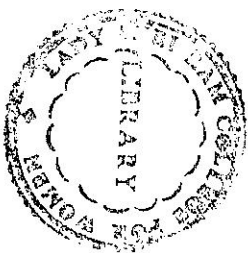


*Ideas and Society in India
from the Sixteenth to the
Eighteenth Centuries*

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It has already been mentioned elsewhere that the main posture of the political theory worked out by Abu-I-Fazl was the idea of divine sanction for all the innovations made by the 'true king'. If that was the only guiding principle, the whole concept would have led only to an Islamic theocracy. But according to Abu-I-Fazl and Akbar himself, this divine sanction was supposed to come not from Allah, but from the Absolute God who was common to all religions and was only worshipped under different names by different creeds. The religious and social aspects of Akbar's reforms will be discussed in the second chapter, but for the present study we must note that these reforms and Abu-I-Fazl's political ideas cannot be assessed properly without this most significant principle, that the 'true king' was blessed by Absolute God, for whom there were no 'believers' or 'unbelievers'. As Akbar said in a letter to Abbas, the Shah of Iran, 'It has been our disposition from the beginning not to pay attention to the differences of religion and to regard all the tribes of Mankind as God's servants. It must be considered that Divine Mercy attaches itself to every form of creed.'⁶² It can be concluded from this statement that Akbar regarded the king as the worldly and spiritual master of his subjects; as a protector and a supreme authority not only for Muslims, but all subjects, whatever their creed.

This was in complete opposition to a pivotal principle of Hindu, Muslim, as well as European political tradition, according to which the king was, first and foremost, the head and protector of a privileged community of his co-believers while all others could hope only for tolerance.

Akbar introduced reforms like the abolition of *jizya*, poll-tax from the non-Muslims which was economically burdensome and morally humiliating; a ban on forced conversions to any religion; the prohibition of temple destruction, a ban on cow slaughter etc. Moreover Hindu festivals began to be celebrated at the court. For all this Akbar incurred the wrath and condemnation of the orthodox Muslims, who openly accused him of heresy.⁶³ Akbar's religious reforms culminated in the *din-i-illahi* which is discussed below.

To sum up, the political theory on which Akbar's reforms were based had two new features: priority of worldly power over spiritual power, i.e. priority of the king's decisions which would

aim at universal peace and well-being, over the regulations of the holy law. Secondly, the ruler was seen as a leader and protector not only of the privileged community of co-believers, but of all his subjects, whatever their creed. So his judgement was considered to be above religious differences and dogmas. These principles became pivotal in the concept of the social structure outlined by Abu-I-Fazl.

The 'true king' was the centre of this system with *subhe-khalas* his main purpose. He had to govern society which, according to Abu-I-Fazl, was like an organism and consisted of four elements:

'Warriors who in the political body have the nature of fire. Their flames directed by understanding, consume the straw and rubbish of rebellion and strife but kindle also the lamp of rest in this world of disturbances. Artificers and merchants, who hold the place of air. From their labours and travels, God's gifts become universal, and the breeze of contentment nourishes the rose-tree of life. The learned, such as the philosopher, the physician, the arithmetician . . . , the astronomer, who resemble water. From their pen and their wisdom a river rises in the drought of the world, and the garden of creation receives from their irrigating powers a particular freshness. Husbandman and labourers, who may be compared to earth. By their exertions, the staple of life is brought to perfection, and strength and happiness flow from their work.'⁶⁴

Dr Clara Ashrafyan considers this document to be a model of social hierarchy. She observes that despite the caste system, the second place was allotted to craftsmen and merchants, and this signifies the latter's elevation in society due to the development of trade and industry.⁶⁵ We have interpreted Abu-I-Fazl's ideas differently. His model of social structure is not based on hierarchy at all. He constructed the scheme according to established ideas in the natural philosophy of that epoch. According to these ideas, each living body consisted of four equally significant elements: fire, air, water and earth. Such an equation of the natural and social structures was common to medieval thinkers elsewhere. Abu-I-Fazl might have numbered the elements in any order; so there was no hierarchical structure involved. The main stress was on the equal significance of the four elements, on the necessity of keeping them in harmony, since any imbalance would be harmful for the organism, similarly diseases were also supposed to be caused by imbalanced humours. Abu-I-Fazl was not egalitarian; he never meant that a warrior was equal to a peasant or a scholar to a

craftsman; he only suggested their equal significance for the state and its well-being.

