

Akbar and the Mughal State: The Quest for Legitimization in Hindustan

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ABSTRACT

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I. Introduction

Prior to the rise of the Mughals, Muslim rulers had been struggling unsuccessfully for over three hundred years to impose their authority over the majority Hindu population. Not one Muslim ruling house had created a ruling dynasty lasting over fifty years, which were marked by rebellions and constant resistance. The sultan Akbar understood the inefficiency of prior Muslim rulers and saw that the only way to create a

lasting empire in Hindustan was to gain the consent of the majority of his subjects while still maintaining support from the Muslim ruling-class minority. He was a Muslim ruler in a land of indigenous Hindus who had been treated as inferior people and were prepared to fight for their autonomy. The Hindus were unwilling to accept the status of second-class subjects under the rule of foreigners. Akbar thus understood the need for legitimizing his rule, but also understood what a monumental task it was – given the antecedents of Muslim rule on the subcontinent – to make it acceptable to the Hindu majority to become willing subjects of the Mughal Empire.

Akbar began the task of establishing the legitimacy of Mughal rule by freeing himself from existing methods of kingship. In doing so, he chose a course of action that took him away from the Muslim standard practice for rule, but retained his Muslim beliefs and synthesized Islamic political philosophy and practice with its Hindu counterpart, a path smoothed by the syncretic ruling style that was a part of his Mongol heritage. To separate himself from the failed past standards of Muslim rule, Akbar waged war against the *mullahs* (experts in Muslim religious matters) for control over social and political policy in his empire. Akbar's drive to establish his full control over the *mullahs* demonstrates clearly that one of his objectives was to create a multi-cultural state by incorporating Hindus into all levels of government, as opposed to an orthodox *mullah* government which imposed their version of orthodox Islamic polity and their personal opinions onto all of the subjects. His efforts include the rewards given out to tax collectors in a manner winning support from the Hindu masses while reassuring the Mughal elite of the sultan's good will with a guarantee of stability.

Akbar served both ends by re-positioning longstanding court rituals and pre-existing Muslim conceptions of the ruler, manufacturing a personal relationship with each *mansabdar* (rank holder), and employing a generous policy of incorporating into his imperial administration Hindu chieftains who had previously been engaged in a military coercive relationship with prior Muslim rulers, without alienating the latter. Finally, Akbar sought to end this inefficient military coercive method of tax revenue and to establish a system in which all officials were willing participants in the new Mughal administration.

II. The New Vision of the Ruler of Hindustan

Akbar's youth was grounded in the realities of life because it was mostly spent in exile; not having been raised in an imperial bubble allowed him to empathize with the hardships of the common man. Akbar was born during a time of political unrest in the subcontinent, which had a lasting effect on him. His father, Humayun (r. 1530-1556), was expelled from Hindustan by competing Turks, the Surs, and was forced into exile. Living in exile and witnessing his father's troubles greatly influenced Akbar's concept of ideal rule in Hindustan. He understood the importance of a dynasty with a sustained ruling house over all the land. Akbar had witnessed the result of Humayun's fall from the throne and his vision of rule was driven by his goal of how not to lose it again once it had been reclaimed by the Mughals.

To establish his new vision for the rule of Hindustan, Akbar had to deviate from existing ruling standards in order for his legislative policies and administrative reforms to be implemented as envisioned. He first had to break from some of the traditional responsibilities and privileges of a Muslim ruler, so that he could have full reign over his

empire. Islamic law delegates the responsibilities and privileges of the monarch as the ruler of the land, the right to preserve order for all people on that land regardless of religion, to conquer in the name of Islam, the protection of Islamic standards, and to rule according to the *Shari'ah* (Islamic law) as interpreted by the *mullahs* and based on *fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence).

Akbar's interpretation of law included actions that drew their support from the Hindu population and deviating from the Muslim belief in the protection of Islamic standards. One such action was the abolition of the *jizya*, the capitation tax paid by non-Muslims as protected people of the Mughal state. The *jizya* was a symbol of inferiority because it had been a formal law establishing Muslims as the ruling people and Hindus as second class subjects through taxation.² Abu'l Fazl places this imperial decree in 1564, which was quite some time before his arrival in court. Most historians have agreed upon this date, but it has come to be contested. Douglas Streusand places the decree in 1579, citing that the conditions in 1564 do not match the statement because Akbar had only begun his military campaigns to conquer the lands that would eventually become his empire.³ Also, the earlier date is seen as an attempt by Abu'l Fazl to undermine his family's influence on Akbar in order to show his patron's own inspiration and divine revelation.

The effects of rescinding the *jizya* were very important because it did away with a hierarchal society based on religious divisions and created a common class of subjects. Other changes made to the existing law helped to break down the social divide, such as the abolition of the pilgrimage tax, which solely applied to Hindus because it was part of

² Douglas E. Streusand, *The Formation of the Mughal Empire* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1989), 28.

³ Streusand, 114.

their faith to go on set pilgrimages in their lifetime. Akbar also allowed all forms of public prayer worship to take place, allowed non-Muslim temples and churches to be built or repaired, banned the slave trade, and allowed for open conversion to or from Islam, although he did outlaw forced conversions of slaves to Islam. He also prohibited the slaughter of animals on certain days which aided in his quest to gain the consent of the Hindu majority.

Akbar ruled with a social and religious toleration that was relative, not absolute, and was based on his concept of *sulh-i-kull* (for the general good of all people) which built on his liberal views of religion. Akbar took the Sufi mystic notion of *sulh-i-kull* and transformed it to become a principle denoting amity within a culturally pluralistic India.⁴ Muhammad 'Abdu-l Baki, in his history of Akbar's reign, states: "Akbar extended toleration to all religions and creeds, and would recognize no difference between them, his object being to unite all men in a common bond of peace."⁵ *Sulh-i-kull* was to become his method for judging what was legally right or wrong within his empire and was created because Akbar understood that he was trying to build political institutions for a predominately non-Muslim society. Thus, in his empire, the beliefs and opinions of the orthodox *mullahs* were not to be the critical test for his rule because he wanted all of his subjects to be judged equally before the law.⁶

The culmination of Akbar's legal policy was reached in 1579, when, after seventeen years of rule, the *mahzar*, or "Infallibility Decree," was issued. It came with

⁴ Iqtidar Alam Khan, "Akbar's Personality Traits and World Outlook – A Critical Reappraisal" in *Akbar and His India*, ed. Irfan Habib, 88 (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997).

