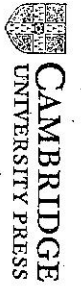


Domesticity and Power in the  
Early Mughal World

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Akbar, Gulbadan Bānu Begum's *Ahval-i Humayun Badshah* is crucial. Present us with materials that open up some of the European travel accounts – papered over in his narrative.

In exploring the process of empire-building, I note how Abu-l-Fazl brings into play Nasir al-Din Tusi, the thirteenth-century Persian philosopher's idea of the monarch, household, and empire as homologous domains. The way in which Tusi's ideas are put to use by Abu-l-Fazl tells us a great deal about the imagined structures and procedures of the Mughal imperium under Akbar. I examine three sites that may be said to exemplify Tusi's three realms. These are: the body of the emperor as sovereign and masculine; the elaborate set of women's quarters at Fatehpur-Sikri, the only ones surviving from the time; and the network of the emperor's marriages. I read the narratives surrounding these three different "texts" to make an argument about the new imperial vision and the new relationships and hierarchies (not least among these, the hierarchies of gender) that it sought to set in place.

### The sacred and sublime monarch

Abu-l-Fazl constructs a unique place for Akbar as the center of the universe in his narrative on Akbar's genealogy, and through his use of a new vocabulary to project the power of the monarch. Both the genealogy and the language are well known and often cited in historical writings on Akbar. Historians have not, however, paid close attention to the manner in which this genealogy is constructed and how the new terms come to display the special place of Akbar. Through an examination of this genealogy and terminology, I shall explore the exalted place that Abu-l-Fazl gives his monarch (positioning Akbar at the very center of the cosmos) – "the King of manifestation and reality, the leader of religion and realm (*dir-u-dunya*)" – the ways in which he builds up his luminous qualities, and the omnipotence he ascribes to the emperor.

Akbar is raised to this pedestal through repeated references to his extraordinary undertakings, political and familial; through lists of his "holy qualities"; through a language signifying a sacred milieu; and through a discourse

<sup>6</sup> Ebbas Koch points out that we lack the means to compare the plan of the palace at Fatehpur-Sikri with earlier Mughal architecture of Akbar's period, because "no palace ensemble predating Fatehpur-Sikri has survived intact." Ebbas Koch, "The Architectural Forms," in Michael Brand and Glenn D. Lowry (eds.), *Fatehpur Sikri* (Bombay, 1987), p. 126. The only "living" example of an Akbari palace is the Jahangiri Mahal in the Agra Fort; for an analysis, see William G. Klingelhofer, "The Jahangiri Mahal of the Agra Fort: Expression and Experience in Early Mughal Architecture," *Mtqammas*, 5 (1988), pp. 153–169.

<sup>7</sup> I use Maulavi Abd-ul-Rahim (ed.), *Akbarnamah by Abu-l-Fazl Ishaq Khan*, vols. I–III (Calcutta, 1873–86), Persian edition, along with Beveridge's English translation already cited; hereafter cited as Maulavi, *Akbarnamah* and *Akbarnama*. For the above quote, see *Akbarnama*, I, p. 25.

on the body of the emperor that is now constructed as the most appropriate site for learning the rules of conduct, control, and ethics. It is in the extraordinary detail presented by the author, and in the recurrent glorification that we begin to see the wondrous projections of the monarch.

Consider these remarks allegedly heard by Abu-l-Fazl himself from the "sacred lips of his Majesty":<sup>8</sup>

I perfectly remember [says Akbar] what happened when I was one year old, and especially the time when his Majesty Jahanbani [Humayun] proceeded towards Iraq and I was brought to Qandahar. I was then one year and three months old. One day Mahan Anaga, the mother of Adham Khan (who was always in charge of that nursing walk, the father or grandfather or whoever represents them, takes off his turban and strikes the child with it, as he is going along, so that the nursing of hope may come to the ground. . . . At present his Majesty Jahanbani is not here; you are in his room, and it is fitting you should perform this spell which is like *sipand* [heena] against the evil eye. The mirza immediately took off his turban and flung it at me, and I fell down.

"[His striking and falling], his Majesty deigned to observe," Abu-l-Fazl goes on, "are visibly before me. Also at the same time they took me for good luck to have my head shaved at the shrine of Baba Hasan Abdal. That journey begins here to construct the childhood of Akbar by documenting his incredible memory, "as in a mirror."

