akbar maintained economic growth by trading cotton cloth with European merchants, and promoted cultural blending and innovation in the arts, but he demonstrated true genius in creating a well-organized central bureaucracy and strong military. The loyalty of these officials was ensured through the reward of lifetime (but nonhereditary) land grants. Akbar's greatest challenge was in dealing with various Hindu kings, who resented centuries of Muslim domination of their homeland. By incorporating Rajputs, Hindu warriors from the north, into the Mughal military and government, Akbar set a tone of religious tolerance that largely freed him and his initial successors from enduring conflict with the Hindus. In fact,

Akbar went on to create a new "Divine Faith" that mixed Muslim, Hindu, Christian, and other beliefs. Another, more enduring religion that blended Muslim and Hindu elements also emerged during the Mughal period: the Sikhs, of the Punjab region in northwest India, initially focused on the peaceful attainment of enlightenment, but transformed dramatically into a militant group opposing Mughal rule after Akbar's great-grandson Aurangzeb beheaded their guru for refusing to convert to Islam. Aurangzeb also broke the Mughal policy of religious tolerance by imposing a number of limitations on Hindu rights in the late 1600s. As the 1700s began, the Mughals faced challenges to their authority from both the Sikhs and the now-resentful Hindus. This internal strife combined with the invasion of Nadir Shah of Iran to bring an end to centralized Mughal rule in 1739. The empire disintegrated into a number of regional powers, just as the French, Dutch, and British began turning their attention away from the coastal Indian Ocean trade to seek new opportunities on the subcontinent itself.