⁵ H.M. Elliot, *The History of India as Told by its Own Historians*. Ed. John Dowson. Vol. VI, *The Muhammadan Period*. (London: Trubner and Co., 1875) 242.

⁶ John F. Richards, "The Mughal Empire" in *The Magnificent Mughals*, ed. Zeenut Ziad, 7 (Karachi, Pakistan: Oxford University Press, 2002).

much criticism from orthodox *mullahs* in court because Akbar proclaimed himself to be the interpreter of law and no longer desired for the *mullahs* to interpret and design the law. Through his conflict with the *mullahs* he freed himself from the confines of traditional Muslim rule that was dictated by *Shari'ah* as interpreted by the *mullahs*, leading historians like Sri Ram Sharma to conclude: "Akbar's greatest achievement lay in liberating the state from its domination by the *mullahs*."⁷ This rule free from *mullah* control meant that everyone in the empire, from the sultan to the subjects, had a social freedom never experienced before under Muslim rule in Hindustan. Literally, the *mahzar* designated Akbar as "one capable of individual legal reasoning, a just ruler, the ruler of Islam, commander of the faithful, and the shadow of God over the two worlds."⁸

A common misinterpretation of the *mahzar* was that it was an official edict by Akbar proclaiming himself to be infallible. Thus, the decree has commonly been mislabeled as the "Infallibility Decree." However, the *mahzar* was not solely a despotic move to obtain ultimate power, but heavily drew upon Akbar's liberal religious views, which in turn affected his views on social leadership. By issuing the *mahzar* Akbar was not claiming to be infallible, but was claiming that when the religious divines disagreed he would become the judge and not the *mullahs*.⁹ The orthodox *mullah* historian Badayuni states: "The object of this declaration was to establish the complete superiority of the *Imam-i 'adil* (just leader) over the *Mujtahid* (chief lawyer); and to make his judgment and choice on diverse questions, so that no one could reject (his) command in

⁷ Sri Ram Sharma, *The Religious Policy of the Mughals*. (London: Asia Publishing House, 1940). 36.

⁸ Streusand, 115.

⁹ Sharma, 50.

either religious or political matters."¹⁰ In this way Akbar was proclaiming himself to be the *Mujtahid* of Hindustan in order for his vision of *sulh-i-kull* as a social policy to prosper. In effect, the decree only took away the right of orthodox *mullahs* to persecute others for their opinions.¹¹ This meant that he no longer relied on the Muslim population in his empire for support; the indigenous Hindus now began to be recognized as part of the population and not just a source of revenue or exploitation. Sri Ram Sharma refers to Akbar's rule as "a despotism that left a wide margin to its citizens' choice."¹²

This decree proclaiming Akbar as the ruler of Islam, and not the current *Khalifah* over the Islamic world, upset many orthodox *mullahs* in his court. Still, it was not unique in the thought or actions of his Mughal lineage. Since the defeat of the Ottoman sultan in Baghdad in 1258, a puppet *Khalifah* had been established in Egypt, and subsequently in the subcontinent. The *khutba* had been read in the same puppet *Khalifah's* name ever since.¹³ Although not much importance was given to it, reading the *khutba* in the name of the same *Khalifah* did establish legitimacy to the rest of the Islamic world of the Indian Sultanate's rule because they were conquering in the his name. This included the two Mughal rulers prior to Akbar, Babur and Humayun, who did not attach any importance to the *khutba* being read in their courts giving reverence to the Ottoman Sultan.¹⁴ By Akbar's move away from this 300-year-old tradition, he was proclaiming a new era of dynastic rule in the subcontinent. Because the *khutba* proclaims the political allegiance

¹⁰ H.M. Elliot, *The History of India as Told by its Own Historians*. Ed. John Dowson. Vol. V, *The Muhammadan Period* (London: Trubner and Co., 1875), 531-2.

¹¹ Sharma, 51.

¹² *Ibid*, 223.

¹³ The *khutba* is the prayer recitation done throughout the Muslim world on Fridays, and is read in the name of the *Khalifah* of the Islamic World, and in the name of the ruling monarch of the region which it is read. However, there is currently no *Khalifah* of the Islamic World.

¹⁴ Ram Prasad Tripathi, "The Turko-Mongol Theory of Kingship" in *The Mughal State 1526-1750*, ed. Muzaffar Alam and Sanjay Subrahmanyam, 125 (New Delhi: Oxford, 1998).

of the region in which it is read, this action meant that Akbar was establishing the Mughal Empire's legitimacy to the rest of the Islamic world as the just rulers of the Indian subcontinent.

Many of Akbar's actions to establish a new method for kingship in the Indian subcontinent were influenced by the beliefs on kingship of his Mongol lineage. From his ancestor Ghengiz Khan (r.1206-1227), he received a theory of kingship whereby the king possessed a divine mandate to rule and answered to no other superior. This meant that the Mongol sovereign should rule by centralizing power and not by distributing it. The Mongol indifference to their subjects' religion is also reflected in Akbar's actions. He can be seen as continuing the method of rule that allowed for all faiths to be worshipped in their empires. The subordination of subjects and not the dictation of social policy, such as religion, was the Mongol ruler's primary goal. With the culturally pluralistic Turk, Timur Gurgan of Samarkand (r. 1370-1405), came the addition of Islam to the Mongol theory of kingship, but it did not come to dictate how he should rule. He successfully explained the sultan's supreme status within the confines of Islam by stating "since God is one and hath no partner, therefore, the vice-regent (sultan) over the land of the Lord must be one."¹⁵ He believed that both religious law and kingship came directly from God and as such the sultan was only accountable to God. Timur's concepts on kingship meant that since the right to rule came from God, then all actions, whether done in the name of Islam or not, were justified by the sultan's Divine judgment.

Babur (r. 1526-1530) continued the theory of the Timurid doctrine by invading the Indian subcontinent and establishing the Mughal Empire in 1526. Babur believed strongly in his Mongol tradition of having the divine mandate to rule and also in the

¹⁵ Tripathi, 116.

