

AKBAR: THE GREAT MOGHUL

1542	Born
1556	Succeeded to the throne
1562	Began personal rule
1575	Conquest of Bengal
1579	Infallibility Decree
1586	Conquest of Kashmir
1591	Conquest of Sind
1601	Conquest of the Deccan
1605	Died

Jalal-ud-din Muhammad Akbar was only a boy when, in January of the year 1556, his weak and incompetent father Humayun died in an accidental fall. As one chronicler put it, "He stumbled out of life as he had stumbled through it." This was not to be the case with Akbar, whose name means "great": he was destined to be the greatest of all the Moghul emperors.

At his succession Akbar was only thirteen—strong-willed, impulsive, and untrained. He had rejected all efforts to educate him. Earlier, after the court astrologers had laboriously fixed the most propitious day for beginning the boy's education, they found that he "had attired himself for sport and had disappeared." He never returned to school, and he remained illiterate, the only Moghul emperor to do so. Abul Fazl, his dutiful biographer, speaks delicately of this failing and tries to put a good face on it, pointing out "that this lord of lofty wisdom and special pupil of God should not be implicated and commingled with ordinary human learning . . . that the knowledge of this king of knowers was of the nature of a gift, and not of an acquirement."¹

At his father's death, Akbar could claim to rule only the Punjab, on the Indian northwest frontier, and the area around Delhi. His fledgling state was consolidated and extended by the able and faithful regent his father had appointed, Bayram Khan. But by 1562 Akbar

¹Abul Fazl, *Akbar-nama*, tr. H. Beveridge (Calcutta: Asiatic Society Bibliotheca Indica, 1907–1939), I, 519.

had put Bayram Khan aside, and his personal reign began. His chief problem was the jealous independence of the Hindu Rajput princes immediately to the east in the region of Rajasthan. When one of these princes, the Raja of Jaipur, needing a military alliance, offered Akbar his daughter in marriage, Akbar accepted—but only on condition that the *raja* accept his suzerainty. The *raja* agreed. This formula Akbar then proceeded to apply with the other Rajput princes. They were permitted to continue to hold their territories provided they acknowledged Akbar as emperor, paid tribute, supplied troops for him when required, and concluded marriage alliances with him. Further, they and their sons were brought into the emperor's military service, enriched and honored, some becoming generals and provincial governors. But Akbar could be as ruthless as he was accommodating. The state of Mewar refused to acknowledge his supremacy. He personally laid siege to its principal fortress, Chitor, and when it fell in 1568 he massacred all thirty thousand of its defenders. This stern example brought nearly all the remaining Rajput princes into alliance with him.

After conquering the province of Gujarat to the southwest, with its port of Surat, which dominated the trade in Indian goods to the west and the Muslim pilgrim traffic to Mecca, and thus consolidating his power in northwest India, Akbar turned eastward to the rich and ancient region of Bengal. Bengal was held by another Muslim-Afghan ruler. Akbar forced him to recognize his suzerainty in 1575, and when, in the following year, he rebelled and was defeated and killed, Akbar annexed Bengal to the Moghul Empire. In 1586 Kashmir to the north was conquered and in 1591 Sind to the southwest. Between 1596 and 1601 his forces gradually penetrated the great southern plateau of the Deccan. By 1601 Akbar ruled virtually the entire subcontinent.

In Praise of Akbar: Akbar-nama

ABUL FAZL

Akbar had proved himself a mighty conqueror, but in the course of his conquests he had also proved himself a brilliant and innovative ruler by virtue of his religious and administrative reforms. He recognized that his dynasty could not be secure unless it somehow reconciled the vast Hindu majority of the people to Muslim rule, and that his own rule could not be secure unless it recognized the claims and ambitions of the native Hindu princes. We have already noted his policy of conciliation toward the Rajput princes. This in itself was not entirely new. Earlier Muslim rulers had found it necessary to enlist Hindu support. But the Hindus had always been subordinates rather than partners. The ruling force was foreign and alien. It was the genius of Akbar to grant true equality to his Hindu subjects and to confer genuine respect on their institutions. "The essential pillar of this policy was the settlement with the Rajput chiefs and the policy of partnership which sprang from it."² They accepted the authority of the Moghul Empire, and in exchange they were left in control of their lands as Moghul agents. To preserve their dignity, they were allowed to beat their drums in the streets of the capital—a sign of royalty—and to enter the Hall of Public Audience fully armed. They were taken into the imperial service as genuine equals. No office or honor was closed to them—some were even among Akbar's most trusted confidential advisers. His policy of intermarriage of his dynasty with Hindu ruling houses was a final recognition of equality.

But Akbar aimed to reconcile himself not only with the Hindu ruling houses but with the Hindu community as a whole. To this end he implemented a series of administrative reforms that marked the entire course of his reign. More important, he granted religious toleration, not only to Hinduism but to other religions, including Judaism and Christianity—nearly unheard of in Muslim lands—and intimately associated himself with these diverse religions.

For an account of these policies we turn to the massive *Akbar-nama: The History of Akbar*, written by Abul Fazl. Abu al-Fazl ibn

²Percival Spear, *India: A Modern History*, new and rev. ed. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1972), p. 132.