And in the same manner that the equilibrium of the animal constitution depends on an equal mixture of the elements, so also does the political constitution become well tempered by a proper division of ranks; and by means of the warmth of the ray of unanimity and concord, a multitude of people become fused into one body.⁶⁵

This observation by Abu-l-Fazl provides a good picture of his social ideas as consisting of two contradictory positions: different social groups are not equal, but for the well-being of the state they are equally important; and the force which can unite them is the State based on the principles of *sulhe-kul*.

It is against this background that one has to view both Abu-l-Fazl's ideas and Akbar's reforms, one must also take into consideration the unavoidable difference between ideas and real practice. It was only natural that the reforms meant that the state interfered in spheres of life which had hitherto been the domain of caste, kin, guild and community. For this reason Akbar had to get rid of not only the 'intermediaries' between the king and God, but also the intermediaries between the king and the taxpaying population. Hence the attempt, though unsuccessful, to abolish the *jagir* system and to entrust tax collection not to the *jagirdars*, but to the centrally-appointed officials—*kurri*. Another important step in this direction was a change in the mode of tax and rent payment from kind to cash. The methods of land measurement and tax collection were to be determined not by the community or by the feudal lords, but by rules fixed by the government. For this a uniform system of weights and measures and uniform measuring instruments were introduced; statistical accounts of crops, fertility of land, corn prices, etc. were compiled. Accordingly, the country was divided into *subas*—provinces with a uniform system of administration. A system of ranks—*mansabs* was introduced for all officials so that a uniform pattern of promotion could be established.⁶⁷

A logical question that arises out of our study is: what kind of a state did Abu-l-Fazl suggest and Akbar put into practice? To find an answer, we have to remember the main feature of the state model (both Hindu and Muslim) before Akbar. At different junctures in their history, when vast empires were established and

quickly disintegrated, both 'Hindu' and 'Muslim' political theories suggested that a state was an amorphous unstable loosely knit body.

The history of many medieval societies in Europe is known to embrace three main stages: huge early feudal empires, then their disintegration; a long period of feudal anarchy and separatism of independent principalities, and their bloody rivalry; followed by the establishment of a strong centralized state. (This is only a general scheme, the historical reality was different in each particular country). On the first glance, India witnessed a similar process. After the disintegration of early feudal empires came a long period of feudal disunity which ended in the north by the establishment of the Delhi Sultanate and in the south by Vijayanagar and Bahmani kingdoms. But all these mighty states were not destined for long life and broke into smaller principalities which started to fight among themselves. Then started a new period of centralization with the establishment of the Mughal empire which, though much stronger than its predecessors, followed the same road to disintegration.

Can it be concluded that the establishment of the Delhi Sultanate and the Mughal empire was a process similar to the establishment of the centralized states in Europe? The answer would be in the affirmative if one views the centralized state only as an antonym of the disintegrated state. But by this formal criterion any early feudal empire can be called a centralized state, be it the empire of Carolus Magnus or the Golden Horde. If we look at the centralized state as an important stage in the development of the feudal state which precedes its last, absolutist form, the answer is not so easy.

