

Historical Background to MUGHAL-E-AZAM ("The Great Mughal")

The film is set during the reign of the Muslim ruler Akbar the Great (Jalal ud-din Muhammad Akbar, 1542-1605), the third and most celebrated emperor of the Mughal dynasty, which held power over much of the Indian subcontinent for roughly two centuries (ca. 1530-1730). Akbar took the throne at the age of thirteen, after his father, Humayun, fell to his death (stoned on opium, some say, or pushed, as others allege) on a palace staircase in Delhi. By the seventh year of his reign (1562), Akbar took firm personal command of his court. In that year he married Joda Bai, daughter of the Hindu Raja of Amber (modern Jaipur), the first of a series of marital alliances that were part of a deliberate policy of integrating Rajput (Hindu) princes into the ruling elite; Joda Bai would eventually give birth to Akbar's heir. These alliances were part of a successful strategy of consolidating power over much of northern and central India (Mughal rule was never effective in the deep south), but Akbar was not averse to military campaigns as well, directed against both Islamic and Hindu rulers. In 1567 he laid siege to the Rajput fortress of Chitor (in modern Rajasthan), and allegedly ordered the massacre of 30,000 inhabitants when it fell the following year. In 1572 he invaded the western region of Gujarat, and in 1576 annexed the eastern realm of Bengal, thus securing Mughal power across the breadth of the subcontinent. In 1581 he invaded Afghanistan in the northwest, and in 1592 Orissa in the southeast. By the end of his reign he directly controlled more of the subcontinent than would the British Raj.

Akbar is most celebrated for his cultural and administrative policies, and his reign is considered the high-water mark of Hindu-Islamic cooperation and synthesis—a fact that has made it of special interest to modern Indian nationalists. In 1563, Akbar abolished the tax on Hindu pilgrims, and the following year, removed the much-resented *jizya* tax on non-Muslims (prescribed by Quranic law). He had Hindu temples built within his palaces and staffed by Brahman priests for the convenience of his Hindu wives, and he participated in many Hindu festivals, such as the birthday of Krishna (depicted in the film), when an image of the divine infant is ceremonially swung on an ornate cradle. In later years, he forbade the slaughter of cattle in deference to Hindu sentiments, and briefly became vegetarian himself. Though Hindus comprised only 15% of his administration, these included 20 of the most powerful courtiers, including the minister of revenue and the *vakil*, the emperor's bureaucratic right hand; Man Singh of Amber, Joda Bai's father (depicted in the film) was reputedly a close friend as well as a leading general and minister. Passionately fond of miniature painting, Akbar assembled a royal atelier of more than 100 masters, mainly Hindus, who produced lavishly illustrated versions of the great Sanskrit epics *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*, as well as other works. Significantly, it was during Akbar's reign (though far from his court) that the Hindu poet Tulsidas produced a Hindi vernacular version of the *Ramayana* (1574). Akbar also patronized master architects, who developed the characteristic "Mughlai" style, combining Persian and Rajput elements. His legendary court musician Tansen (depicted in the film, singing in the garden during the lovescene between Salim and Anarkali, in the voice of the great modern maestro Bade Ghulam Ali Khan) is considered the founder of modern Hindustani classical music. Both painting and music were frowned on by orthodox Islamic legalists, who in fact opposed many of Akbar's policies. Highly curious about spiritual matters, Akbar invited representatives of all religions (including Jesuits from Rome) to his court to debate before him, and eventually created a syncretic court cult, centered on himself. In 1579, he declared that imperial judgments were infallible and took precedence even over Islamic law (further enraging the orthodox). This centralization of authority was reflected in administration, through a complex hierarchy of functionaries who owed direct allegiance to the emperor and whose properties reverted to him on their death. At the same time, Akbar launched an ambitious scheme of land surveying and graded taxation that reduced the burden on the peasantry and resulted in greater rural prosperity.

Childless until the age of 27, Akbar sought the blessings of a Sufi mystic, Salim Chishti, and shortly thereafter Joda Bai gave birth to a son, who was named for the saint. In later years, Prince Salim and his younger brothers grew restless and eventually rebelled against the aging emperor. Salim declared himself emperor in 1601, and three years later had his father's closest friend (and court chronicler) Abu'l Fazl murdered. When Akbar died (some say of poisoning), the 36-year-old Salim took the throne under the name of Jahangir ("world seizer," reigned 1605-1627).

Jahangir's own legend, and much of the film, centers on his supposed rebellious love affair with the lowly court dancer Anarkali ("pomegranate bud"). In some versions of this popular story, she was buried alive at Akbar's order; her grave is reputedly in Lahore (now in Pakistan). (On the film, see also Sumita Chakravarty, *Indian Popular Cinema*, pp. 167-73.) Most historical accounts depict Jahangir as a comparatively weak ruler, overly fond of alcohol and opiates and much under the influence of his Persian wife Nur Jahan ("light of the world," perhaps suggested in the film by the scheming anti-heroine Bahaar) and her ambitious family. In standard imperial fashion, he was eventually challenged and then succeeded by his own son, who became the emperor Shah Jahan (DATES), builder of the Taj Mahal.