Mubarak (1551–1602) was not only a contemporary of Akbar; he was a close personal friend and, along with his brother the poet Faizi and his father Shaikh Mubarak, a minister of the court. Fazl was Akbar's official court historian, and the emperor not only received Fazl's completed work but had each successive chapter read to him while he corrected and commented on them. This alone would have tended to give a laudatory cast to the work. But the work is more than simply laudatory: its most obvious quality is its outrageously exaggerated flattery. Yet Fazl does not falsify events; he simply presents them in a totally partisan manner. To Fazl's credit, however, he truly believed what he wrote. He was an unabashed advocate of divine right monarchy and an equally unabashed admirer of Akbar, who was, to him, the ideal monarch. He was also, fully as much as Akbar, a freethinker in religion and philosophy and hence an enthusiast for his king's policy of toleration. But with all its faults and limitations, the *Akbar-nama* "must be treated as the foundation for a history of Akbar's reign."³ The work was written in the ornate Persian court language, and some of that quality comes through even in the translation. It is organized, in chronicle fashion, on a year-by-year basis. Our excerpt begins with the year 1562.

One of the glorious boons of his Majesty the Shāhinshāh⁴ which shone forth in this auspicious year was the abolition of enslavement. The victorious troops which came into the wide territories of India used in their tyranny to make prisoners of the wives and children and other relatives of the people of India, and used to enjoy them or sell them. His Majesty the Shāhinshāh, out of his thorough recognition of and worship of God, and from his abundant foresight and right thinking gave orders that no soldier of the victorious armies should in any part of his dominions act in this manner. . . . It was for excellent reasons that His Majesty gave his attention to this subject, although the binding, killing or striking the haughty and the chastising the stiff-necked are part of the struggle for empire—and this is a point about which both sound jurists and innovators are agreed—yet it is outside of the canons of justice to regard the chastisement of women and innocent children as the chastisement of the contumacious. If the husbands have taken the path of insolence, how is it the fault of the wives, and if the fathers have chosen the road of opposition what fault have the children committed? . . .

³V. A. Smith, *Akbar the Great Mogal 1542–1605* (Delhi et al.: Chand, 1966), p. 338.

⁴This is a title borrowed from Persian court usage meaning "King of Kings," i.e., Emperor.—ED.

As the purposes of the Shāhinshāh were entirely right and just, the blissful result ensued that the wild and rebellious inhabitants of portions of India placed the ring of devotion in the ear of obedience, and became the materials of world-empire. Both was religion set in order, for its essence is the distribution of justice, and things temporal were regulated, for their perfection lies in the obedience of mankind. . . .

One of the occurrences [of the year 1563] was that the joyous heart, of H. M.⁵ the Shāhinshāh turned towards hunting, and he went to the neighbourhood of Mathura with a select party. The hunting was successful. One day that tiger-hunter hunted seven tigers. Five were levelled with the dust by arrow and bullet, and one that repository of courage caught alive and so was the subject of a thousand wonderings. The other was caught by the united efforts of a number of bahadurs. In the same hunt he joined worship with pleasure and became distributor of justice. It was brought to his notice that for a long time it was the custom in India for the rulers to take sums from the people who came to sacred spots to worship, proportionate to their rank and wealth. This (worship) was called Karma.⁶ The Shāhinshāh in his wisdom and tolerance remitted all these taxes. . . . He looked upon such grasping of property as blameable and issued orders forbidding the levy thereof throughout his dominions. . . .

One of the great gifts which H. M. the Shāhinshāh made at the beginning of this year [1564] was the remission of the *Jizya* throughout India.⁷ Who can estimate the amount thereof? As the far-seeing glance of the Shāhinshāh looked to the administration of the world, he paid great attention to the issuing of this edict, which might be regarded as the foundation of the arrangement of mankind. In spite of the disapproval of statesmen, and of the great revenue, and of much chatter on the part of the ignorant, this sublime decree was issued. By this grand gift, thousands of leading-reins and lassoes were made for the stiff-necked ones of the age. . . .

His (Abkar's) keen eye is the astrolabe of the substantive sun—his truth-discerning heart is the celestial observatory of Attributes—he is of noble lineage, of joyous countenance—of right disposition—of open brow—of well-proportioned frame—of magnanimous nature—of lofty genius—of pure purpose—of enduring faith—of perfect

⁵This abbreviation, used throughout in the translation, stands for "His Majesty."—Ed.

⁶"Fate" or "destiny" in Hindu religious thought.—Ed.

⁷This was a yearly tax on all non-Muslim subjects of the Empire—Ed.

wisdom—begirt with varied talents—of wide capacity—of high honour—of splendid courage—of right judgment—of choice counsel—of generosity unfeigned—of boundless forgiveness, abundant in graciousness—at peace with all—compendium of dominion—of plenteous sincerity—multiple of single-minded warriors—abounding in wealth—accumulator of the world's rarities—of pure heart—unspotted by the world—leader of the spiritual realm—of enduring alertness! How has he been gathered together into one place? Or how doth a single body upbear him on the shoulders of genius?