Muslim methods for rule. When he invaded Hindustan, he was surprised to discover the Bengali custom whereby any person who could kill the ruler and usurp the throne would receive homage from officials and the subjects.¹⁶ Babur, just as Timur and Ghengiz Khan, did not believe in the division of authority within the empire. This belief in centralized authority also influenced Akbar's method for rule in his empire. Humayun's other-worldly pursuits led him to make a mystical addition to the Timurid doctrine: "He believed that just as the sun was the center of the material world, similarly the sultan, whose destiny was closely associated with that great luminary, was the center of the human world."¹⁷

Akbar's new Mughal doctrine of kingship was further developed through the combination of Akbar's actions that influenced Abu'l Fazl's writings of his reign. Akbar's Mughal doctrine maintained the prior belief in the divine mandate to rule, but changed the Timurid doctrinal stance on conforming to Islamic standards. Akbar furthered the existing Muslim theory that the sultan was the shadow of God on earth by claiming on the one hand that his mandate was from God to rule, and on the other that he had a sovereign nature that emanated from God.¹⁸ This two-fold doctrine of kingship elevated Akbar above all people and gave more legitimacy to the Mughal lineage as eternally sovereign because he succeeded in making the Mughal sultan recognizable to all in the empire.

Akbar's Mughal doctrine of rule was justified to his subjects through his actions inspired by his religious beliefs. Early on in his life he was very inquisitive about his own faith as well as that of others and wanted an understanding of the religious doctrine

¹⁶ Ibid, 119.

¹⁷ Ibid, 122.

¹⁸ Streusand, 152.

because he could not accept blind faith. His early inquisitiveness was shown through his practice of not only allowing his Hindu wives and the Hindus in his harem to perform Hindu fire rites in the palace, but by also taking part in them.¹⁹ Prior to this exposure, Akbar had religious influences from his turbulent early life which gave him exposure to thoughts and beliefs that many young orthodox Sunni Muslims did not have. One influence came during his life in exile from his father's political friendship with the Shi'a majority empire of Persia. Humayun eventually won back his throne with the help of these Shi'as, and took on some Shi'as as imperial officials.²⁰ Bayram Khan was another Shi'a influence on Akbar as his regent during his first years of rule. Khan did not impose his religion on the imperial court, but did introduce more Shi'as to the court. These examples of Humayun and Bayram Khan demonstrate that Akbar was not the first of the Mughals to introduce people of other faiths to the imperial court. Nor was he the first to synthesize Muslim Sunni, Shi'a, and Sufi beliefs.

Influence from other faiths led to Akbar's eventual beliefs in mysticism and, in turn, Sufism. He was especially intrigued with the *Chishtiyah* order in India, including Shaikh Salim Chishti, who aided Akbar in conceiving his first son Salim (later Jahangir), and Shaikh Mubarak Nagawri. A momentous change in the development of Akbar's worldview occurred when he came under the influence of Sufi doctrines beginning around 1571.²¹ His drastically different outlook on Islam turned away from orthopraxy and towards the overcoming of worldly desires and urges while still preserving the fundamental doctrines. One influential aspect of the Sufi doctrine on Akbar was the belief in the transcendent unity of religions while understanding the unique distinctions of

¹⁹ H.M. Elliot, Vol. V, 530.

²⁰ Sharma, 33

²¹ Alam Khan, 86.

each religion. His mystic religious beliefs fused well with his belief of equality and his law policy of *sulh-i-kull*.

Many of Akbar's religious pursuits were borne out of his belief that "the Truth was an inhabitant of every place."²² To satisfy his inquisitive mind, Akbar would invite theologians from other religions and practices to come and stay at his palace and teach him the doctrines of their respective beliefs. This included Hindu Brahmans, Jains from Bikaner, Portuguese priests from Goa, and Zoroastrians. Of these, the Zoroastrian priests, who would come to reveal the mysteries of fire and of the sun, had the most effect on Akbar. In 1583, Akbar rejected many orthodox Muslim rituals, such as public prayer, and began to publicly worship the sun four times a day instead.²³

The exact origins and direct influences on Akbar's turn to worship of the sun are arguable, but most agree that it was a concoction of his fertile intellect. Abu'l Fazl offers a short justification of the sun being divine because every flame is derived from the divine light and the fire of the sun is the torch of God's sovereignty.²⁴ However, Abu'l Fazl's primary argument to legitimize the sultan's sun worship is through the *Akbarnama's* explanation of the dynastic transmission of the hidden Divine light. This light was transmitted through fifty-two generations of Akbar's lineage and meant that the sultan possessing it was the closest living person to God. Babur possessed the Divine illumination, and his conquest of the heart of Hindustan with the minimal army of only 13,000 was proof of "divine aid."²⁵ Although Humayun's short-lived rule was plagued by

²² Sharma, 36.

²³ J.F. Richards, "The Formulation of Imperial Authority under Akbar and Jahangir," in *Kingship and Authority in South Asia*, ed. J.F. Richards, 306 (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998).

²⁴ Streusand, 136.

²⁵ Abu'l Fazl, "Akbnama," Vol. I, 243-244.

political failures and an early death, he received the Divine light as well and then passed it to the sultan of sultans, Akbar.

In his quest to legitimize his rule to the Hindu majority, many orthodox *mullahs* at the imperial court viewed Akbar as having denounced Allah and his move towards sun prostration as apostasy. However, Sri Ram Sharma claims that Akbar did not worship the sun as a god, but thought it was the most powerful manifestation of God, which shows that Akbar remained a Muslim.²⁶ Akbar still believed in the worship and supremacy of Allah, but did not agree with the judgment of orthodox leaders or the orthopraxy of Islam. On one occasion, to discover which doctrine, Christian or Muslim, was superior Akbar suggested a test to prove which of the two laws was superior. He suggested that "the Fathers and the *mullahs*, the former holding their holy scriptures, and the latter their Qur'an, should enter a fire together, and those who were not burnt should be regarded as the possessors of the true law."²⁷ Neither the *mullahs* nor the priests followed through with the request, citing that they did not need to be presumptuous and tempt God. This led Akbar to conclude: "Man's outward profession and the mere letter of Islam, without a heartfelt conviction, can avail nothing."²⁸ This event provides insight into how *mullah* orthodoxy had failed Akbar's inquisitive nature because it showed that these men who claimed to be superior would not actually apply their beliefs. Akbar states: "I have forced many Brahmans to adopt the religion of my ancestors; but now that my mind has been enlightened with beams of truth, I have become convinced that the mist of self-

²⁶ Sharma, 59.

