



AKBAR I

AKBAR I, ABU'L-FATH JALĀL-AL-DĪN MOḤAMMAD (949-1014/1542-1605), third and greatest of the Mughal emperors of India. Akbar established the patterns of Mughal government and culture during his forty-nine year reign. While he worked successfully to establish his empire as one of the major sovereign states of the Islamic world, independent of the Safavid Persian sponsorship his grandfather and father had from time to time been forced to acknowledge, paradoxically his reign brought Persian cultural influence to its zenith in India, and the resulting Indo-Persian synthesis, in fact, outlived the Mughals.

The foothold of Akbar's grandfather Bābor in Hindustan was lost by his son Homāyūn in the first year of Akbar's life. After years of exile in, and sponsorship by, the Safavid court of Shah Ṭahmāsp, Homāyūn was on the verge of regaining his Indian kingdom when he died by accident in Delhi on 12 Rabī' I 963/24 January 1556. Akbar was only thirteen years and three months old at the time. He was the first Mughal ruler to have been born in India (at Umarkot, Sind) and to identify with it, though his mother, Ḥamīda Bānū, was a Persian and thus, like his father, a foreigner. His early life was unsettled enough to permit him to avoid most formal schooling (some authorities argue that he remained illiterate all his life), and he spent his efforts in mastering the more profitable arts of war and leadership. His powerful mind thus escaped the dogmatic rigidity that characterized much of medieval education, but he retained a zest for learning which was manifested in later life by his interests in curricular reform and his patronage of writers of new and better textbooks.



Homāyūn had given the young prince responsibilities from an early date, and he was already governor of the Panjab at the time of his father's death. When Akbar was officially proclaimed emperor on 3 Rabī' II 963/14 February 1556, the prospects were not promising for a long or successful reign. Sekandar Sūr was still a threat in the Panjab; other Afghan chiefs held most of the Gangetic plains; and the Hindu minister-general Hēmū made his own bid for power by taking Delhi from the Mughals in October, 1556. But under the exceptionally able and loyal regent **Bayrām Khan**, the Mughals rallied to defeat Hēmū decisively at the second battle of Panipat on 2 Moḥarram 964/5 November 1556; with the constant threat of an Afghan revival hanging over them, the older Mughal nobles accepted the irksome burden of central administration and control as the price for their share in continued Mughal rule over the Asian subcontinent.

Political career. Throughout his life Akbar consistently pursued the twin goals of enlarging the Mughal state and increasing his own personal control over it. He was the greatest centralizing ruler seen by India before Lord Curzon or Indira Gandhi. Akbar began modestly by dismissing his regent, Bayrām Khan, in October, 1560. The astute statesman had saved the throne for Akbar and recruited many able Persian immigrants while delicately balancing the ever-jealous factions of sect, race, and clan among the older Mughal nobility. Akbar, however, ordered him to make the pilgrimage to Mecca, and Bayrām Khan was assassinated en route by Afghan nobles at Patan, Gujarat in 968/1561. By 972/1564, when he was twenty-two, Akbar had also freed himself from the political tutelage of the harem ladies and their relations. Building upon Bayrām Khan's foundations, Akbar worked steadily to consolidate and then enlarge the empire. He expanded to the south and to the east, and also assimilated new elite groups into the ruling circle. In 1557 the Sayyeds of Barh began to enter his service; since they were not only Hindustani Muslims but also Shi'ites, they constituted an important new element. In 970/1562 he was offered and boldly accepted a marriage alliance with Rāja Bhar Mal of Amber (Jaipur). The marriage signaled his intent to recruit non-Muslim Hindustanis, especially Rajputs, into the Mughal bureaucracy. Rāja Tōdar Mal, the organizational genius of Šīr Shah's reign and a Khattrī, and Bīr Bāl, a Brahman, were among the non-Rajput Hindus whom Akbar brought to court at this time. In general, he received more loyal service from his Hindu officers than from the turbulent older nobility of Central Asian origin. The story is familiar; the zeal of the king's creatures exceeds, even as it challenges, the pride of the hereditary nobles.