At this time⁸ when the capital (Fathpūr Sikrī) was illuminated by his glorious advent, H. M. ordered that a house of worship ('Ibādatkhāna) should be built in order to the adornment of the spiritual kingdom, and that it should have four verandahs (aiwān). Though the Divine bounty always has an open door and searches for the fit person, and the inquirer, yet as the lord of the universe, from his general benevolence, conducts his measures according to the rules of the superficial, he chose the eve of Friday,⁹ which bears on its face the colouring (*ghāza*) of the announcement of auspiciousness, for the out-pouring (ifāzat). A general proclamation was issued that, on that night of illumination, all orders and sects of mankind—those who searched after spiritual and physical truth, and those of the common public who sought for an awakening, and the inquirers of every sect—should assemble in the precincts of the holy edifice, and bring forward their spiritual experiences, and their degrees of knowledge of the truth in various and contradictory forms in the bridal chamber of manifestation. . . .

At this time, when the centre of the Caliphate (Fathpūr Sikrī) was glorified by H. M.'s advent, the former institutions were renewed, and the temple of Divine knowledge was on Thursday nights illuminated by the light of the holy mind. On 20 Mihr, Divine month, 3 October 1578, and in that house of worship, the lamp of the privy chamber of detachment was kindled in the banqueting-hall of social life. The coin of the hivers of wisdom in colleges and cells was brought to the test. The clear wine was separated from the lees, and good coin from the adulterated. The wide capacity and the toleration of the Shadow of God were unveiled. Şūfi,¹⁰ philosopher, orator,

⁸The order for the building of the 'Ibādatkhāna was given in February–March, 1575.

⁹Thursday evening. The Muslim holy day was Friday, but it began with sunset the previous day.—Ed.

¹⁰Sufi, a modified, mystical form of Islam that attracted millions of former Hindus and Buddhists to the Muslim faith.—Ed.

jurist, Sunnī,¹¹ Shīa,¹² Brahman,¹³ Jati,¹⁴ Sūrā,¹⁵ Cārbāk,¹⁶ Nazarene,¹⁷ Jew, Šābī (Sabian),¹⁸ Zoroastrian, and others enjoyed exquisite pleasure by beholding the calmness of the assembly, the sitting of the world-lord in the lofty pulpit (*mimbar*), and the adornment of the pleasant abode of impartiality. The treasures of secrets were opened out without fear of hostile seekers after battle. The just and truth-perceiving ones of each sect emerged from haughtiness and conceit, and began their search anew. They displayed profundity and meditation, and gathered eternal bliss on the divan of greatness. The conceited and quarrelsome from evilness of disposition and shortness of thought descended into the mire of presumption and sought their profit in loss. Being guided by ignorant companions, and from the predominance of a somnolent fortune, they went into disgrace. The conferences were excellently arranged by the acuteness and keen quest of truth of the world's Khedive.¹⁹ . . . The *Shāhinshāh's* court became the home of the inquirers of the seven climes, and the assemblage of the wise of every religion and sect. . . .

In Criticism of Akbar: *Muntakhabu-T-Tawarikh*

AL-BADAONI

Another contemporary historian of Akbar was al-Badaoni (1540–1615), whose great work, *Muntakhabu-T-Tawarikh*, *Abstract of Histories*, is an account, in three large volumes, of the family of Akbar, the reign of Akbar himself, and of the leading intellectuals of the age. It was not an

¹¹Sunni, the majority sect of Islam.—ED.

¹²Shia, a minority sect of Islam.—ED.

¹³Brahman, i.e., Hindu.—ED.

¹⁴Jati, a sect of the Jain religion.—ED.

¹⁵Siura, another term for the Jains.—ED.

¹⁶Carbak, an outlawed Hindu sect.—ED.

¹⁷Nazarene is the term Fazl usually uses for Christians.—ED.

¹⁸Sabi, native Indians of a sect converted centuries earlier and sometimes called the Christians of St. John.—ED.

¹⁹A Turkish term for "ruler."—ED.

official history but a private work, even a secret one, which might have been lost had it not been discovered among Badaoni's papers after his death. It is as different as possible from Fazl's work. It was motivated by the author's devout, even bigoted commitment to the orthodox, conservative Sunni sect of Islam. He was convinced that Akbar had hopelessly damaged Muslim orthodoxy by his policy of religious toleration. He included in his denunciation his fellow historian Abul Fazl who, in his view, had not only abetted the emperor's apostasy but had prevented him (Badaoni) from receiving preferment at the hands of the emperor. Nevertheless, it is the opinion of the greatest modern biographer of Akbar that this "hostile criticism of Akbar . . . is of the highest value as a check on the turgid panegyric composed by the latitudinarian Abul Fazl. It gives information about the development of Akbar's opinions on religion which is not to be found in the other Persian histories."²⁰

The excerpt begins with Badaoni's account of Akbar's Ibadat-khanah, the center for the discussion of religions.

. . . the Emperor came to Fathpūr. There he used to spend much time in the *'Ibādat-khānah* in the company of learned men and Shaikhs. And especially on Friday nights, when he would sit up there the whole night continually occupied in discussing questions of Religion, whether fundamental or collateral. The learned men used to draw the sword of the tongue on the battle-field of mutual contradiction and opposition, and the antagonism of the sects reached such a pitch that they would call one another fools and heretics. The controversies used to pass beyond the differences of Sunnī, and Shī'ah, of Hanīfī and Shāf'ī,²¹ of lawyer and divine, and they would attack the very bases of belief.