²⁷ Father Pierre de Juric, S.J., *Akbar and the Jesuits*, (New York and London: Harper and Bros., 1926) 30. Abu'l Fazl in the *Akbarnama* (Vol. III, p.215) provides an account of this event, but states that the Padres suggested the demonstration to the *mullahs* in Akbar's court and that they declined.

²⁸ H.M. Elliot, Vol. VI, 60.

opinion has gathered round you and not a step can be made without the torch of proof."²⁹ These words mark the turning point of Akbar's move away from rule as a strict Muslim sultan and to a multi-cultural Muslim leader.

Akbar's lasting belief in Islam is also apparent through his repeated actions as sultan that supported his monotheistic belief in Allah and showed that he always considered himself to be a Muslim, regardless of others' opinions.³⁰ Evidence of his monotheistic belief is the many times throughout his life that he would test the Divine Will by deliberately tempting death. Akbar offers an explanation for his actions, stating that if we have displeased God in any way, "may the elephant finish us, for we cannot support the burden of life under God's displeasure."³¹ Those people opposing Akbar's religious views pointed out that his move to understand other religions, combined with his sun worship, were revolutionary actions that demarcate his move away from Islam. Yet, Akbar's inquisitiveness and unorthodox Muslim thought were not unique to his lineage. He was not the first Mughal to recognize the spiritual importance of the sun. Humayun's mystic beliefs and faith in astrology led him to first synthesize the idea of the sun with the Divine light of God.

Akbar's religious beliefs reached their culmination with the development of his own interpretation for religion, the *Din-i-Ilahi*, which literally means "divine faith" or "religion of God." No official or subject was forced to convert and discipleship predominately remained inside the palace walls. The basic premises to accept the sultan's faith were that each disciple must repudiate the bonds of orthodox Islam and give reverence to Allah directly. This meant that followers of his religion were to no longer

²⁹ H.M. Elliot, Vol. VI, 60-61.

³⁰ Sharma, 59.

³¹ *Akbarnama*, II, 152 – in *Akbar and his India*, p.83.

be considered as Hindu or Muslim, but solely as a disciple of Akbar. The disciple must swear to be willing to sacrifice life, property, religion, and honor in the service of the Master (Akbar).³² Thus, the function of the *Din-i Ilahi* was a system of loyal discipleship rather than a new religion.

The *Din-i-Ilahi* was Akbar's ultimate bureaucratic tool in his quest for legitimization. It created a loyal inner circle directly under his command. The new disciples swore to sacrifice life, property, religion and honor in the service of Akbar. Conversion to the religion was voluntary and open to everyone, although it was not publicized outside the palace. The exact number of converts cannot be determined, but it is known that many of Akbar's close friends and imperial officials did convert. This does not mean that Akbar required all imperial officials to become disciples and accept him as their spiritual guide. On one occasion, Akbar questioned Rajah Man Singh, a Rajput Hindu and one of his most trusted officials, about becoming a disciple and Singh answered that "if discipleship means sacrifice, I have already done so: what need is there of any other proof? But if the term has another meaning and refers to faith, I know no other ways than Hindu and Muslim."³³ This event shows that Akbar did not require his imperial officials to accept his spiritual leadership; rather his main objective was to gain the undying loyalty of his highest officials.

In the above context, Akbar's religious beliefs and pursuits should be seen as personal ideas that he wanted to develop for his own welfare as well as the general welfare of the empire, with the latent motive of aiding in the establishment of the Mughal supremacy over his subjects. His progressive religious views synthesized well with

³² Richards, "The Formulation of Imperial Authority Under Akbar and Jahangir," 307.

³³ Streusand, 149.

Hindu tradition and aided in his goal of legitimizing his rule to Hindus. Concurrently, Akbar's religious views were close enough to Islamic doctrine for dissenters to only speculate whether he had abandoned Islam or not. By always walking a middle ground with his religious beliefs and practices, Akbar was able to win over much of the Non-Muslim population while sustaining sufficient, although at times waning, Muslim support.

III. The Imperial Court

Akbar had in place a policy of incorporating his opponents into his imperial administration by treating them generously and providing them with lives much better than their previous ones as autonomous warriors. He would offer new opportunities for imperial service to many of the defeated nobles, their kinsmen, and most other pre-existing state positions.³⁴ The newly incorporated officials would become *zamindars* (local level land-holders), and some would even be promoted to high-ranking *mansabdars* (imperial rank holders). The importance of Akbar's incorporation policy was that the sultan did not have the concern of implementing imperial policy at the village level, which allowed him to direct all his energy towards the expansion and legitimization of his rule throughout the whole of the empire. Incorporation also symbolized his former opponents' status as willing subjects to Mughal superiority that recognized the Mughal Empire's legitimacy.

Once he had incorporated his opposition into the imperial administration, Akbar had to develop a way to maintain their loyalty to him and the Mughal Empire. He needed to create a lucrative system that the people whom he was conquering would find appealing so that they would want not only be a part of it, but also to uphold it. To do

³⁴ Richards, "The Mughal Empire," 10.

this, Akbar developed an elaborate system of daily, unchanging ritual that created a lasting sense of legitimacy by incorporating many methods allowing subordinates to easily recognize the sovereign. Ritual was a tool to overcome many of the pre-existing loyalties of Hindu chiefs and prior Indo-Muslim rulers that had been incorporated into the empire by making them become a physical extension of Akbar. F.W. Buckler states: "The sultan stands for a system of rule of which he is the incarnation, incorporating into his own body by means of symbolized acts, the person of those who share his rule. They are regarded as being parts of his body...and in their district or their sphere of activity they are the sultan himself."³⁵ This means that Akbar ruled a theater state because the person who was the Mughal sultan was irrelevant. What mattered to the dynasty was that the local officials identified themselves with the position of the Mughal sultan, both physically and symbolically.

