



ABU'L-FAẒL 'ALLĀMĪ

ABU'L-FAẒL 'ALLĀMĪ, historian, officer, chief secretary, and confidant of the Mughal emperor Akbar I. Born on 6 Moḥarram 958/14 January 1551, he was the second son of Shaikh Mobārak, a teacher and scholar who had migrated to Agra in 950/1543 from Nagaur, Rajasthan. Although Abu'l-Faẓl grew up in the capital during the period when Akbar was reestablishing Mughal authority in north India, he was not initially attracted to court service, as had been his older brother [Fayẓī](#), Akbar's famous poet-laureate. Instead, he applied himself to rigorous life of study, and by the age of fifteen he had read widely in Arabic, Greek philosophy, and Sufism. His precociousness seems to have made him something of a social misfit, however, and by the time that he was twenty he had already embarked on a life of ascetic withdrawal.

Meanwhile the leading members of the Mughal '*olamā*' were mounting an intense campaign against Shaikh Mobārak, because the latter had publicly defended a member of the Mahdawī sect. In 977/1569-70 Abu'l-Faẓl exacerbated matters by challenging in public the opinions of one of the leading '*olamā*'. The atmosphere at court became tense. Shaikh Mobārak, accused of being a Mahdawī and a Shi'a himself, was driven with his family from home to home seeking refuge. For a while he lived in Delhi. The events surrounding his father's persecution made a profound impression on Abu'l-Faẓl; he devoted a major part of his autobiography to describing them, and he dedicated his subsequent career to exposing what he considered the narrow-minded bigotry of the '*olamā*'. In 981/1574 Abu'l-Faẓl made his first appearance in Akbar's court. He favorably impressed the emperor and soon



thereafter entered court service.

For the next quarter of a century Abu'l-Faẓl served as Akbar's spokesman par excellence, shaping, articulating, and immortalizing the ideals espoused by the emperor, a circumstance greatly facilitated by the coincidence of the two men's political and religious views. Attracted to Hindu ascetics and Sufi *qalandars* as a youth, Akbar had early acquired a keen interest in an eclectic and untrammelled spiritual life. He also developed humanitarian values which, as emperor, he transformed into specific measures. Between 969/1562 and 972/1564 he abolished the *jezya* tax, the pilgrimage taxes, and the practice of enslaving prisoner-of-war families. But in order to continue the implementation of his programs, Akbar needed ideological support against the powerful vested interests he had inherited, in particular, the Tūrānī nobility, the swollen class of *madad-e ma'āš* grantees (those holding land in perpetuity) and the Sunni '*olamā*'. Abu'l-Faẓl, with his background as a forceful debater, independent thinker, and opponent of the conservative '*olamā*', was perfectly suited for this role.

On becoming Akbar's chief secretary and close friend, Abu'l-Faẓl took a hand in framing many of the emperor's projects. In 982/1575 Akbar began convening weekly discussions, with a wide variety of religious participants, in his house of worship (*'ebādat-kāna*). Abu'l-Faẓl figured prominently in these discussions and, by virtue of his intellect and skillful manipulation of the conversations, helped to discredit the '*olamā*' in the mind of the emperor. Subsequently Akbar, with a view to protecting his Indian subjects from the arbitrary judgments of the '*olamā*', promulgated the decree (*maḥẓar*) of 987/1579. Drafted by Abu'l-Faẓl and his father and reluctantly signed by the leading '*olamā*', the decree gave Akbar as emperor the right to decide any religious question on which qualified legal interpreters (*mojtahedīn*) were not in agreement. The '*ebādat-kāna*' discussions also seem to have persuaded Akbar that other members of the Persian-speaking nobility should become familiar with the literary legacy of non-Muslim cultures. To this end he established a bureau (*maktab-kāna*), supervised by Abu'l-Faẓl, to provide Persian translations of important works from the Hindu and other religious traditions.

Despite the fact that during more than twenty years in the imperial service he had never performed any military duties, as was normal for members of the Mughal nobility, Abu'l-Faẓl had received substantial promotions and enjoyed enormous influence with the emperor. Combined with his liberal religious



sentiments, these circumstances aroused ill-feeling among certain nobles, including Akbar's son, Prince Salīm, the future emperor Jahāngīr. In 1007/1599 Abu'l-Faẓl was deputized to the Deccan to settle some complex military and political affairs in an area where Mughal power was then attempting to expand. While there he did, in fact, distinguish himself as both a superior administrator and an effective general. But after a short time he was recalled from the Deccan to Agra to assist Akbar in dealing with the contentious Prince Salīm. The heir designate to the Mughal throne now became convinced that Abu'l-Faẓl would hinder his political designs. He conspired to have him murdered, and on 4 Rabī' I 1011/22 August 1602 the plot was executed—to the dismay of the aging Akbar, who lost not only an able minister but a close confidant.