Constant campaigning in the early years of his reign enabled Akbar to consolidate his control of the original territories, which he then expanded down the Ganges basin to the east, taking the strategic fort of Chunar in 970/1562, the province of Bihar in 982/1574, and the Afghan kingdom of Bengal in 984/1576. To the south, the conquest of Malwa in 968/1561, the marriage alliance with Amber in 969/1562 and the conquest of the famed Rajput forts of Chitor (in 975-76/1568, with the massacre of its garrison) and Ranthambor (in 976-77/1569) gave Akbar strategic control of the Rajput hills and passes, making possible his acquisition of Gujarat in 979-80/1572; the key port of Surat fell in 980-81/1573. By uniting the maritime and commercial province of Gujarat with the agricultural heartlands of the Panjab and Gangetic basins, Akbar made possible an expansion of trade and production within the Mughal state. His further conquests—Kashmir in 995/1586-87, Sind in 1000/1591-92, parts of Orissa in 1001/1592-93, and various territories in the Deccan plateau from 1004/1596 to 1010/1601—were of political and cultural significance, but they made only marginal additions to the economic base of the empire. He was aware of the problem posed by Portuguese naval hegemony off his coasts, but despite his interest in overseas trade and the pilgrimage route, he took no effective action to challenge it.

Akbar's incorporation of all of northern India into his empire was an impressive military achievement, but arguably the least of his accomplishments. Aśoka Maurya, the great Guptas, Harṣavardhāna and 'Ala'-al-dīn Ḳaljī had conquered as much or more. Akbar surpassed all these rulers in creating a rationale for, and a practical system of, governing an empire that inspired the best efforts of his contemporaries. Both the rationale and the system retained a strong appeal to Indian minds for more than two centuries after his death, despite the appreciably lesser abilities of his successors; they continued to survive in part in the administrative organization of the British Raj in India (and indeed, some echoes persist till the present); and they provided the major share of the historical precedents drawn upon by the 20th century movements for a free, secular, and united Indian nation-state. Along with considerable talents as a leader in war, Akbar had a genius for winning over former enemies (except the Afghans, whom he always distrusted and feared) and making them loyal servants of the crown. His court was made brilliant by the presence in it of the outstanding men of his generation. If his charisma was magnetic, his judgment was shrewd; the courtiers he selected came to share his ideal of building an expanding empire governed more than ever before by canons of equity and reason. His closest confidant, [Abu'l-Faẓl](#)



‘Allāmī (958-1011/1551-1602), produced an important statement of Akbar’s political philosophy in the guise of an administrative handbook for the empire, the justly famous *Āīn-e Akbarī*. Akbar achieved major changes in three main areas—the system of assessment and collection of taxes, the system of organization and control of the nobility, and the reform of the religious arm of the state, the Muslim establishment. In each of these areas his work required many years of experimentation and debate; it aroused persistent opposition from vested interests; and despite remarkable gains (never surpassed by later Mughal rulers), Akbar achieved only partial success, his failures becoming the seeds of later collapse.

His reform of the tax structure was based on the solid work of Šīr Shah Sūr (r. 947-52/1540-45), whose revenue minister, Tōdar Mal, was recruited by Akbar despite objections from Muslim nobles. Characteristically Akbar was not satisfied until 987/1579-80 when his third try at an equitable land tax saw the establishment of a system in which the state demanded one-third of the normal average gross agricultural production. Ten-year averages were the basis of the assessment, derived from careful records of land areas planted, crops sown, yields, prices, and taxes, all kept by a competent bureaucracy of local and central officials, whose papers were written, significantly, in Persian. The success of this system, where it was fully applied, gave the peasantry security and the state sufficient income, enabling Akbar to abolish many unpopular irregular taxes that had often discouraged investment and trade. Yet Akbar was not able to carry out his intention of having state officials deal directly with all peasant cultivators. Political necessity forced him to leave largely intact the powers of hereditary local chieftains and intermediaries (*zamīndārs*), a great source of political difficulty after his reign. Nevertheless, Akbar’s system was the model for the successor governments to the Mughals, including the British, and it could be argued that greater equity was not achieved in some areas until the Indian land reform legislation of the 1960s.

