

AKBARNAMA ('BOOK OF AKBAR')

Abul Fazl

Reading

Akbarnama of Abul-Fazl, three volumes, translated by Henry Beveridge (1902-1939, reprint, 2010)
The History of Akbar, Vol. 1 (the Akbarnama), translated by Wheeler M. Thackston, 2015

Cultural Significance

The *Akbarnama* has a special place in Indian culture for several reasons. First and foremost, it has remained the best source for anyone to understand the reign of Akbar, the greatest emperor of India's greatest empire. Since the late 19th century, when the first English translation of volume 3 appeared, anyone could discover fascinating nuggets of information about this crucial period of Indian history. Second, the *Akbarnama* pioneered a new kind of historical writing (as mentioned above) based on objective research in diverse sources. Fazl's own description of his method would not be unfamiliar to someone doing historical research in the modern era (at least before the digital age). 'Assuredly,' Fazl wrote, 'I spent much labour and research in collecting the records and narratives of His Majesty's actions.' He then goes on to list the types of sources: eye-witnesses, reports, memoranda, officers' minutes, Imperial declarations (*firmams*), court proceedings, court bulletins, and, finally, interviews with members of the royal family and other dignitaries. His approach, combining ethnography with sociology, geography and many other fields, was emulated by the British when they came to produce their own 'gazetteers' (or district manuals) in the 19th century. Third, the paintings that were commissioned to accompany the *Akbarnama* are among the most exquisite in the history of Indian art and are still admired today. Akbar himself was a connoisseur of these paintings, as he explains in the *Akbarnama*: 'It seems to me that a painter is better than most in gaining a knowledge of God. Each time he draws a living being he must draw each and every limb, but seeing that he cannot bring it to life must perforce give thought to the miracle wrought by the Creator and thus obtain a knowledge of Him.'



(A Hindu king making obeisance to Akbar, painted by Shankar, 1590s)

Lastly, this wonderful text seems to have gained, rather than lost, relevance over time. Its projection of a unified imperial vision based on a secular society is today often invoked as a contrast with the Hindu and Muslim fundamentalism that has grown more popular over the past decades. In the wake of the divisive social forces and bloody conflicts that have blighted India since the turn of the 20th century, it is a relief to know that four hundred years ago a philosopher-king worked hard to create a united country. In the *Akbarnama* we can read about a man who had the insight to complain that too many people fail to consider their own religious arguments and instead blindly 'follow the religion in

which [they] were born and educated, thus excluding [themselves] from the possibility of ascertaining the truth, which is the noblest aim of the human intellect.'

Overview

The *Akbarnama* is a historical record of Akbar, the Mughal Emperor (r. 1556-1605) and his ancestors spread over three volumes, narrated in classical Persian prose, interspersed with verse and annotated with long footnotes and explanations. The third volume is a sort of 'gazetteer' of north India in the 16th century. The story reaches back to Timur (14th c) and continues up to 1602 (Akbar's 42nd regnal year) when its author, Abul Fazl, who was Akbar's secretary, was assassinated. Fazl had planned a series of five volumes, but only three were completed. Two original copies of the manuscript were also richly illustrated with miniature paintings. The quality of the paintings was supervised by Akbar himself, as Fazl notes: 'Each week the several superintendents and clerks submit before the king the work done by each artist, and His Majesty gives a reward and increases the monthly salaries according to the excellence displayed. His Majesty looks deeply into the matter of raw materials and set a high value on the quality of production. As a result, colouring has gained a new beauty, and finish a new clarity ... Delicacy of work, clarity of line, and boldness of execution, as well as other fine qualities, have reached perfection, and inanimate objects appear to come alive.' After Akbar's death, these illustrated manuscripts were kept in the Mughal library at Delhi by later emperors. One copy was acquired by a British official after the defeat of the Mughal empire in 1858 and now can be seen at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London. The other illustrated manuscript is jointly owned by the British Library and the Chester Beatty Library in Dublin.