The most important aspect of ritual was the show of power. All proceedings were conducted in an elaborate and repetitive manner for the purpose of placing overwhelming reverence in Akbar's subjects and, more importantly, in the imperial officials. Akbar made the important addition of many aspects of ritual from the Hindu style of kingship which made the Mughal sultan legitimately recognizable to all in the empire, both Hindu and Muslim. This included such rituals as the *jharuka darshan* (visits to the balcony each morning to show himself to the general public gathered below), *Tuladan* (which entailed the sultan being weighed on auspicious occasions and that weight in gifts being given to

³⁵ F.W. Buckler, quoted in Streusand, 130.

the needy)³⁶ and his style of *darbar* (visits to the *Diwan-i 'Am*, the Hall of Public Audience).³⁷

More importantly, the ritual show of power was a regular affirmation of the stability of the empire, whether it was from a palace balcony or an imperial encampment on the move. Because of the vast system of imperial officials and the trade that began to boom from the land revenue system, news of the sultan or empire in distress would spread rapidly. Also, many of these officials were formerly autonomous and would jump at the chance to regain their former status. Thus, Akbar needed to constantly show the success of the empire in order to prevent any malicious news from spreading to regional officials. This ritual relationship between Akbar and his officials and subjects was the essence of the Mughal Empire, a position that was precarious at its best and required the balance and skill of a tightrope performer to maintain. Douglas Streusand states that "the Mughal Empire existed as long as regional power holders defined themselves as Mughal ambassadors."³⁸

Most of the daily ritual interaction between Akbar and his officials occurred during the *darbars*. At the *Diwan-i 'Am*, the unchanging daily system of rituals reaffirmed the sultan's personal relationship to each official, while also reaffirming his authority over the empire. *Mansabdars* were an essential part of the Mughal court. In theory, all of these ranking officials were to serve for one month at the imperial court, so all could experience the grandeur of Akbar's court and learn the proper court etiquette. While at court, they were required to perform guard duty at least once a week and to

³⁶ Sharma, 48.

³⁷ Streusand, 136.

³⁸ Streusand, 172.

perform in all court rituals.³⁹ When the *mansabdars* were not at court, the reciprocal exchange of gifts still occurred regularly by way of imperial messengers. When *mansabdars* received robes and promotions, they would prostrate to the imperial decree and the messenger who brought it as though they were the Akbar himself.⁴⁰

The daily process of imperial ritual experienced in attending Akbar's court meant that *mansabdars* were assigned roles, both passive and active, in a wide range of ceremonies. These actions included all officials standing, disarmed and alone with no attendants, in rows based on rank during court proceedings. Standing by rank served the purpose of reminding all officials, many of whom were previously autonomous chieftains, of their new inferior status within the empire. By being stripped of their guards and weapons they were reminded of their own weakness without the protection of the sultan, as well.

The most important and elaborate ritual was the reciprocal exchange of gifts, which symbolized the close personal tie between the sultan and the *mansabdars*.⁴¹ The gifts transformed the officials into extensions of Akbar's body and provided external marks of their status.⁴² The different levels of gifts exchanged were indicators of each official's status in the empire. Higher status in society became synonymous with deep prostration to the sultan; the deeper the prostration, the higher the status. This meant that the greater the present given to Akbar, then the higher the rank of the giver. Those officials who did not give the right amount or those who did not send anything at all were

³⁹ Ibid, 145.

⁴⁰ Ibid, 143.

⁴¹ Richards, "The Mughal Empire," 13.

⁴² Streusand, 152.

punished, for “failure to send it [the present] meant disruption of the relationship which the gift exchange stated.”⁴³

Nazr denoted the highest level of gift exchange, usually gold coins, and was only for the highest officials. In return for the gifts he gave, a high officer or a prince serving as a provincial governor might receive a more elaborate robe, jeweled weapons, and jeweled animals such as a pair of breeding elephants or horses. *Pishkash* was for lower officials, and denoted most other gifts given to the sultan. No standard existed of what items to give for a *pishkash*; ultimately, the sultan cared only for the fact that a gift was given and the ceremonial gesture was made. *Pishkash* included plunder gained by officials from battle because, as the *mansabdars* were Akbar's men, all wealth taken in campaigns was his, not theirs.⁴⁴ This mode of gift-giving was important because it demonstrated both the political inferiority of the officials and the military superiority of the sultan. When *mansabdars* were on campaign, it was for the good of the empire rather than for individual gain.

Of the gifts exchanged, the most important and most common was a *khilat* (robe of honor) given by Akbar to an official. In this particular gift-giving ceremony, the robe was first placed on the sultan's shoulder and then draped over the recipient. This process symbolized the master incorporating his servant's body into his own and served as a visible sign to all others of the receiver's status and loyalty to Akbar. In the Mughal Empire, the clothes made the men because the clothes were external markers of ritualized political status.

⁴³ Ibid, 144.

⁴⁴ Ibid, 144.

Akbar began another ritual that was associated with, though not exclusively for, the *Din-i Ilahi*. The ritual entailed issuing a tiny portrait of Akbar, meant to be worn on the turban, to disciples of his faith and to trusted imperial officials.⁴⁵ With this portrait in place, lesser officials and subjects were forced to think of the effulgence of the sultan when they looked upon people of higher rank. More importantly, these visual signifiers of a robe or portrait on a turban symbolized the officials' loyal incorporation into the empire. When a former Hindu chieftain wore these Mughal symbols, he showed his loyalty to Akbar. The practice quelled other Hindus from possible dissention, such as rebellion, since they could visibly understand the Mughal sultan's legitimate supremacy over Hindus, as well.

Akbar employed a lucrative policy of incorporation for defeated, formerly autonomous opponents. This incorporation brought them into the Empire, but did not legitimize Mughal rule to them. A powerful tool in Akbar's quest to legitimize his rule was the incorporation of rituals drawn from pre-existing Hindu methods for kingship, which strengthened his relationship with the former Hindu chieftains. Through the unchanging daily ritual interaction between Akbar and his *mansabs* in court, Akbar was able to solidify his hold over the empire while assuring all of his subjects of the empire's welfare. Thus, imperial ritual was an administrative tool which formed the "cohesive glue" to allow the codependent *mansabdari* and land revenue systems to operate without fail. The *mansabs* symbolically became visual signifiers of Akbar throughout the empire, serving the larger purpose of affirming the effulgence of the empire to all of its subjects.

IV. The Land Revenue System

⁴⁵ Richards, "The Formulation of Imperial Authority under Akbar and Jahangir," 307.