While Akbar’s tax reforms grew by trial and error out of earlier Indian practice, his redirection of the nobility was a daring innovation with minimal precedent. The indiscipline and personal opportunism of the nobles had been a constant threat to both Bābor and Homāyūn, and again Akbar worked patiently and persistently for many years to find viable alternatives. Enlarging upon Šīr Shah’s reform of the Delhi sultanate practice, he eventually created a complex system of hierarchical territorial organization with dual civil and military bureaucracies, officered by men appointed and frequently



transferred by himself; a parallel structure of intelligence officers reported directly to him to insure that he was continuously well informed. The heart of this organization was the *manṣabdārī* system, which placed every official, civil as well as military, into a hierarchy of rank (nominally as the holder of a command of a certain number of cavalry troops, from the command of ten to the command of thousands), with regular review holding out the incentive of promotion or demotion to all the nobility and officeholders. This system greatly facilitated Akbar's efforts to integrate his very disparate nobility, breaking down the importance of clan and tribe by emphasizing individual achievement and reward, making the emperor himself and not immediate superiors the determiner of rank, and legitimating the new men whom Akbar brought into state service from non-traditional sources. Here again, however, his success was less than total. Akbar achieved far greater accountability from his military nobility, especially with the *dāḡ* (branding of horses) regulation suggested in 1574 by Šāhbāz Khan, significantly a Hindustani (Panjabi Muslim) noble and one of the emperor's new men; the older Turani nobles bitterly resisted this rule, since it compelled honest performance of their military obligations. But Akbar had to abandon his reform of 982/1574-75, according to which he proposed to have all official salaries paid in cash. In its stead, he had to revive the assignment of *ḡāḡirs*, land grants in lieu of salary, a practice which many modern scholars (e.g., Irfan Habib and A. L. Srivastava) believe to have been the chief cause of Mughal decline in the 17th and 18th centuries. Of course, the tributary local chieftains, such as the Rajputs, continued to hold their own territorial bases outside the direct administration of the imperial government throughout his reign, and they thus posed a constant alternative model for those Mughal nobles resisting both the salary system and the mandate of accountability to the center.

While all of Akbar's reforms were controversial, none produced more lasting discussion than his attempt to bring control and accountability to the religious establishment. After taking power from Bayrām Khan, Akbar dismissed his regent's appointee, Shaikh Gadāī (a Shi'ite), as the *ṣadr-al-ṣodūr*. Akbar's second appointment to this position, combining the duties of chief justice of the empire, controller of imperial patronage for religious and charitable purposes, and de facto government representative of the orthodox '*olamā'*', was Shaikh 'Abd-al-Nabī, whose long term of office (971-87/1564-79) brought on the turning point in the emperor's attitude toward the role of religion in government. Despite some glimmerings of the mystical and rationalist interests that later preoccupied him, Akbar as a young king was himself a



staunchly orthodox Sunni with great respect for, and perhaps too much trust in, his chief religious officer. ‘Abd-al-Nabī had been appointed partly to clean up scandalous bribery and corruption in the administration of land grants for charitable purposes, and in 983/1575-76 he was given enhanced powers; no such grants were to be valid without his signature. His gross abuse of these powers, along with the steady revelations of his arrogance, hypocrisy, and dishonesty, eventually destroyed Akbar’s confidence in him. ‘Abd-al-Nabī was dismissed from office and commanded to go to Mecca—permanently. (In 990/1582, however, he did return to India without permission and died in prison in 991-92/1583-84, while auditors were examining his embezzlement of state funds.)

‘Abd-al-Nabī and the other high-ranking ‘*olamā*’ at court, such as Mawlānā ‘Abdallāh Solṭānpūrī (who had been influential in the reigns of Homāyūn and Šīr Shah), displayed ample proof of their own unfitness to share in the government during those critical years when Akbar was comparatively free from the pressures of immediate military-political crises and intent on exploring his own religious views. Akbar was certainly cognizant that some of the ‘*olamā*’ had taken a leading role against him in the rebellions of 988/1580-81, since they sensed the threat posed by his reforms to vested interests. But he faced squarely the issue of the role which a Muslim king should play in ruling a huge non-Muslim population. The role was not without some precedents in Islamic history, but in Akbar’s empire it was offered on a uniquely vast scale. Akbar wanted, needed, and from at least 1562 actively sought an acceptable *modus vivendi* capable of preserving his Muslim identity and the loyalty of the Muslim majority of his officials while effectively establishing the loyalty of the Hindu officers he wanted to bring in. His religious officials thwarted him while selfishly exploiting their offices for personal aggrandizement.