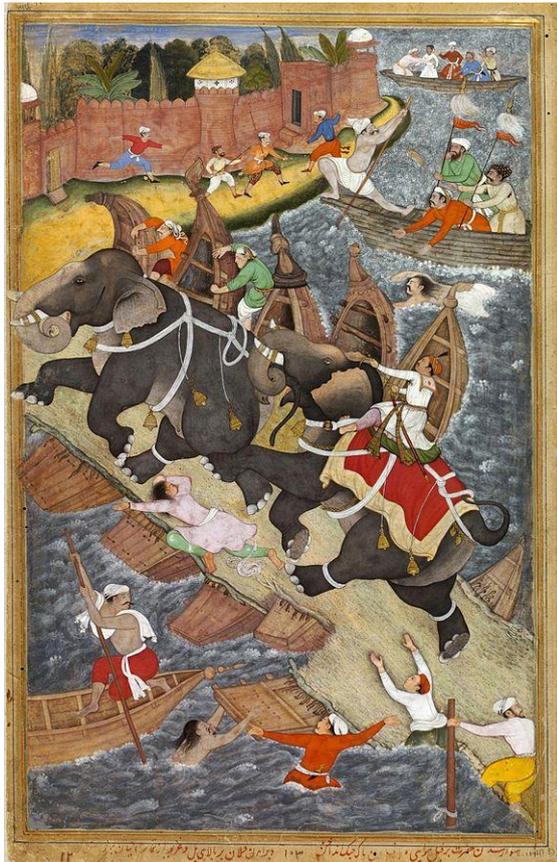
Story

Volume One of the *Akbarnama* (which is a mere 700 pages in an English translation) begins with the author's Prologue, in which he invokes Almighty God and deprecates his own ability to undertake the task of writing such a history. Regarding his own meagre place in the universe, he asks, 'As long as there is no link between terrestrials and celestials, the path of speech between the earthly and the heavenly is limited, what intercourse can there be between the limited and the unlimited, so that an atom of the dust can have any lot in the pure, world-warming sun?' Soon, we move onto the astrological signs at Akbar's birth, which the sages recognised as heralding a wise and compassionate 'Lord of the World.' However, Akbar is so 'great' that even 'these wise men justly admit their inability to expound his orbit.' After a long discussion on the science of Greek and Persian astrology, we get the story of God's creation, narrated in Biblical style, beginning with the birth of Adam, which leads through history to the Timurid line of Akbar's ancestors in the 14th century. Now the tone shifts somewhat from genealogy to more documentary history, albeit glorified and narrated in poetic prose. The life of Humayun, Akbar's father, is covered in great detail, before we come to Akbar himself. His childhood leads to his first marriage at age fourteen, just months before his father dies in an accident. After Akbar ('His Majesty') accedes to the throne, his rule is documented year by year, noting every word and movement he makes, every letter, decision and meeting. Considerable space is devoted to Akbar's many military campaigns, which extended the empire into central and western India. There are also important negotiations with the Ottomans and Rajputs, to secure new types of guns and horses. In 1569, Akbar creates a new capital at Fatehpur Sikri, outside Agra, which will become a spiritual home for him.

Book Two begins in 1572 and ends in 1602, when Fazl died with three years still left in Akbar's reign. We get valuable inside information on Akbar's political strategy, his reorganisation of the administration of the empire, on coinage and especially on the establishment of the *Ibadat Khana* (House of Worship) at Fatehpur Sikri in 1575. He then introduced a new religion of 'Din-i-Ilahi' in 1582, which combined the practices of Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, Jainism, Christianity and Zoroastrianism. There are also fascinating details of his negotiations with the Portuguese on the west coast of India, from whom he gains new military hardware. With superior firepower and intelligence, Akbar's army pushes east, conquering Bengal, and north, taking Kabul. The final years of Akbar's life, including his death from dysentery in 1605, are not included in this Book.