At the time Akbar ascended the throne as ruler of the Mughal Empire, he inherited a land revenue system that did not have great influence upon the local economy. He did, however, understand the abilities of the land revenue system begun by prior Indo-Muslim regimes, such as the ruler Sher Shah Sur. Rather than try to create a new revenue system, Akbar employed the help of his advisers to reform this one.⁴⁶ Akbar's fiscal reforms had the administrative purpose of stabilizing the village-level peasant population while consolidating regional rule directly under his command. It was imperative that Akbar create a land revenue system and administration that gave the appearance of a cohesive central government in order for all of his subjects to unquestionably view Akbar and the Mughals as legitimate rulers. Here, Akbar's policies show how important Akbar considered support from all classes of the population—not just from the ruling class—in order to legitimize his rule within the empire. The reformations of the land revenue system included reorganizing all of the Mughals' land and correcting the inherent corruption of the system.

Akbar began by reclassifying all land holdings into five categories based on the fertility of the soil. Under the new regulation land tax system, imperial revenue officials, theoretically, gathered reports on the status of the cultivation of each peasant in each village. From the reports, they assessed taxes based on the recorded prices and yields specific to each locality. In 1580, Akbar and his advisers succeeded in the reorganization of the empire on the provincial level of the tax revenue system with the establishment of twelve provinces.⁴⁷ Each province, by imperial decree, was to have its own

⁴⁶ G.B. Malleson, *Rulers of India: Akbar*, (Oxford, 1899) 185. The system had existed under the prior Muslim ruler Sher Shah Sur, the details of which are not given by any of the sources I read which led me to refrain from an analysis of Akbar's reforms to the existing system.

⁴⁷ Streusand, 113.

administration, consisting of seven posts who were both functionaries of the province and people who reported to the central administration, as well. The governors had military control over the region, but not administrative free reign. Through this division between civil and military authority, Akbar had begun to restrict the autonomy of the provincial governors.

Another reform, one which shocked the upper rung of the Muslim hierarchy, was the re-examination of all religious land grants. Akbar analyzed each grant and reassessed them personally. For these reexaminations, Akbar arranged private interviews with the *shaikhs* and *ulemas* (leaders of Sufi brotherhoods and scholars) to decide whether each land grant was valid. He upheld the validity of many land grants if he was satisfied, but those religious leaders who had disciples, held spiritual soirees, or claimed to have accomplished miracles were punished by a withdrawal of their grants.⁴⁸ The reassessment of all land grants shows that Akbar wanted to establish from the beginning of his rule the idea that he kept close watch over the religious Muslim authorities, the *shaikhs* and *ulemas*. Akbar's control of the Muslim officials demonstrates the sultan's commitment to establishing Mughal legitimacy in Hindustan and to separating himself from the corrupt, dysfunctional elements of a Muslim-run empire.

The greatest improvement to the administration and land revenue system was the development of the *mansabdari* system, which created a hierarchy of officials, all of whom were exclusively loyal to the sultan. This new system for administration was meritocratic and not based on a religious aristocracy. Previously, the Muslims in India formed the governing class from which all high officials were drawn. However, Akbar

⁴⁸ Iqbal Husain, "Akbar's Farmans – A Study in Diplomatic," in *Akbar and His India*, ed. Irfan Habib, 75 (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997).

ended Muslim superiority in his empire by choosing men on merit, rather than on the basis of kinship, religion, or nepotism, including many very able non-Muslims.⁴⁹ The inclusion of Hindus into high posts of the administration was a form of tokenism. Their elevated stature would allow other Hindus who came to court to recognize Akbar's superiority, as Hindus would already be standing near him. It also expressed to every person that the Mughal Empire was not subject to a harsh, fundamentalist Muslim rule, but was subject to the goal of the equality of all of its subjects.

The hierarchal system of imperial rank existed in Akbar's Mughal lineage, but he viewed it as inefficient for his ideal administration. Babur was the first to bring this Mongol system to the Indian subcontinent. With the exception of the numerical rank, his system had a division between high officials, labeled "great Begs", and lower officials, "Begs."⁵⁰ All of Babur's officials were members of a regular service, which had formal appointments and promotions, as well. Mirroring the formality of the regular service system before him, Akbar's *mansabdari* system also sought to distinguish levels between rank holders. Akbar differed from Babur's system, however, as he was the first of his Mughal lineage to create the dual status of a separate civil and military rank for each rank holder.

Akbar introduced giving each *mansab* two rank numbers, which expanded the officials' responsibility to the empire into civilian duty. The first rank was the *zat*, the personal numerical rank given to middle and high officials which determined their salary. The addition of the *zat* rank denoted numerically how that official stood in relation to the sultan. The higher the rank, the more important that official's relationship was to Akbar.

⁴⁹ Syed Giasuddin Ahmed, "A Typological Study of the State Functionaries under the Mughals," *Asian Profile*, 10, no. 4 (1982): 339.

⁵⁰ Moreland, 220.

The second number, the *suwar*, was the numerical rank given to officials denoting the number of soldiers and cavalry the *mansab* was responsible for when called upon. *Suwar* was a "trooper rank" and was first introduced in Akbar's eleventh regnal year.⁵¹ This separation between civil and military ranks for each official, ranks that could be changed at Akbar's will, allowed him to maintain a civil hierarchy dependent exclusively on his will while concurrently maintaining the strength of the imperial army.

Akbar limited the power of his *mansabdars* by personally appointing each *mansabdar* and imposing his will over them through legislative procedure. Syed Giasuddin Ahmed states that "officials [in the *mansabdari* system] were bound to the ruler not through serfdom, but through a free and mutual contract."⁵² All officials were subject to dismissal or transfer to another region, for Akbar never wanted any official to gain too much loyalty or power in one particular region. This transfer was not without warrant because, in the provinces, the provincial governor was viewed as the incarnation of the sultan himself, and would gain allegiances in his region as such. Also, every *mansabdar*, theoretically, was chosen personally by Akbar, requiring an elaborate process by which each *mansab* had to be appointed twice. The reason behind Akbar's use of personal appointment was his belief that the imperial eye was sharp enough to discern the merits of every man. Abu'l Fazl states of Akbar that "his majesty sees through some men at the first glance, and confers upon them high rank."⁵³

The sultan did not allow for many officials to be trained in important administrative practices, such as fiscal matters, meaning that Akbar only allowed for a select few to have the knowledge of how the empire was run. The limited amount of

⁵¹ Moreland, 214.