. . . Then the Mullās became divided into two parties, and one party took one side and one the other, and became very Jews and Egyptians for hatred of each other. And persons of novel and whimsical opinions, in accordance with their pernicious ideas, and vain doubts, coming out of ambush decked the false in the garb of the true, and wrong in the dress of right, and cast the Emperor, who was possessed of an excellent disposition, and was an earnest searcher after truth, but very ignorant and a mere tyro, and used to the company of infidels and base persons, into perplexity, till doubt was heaped upon doubt, and he lost all definite aim, and the straight wall of the clear Law, and of firm Religion was broken down, so that after five or six years not a trace of Islām was left in him: and every thing was turned topsy turvy. . . .

²⁰V. A. Smith, *Akbar the Great Mogul*, p. 339.

²¹Two of the four schools of Islamic jurisprudence.—ED.

Crowds of learned men from all nations, and sages of various religions and sects came to the Court, and were honoured with private conversations. After enquiries and investigations, which were their only business and occupation day and night, they would talk about profound points of science, the subtleties of revelation, the curiosities of history, and the wonders of tradition, subjects of which large volumes could give only an abstract and summary: and in accordance with the saying:—"Three things are dangerous, Avarice satisfied: desire indulged: and a man's being pleased with himself." Everything that pleased him, he picked and chose from any one except a Moslem, and anything that was against his disposition, and ran counter to his wishes he thought fit to reject and cast aside. From childhood to manhood, and from manhood to his declining years the Emperor had combined in himself various phases from various religions and opposite sectarian beliefs, and by a peculiar acquisitiveness and a talent for selection, by no means common, had made his own all that can be seen and read in books. Thus a faith of a materialistic character became painted on the mirror of his mind and the storehouse of his imagination, and from the general impression this conviction took form, like an engraving upon a stone, that there are wise men to be found and ready at hand in all religions, and men of asceticism, and recipients of revelation and workers of miracles among all nations and that the Truth is an inhabitant of every place: and that consequently how could it be right to consider it as confined to one religion or creed, and that, one which had only recently made its appearance and had not as yet endured a thousand years! And why assert one thing and deny another, and claim pre-eminence for that which is not essentially pre-eminent?

He became especially firmly convinced of the doctrine of the transmigration of souls, and he much approved of the saying:—"There is no religion in which the doctrine of Transmigration has not a firm hold." And insincere flatterers composed treatises in order to establish indisputable arguments in favour of this thesis. And having instituted research into doctrines of the sects of the Hindū unbelievers, of whom there are an endless and innumerable host, and who possess numbers of sacred books, and yet do not belong to the *Ahl-i-Kūtāb*,²² he took so much pleasure in such discussions, that not a day passed but a new fruit of this loathsome tree ripened into existence. . . .

Learned monks also from Europe, who are called *Pādre*, and have an infallible head, called *Pāpā*, who is able to change religious ordinances as he may deem advisable for the moment, and to whose

²²Literally "people of the book," referring to Jews and Christians, who worship the same God as Muslims and whose scriptures contain divine truth.—ED.

authority kings must submit, brought the Gospel, and advanced proofs for the Trinity. His Majesty firmly believed in the truth of the Christian religion, and wishing to spread the doctrines of Jesus, ordered Prince Murād to take a few lessons in Christianity under good auspices, and charged Abu-l-Fazl to translate the Gospel. . . .

Fire-worshippers also came from Nūsārī in Gujrāt, proclaimed the religion of Zardusht²³ as the true one, and declared reverence to fire to be superior to every other kind of worship. They also attracted the Emperor's regard, and taught him the peculiar terms, the ordinances, the rites and ceremonies of the Kaiānians.²⁴ At last he ordered that the sacred fire should be made over to the charge of Abu-l-Fazl, and that after the manner of the kings of Persia, in whose temples blazed perpetual fires, he should take care it was never extinguished night or day, for that it is one of the signs of God, and one light from His lights. . . .

Every precept which was enjoined by the doctors of other religions he treated as manifest and decisive, in contradistinction to this Religion of ours, all the doctrines of which he set down to be senseless, and of modern origin, and the founders of it as nothing but poor Arabs, a set of scoundrels and highway-robbers, and the people of Islām as accused. But in the course of time the truth of this verse in its hidden meaning developed itself: "Fain would they put out the light of God with their mouths! but, though the Infidels abhor it, God will perfect his light." By degrees the affair was carried to such a pitch that proofs were no longer considered necessary for abolishing the precepts of Islām. . . .

I have made bold to chronicle these events, a course very far removed from that of prudence and circumspection. But God (He is glorious and honoured!) is my witness, and sufficient is God as a witness, that my inducement to write this has been nothing but sorrow for the faith, and heart-burning for the deceased Religion of Islām, which 'Anqā-like turning its face to the Qāf of exile, and withdrawing the shadow of its wings from the dwellers in the dust of this lower world, thenceforth became a nonentity, and still is so. And to God I look for refuge from reproach, and hatred, and envy, and religious persecution. . . .

And in these days, when reproach began to spread upon the doctrines of Islām, and all questions relating thereto, and ever so many wretches of Hindūs and Hindūizing Musalmāns brought unmitigated reviling against the Prophet, and the villainously irreligious Ulāmā²⁵

²³Persian Zoroastrianism.—Ed.

²⁴An old Persian dynasty.—Ed.