Book Three has a separate title, *Ain-e-Akbari*, meaning something like 'The Institutes (or Regulations) of Akbar'. It is an entirely different kind of text, turning inward, toward his palace, his household and his administration. It is then divided into five volumes. Volume 1 describes the organisation and

regulation of the imperial household, including the kitchen, gardens, harem, mint, treasury and army. The second volume provides a look at the employees of the emperor, from the military to the arts (poets, scribes, artists and musicians). Special attention is given to Akbar's famous *manṣabdari* system, which organised the vast administration of the empire into minutes hierarchical grades. Volume three sets out the guidelines that regulate the judicial and executive departments of the empire, including local and regional revenue collection, which depend on different crops and soils. Volume four provides a more ethnographic and sociological description of north India at that time, including descriptions of the society, religion, literature and philosophy of the Hindus. Smaller sections are devoted to Muslim populations, Muslim saints and famous travellers to the subcontinent. The fifth and final volume is again very different, as it contains mainly Akbar's declarations and observations on religion and morality, which was a recognised genre of Indo-Persian literature.



(Akbar taming a wild elephant, c. 1590)

Themes

History It can be argued that Abul Fazl's main objective in compiling this magisterial text (aside from complying with the Emperor's orders, of course) was to present a new kind of historiography. Although Fazl relied on many existing documents, chronicles and oral histories, and although he clothed his text with conventional Perso-Islamic religious imagery and language, his manuscript is radical in its synchronic presentation of Akbar's rule. This is mainly achieved in the third and last Book. Whereas books one and two followed a more traditional diachronic format, with events unfolding in roughly chronological order, the last book gives us a synoptic view of all aspects of Akbar's empire, from the workings of the royal mint to the various types of maize grown in different regions. It is truly an 'imperial vision,' which matches Akbar's own view of himself and his role in history, and one that is unparalleled in Indian literary tradition. The detailed descriptions of the geography, society, economy, religion, philosophy of the people, allied to a similarly precise portrait of the administration of the empire itself, from local officials right up the royal courts in Delhi and Agra, are an attempt to freeze the movement of history, like a photograph taken by a wide-lens camera. If the two preceding books presented history as an evolution from Adam to Akbar, the final book rests in

the serene grandeur of its culmination. Perfection has been reached, the author seems to say, so let us gaze upon its many-sided magnificence. It is significant that this imperial vision was the format borrowed by the British in the 19th century when they produced the 'imperial gazetteers' for every region of their empire, a kingdom that was self-consciously modelled on its predecessor.

Akbar as God A second, and more explicit, theme of the text is the presentation of Akbar as the ultimate sovereign. And not just that, but also as the representative of divinity on earth. To this end, Fazl drew on semi-divine figures from both Persian and Indian sources, such as the *Shahnamah* and the *Ramayana*. Very often Fazl refers to aspects of traditional Persian traits of a divine absolute monarch. To further support the apotheosis of Akbar, Fazl added material from the Sufi doctrine of the 'Perfect Man' (*ensan e kamel*), which was formulated by the 13th-century Islamic thinker Muhyi-al-Din ibn Arabi and claimed that certain human beings can possess all the attributes of God. This Sufi portrait of Akbar as the god-king ran counter to more traditional strains of Islam as practiced in most of medieval India, which Akbar himself opposed when he set up his own council of religious thinkers (including Jesuits and Hindus) over which he presided. In order to justify the sweeping changes that Akbar made to religion and society, Fazl places his employer in the category of a 'true' sovereign. A true sovereign, as opposed to Fazl's other category of 'selfish' king, is one who rules for the welfare of his people. A true king, Fazl argues, is guided by God so closely that he is inseparable from God's will. By this reckoning, Akbar's radical social and theological ideas are seen as part of God's divine plan. The deification of Akbar is developed not just in the words of Fazl, who regularly referred to him as 'Lord of the World' and 'The Divine Light,' but also by the illustrations that accompanied his text. Looking at the visual images of Akbar, we notice that many show him with a halo or as a Sufi saint in prayer or in a trance.