⁵² Syed Giasuddin Ahmed, 342.

⁵³ Abu'l Fazl, *Ain-i Akbari*, I, 248?

specialization prevented officials from learning how to manipulate the system by knowing its intricacies. These restrictions were, in effect, one more method of checking the power of his officials. Closest to Akbar in the administration were only four primary ministers. The *Divan-i-Kul* was the head financial minister in charge of revenue and expenditure; the *Mir Bakhshi* was primarily responsible for military and the *mansabdari*; the *Khan-i-Zaman* was in charge of factories and stores and the imperial household; and the *Sadr-us-Sudar* was the chief justice heading ecclesiastic and judiciary matters.⁵⁴ The post of the *Vakil* (prime minister) remained unfilled through much of Akbar's reign; when it was filled, the post had very limited power.⁵⁵ Akbar allowed for the officers to act autonomously and check each other while in office, but he still retained the right to impose his will. The overlap of these high posts inherently regulated each office because none of the imperial officials could act without the aid of another office; nor could they act without the final approval of Akbar. For example, the *Sadr-us-Sudar* was the chief theologian in the state who, when in office, had the autonomous power of declaring legal *fatawi* (legal pronouncements). But Akbar appointed the *Sadr* and could dismiss him at any time.⁵⁶ Thus, the incumbent was kept in the predicament of being autonomous while having to make judgments according to the sultan's will.

Some officials received their salaries directly from the imperial treasury, but the majority received their salary by way of a decree (*jagir*). The *jagir* system of salary assignment was important because it was a convenient way for the central government to maintain the bureaucracy; or, in other words, the system “rid the central government of a fair measure of responsibility with regard to collection and disbursement without any

⁵⁴ Syed Giasuddin Ahmed, 335.

⁵⁵ Ibid, 335.

⁵⁶ Sharma, 223.

corresponding reduction in authority or increases in the revenue burden."⁵⁷ Under this system, local officials were paid through *jagirs*, the order to collect revenue from certain areas in lieu of a salary. Any official, regardless how high or low their rank, could receive a salary in this way, and those who were assigned a *jagir* were labeled *jagirdars*. To classify the central government's relationship to these regional officials in Marxist terms, the *jagirdar* "represented the despotic government suspended over the small community."⁵⁸ The region they were to collect from may or may not have been near their region of rule. In practice, however, *jagirdars* tended to obtain salary assignments within the provinces they were currently serving.⁵⁹

In Akbar's quest to establish Mughal legitimacy and his own legacy on the subcontinent, he had effectively created an imperial administration which inherently checked itself. Whether the ruler and his judgment were present or not, the Mughal administration would continue to run without major problems. Although the Mughal Empire began its decline with Akbar's successor and son, Jahangir, the *mansabdari* system lasted through British rule and into the mid-1800s.

The thousands of *zamindars* in the empire had a very important relationship with Akbar. The term *zamindar* was coined by the Mughals and referred to the "various holders of hereditary interests, ranging from powerful, independent, and autonomous chieftains to petty intermediaries at the village level."⁶⁰ *Zamindars* exercised tremendous power over the economic life of the country, including agricultural production,

⁵⁷ Tapan Raychaudhuri, "The Agrarian System of Mughal India: A Review Essay," in *The Mughal State 1526-1750*, ed. Muzaffar Alam and Sanjay Subrahmanyam, 268 (New Delhi: Oxford, 1998).

⁵⁸ Raychaudhuri, 275.

⁵⁹ Richards, "The Mughal Empire," 16.

⁶⁰ S. Nurul Hasan, "*Zamindars* under the Mughals," in *The Mughal State 1526-1750*, ed. Muzaffar Alam and Sanjay Subrahmanyam, 268 (New Delhi: Oxford, 1998).

handicrafts, and trade.⁶¹ They maintained the economy of the empire on the village level and collected revenue for either a *jagirdar* or, in certain cases, the imperial treasury.

Douglas Streusand has referred to Akbar's relationship to the village level of his empire as the "Akbari Compromise."⁶² Streusand's interpretation builds on the idea that Akbar wanted to run the empire with a focus on individual households, achieving this through central officials reporting directly to him on the status of the people. However, he quickly discovered the central administration could not penetrate into the village level due to the long existing regional system of rule backed by a loyal armed peasantry. Therefore, Akbar abandoned his dream of a fully centralized administration and entered into a compromise of keeping the regional rulers in similar positions as they were prior to his rule. Streusand claims that the compromise consisted of regional rulers who need not fear losing their position as long as they maintained the sultan's trust and did not abuse their authority by being disloyal to him.

Akbar inherited a hierarchal system of land revenue that had been developing since the establishment of the Sultanate in the twelfth century. In the land revenue system, the sultan's relationship to the chieftains depended on constant military coercion for tax revenue. This situation perpetuated a never ending power struggle between the state's efforts for a consolidation of power and the chieftains' desire for territorial autonomy. Akbar saw the inefficiency of the existing tax revenue system and sought to reform it in a way that would legitimize the state, ending the need for military coercion while continuing to demand from chieftains recognition of the central government's superiority, the obedient remit of tax revenue, and the rendering of military assistance.

⁶¹ Hasan, 284.

⁶² Streusand, 170-171.

Akbar made the system of regional control more effective because he developed a lucrative policy of incorporation for his opponents into the Mughal hierarchical administration. He was the first ruler to realize the importance of forging links between the position of the sultan and the chieftains by incorporating them into the imperial hierarchy of administration.⁶³ Akbar understood that military coercion was not the right method for consolidation. He obtained the empire's revenue through aggressive diplomacy designed to reduce the chieftains' status to intermediaries for the empire, for which they would receive just compensation. The first step in the reductive process was the introduction of the same generic term (*zamindar*) to refer to all of the holders of widely varying types of landed interests. In doing this, Akbar destroyed the pre-existing hierarchy on the local level, as all persons who were previously in that hierarchy were now equal in the community. From autonomous chieftains to village heads, all possessed the same rank in the view of the Mughal Empire.