It is well known that the centralized feudal states in different parts of the globe had many individual features and in each case the historical premises, ways and tempo of this process were different. In some cases aspirations for unity grew as a result of the development of the economy and market connections between different regions and principalities: feudal disunity, never-ending feuds and wars were hindrances to the growing market and developing trade. In other cases centripetal tendencies were stimulated by the growing feeling of ethnic and cultural unity or by some external threat, by the necessity to fight against foreign invaders, as it happened in Russia during the Mongol occupation.

a centralized state. Babur died four years after the invasion and his heir Humayun not only had to spend his whole life fighting against feudal separatism and political rivals, but to live for fifteen years in Afghanistan and Iran as a refugee. When Akbar ascended the throne, he had to resist feudal separatism, rivalry at court and bloody rebellions. Because of these reasons, he and some farsighted members of the ruling elite began thinking about the necessity of changing the very model and structure of the state. That in some fields of his reforms Akbar had predecessors like Sher Shah Suri or the Kashmiri ruler Zain ul-Abidin meant that there existed, though in a weak form, some tendencies for centripetal movement. But the main effort towards this was made by Akbar.

It is against this background that one has to view Abu-l-Fazl's ideas and Akbar's reforms. The conclusion of some scholars that the main object of Akbar's reforms was to establish a strong centralized state⁷³ appears to be true but needs further analysis. Firstly, the state which Akbar tried to establish was a significant step forward as compared to the earlier models of Indian statehood, Hindu and Muslim. In such a state, royal power governed by the ideas of *subhe-kul* would have rivals neither in the *jagiridars*, nor in the *ulamas*; there would be administrative borders between the provinces rather than political borders between semi-independent principalities. Such a state could have developed into an absolutist state which is an extreme form of a feudal set-up.

The idea of a strong centralized state was pivotal to Abu-l-Fazl's model. In this connection it is interesting to return to his model of the social structure of a state which was a harmony of four equally significant elements (warriors, traders/craftsmen, learned men, peasants/laboures).

This system had nothing in common with any earlier model of social structure followed by any religious community.⁷⁴ One also has to bear in mind that the caste system and caste values that existed in India were also adopted by the Muslims.⁷⁵ The religious heterogeneity of the Indian population would mean that any specific social group or category mentioned by Abu-l-Fazl would either be an abstract notion or connected with a profession rather than a religion. So, who did the social groups of a 'trader', a 'learned man' or a 'warrior' consist of? A trader could have been a Hindu, a Muslim, a Jain or a Parva. Similarly, a Rajput or a Chandal could become a warrior. The important question that we

must address is: why did Abu-l-Fazl, who had such a minute knowledge of the religious composition of Indian society, erase all religious differences while analyzing social groups in India?

We may suppose that such a scheme was a logical outcome of Abu-l-Fazl's model of the state. If it provided that the King was a ruler and protector of all his subjects, if he was the highest authority on religious questions, then he would not require intermediaries like *ulama* or *brahmins* to stand between him and his people. But the ideas of *subhe-kul* likewise demanded that the state should exercise its authority in the spheres hitherto controlled by caste, kin and community. The King would not have been able to ban child marriages or sati, to introduce new calendars weights and measures, to establish new school curriculum except by interfering in the inner life of different communities. It would have hardly been possible when the life of a person in a community was regulated by caste rules. This was the difference between Abu-l-Fazl's projects and their practical implementation: if Akbar had tried to press social reforms any further, he would have been confronted by resistance from traditional values and institutions.

One of the distinctive features of the Indian feudal society was the diffused and flexible character of its social structure. In any country's history, a high stage of social development is reached only when the main social divisions are formed. According to Prof. V.I. Pavlov, 'caste system not only was no substitute for the estates' structure, but was historically alien to it.'⁷⁶ One can hold different opinions about the caste system being totally alien to the system of estates which existed in other feudal societies. But it seems clear that the caste system, adopted in India by a considerable part of the population, was inimical to the development of social groups which would have distinctive attitudes to property, means of production, social status, etc. and, what is more important, common interests in economy, politics and culture. It may seem that when people are divided into innumerable castes, it is easier to govern and the state is politically more stable; but, as it was mentioned above, the state in such a case was bound to be autophans and loose. The strong centralized state projected by Abu-l-Fazl and its implementation by Akbar envisaged that the state model be based on a social structure different from the traditional one. Therefore Abu-l-Fazl's model of the state was

based not on castes but on social groups like estates in Europe or Russia.