²⁵The Islamic learned community.—Ed.

in their works pronounced the Emperor to be without sin, and contenting themselves with mentioning the unity of God, they next wrote down the various titles of the Emperor, and had not the courage to mention the name of the Prophet (God be gracious to him and his family, and give them peace in defiance of the liars!) this matter became the cause of general disgrace, and the seeds of depravity and disturbance began to lift their heads in the empire. Besides this base and low men of the higher and lower classes, having accepted the collar of spiritual obedience upon their necks, professed themselves his disciples. They became disciples through the motives of hope and fear, and the word of truth could not proceed out of their mouths. . . .

At this time a document made its appearance,²⁶ which bore the signatures and seals of Makhdūm-ul-mulk, of Shaikh ‘Abd-un-nabī *çadr-uç-çudūr*, of Qāzī Jalāl-ud-dīn of Multān, *qāzī-l-quzāt*, of Çadr Jahān the *muftī* of the empire, of Shaikh Mubārak the deepest writer of the age, and of Ghāzi Khān of Badakhshān, who stood unrivalled in the transcendental sciences. The subject-matter of the document was the setting of the absolute superiority of the *Imām-i-‘ādil* over the *Mujtahid* and the investigation of the grounds of this superiority. . . . I shall copy the document *verbatim*:—

“Petition.

Whereas Hindūstān is now become the centre of security and peace, and the land of justice and beneficence, a large number of people, especially learned men and lawyers, have immigrated and chosen this country for their home. Now we, the principal ‘Ulamā, who are not only well-versed in the several departments of the Law and in the principles of jurisprudence, and well acquainted with the edicts which rest on reason or testimony, but are also known for our piety and honest intentions, have duly considered the deep meaning, *first*, of the verse of the Qur’ān: “Obey God, and obey the prophet, and those who have authority among you,” and, *secondly*, of the genuine Tradition: “Surely the man who is dearest to God on the day of judgment is the *Imām-i-‘ādil*; whosoever obeys the Amīr, obeys Thee; and whosoever rebels against him, rebels against Thee,” and, *thirdly*, of several other proofs based on reasoning or testimony; and we have agreed that the rank of *Sultān-i-‘ādil*,²⁷ is higher in the eyes of God than the rank of a *Mujtahid*.²⁸ Further we declare that the king of Islām, Amīr of the Faithful, shadow of God in the world, *Abu-l-Fatḥ Jalāl-ud-dīn Muḥammad Akbar*

²⁶The so-called Infallibility Decree.—ED.

²⁷Just ruler.—ED.

²⁸Authority on points of law.—ED.

Padshāh Ghāzī (whose kingdom God perpetuate!) is a most just, a most wise, and a most God-fearing king. Should therefore in future a religious question come up, regarding which the opinions of the Mujtahids are at variance, and His Majesty in his penetrating understanding and clear wisdom be inclined to adopt, for the benefit of the nation, and as a political expedient, any of the conflicting opinions, which exist on that point, and issue a decree to that effect, we do hereby agree that such a decree shall be binding on us and on the whole nation.

Further, we declare that, should His Majesty think fit to issue a new order, we and the nation shall likewise be bound by it, provided always that such order be not only in accordance with some verse of the Qur'ān, but also of real benefit to the nation; and further, that any opposition on the part of his subjects to such an order passed by His Majesty shall involve damnation in the world to come, and loss of property and religious privileges in this.

This document has been written with honest intentions, for the glory of God, and the propagation of Islām, and is signed by us, the principal 'Ulamā and lawyers, in the month of Rajab of the year nine hundred and eighty-seven (987) [1579–80].”

The draft of this document, when presented to the Emperor, was in the handwriting of Shaikh Mubārak. The others had signed it against their will, but the Shaikh had added at the bottom that he most willingly signed his name; for this was a matter to which for several years he had been anxiously looking forward.

No sooner had His Majesty obtained this legal document, than the road of deciding any religious question was open; the superiority of the intellect of the Imām was established, and opposition was rendered impossible. All orders regarding things which our law allows or disallows were abolished, and the superiority of the intellect of the Imām became law. They called Islām a travesty.

A Modern Assessment of Akbar

BAMBER GASCOIGNE

Every modern writer on the Moghul Empire has had to deal with Akbar's administrative and religious reforms, and most find them the well-spring of his greatness as an emperor. One of the best of

the modern commentators is the British journalist and historical popularizer Bamber Gascoigne. His work *The Great Moghuls* is one of the most reliable treatments of the complex history of Moghul India, solidly based on the sources—including Fazl and Badaoni—and on the best current specialists' research.

At the age of twenty-three Abul Fazl arrived at Fatehpur Sikri to enter Akbar's service—in the very same year, 1574, as another equally brilliant young man, Badauni. From early in his childhood Abul Fazl had known Badauni, eleven years his senior, because Badauni had studied at Agra under Abul Fazl's father, Shaikh Mubarak. Each now immediately caught Akbar's eye; each seemed destined for a most promising career; and they were to become, between them, the two most important historians of the period. But their paths rapidly diverged and the vast difference between their two careers and their two books symbolizes neatly the gulf which opened in the second half of Akbar's reign and which made these seem years of calamity to the more orthodox Muslims among Akbar's subjects, many of whom came to believe that the emperor had become a Hindu. Badauni was a strict Sunni, whereas Abul Fazl was a freethinker, as were his elder brother, Faizi, and his father, Shaikh Mubarak. The appointment of the three members of this talented family to positions at court was an ominous reversal for the rigidly orthodox and until now very powerful members of the *ulama*, or religious hierarchy.