Akbar did not hesitate to use force to establish his supremacy over some staunch opponents, although diplomacy was preferred. During the beginning of his rule, he would conquer his opponents by whatever means necessary, which included personally leading his army on campaigns of bloody battles and sometimes enduring long devastating sieges. The power of Akbar and his empire came from one important fact: he always won. Later in his rule, many opposing chieftains began to understand the extent of his power, receiving the positive benefits of his incorporation policy by conceding to him without much bloodshed. In Akbar's policy of incorporation, a chieftain's submission brought the possibility for advancement within the imperial bureaucracy.⁶⁴

⁶³ Hasan, 286.

⁶⁴ Streusand, 113.

The usual appointment of chieftains was to *mansabdars* who were allowed to rule their territory much in the same way as before.

The new treatment of the chieftains made them depend on Akbar's goodwill for their positions, as opposed to their prior hereditary rights. This dependency for their livelihood, combined with the Mughal-reserved right to transfer officials, meant that the sultan effectively had full control over the former chieftains' territory.⁶⁵ Akbar was the first foreign ruler of Hindustan to make a direct relationship with the vassals. Prior Indo-Muslim rulers only tried to control the various levels of chieftains, without attempting to penetrate deeper into the multi-layered agrarian system.⁶⁶ Akbar forged new relationships on the local level in an attempt to undermine the power of formerly autonomous chieftains and to form new allies who would act as imperial spies for the welfare of the state.⁶⁷

Akbar's actions on the village level demonstrate his concern for legitimizing the Mughal Empire to all of his subjects, not just to the bureaucracy. He created a system which ventured deep into the local sphere in order to discover how his policies were being implemented. His generous policy of incorporation left prior autonomous rulers with a comfortable position in the Mughal administration, allowing them to rule over their regions with few changes apart from slightly less power and a new allegiance. As long as they identified themselves as part of the Mughal Empire, prior chieftains were allowed to prosper along with it.

V. Conclusion

⁶⁵ Hasan, 287.

⁶⁶ Hasan, 286.

⁶⁷ Ibid, 288.

Prior to Akbar's ascension to the throne of Hindustan, Muslim sultans had been trying to establish their hold over the majority Hindu population for three-hundred years. Prior Muslim rulers had not been successful because they did not understand the importance of appealing to the Hindu majority, rather than trying to win the fierce Hindu warriors over by might. Akbar also had the advantage of being raised in exile and witnessing his father's political failures, which had a great influence on his quest to establish a lasting Mughal Empire. For Akbar's new vision for the ruler of Hindustan to be finalized, he first had to legitimize the Mughal state to the Hindus, as well as the competing Muslim factions, for the throne of Hindustan. Akbar's re-imagining of legislative policies and administrative reforms in the subcontinent should be viewed as tools to aid in fulfilling the larger objective of the legitimization of his rule, and more importantly, the Mughal Empire.

The tools Akbar employed to legitimize his rule included efforts to centralize all rule in the empire directly under him by reforming the legislative policy, administration, and the land revenue system. In the legal sphere, Akbar moved away from the Muslim custom of appealing to orthodox *mullah* judgment and towards his own amicable policy of *sulh-i-kull*. Under *sulh-i-kull*, both Muslim and Hindu were equal in the eyes of the law. The creation of *sulh-i-kull* included the abolition of many customary Muslim policies, such as the *jizya* and the pilgrim tax. Subjects of the new Mughal Empire were also free to convert to or from religions, as long as it was not a forced conversion. The culmination of Akbar's legal reform policy came with the 1579 *mahzar*, or "Infallibility Decree," which effectively established Akbar's freedom from orthodox *mullah* opinion as well as the creation of the legitimate Mughal Empire to the rest of the Islamic World.

For his imperial administration, Akbar created the efficient *mansabdari* system. Almost every imperial official from all levels of administration was included in this system, and his status determined his closeness to Akbar, as well as his position in society. The hierarchal *mansabdari* system was indiscriminate of religious affiliation and served the larger purpose of having all in the administration identify directly with the Mughal sultan for their status in the empire, not with a religious hierarchy. Most *mansabdars* were paid by the *jagir* system of salary assignment, in which *mansabdars* collected their own salary from specified regions. This self-generating tax revenue system was efficient for Akbar because he could focus more energy on expanding the empire rather than on running the land that was already incorporated.

Life-indoctrinating ritual interaction was the "cohesive glue" which held Akbar's administration together. In this system, higher prostration to the sultan became synonymous with higher status within the empire. Some rituals were incorporated from the Hindu style of kingship, which allowed for Hindus to easily recognize the sovereign. By drawing on Hindu methods, ritual served as an effective tool for overcoming pre-existing loyalties. Through the ritual interaction, Akbar's subordinates became a visible representative and reminder of the effulgence of the sultan throughout the empire.

Akbar's administration outlived his horribly inefficient successors, Jahangir, Shah Jahan, and Aurangzeb, who seemingly tried to destroy the system their brilliant forefather created. Jahangir and Shah Jahan allowed personal greed to overwhelm their rule and, by the end of the latter's reign, the imperial coffers were almost empty. Aurangzeb was the worst ruler who most damaged Akbar's system because he attempted to return the rule of Hindustan back to that of a fundamentalist Muslim vision,

where the empire was run by the *mullahs'* judgment. His vehement, yet futile, attempts to secure the status of Hindus as inferior people were no match for the legitimacy Akbar had created one hundred years earlier. Akbar was so successful at creating an efficient method for rule in Hindustan that even after the Mughal Empire's collapse, Mughal rule was still legitimate in the eyes of the peasants. During the War of 1857, after which the British government formally took control over the Indian subcontinent, a British officer killed off the sons of the last Mughal and exiled the current ruler to Burma, despite the fact that these Mughals possessed little to no actual power. This effort by the British to emasculate the Mughal line demonstrates the effectiveness of the Mughal Empire created by Akbar. The vile treatment given to the last of his lineal descendants, even though they were reduced to less than a shadow of their former power, mere figureheads, was necessary in part because the Great Mughal still retained enough of the aura of legitimate grandeur that Hindustan had once experienced under Muslim rule that the British felt compelled to humiliate them in order to establish their own right to rule. By the late nineteenth century, the British began to realize the magnitude of Akbar's achievement insofar as his rule appealed to both Hindu and Muslim, but by then it was too late. They had gone too far down the road of rule by force and fear, leaving the rule by divide to become the order of that day. As a result, the British found that their rule never acquired what Akbar had made central to Mughal society and without which no empire can long survive: legitimacy.

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