Abu'l-Faẓl's enduring fame rests upon his chronicle of Akbar's reign, the *Akbar-nāma* and its concluding section, the *Ā'īn-e Akbarī*. The influence of his life and work on the subsequent history of the Indian subcontinent has been enormous. As an ideologue, Abu'l-Faẓl articulated the thoughts of his patron, but he went further: He portrayed Akbar as an embodying both the Iranian ideal of the divinely sanctioned monarch and the Sufi ideal of the Perfect Man. In the process, he created a legend of Akbar that long survived both the emperor and the empire. Though his veneration of the Mughal regent occasionally led him to blatant panegyric, as an historian Abu'l-Faẓl broke new ground by placing the study of the past on a secular and rational basis and by utilizing disparate sources of information, from revenue data to Rajput chronicles. His literary skill was as laudable as his historical methodology. A consummate wielder of the pen in the art of epistolography (*enšā'*), he developed a distinctive style that has been taught and imitated in Indian schools for centuries.

But Abu'l-Faẓl's major importance was as a theorist who developed an ideology not only for the Indian empire ruled by Akbar but for Mughal civilization in the broadest sense. He addressed himself to the role of Islam in Indian history, squarely facing the difficulty of reconciling theory with fact—the theory of Islam as a universal religion in which state and community are ideally coterminous, with the historical fact that Islam in India was the religion of a minority community ruling over a Hindu majority. One approach to this dilemma had been presented by *Ziā'-al-dīn Baranī*. Ignoring the theory of the coterminous state and community, Baranī had de-universalized Islam into a tribal religion, viz., a religion of the Turks in India. (See especially his



Fatāwā-ye jahāndārī, tr. M. Habib and A. Afzal-al-din, *The Political Theory of the Delhi Sultanate*, Aligarh, 1960.) Another approach, advanced by Firūz Toḡloq among others, was to shape the Indian reality to fit the Islamic theory by converting the subcontinent's indigenous population to Islam. (On Firūz Toḡloq's alleged bigotry, see M. Habib and K. A. Nizami, eds., *A Comprehensive History of India V: The Delhi Sultanate*, Delhi, 1970, pp. 609-10.) Though it proved to be impractical, the latter approach would have upheld Islam's claim to being both exclusively true and universal, valid for non-Turks and Turks alike.

Abu'l-Faẓl's approach to the same issue was twofold. In the first place he regarded all creeds as inherently possessing the same universal truth. Not only did he view the Hindu faith as essentially monotheistic, but he identified the object worshipped in Hinduism and all other religions, including Islam, as one and the same deity. The practical effect of this view was to pave the way for creating a pan-Indian ideology which the other two approaches could not do. Baranī's solution required the state to discriminate against non-Muslims as *jezya*-paying infidels, while Firūz Toḡloq's policy called for them to abjure allegiance to Hinduism or to any creed other than orthodox Islam. Abu'l-Faẓl's cosmopolitanism, however, exacted a high cost: While he regarded Islam as universally true, he could not and did not argue that it was exclusively true. As a result, in his own day and after, conservative Muslim opinion branded him as apostate or a heretic. Yet he remained unperturbed. "God be praised," he wrote toward the end of *Ā'in-e Akbarī* (tr., III, p. 524), "that I am not moved from these honorable dispositions by watching the strange vicissitudes of life, nor turn from well-wishing both to those who blame and those who commend, and defile not my tongue with reproof or praise."

At still another level, however, Abu'l-Faẓl wanted to divorce religion from politics altogether. This he endeavored to do by elevating allegiance to Akbar above the constraints of any single religious community, in effect creating a cult of loyalty around the personality of the emperor. Whether termed *tawhīd-e elāhī* or *dīn-e elāhī*, the ensuing cult seems to have been modeled primarily on the Sufi *pīr-morīd* relationship in which the disciple pledges absolute obedience and devotion to his master. It was Abu'l-Faẓl's intention to endow the office of emperor with an ideology that would replace the Sunni *šarī'a* as the sole principle by which the state was run. His own ideology, known as universal peace (*ṣolḥ-e koll*), pervades all of Abu'l-Faẓl's political and religious theory. It was in the spirit of universal peace, for example, that Akbar's



government integrated diverse cultural groups into a stable administrative and military system. Insofar as the same principle has provided an antecedent for the secular ideology of independent India, it remains Abu'l-Faẓl's most far-reaching legacy.

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