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Historian Finds Herself at the Center of India's Hindu-Muslim Conflict

By Lawrence Lerner

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Assistant Professor Audrey Truschke gets a lot of hate mail. In fact, these days she's bombarded almost hourly.

A leading scholar of South Asian cultural and intellectual history, Truschke has just published a book on one of the most hated figures in Indian history, the last of six great kings of the powerful Mughal dynasty, whose empire stretched across the Indian subcontinent during the heyday of Muslim rule in the region from the 16th to 18th centuries.

Since this year's publication of *Aurangzeb: The Man and the Myth*, Truschke has been targeted by Hindu-nationalists supporting the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and by other groups, whose current anti-Muslim sentiment traces back to medieval times, when Muslims started expanding into the region.

"My Twitter account is a nightmare right now," Truschke says. "It hasn't been fun."

The popular view in today's India is that, like other Mughal kings who were hostile to Indian languages, religions and culture, Aurangzeb was a Hindu-despising Islamist fanatic who destroyed Hindu and Jain temples and imposed a military tax on most non-Muslims.

But Truschke, one of the few living scholars who reads pre-modern Persian, Sanskrit and Hindi, had in a prior book argued that the Mughal courts were deeply interested in Indian thinkers and ideas, with elites and intellectuals engaging across cultures. In researching that monograph, *Culture of Encounters: Sanskrit at the Mughal Court* (2016), she was the first scholar to study texts in Sanskrit and Persian in exploring the courtly life of the Mughals.



In her latest work, she paints a much more nuanced picture of Aurangzeb, showing how he also protected most Hindu and Jain temples and increased the Hindu share in the Mughal nobility. Rather than hatred of Hindus driving his decisions, Truschke says, more likely Aurangzeb was guided by political reprisals and other practical considerations of rule, along with morality concerns, and a thirst for power and expansion.

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That interpretation hasn't sat well with some factions in India, but Truschke argues that as an academic historian, her project wasn't to play political football with Aurangzeb to satisfy current agendas. It was to recapture the world of the sixth Mughal king, which operated according to quite different norms and ideas.

“My book looks at Aurangzeb as part of an Indian dynasty in all its complexities and nuances. I don't ask if he was good or bad; that's not an interesting historical question,” says Truschke. “I look at him with a purely empirical view, and that has been widely read by Hindu-nationalists as an apology for his Muslim atrocities.”

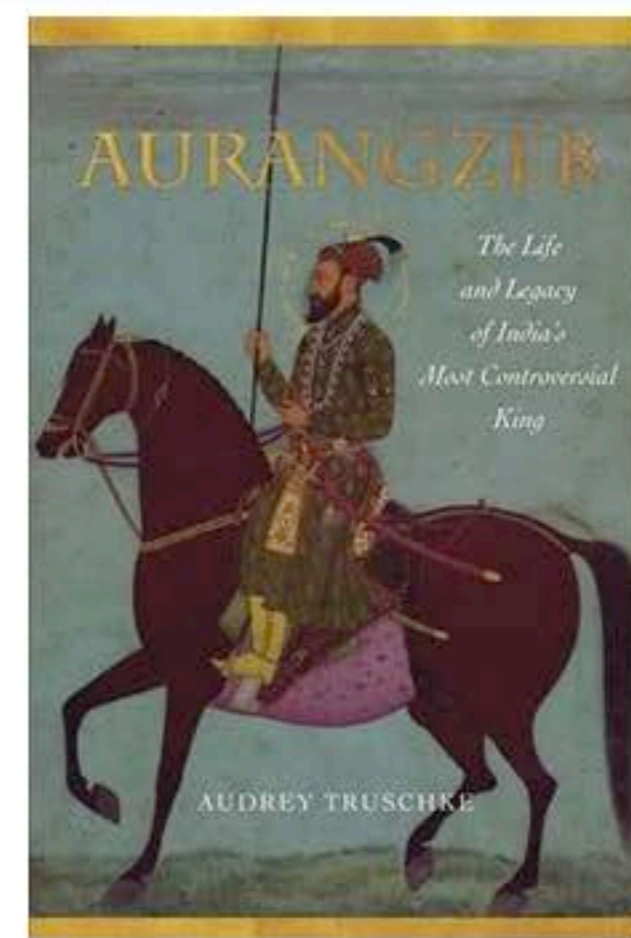
Truschke says that the current ethno-religious tensions in India were stoked during the British colonial period, when Britain benefitted by pitting Hindus and Muslims against each another while portraying themselves as neutral saviors who could keep ancient religious conflicts at bay.

Modern Hindu-nationalists, meanwhile, saw the political value in perpetuating the conflict and have done so with great success.

The BJP, led by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, rose to national prominence in the 1990s and became the dominant party by winning the 2014 general Indian elections. Modi, first as Chief Minister of Gujarat and then as India's Prime Minister, has been accused of condoning, and some would say stoking, anti-Muslim sentiment and violence along the way.

Truschke says the Hindu-right largely ignore the colonial history and see their history through an Indo-Islamic lens only.

"So, to contradict that narrative or make it more nuanced and complex is a problem, since their current position in the Indian cultural and political landscape rests on their reading of the past," says Truschke. "But Aurangzeb was a complex king who had a profound impact on the political landscape of 17th- and 18th-century India. As historians, we need to avoid this presentist stance and look at the evidence before us."



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