Imperial state The third theme of the *Akbarnama*, which follows from the first two, is the projection of Akbar's kingdom as an imperial state. The empire was not to be understood as the ordained fate of Islam in conflict with a static and Hindu India, which was the prevailing view of most Indo-Persian chronicles of the time. Instead of this divisive ideology, Fazl highlighted the coherent mixture of Akbar's kingdom, a quality most evident in third volume, which is largely ethnographic in nature. Rather than pitting the emperor and his allies, mostly rural Muslim landlords, against the Hindu bulk of the population, Fazl's biography of Akbar presents an 'imperial fabric' interwoven with the diversity of Indian cultures, plus highlights from Europeans traditions. In one sense, this projection of imperial coherence was a necessity created by the fact that Akbar had extended the empire in all directions and covered almost the entire subcontinent. His reign also coincided with the expansion of European trading companies on the west coast of India, and Akbar established extensive trading networks with them. But perhaps the most explicit demonstration of Akbar's transnational vision of empire was the 'House of Worship,' which he established in 1575 at Fatehpur Sikri, near Agra. The House of Worship was a medieval 'think-tank', where Hindu and Muslim philosophers (representing all schools of Hinduism and Islam) were joined by Buddhists, Zoroastrians and Jesuits to debate theological issues. It led, in 1582, to the establishment of a new religion, called Din-i-Ilahi ('The Religion of God'), which borrowed ideas and practices from all world religions, including Christianity. The controversial nature of this new religion is obvious from the fact that some of Fazl's contemporaries condemned him as an 'infidel' or branded him a 'Fire Worshipper' (Zoroastrian). The *Akbarnama* discusses the nature and purpose of these new imperial institutions in some detail and rounds off the discussion by mentioning that Akbar's new state did not just exist in the world of ideas: he also abolished a special tax on non-Muslims.

Characters

The list of historical figures who appear in the *Akbarnama* is vast, stretching from ancient times to more than fifty leaders in Akbar's army and administration. In addition to full biographies of his father, Humayun, and a lesser portrait of his mother, Hamida Banu Begum, there are also cameos of some lesser-known figures in Akbar's family, such as his paternal uncles, Kamran Mirza and Askari Mirza, who helped to bring up the young boy when his father was forced into exile in Kabul. Akbar's first wife, and cousin, Ruqaiya Sultan Begum, appears in several passages, as do his later six wives, albeit more briefly. Of his eight (acknowledged) children, his son, Jahangir, receives the most attention because he will become, in 1605, the next Mughal Emperor.

Other major characters include:

Faizi Faizi (1547 – 1595) was the brother of Abul Fazl, the author of *Akbarnama*. He was a poet, whom Akbar patronised at court and appointed as a tutor for his son.

Bairam Khan Bairam Khan (c. 1501 – c. 1561) was an advisor and friend of the young Akbar and later became an important statesman and commander-in-chief of Akbar's army.

Tansen Tansen (c. 1500-1586) was a famous classical singer of north Indian music, whom Akbar brought to his court

Birbal Birbal (1528 – 1583) was a Brahmin whose wit and wisdom Akbar respected. He became a sort of court jester and stimulated a tradition of oral stories about him, which are still told today.

Raja Todar Mal Raja Todar Mal (d. 1589) was Akbar's finance minister, or *diwan*, who overhauled the revenue system in the kingdom and introduced a standard system of weights and measures.

Raja Man Singh Raja Man Singh was Hindu ruler of Amber and a trusted lieutenant of Akbar, who became the governor of Lahore and campaigns in Orissa.

Akbar (Ambitious)

Character Akbar's character was, in part, formed by his Timurid ancestry. As a Timurid, with a proud lineage stretching back to Timur in the 14th century, Akbar was always aware of destiny pushing on his back. He knew he was expected to become an accomplished warrior. Akbar the Great, as he was known even during his lifetime, was indeed a skilled military commander, who personally led troops into battle on many occasions. He was also wary, constantly on the alert for the 'enemy,' and not only on the battle field. Like his father and grandfather, his rule was beset by internecine disputes and betrayals. He was thus cautious if ambitious in his military campaigns and built his empire as much by strategic alliances (especially by marrying princesses from Hindu royal families) as by warfare. Lauded for his considerable achievements, he placed himself at the centre of a new religion, and showed that he could also be authoritarian.