Shaikh Mubarak and his two sons rapidly became the most influential group at Akbar's court, largely because their eclecticism chimed so well with his. The shaikh himself took the leading place among the palace divines. His elder son, Faizi, became the poet laureate. And Abul Fazl launched with a will into the many tasks which would bring him ever closer into the emperor's trust. The more affairs at Fatehpur Sikri went the elegant and carefree way of Abul Fazl and Faizi, the more Badauni and his like felt excluded. Badauni claims to have upbraided Abul Fazl one day for his notorious heresies and to have been enraged by the cool reply 'I wish to wander for a few days in the vale of infidelity for sport' though the story does less than justice to the political seriousness underlying Abul Fazl's wish to broaden the regime's religious basis. With poignant irony the two rival intellectuals were each as young men given the rank of twenty horse and were made to share the same task—supervising the branding of horses for muster. Abul Fazl knuckled down to it, and in Badauni's words, 'by his intelligence and time-serving qualities' managed to raise himself from here to the highest positions in the realm, 'while I from my inexperience and simplicity could not manage to continue in the service'. Badauni

soon sank to the official level of a mere translator. Akbar, with characteristic lack of concern for Badauni's bigotry, gave him the four-year task of translating into Persian the Hindi classic the *Mahabharata*, which he predictably found nothing but 'puerile absurdities of which the eighteen thousand creations may well be amazed . . . but such is my fate, to be employed on such works'. Badauni hardly appears in Abul Fazl's book, but the latter looms large in Badauni's as the 'man that set the world in flames' and as being 'officious and time-serving, openly faithless, continually studying the emperor's whims, a flatterer beyond all bounds'. The two men's books make together a perfect pair of commentaries on the reign. Badauni's, crotchety, bigoted, ruthlessly honest with himself as well as with others, is much the more readable and in modern terms is far better written. It was compiled in secret and only discovered in 1615 after both Akbar and Badauni were dead. Abul Fazl's, in which a mere list of Akbar's good qualities can run to several pages, was commissioned by the emperor and was read aloud to him as each stage was completed—and no doubt again and again subsequently. Yet it carries one along by the sheer confident profusion of its flowery Persian metaphors and can also be surprisingly vivid, as when a holy man has 'for thirty years in an unnoticed corner been gathering happiness on an old mat'. The difference between the two histories is that between a brilliant diary and the most magnificent of ornamental scrolls.

Akbar's own bent for religious speculation was encouraged not only by Shaikh Mubarak's family but also by wider currents of opinion in India at the time. Within Islam there had long been a tradition of free-thinking mysticism, known as Sufism, which was opposed to the rigid distinctions of orthodoxy, and in the past century this had been joined in India by similar stirrings within Hinduism, in particular the Bhakti movement and the beginnings of the Sikh religion, both of which included a rejection of the caste system and a belief in a personal God. By 1575 Akbar's interest in comparative religion had become so strong that he built a special *ibadat-khana* or 'house of worship' in which to hold religious discussions. The building, which no longer exists, was an extension of a deserted hermit's cell. It was situated behind the mosque at Fatehpur Sikri and Akbar would go there after prayers in the mosque on Thursday evenings—the Muslim day is calculated as beginning at dusk, rather than midnight, so Thursday evening was for Akbar and his mullahs the evening of the holy day, Friday.

His intention, as in his *diwan-i-khas*, was to sit in the middle and digest the arguments from all sides. He was deeply shocked—and sufficiently inexperienced in academic matters to be surprised—when the learned divines whom he invited to participate immediately fell out over who

should sit where, but this was finally settled by separating the rival groups to the four sides of the building. The discussions went on long into the night; much perfume was wafted on the air; and Akbar had a pile of money in front of him, as he always did on any comparable occasion, with which he hoped to reward the most persuasive and elegant contributions. But here too he was disappointed. Badauni records that in no time the learned doctors were calling each other 'fools and heretics', and the arguments soon went beyond subtle sectarian differences and threatened to undermine the very foundations of belief, until the participants 'became very Jews and Egyptians for hatred of each other'. The foundations of Akbar's belief, perhaps already shaky, were certainly further disturbed by these performances; such furious differences of opinion within the Muslim community, to whom the discussions were at this stage restricted, seemed to him to cast doubts on Islam itself and his next step was to throw the debate open to learned men from other religions. Eventually he included Hindus, Jains, Zoroastrians, Jews and even a small group who came to play a prominent and most interesting part in the court life at Fatehpur Sikri, three Jesuit fathers from the Portuguese colony at Goa. . . . They were Rudolf Aquaviva, an Italian aristocrat whose uncle became General of the Society of Jesus; Antony Monserrate, a Spaniard who later left a very full account of his experiences in the land of the Moghul; and Francis Henriquez, a Persian convert from Islam who was expected to act as interpreter. . . .

Akbar always treated the 'Nazarene sages', as Abul Fazl called them, with the greatest courtesy; he liked them to sit near him, and would often draw them aside for private conversation; he sent them food from the royal table; when Monserrate was ill he visited him, and he had even gone to the trouble to learn a special Portuguese greeting for the occasion; and he could sometimes be seen walking in public places with his arm around Father Aquaviva. On religious matters he was just as cooperative; he was prepared to kiss their sacred books and holy images; he came to see the crib which they had built for their first Christmas at Fatehpur Sikri, and when he entered their little chapel he took off his turban; he appointed Abul Fazl to teach them Persian and allowed Monserrate to become tutor to his son Murad, then about eleven, even tolerating 'In the name of God and of Jesus Christ, the true Prophet and Son of God' at the head of each of the prince's exercises; he allowed the fathers to preach, to make conversions and to hold a large public funeral for a Portuguese who died at court, processing through the streets with crucifix and candles; he even took in good part the Jesuits' chiding him for his surplus of wives.