In doing so Abu-l-Fazl did not deliberately follow a 'progressive' European model. The system of estates existed not only in Europe, but also in Japan, China, etc. He was too much of a realist to be simply an imitator in his projects; he was an Indian, he thought and acted like an Indian and had no intentions to change the very core of the Indian social structure. But the very logic of his model state brought him to the idea that a new type of state needed a new type of social structure.

It is noteworthy that Abu-l-Fazl's ideas worked towards the establishment of a strong centralized state. It is an interesting fact that in medieval Europe too, the stronger and mightier the centralized state grew, the closer it was to absolutist forms and lesser was the traditional 'freedom' of guilds and corporations.⁷⁷ If viewed in this light, Abu-l-Fazl's state can be regarded as a manifestation of some common tendencies in the development of the feudal state elsewhere.

In our final assessment, Akbar tried to establish in India a centralized state that was based on Abu-l-Fazl's ideas. In doing so he progressed a step further than his predecessors, both Hindu and Muslim. It is very difficult to compare ideas that developed in different countries and historical contexts. But some attitudes of Abu-l-Fazl and his king seem to be close to the ideas of some Italian thinkers of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, who also discussed the necessity of building a centralized state in Italy because it was torn apart by disunity and internal conflicts at that time. Abu-l-Fazl's ideas had much in common with the ideas of Janfrancesco Lottini (1512-1572). Much like his contemporary from India, this Italian thinker believed that outmoded laws, established by the forefathers should not guide the policies of the state, but that the law should be modified according to the necessities of time and needs of the state. The law, according to him, should not be considered as divine regulation, but should be formulated by the ruler whose main purpose should be the well-being of his people. Abu-l-Fazl would, seemingly, also agree with some aspects of Hobbes, according to whom, only absolute power was a moral and the state was to be the highest authority in the affairs of earth. Of course, Hobbes represented a different stage in the development of political thought: he regarded the divinity

of royal power which Abu-l-Fazl had made even stronger, than his early medieval predecessors. Nevertheless, one should bear in mind that the idea of the divinity of royal power was used by Abu-l-Fazl for the very practical purposes of enforcing the sovereign rights of the 'true king' to enable him to make changes in centuries-old tradition. These common features and ideas that Abu-l-Fazl shared with European thinkers who authored the political theory of a strong centralized state, show that similar perceptions about the feudal state were worked out by thinkers who belonged to different countries and traditions. In Abu-l-Fazl, India produced a thinker who was able to respond to the immediate problems of his times and contributed to the development of political thought in the sixteenth century.

'PUTTING THE CLOCK BACK'

Scholars and observers have made different assessments of the results achieved by Akbar's reforms. Some scholars are of the opinion that they were a 'dismal failure' because of Akbar's unsuccessful efforts to 'fuse both communities'. Others insist that Akbar, on the contrary, succeeded in creating a united 'national' state.⁷⁹ The latter position was summed up by Jawaharlal Nehru in his celebrated *Discovery of India*. 'Akbar's success is astonishing', said he; it became the cause of the flourishing of Mughal India till the very period when Aurangzeb, with his religious bigotry, 'put the clock back'.⁸⁰

Indeed, it is difficult to formulate a single categorical estimate of Akbar reforms. From one point of view, he really succeeded in strengthening the empire, in consolidating the social base of his power through his refusal to discriminate against the non-Muslims, abolition of *jizya*, and through his administrative and fiscal reforms. But on the other hand, Akbar failed to abolish or reform the *jagirdari* system; he could not insist on subordinating traditional institutions to the state otherwise mass protests would have followed from both Hindus and Muslims. One has to agree with Dr P.N. Chopra that 'Akbar's well-meant attempt . . . touched only a fringe of society, its even tenor continued undisturbed.'⁸¹

Akbar had a few supporters among the ruling elite. This was a relatively narrow circle of unorthodox 'feudal intelligentsia'