The other deep-lying factor that shaped his character was that he was forced onto the throne at the age of twelve, after his father, Humayun, died in an accident while still in exile in Kabul. Like his grandfather Babur, Akbar had a mission to regain Delhi, which had been seized by an Afghan king during Humayun's rule. And like Babur, Akbar took Delhi (or retook it, in his case) in a battle at Panipat, in 1556, thirty years after Babur had won a battle on that same ground to begin the Mughal Empire. Becoming emperor at such a young age, while in exile, meant that Akbar had to rely on senior advisors, which was a habit that stood him in good stead during his entire life. Even allowing for some exaggeration by his biographer, Akbar had limitless energy, which he poured into his many pursuits. He was a connoisseur of the arts, especially painting, and had a tremendous interest in literature, building up a library of 24,000 volume. However, Akbar was illiterate. He was able to discuss complex philosophical issues with learned men but had never actually read a book or written a poem. He had a phenomenal memory and a very keen mind. Akbar was indeed great, if only to remind us that literacy does not equal intelligence.

Activities Judging from both the text and the paintings of the *Akbarnama*, we know that Akbar was an extremely active person. Although he slept very little and ate a largely non-meat diet, he was passionate about hunting, scholarship, poetry and music. He also liked to drink, quite a lot. If he wasn't hunting, he was conversing with six different philosophers. If he wasn't listening to poetry, he was leading troops into battle. He also spent a lot of time with the women in his harem, said to number more than two hundred. Although he loved hunting, he also liked pet animals, a cheetah being his favourite. But his real obsession, as with other Indo-Persian rulers, was raising and training pigeons. Fazl says that Akbar kept about 20,000 pigeons at court and took nearly 500 with him on his campaigns so that he could use them for communications. He also liked spectacles and events of various kinds, such as poetry competitions and wrestling.

Illustrative moments

Open-minded The illiterate emperor was also remarkable for his willingness to entertain different points of view. He created a special debating society, called the 'House of Worship,' where Sunnis argued with Shias, Hindus with Buddhists, Jains with Jesuits, and Zoroastrians with atheists. Akbar's open-mindedness is noted at many places in the *Akbarnama*, but a particularly memorable incident is described by the biographer Fazl. 'At one time,' Fazl writes, 'a Brahmin, named Deb, who was one of the scholars interpreting the *Mahabharata*, was pulled up the side of the palace courtyard while sitting on his bed, until he arrived at the balcony, where the emperor had made his bedchamber. Whilst thus suspended, he instructed His Majesty in the secrets and legends of Hinduism, in the manner of worshipping idols of these unbelievers....His Majesty, upon hearing further how much the people of the country prize their institutions, began to look upon them with affection.' This might have been a ludicrous scene—an old Brahmin on his bed, hoisted up by ropes and pulleys, to teach the emperor about the infidels—but we know that Akbar was genuinely interested in religions and Hinduism, in particular. It was his willingness not only to listen to different religious scholars, but also to incorporate their ideas into his own religion (which he called the 'Religion of God') that angered many Islamic scholars of the time. And yet, his broad-minded view of the world was probably one of the reasons he was able to create a Muslim empire in a country that was overwhelmingly non-Muslim. This quality can be traced back to his childhood, when he became emperor at age 12 and had to rely on the advice of others. From the biography, we learn that Akbar only slept for a few hours every night, and we now know how he spent all those waking hours. Conversing with a Brahmin suspended outside his balcony.