Songs in *Mughal-e-Azam*

1) *Mohe panghat pe*

An erotic song about the god Krishna. Anarkali sings as a *gopi* or village cowherd maiden, complaining to Krishna's parents that he has been teasing her when she goes to the bank of the river (*panghat*) to fetch water in a clay pot.

2) *Teri mehfil men*

("in your assembly") In this *ghazal*, two teams of singers, led by Bahar and Anarkali, stage a poetic competition or "debate" over the nature of love for the entertainment of Prince Salim. All the singers are female in this "inner apartment" entertainment, but Bahar's team is symbolically dressed as men (with caps), and expresses more a "male" point of view ("Who needs love?"). Anarkali's team responds with stock Urdu poetic conventions: of adoring and being willing to die for the Beloved, etc.

(chorus 1, with Bahar) In your assembly we too will test our fate and see what happens,
For one full moment we will draw near you and see what happens.

(chorus 2, with Anarkali) In your assembly we too will test our fate and see what happens,
Bowling our heads before your footsteps, we will see what happens.

(chorus 1) Spring has come today bringing the message of love,
In the garden the flowers of our hopes smilingly bloom,
We will spare ourselves the sorrow of the heart, and see what happens.

(chorus 2) If the heart is void of sorrow, then where's the fun of life?
Without the flavor of heart's blood, where's the fun of drinking tears?
We will freely shed tears in love and see what happens.

(chorus 1) The whole tale of lovers consists only of this:
To writhe in silent anguish, sigh deeply, and then to be ground down and die.
Some day we too will see this farce and smile.

(chorus 2) We have accepted love, though it destroys our life.
What loss is this, when, upon our dying, the world forever remembers us?
For someone's love, we'd even loot the world, and see what happens...

3) *Ae ishk ye sab duniyawale*

Sung by Suraiya, Anarkali's sister, to convey to the Prince that Anarkali is in love with him. "All worldly people talk foolishly about 'love'" (but only those willing to throw off all bonds and surrender to madness or death really experience it.)

4) *Mohabbat ki juthi kahani pe roe*

In Akbar's dungeon, Anarkali invites us to "weep at the false/deceiving tale of love," which promises us joy but in the end delivers only pain.

5) *Hume kash tumse mohabbat na hoti*

"If only I had not fallen in love with you, our tale would not have proven true." Anarkali tries to carry out Akbar's command that she convince Salim of the falseness of her love.

6) *Jab pyaar kiya to darna kya? (on course CD)*

In the grand dance performance that is supposed to demonstrate to Salim the falseness of her love, Anarkali turns the tables and openly defies the emperor, affirming her love for Salim. Her taunting refrain is "When one has fallen in love, then what is there to fear?"

When one has fallen in love, then what is there to fear?
Love is no theft that one should conceal one's sighs in silence.
When one has fallen in love, then what is there to fear?"

Today we will declare the heart's tale, though the world take away our life.
Death is what the world sees, but why thus die by slow degrees?
When one has fallen in love, then what is there to fear?"

The desire for him will remain in my heart, this candle will burn on in the assembly.
Live in love and die in love, now what else is there for me to do?
When one has fallen in love, then what is there to fear?"

My love cannot remain silent, it is visible on all sides.
When there is no curtain between oneself and God, then why a curtain between (His) slaves?
When one has fallen in love, then what is there to fear?"

7) *Bekas bekaram kijiye sarkar Madina*

Back in the dungeon for defying the emperor, Anarkali sings to the Prophet ("Lord of Madina") for mercy and strength in her trials.

Have mercy on the destitute, O Lord of Madina.
I lament, I lament my afflictions,
That despite Your presence, the world has turned against me.

8) *Zindabaad*

As Salim is prepared for execution, the nameless sculptor sings a rousing anthem that declares “Victory to Love!,” hailing him as a martyr (*shaheed*) in the name of love, whose memory will live beyond that of tyrants. The song alludes to both romantic and spiritual love, addressing God as the source and embodiment of both, and calling Him by both Hindu and Muslim names. Love is equated with freedom and idealism. The singer ends with a challenge to the emperor.

Long live, long live, long live love!
Having broken the chains of material wealth,
It endures in perfect freedom.
Long live, long live, long live love!

Whether in temple or in mosque,
You and You alone abide among the pure.
It is You in the notes of Murali’s (Krishna’s flute)
And You alone in the (Quranic) prayers.
Your life breath maintains the world
through (Muslim) religion and (Hindu) dharma.
Long live, long live, long live love!

The storm of love cannot be stopped by walls of hatred.
Love cannot be slain by daggers and swords.
The lover may die but his memory remains alive.
Long live, long live, long live love!

When love is persecuted, let the world avert its gaze.
Let palaces be set ablaze and royal thrones smashed.
Hold your head high and face death without complaint.
(with chorus) Long live, long live, long live love!

One whose religion is royal decree, where is his honor?
One in whose heart there is no love,
Is but a stone. How can he be a man?
Beware, O enemy of love—you will be destroyed!
(with chorus) Long live, long live, long live love!

9) *Jab raat hai*

“When the night is this intoxicating, then what will the world of morning be like?”
As Salim and Anarkali plan to spend a night together (which she knows, and he doesn’t, will be her last), they are serenaded by a female chorus led by the black-clad Bahar, singing a song about the intoxicating beauty of the night of love. The lyrics, naturally, are heavily ironic, reminding Anarkali of her impending fate.