It is not surprising that the missionaries felt encouraged, but they were soon to be disappointed. They had mistaken Akbar's fascination

with all religions for an inclination to join theirs. It seems that Christianity appealed to him at least as much as any other religion—though he was distressed, among other things, that Christ should have allowed himself the indignity of being crucified and felt that once up there he should have used his special powers to get down—and it has sometimes been suggested that Akbar was consciously hoping to find in Christianity a religion with which he could solve his empire's communal hostilities by imposing it from the top on Muslims and Hindus alike, precisely, in fact, as the Jesuits themselves intended. But he was too shrewd a politician to imagine that he could solemnly decree a new religion for India, and it is likely that his interest in Christianity derived almost entirely from his personal love of speculation. It is typical that when he did finally decide on his own religion it should turn out to be so generalized, its main distinguishing feature being a vague nimbus of divinity around his own person, and that he should have made so little effort to spread it beyond his own circle of friends. The announcement in 1582 of this new religion, known as the *din-i-Ilahi* or 'religion of God', finally showed the fathers that their efforts had failed. They returned to Goa but at Akbar's request other missions followed them, and on several more occasions Christian hopes were raised high only to be dashed again. . . .

If the Jesuits were wrong in believing that Akbar was moving towards Christianity, the Muslims were certainly right in their conviction that he was drifting away from orthodox Islam. That he was doing so was as much as anything a matter of policy. The principle of a medieval Islamic state gave very great powers to the mullahs, since it was believed that the correct way of doing everything could be found in the Koran or in one or two long established commentaries on it. The ruler must therefore abide by the book and the book was best interpreted by those who had devoted their lives to religion. . . .

Akbar used the undignified squabbles between the Muslim divines in the *ibadat-khana* as an opportunity to limit the power of the priesthood. In 1579 appeared the famous *mahzar* or so-called decree of infallibility, in which it was stated that if there was disagreement among the learned about the meaning of any part of the Koran, it would in future be Akbar who had the deciding say on which of the contending interpretations should be accepted; and further that if he chose to take any step for the good of the state, it should be accepted by all unless it could be shown to be against the Koran. The decree was sound Islamic theory in so far as it placed the book above all, but it did represent a fairly startling upheaval, at least in concept, in the relationship between the *ulama* or body of learned men and the temporal power. . . . The decree of infallibility was signed by several divines but only one of them, Abul Fazl's father Shaikh Mubarak, put

his name to it with enthusiasm, as a note below his signature testified. Having probably been largely Mubarak's idea, the decree marked a definite advance in the power at court of the shaikh and his two sons, and was a serious blow to the orthodox—particularly when coupled with other indications about this time of the direction which Akbar's thoughts were taking. In 1579 he put an end to the custom of sending vast sums of money each year to Mecca and Medina for distribution to the poor; in 1580 he gave up his annual pilgrimage to Ajmer; in 1584 he rejected the Muslim system of dating events from the Hegira, or flight of the prophet from Mecca to Medina, and replaced it with a new chronology beginning with his own accession (Abul Fazl explains that Akbar found it 'of ominous significance' to date things from the Hegira, presumably because of the mention of flight); finally he had had the effrontery to begin preaching and reciting the *khutba*²⁹ himself in the mosque, although on the very first occasion he had to stop halfway, when he began trembling in what appears to have been another of his quasi-mystical seizures. Together with the decree of infallibility, this personal performance in the mosque was perhaps the most offensive of all to the orthodox. It implied that Akbar was conferring on himself the status of a learned divine. Their next shock was when he seemed to take the process one stage further and present himself simply as divine.

The *din-i-Ilahi*, Akbar's new religion based on a vague and mystical liberalism, was at the very best unspecific about how far Akbar straddled the dividing line between mortal and divine. The new chronology dating from his accession was known as the Divine Era. And considerable outrage was caused when he decided to stamp on his coins the potentially ambiguous phrase *Allahu akbar*; the ambiguity derives from the fact that *akbar* means great as well as being the emperor's name so that the words could mean either 'God is great' or 'Akbar is God'. This has seemed to various modern historians the most blatant assumption of divinity, but it need not have been so. When a shaikh accused Akbar of having intended the second meaning he replied indignantly that it had not even occurred to him. His claim sounds far-fetched; and the fact that he had taken the unusual step of removing his own name and titles from his coins, in order to substitute this phrase, suggests that he was not unaware that it included his name as well as God's . . . and it seems likely that Akbar was amused by the ambiguity rather than taking it as a serious statement of his own identity.

²⁹A prescribed sermon read at Friday noon prayers in the mosque, acknowledging the authority of the reigning prince.—Ed.