Radical Although cautious as a military commander, Akbar was radical as a thinker. We have already mentioned his acceptance of heretical religious ideas, but he was equally bold in his political reforms. Reading the *Akbarnama*, we can follow his step-by-step reorganisation of the administrative structures of the empire, of the military and of the system of tax collection. Most of these reforms are difficult for the general reader to fully understand, but there is one that stands out. In 1564, when he was still only twenty years old, Akbar abolished the tax on Hindu pilgrims, which had been imposed on Hindus by Muslim rulers since the coming of Islamic rule in about 1000 CE. As recorded in his biography, the emperor had been hunting in a forest near Mathura, when he encountered a group of Hindus on a pilgrimage to a nearby temple. He spoke with them, heard their concerns and decided to remove the tax, without worrying about the loss of revenue. To show that he understood the value of pilgrimage, Akbar then dismounted and walked back several miles to his tent, barefooted. Opposition to his rescinding the Hindu tax was immediate and vociferous, but Akbar was not swayed. In Fazl's words, 'In spite of the disapproval of statesmen, and of the great revenue [lost], and the chatter on the part of the ignorant, this sublime decree was issued.' The pilgrim tax, however, was only one element of a broader poll tax (*jizya*) on non-Muslims, and in some periods, those who failed to pay it were imprisoned and/or enslaved. A few years later, in 1579, Akbar abolished all forms of this hated tax.

Compassionate Although Akbar loved discipline and expected others to follow rules, he was also compassionate. Aside from the obvious need for discipline in administrative affairs and military campaigns, he followed a strict physical regimen: he drank only Ganges water and ate a restricted diet, abjuring meat for most of his life (which was quite unusual for a Muslim at that time in India). He also condemned those who violated his moral code by drinking to excess and fornicating, but he often showed mercy to those evil-doers. A good example of his compassion, even if reluctantly displayed, is found in a story told by Fazl in the *Akbarnama*. An edited paraphrase is this: A camel-driver's son had an affair with a royal lady. When his base behaviour was revealed, he became the object of righteous scorn. When the shamelessness of this man and woman came to the notice of His Majesty, H.M. issued a proclamation: 'Our court is a sea of pardon and beneficence. But the woman who submits to desire and is overpowered by the lord of lust, becomes disgraceful. Take hold of the thread of prudence—the safeguard of the generality of mankind—and repent of your deeds and amend your evil-doings by good service. Send that camel-driver's son to our court, so that we may regard your deeds as in a new light.' Akbar must have regarded these lovers as lacking discipline, ruled by 'the lord of lust,' but he showed the women (the higher status of the pair) compassion in offering to pardon her if she turned in the man. Some unkind critic might point out that Akbar, a married man (several times over), himself had access to a harem, but can the notion of hypocrisy really apply to a divine king?

Authoritarian The fifty years of Akbar's reign (1556-1605) was nearly coterminous with the reign of Elizabeth I (1558-1603) in England. His achievements were many, and some were spectacular, in

war, politics and culture. So great was this emperor that he, like Julius Caesar, became regarded as a divine ruler, and he even established a new multi-faith religion under his tutelage. We are not surprised, then, to learn that he could be overbearing. His iron-grip on the state and on the military did not cause too much concern, since these were considered the legitimate areas of imperial control, but he also claimed authority in the theological arena. Akbar began to challenge rulings by the Islamic scholars in his own court, which led to murmurings of dissent against the notion of the emperor as a representative of God on earth. But Akbar silenced his critics with this declaration: 'Surely, the man who is dearest to God on the Day of Judgement is the just *imam* [leader, that is, Akbar]. Whoever obeys the *amir* [commander, that is, Akbar] obeys you and whoever rebels against him, rebels against you...The learned have given a decision that the status of a just king [Akbar] is greater before God than the status of an interpreter of the Law [Muslim clerics].' This is the statement of a man who has a grandiose image of himself, an image built, of course, on real achievements and ideals, an image encouraged by his supporters, not least by his biographer and advisor, Abul Fazl, who recorded this statement. But it is also a statement of a person who knows no boundary to his authority. Most biographies of Akbar present him as a compassionate, wise and kind man. He was all those things, but he was also a man who liked power.