

## ABUL FAZL

Abul Fazl (*Akbarnama*)

**Born** 14 January 1551      Agra, India  
**Died** 12 August 1602      Deccan, India

### Life

Abul Fazl (also known as Abu al-Fazal ibn Mubark, Abu'l-Fazl, Abu'l Fadl and Abu'l-Fadl 'Allami) served as court secretary to the Mughal Emperor Akbar, who commissioned him to write the official history of his reign. His three-volume *Akbarnama* (which Fazl authored up to Akbar's 42<sup>nd</sup> year in 1602) secured his place in Indian history. Abul Fazl's ancestors, who came from Yemen on the Arabian peninsula, moved to western India in the late 15<sup>th</sup> century, although several family members died en route, some from famine. Once they settled in India, they became active in Sufi movements, especially that of the Chisti cult at Ajmer in Rajasthan. His father, Nagul Fazl was a Muslim scholar who studied under several leading philosophers and ended up moving to Agra in 1543, where he established his own *madrassa*, or religious school. His lenient Sufi-influenced teachings, however, earned him the ire of orthodox Muslim leaders.

Born in Agra in 1551, Fazl's education began with Arabic and moved on to all fields of Islamic sciences, as taught by his father. His father taught a Sufi-influenced version of Islam that brought down on him the ire of orthodox Muslim clerics. The young Fazl was disturbed by his father's persecution, which influenced him to move even closer to a liberal religious perspective and simultaneously to withdraw from society. Although he grew up in Delhi during the early years of Akbar's reign, Fazl showed no interest in court service, unlike his older brother, who became Akbar's court poet. Rather, he became a book-worm and buried himself in reading classical Arabic and Greek sources, with a special interest in philosophy and Sufism.

Fazl entered Akbar's court in 1574, aged twenty-three, and the two struck up a deep rapport, each influencing the other to more heterodox views. For the next quarter of a century Fazl served as Akbar's spokesman, shaping, articulating, and promoting the emperor's ideas and policies. In 1575, Akbar put Fazl in charge of his secular 'House of Worship', where philosophers of different religions debated issues. Soon after, Fazl was also given the responsibility of overseeing an active literary stable, where poets, scholars and scribes prepared Persian translations of several major works, such as the Bible and the *Ramayana*. Abul Fazl himself contributed a Preface to a translation (now lost) of the *Mahabharata*. Fazl was then commissioned by Akbar to write the official history of his reign, the *Akbarnama*, in 1590. Fazl worked on this enormous project for almost 12 years until his death in 1602.

The fact that Fazl spent his first twenty-five years in the imperial court without performing any military service, and yet became Akbar's right-hand man, made others jealous of him. A notable enemy was Akbar's own son, Salim, who would later become emperor Jahangir. Things came to a head when, in 1599, Akbar sent Fazl to the Deccan in order to sort out problems in the Mughal administration in that region. Once there, Fazl distinguished himself both as an administrator and a military commander. This convinced Crown Prince Salim that Fazl wanted to edge him out and succeed Akbar on throne. When Fazl was recalled from the Deccan to Agra in 1602, Salim had him assassinated on a highway.

**Achievements** Abul Fazl was second only to Akbar in leading the Mughal Empire to its greatest heights. He personally oversaw a radical assembly of philosophers who formulated a new religion under Akbar's tutelage. He was put in charge of all Akbar's several literary projects, including major translations. His most notable achievement, however, was his authorship of the *Akbarnama*, the official history of Akbar's reign. In addition to his great history, Fazl also wrote an interesting preface to a Persian translation of the *Mahabharata*, and it is said, relying on other sources, that he translated

the Bible into Persian, though no such text survives. His lasting legacy, like that of his history, is to have developed a new and unified imperial vision. His version of Akbar's empire was a kingdom ruled by a Muslim leader who practiced a universalist Islam

### **Works**

*Akbarnama* (1590-1602)

*Ruqa'at* (a collection of private letters to Fazl's family and friends, compiled by Fazl's nephew)

*Insha* (a collection of his official despatches, including Akbar's official letters, compiled by his nephew)