In 983/1575-76 Akbar’s reforms began to take shape. He built the ‘Ebādatkāna at Fathpur Sikri for the open discussion of Islamic law. It was there that the worldly ‘*olamā*’ publicly exposed their grievous shortcomings. Matters came to a head with two events in 987/1579. On Friday, 1 Jomādā I 987/26 June 1579, Akbar personally read the *koṭba* in his own name giving himself the title of *kalīfa* (used by ambitious Indian rulers from as early as Mobārak Shah Kālī in 718/1318-19 as well as by many of the Timurids), and in Raġab, 987/August-September, 1579 Akbar extracted from certain leading ‘*olamā*’ of his court a document (*maḥẓar*) declaring that he, a just king, outranked the qualified



interpreters of Islamic law (the *mojtaheds*) and could, therefore, choose between conflicting opinions of the legal scholars that version which best served the nation and good order. Thus Akbar in effect removed his religious establishment from the external claims of the Safavids and Ottomans and also from the internal control of a narrow circle of Sunni bigots—the worldly ‘*olamā*’. Some scholars, e.g., D. B. MacDonald, V. A. Smith and I. H. Qureshi, have seen these acts of Akbar as heretical, even approaching a renunciation or disestablishment of Islam, but the weight of modern scholarship does not agree (see, e.g., M. Mujeeb, *The Indian Muslims*, pp. 263-64). In any event, these reforms worked for Akbar, and during the remaining years of his reign he obtained more responsible officers, chosen from a wider circle of candidates, at the same time that his judicial appointments earned him a high reputation for fair dealing and integrity.

Cultural and religious pursuits. Akbar patronized architecture and the arts with unflagging vigor. His love of beauty and his good taste made him the real founder of the Mughal style in both painting and architecture. Although he built important buildings at Agra, Ajmer, Allahabad, and Lahore, his great monument is the planned city of Fathpur Sikri, a splendid complex of buildings mostly built during the four years 977-980/1569-1572, but abandoned in 993/1585. He built forts, palaces, and mosques in a distinctive style largely derived from Persian architecture but utilizing considerable Indian elements. Unlike Šīr Shah, he had no interest in improving communications and no central program of civil engineering, though a few public works such as the bridge at Jaunpur were built during his reign. In the last months of Homāyūn’s life Akbar had taken painting lessons from Mīr Sayyed ‘Alī Tabrīzī (drawing a corpse with severed head and limbs which he called *Hēmū*), and he carried forward his father’s patronage of Persian artists as well as large numbers of talented Indians whom he actively recruited. In painting, too, his taste and generous patronage produced a new style, at once Persian and Indian. Government workshops, including the widespread mints, and patronage in other fields produced considerable achievement in the manufacture of fine textiles and all kinds of precious objects, largely as prestige items for the court and the ruling elite.

Even more wide-ranging and persistent than his attention to the fine arts was Akbar’s interest in religion and literature. He was keenly attuned to matters of the heart and showed an openness to all sources of knowledge that was rather unusual for a man of his time. Bitterly disappointed by the limitations of the



worldly *'ulamā'* demonstrated in the famous discussions at the 'Ebādatkāna, he opened participation in the discussions to a progressively wider circle of articulate religious professionals, including Shi'ite scholars, Sufi dervishes, and eventually Hindus, Jains, Parsis and Christians, with a similar broadening of the scope of the discussions. This experience reinforced his belief in toleration as a personal and a political policy. In 971/1564, primarily for reasons of state, he had abolished the poll tax on unbelievers (*ḡezya*), but eventually in about 987/1579-80 he adopted the latitudinarian outlook epitomized in his favorite slogan, "peace with all" (*ṣolḥ-e koll*). He used an eclectic mixture of symbols and ideas to formulate his personal beliefs in a divine monotheism, *tawḥīd-e elāhī*, largely derived from various Sufi sources, including Shaikh Mobārak, the father of Abu'l-Faḡl (for most of the numerous references on the subject, see Aziz Ahmad, "Dīn-i Ilāhī," *EI*² II, pp. 296-97).