In all these steps Akbar was energetically supported if not actually led by Shaikh Mubarak and his sons. Abul Fazl's biography of Akbar is liberally sprinkled with epithets suggesting his divinity, and he attributes to the emperor several miracles, including even the making of rain. The emphasis throughout Abul Fazl's writing is on religious toleration—he was a man who practised what he preached, having a Hindu, a Kashmiri and a Persian wife—and within the space of one paragraph he calls the Muslims of Kashmir 'narrow-minded conservatives of blind tradition' but praises the Hindu priests of the same province for not loosening 'the tongue of calumny against those not of their faith'. His stated aim in studying and describing the culture and philosophy of the Hindus was so that 'hostility towards them might abate, and the temporal sword be stayed awhile from the shedding of blood'.

Akbar's progression away from orthodox Islam towards his own vague religion was no doubt part of a conscious effort to seem to represent all his people—the Rajputs, for example, saw their rajas much like Abul Fazl's image of Akbar, both human and divine—and it fitted in with a general policy which included his adoption of Hindu and Parsee festivals and his increasing abstinence from meat in the manner of Hindus. But it also fulfilled a personal need. He was drawn to mysticism, fond of lonely contemplation, eager for any clue to the truth, and if that truth should touch him with divinity there were always precedents within the family; Humayun had indulged in a mystical identification of himself with light, and through light with God; Timur, more conventionally, used to refer to himself as the 'shadow of Allah on earth'. Akbar's religious attitudes seem to have been a happy blend of personal inclination and state policy.

Review and Study Questions

1. How does Abul Fazl manifest his outrageous partisanship in the *Akbar-nama*?
2. How do the two contemporary accounts of Akbar's religious toleration differ from each other?
3. What was the source of al-Badaoni's hostility to Akbar's religious toleration?
4. Why were Abul Fazl and al-Badaoni such bitter enemies? How did this affect their appraisals of Akbar?
5. Given the background of Akbar, could he really be an "infallible" judge of religious and intellectual matters?

Suggestions for Further Reading

The works of Fazl, excerpted for this chapter from Abu-l-Fazl, *The Akbar-nama*, tr. H. Beveridge, 3 vols. (Delhi: Rare Books, 1972) and Badaoni, excerpted for this chapter from Abul-l-Qadir ibn-l-Muluk Shah, Al-Badaoni, *Muntakhabu-T-Tawarikh*, tr. and ed. W. H. Lowe, rev. ed. 3 vols. (Patna, India: Academica Asiatica, 1973), are the only two complete contemporary histories of Akbar's reign, although several partial accounts exist. These can best be sampled in H. M. Elliot and John Dowson, eds., *The History of India, As Told by Its Own Historians*, 2d ed. (Calcutta: Susil Guypta, Ltd., 1955), 8 vols. The interesting account by the Jesuit Father Antony Monserrate is, unfortunately, still in its original Latin, but is summarized with substantial parts translated in Sir. E. D. Maclagan, "The Jesuit Missions to the Emperor Akbar," *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal*, 65, part i (1896), 38–113. Though not a connected history, another large three-volume work by Abul Fazl, *Ain-i Akbari*, tr. H. Blochmann and H. S. Jarrett (Calcutta: Asiatic Society of Bengal, 1873–94), presents a detailed account of Akbar's administrative system.

The best modern biography of Akbar is still Vincent A. Smith, *Akbar the Great Mogul, 1542–1605*, 2nd rev. ed. (Delhi et al.: S. Chand and Co., 1966). A much larger and more detailed work is the learned Ashirbadi Lal Srivastava, *Akbar the Great*, vol. I, *Political History, 1542–1645 A.D.*, vol. II, *Evolution of Administration, 1556–1645 A.D.* (Agra, Delhi, Jaipur: Shiva Lal Agarwala, 1962). There are two old and rather brief biographies of Akbar in English, neither of them critical or based on primary sources: G. B. Malleson, *Akbar and the Rise of the Mughal Empire*, "Rulers of India" (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1894) and Lawrence Binyon, *Akbar* (Edinburgh: Peter Davies, Ltd., 1932). The chapter on Akbar in Sri Ram Sharma, *The Religious Policy of the Mughal Emperors*, 3rd rev. ed. (New York: Asia Publishing House, 1972) is a very reliable and substantial account.

There are a number of works on the Moghul Empire or on late medieval India, including the Moghul period. The most detailed are two works by A. L. Srivastava, *History of India, 1000–1707* (Jaipur, Agra, Indore: Shiva Lal Agarwala and Co., 1964) and *The Mughal Empire (1526–1803 A.D.)*, 7th rev. ed. (Agra: Shiva Lal Agarwala and Co., 1970). Two less satisfactory and older books are Stanley Lane-Poole, *Mediaeval India under Mohammedan Rule (A.D. 712–1764)*, 2 vols. (London: Ernest Benn, 1903) with many revised editions; and S. M. Edwardes and H. L. O. Garrett, *Mughal Rule in India* (Delhi et al.: Chand [1900]). The best and most up-to-date history of the Moghuls is Bamber Gascoigne, *The Great Moghuls* (New York et al.: Harper & Row, 1971), excerpted for this chapter.

There are a great many general histories of India that devote chapters or sections to Akbar. Among the most useful are Stanley Wolpert, *A New History of India* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977); Percival Spear, *India: A Modern History*, new ed. rev. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1972); Francis Watson, *A Concise History of India* (New York: Scribner, 1975); and finally, an old standard work by Vincent A. Smith, in a third edition edited by Percival Spear, with the section containing the Moghuls revised by J. B. Harrison: *The Oxford History of India* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967).