Akbar's religious quest fueled his already remarkable interest in books, which he had read aloud to him daily from a splendid library of some 24,000 manuscripts. Most of the painting done for him was to illustrate books he had had produced, but more important than his sponsorship of books as works of art was his sponsorship of new writing (especially poetry and history) as well as an immense program of translation. Akbar commissioned translations from Sanskrit, Arabic, Turkish, and Latin into the language of his court, Persian. The first translation appears to have been Badā'ūnī's rendition of didactic tales from Sanskrit, begun in Jomādā II, 982/September-October, 1574 with the help of a pundit. The process continued with full vigor till at least 998/1589-90, when 'Abd-al-Raḡīm Kān-e Kānān translated the *Bābor-nāma* from Turkish into Persian. During this time works on folklore, geography, medicine, mathematics, history, religion, and zoology were rendered into Persian, but most significant were the translations from the Hindu religious classics. Both the great epics, the *Mahābhārata* and the *Ramāyāna*, as well as the *Atharva Veda*, were made available to Muslim officials interested in understanding something of the culture of the empire's most numerous subjects, but the major result was to win the enthusiastic participation of the Hindu clerical class (*kayasths*) who made up a large part of the civil bureaucracy. As late as the 19th century Hindus of this class were still writing and reading books in Persian, caught up in the same excitement of discovery as Akbar himself had been. (Previously, they had been unable to read the Sanskrit originals, even when they had access to them.) Long after Akbar's sponsorship ended, translations into Persian continued, and for more than two centuries knowledge of this enriched Persian literature constituted the core of the



Mughal learned culture that dominated Indian intellectual life.

Akbar had hoped to curb polemical dissension by making the major scriptural texts accessible to all (or at least to many) in a simple language and hence undermining the self aggrandizement of religious professionals who harbored such texts as their private preserve. His motive reflects a theme common among contemporary Indian mystics, Muslim and Hindu. It appears to have been aimed both at the Brahmanical caste and the worldly 'olamā'. Yet Akbar, though he had had the Sanskrit classics rendered into Persian, did not perceive the necessity to undertake a similar translation project with the Qur'ān. Moreover, only a relatively small official class could be reached with hand-copied manuscripts of the translations that were made. The Portuguese had presented Akbar with printed books and pictures (which had begun to appear in Italy from 1514 on), and he must have known of their press, first brought to Goa in 1556. It may have been Akbar's keen interest in calligraphy and in the book as a work of art which led him to overlook the possibility of using the printed word to spread his cultural policies.

Akbar patronized all the traditional branches of learning, and was especially proud of recruiting the great Persian scientist Mīr Faṭḥallāh Šīrāzī, who came to Agra from Bijapur in 990/1582 and served as *ṣadr-al-ṣodūr* until his death in 997/1589. In the most prestigious science, medicine, his reign brought the culmination, again through the medium of Persian books, of the stimulating synthesis of the Sanskritic and Islamic systems. But little appreciable gain was made in any aspect of technology, neither in India's foremost industry, textiles (despite the state workshops), nor in military applications: It was Akbar's organizing genius which allowed him to dominate on the battlefield despite artillery that was woefully backward by European or even Ottoman standards. In the 1590s, when the English army was giving up the bow as a weapon and Koreans were experimenting with iron-clad warships, the Mughal state still depended on heavy cavalry with traditional weapons, and it had no deep-water navy. Also, despite the fact that he commanded unprecedented resources of manpower and wealth, Akbar made no major investment in agriculture through irrigation or other works; he was content to encourage recipients of land grants to plant orchards and to bring waste land under cultivation.

End of his reign. Akbar's last years brought disappointments to temper the glory. Two sons predeceased him, not before becoming hopelessly bogged down in mismanaged military campaigns in the Deccan which curiously



foreshadowed Awrangzīb's disasters there. Akbar's robust health and physical stamina, which had permitted him to work at an astonishing pace all his life, finally began to fail him. On his deathbed at Agra he was reconciled with the self-indulgent Salīm, his sole surviving son. The future Jahāngīr had not concealed his impatience to succeed to his father's kingdom during years of intrigue and rebellion that included the arranged murder of Abu'l-Faẓl in 1011/1602. The final tragedy, however, is that after Akbar's truly brilliant beginning none of his successors was able to carry through to completion his policies for dealing with the special circumstances and opportunities that confronted Muslim minority rule in the Asian subcontinent.

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