Another example of Akbar's "illuminated border of miracles (*karamat*)" occurred when Akbar was eight months old.<sup>9</sup> There was a lot of contention among the nurses who fed Akbar in his infancy. Jiji Anageh, in particular, was opposed by others, especially by Maham Anageh. At one point, Abu-l-Fazl records, Jiji Anageh was disturbed to learn that the nurses had reported to Humayun that "Mir Ghaznavi's wife (i.e. herself) was practising incantations" so that Akbar, "the prince of mankind, should not accept anyone's milk but her own."<sup>10</sup> At this time, says the imperial chronicler, Akbar spoke out to comfort Jiji Anageh. "Be of good cheer," Akbar apparently said to her, "for the celestial light of *kitabgar* shall abide in thy bosom and shall bestow on the light of thy sorrow the effulgence of joy." But he warned her not to reveal this secret of the "mystery of God's power" to anyone "for hidden designs and great provisions are infolded therein."<sup>11</sup> The nobility of the emperor is highlighted by his speech in infancy, and a revelatory conversation with Jiji Anageh, alongside a warning of confidentiality.<sup>13</sup>

Great marvels occur in Akbar's adulthood as well. According to Abu-l-Fazl, though Akbar "used his tender age as a veil and lived secluded," yet, since God had willed that his greatness be made manifest, he involuntarily

<sup>8</sup> *Akbarnama*, I, p. 396.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 396–397.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 384.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> I probe the question of foster-care and foster community in detail in the next chapter.

performed unusual deeds, "each of which was a competent witness to his lofty nature."<sup>14</sup> The marvels of Akbar's childhood were only the beginning of the magical activities that the Great Mughal apparently embarked upon.

The *Akbarnama* brims with such "miraculous" episodes. Here is one instance. One day Akbar had gone from Delhi to hunt in Palam (near Delhi) when an enormous serpent appeared along the line of the road. On this occasion, Akbar "exhibited the miracle of Moses," we are told. He put forth his "white hand," an allusion to the white hand of Moses, and approached the serpent, "seized its tail with his holy hand and quelled it."<sup>15</sup> Through such examples, Abu-l-Fazl projects the luminosity of Akbar, and his near-divine qualities. He makes clear that God grants the gift of imperial power only when a very large number of accomplishments have been gathered in one individual. He then argues that Akbar visibly was the repository of these external and internal, physical and spiritual, qualities. At one place, Abu-l-Fazl lists Akbar's virtues as follows:

It is clear to the wise that a few among the holy qualities (requisite) are, magnanimity, lofty benevolence, wide capacity, abundant endurance, exalted understanding, innate graciousness, natural courage, justice, rectitude, strenuous labour, proper conduct, profound thoughtfulness, laudable overlooking (of offences), and acceptance of excuses. . . . The holy personality of the shahshah is a fount of perfect qualities, and a mine of holy principles.<sup>16</sup>

Akbar possessed these qualities, therefore God granted him the kingship. Everything was written of as magical and divinely ordained. The following episode recorded by Nizam al-Din Ahmad in his *Tabaqat-i-Akbari* reproduces the spirit of the *Akbarnama* in its description of the emperor's attributes. On 12 March 1579, Akbar traveled towards Agra, hunting along the way. According to the chronicler, at this time, people suffered great hardship from excessive rain. Akbar called for a mirror, breathed three times on it "with his auspicious breath," and then placed the mirror on fire. The rain immediately stopped, and the people escaped from the distress caused by it.<sup>17</sup>

Consider also the names used for the Mughal *padshahs* from Akbar's time. Akbar was "the spiritual and temporal khedive," *khedive-i-sarar va ma'ni*,<sup>18</sup> "the khedive of the world," *khedive-i-jahan*,<sup>19</sup> "the khedive of the age," *khedive-i-jahan*,<sup>20</sup> and "the unique jewel of the Caliphate," *gawhar-i-yekka-i-khalifat*.<sup>21</sup> His "holy mind," *batin-i-quddisi*,<sup>22</sup> and his "holy personality" were "pure and

<sup>14</sup> *Akbarnama*, I, p. 629.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 385. The miracle of Moses referred to above seems to be the conversion of Moses's rod into a serpent (*Ibid.*, n. 4).

<sup>16</sup> *Akbarnama*, II, p. 421. <sup>17</sup> *Tabaqat*, II, pp. 510-511.

<sup>18</sup> *Akbarnama*, II, p. 156; Maulawi, *Akbarnamah*, II, p. 103.

<sup>19</sup> *Akbarnama*, II, p. 445; Maulawi, *Akbarnamah*, II, p. 304.

<sup>20</sup> *Akbarnama*, II, p. 537; Maulawi, *Akbarnamah*, II, p. 369.

<sup>21</sup> *Akbarnama*, III, p. 112; Maulawi, *Akbarnamah*, III, p. 80.

<sup>22</sup> *Akbarnama*, III, p. 365; Maulawi, *Akbarnamah*, III, p. 252.

chaste," *zai-i-muqqadas*, *'afiy va pak*.<sup>23</sup> He was even called "*Hazrat Shahshah*," thus being honored with the honorific of the Prophet (*Hazrat*) himself. Similarly, Babur's posthumous title was *Giri-sitani-i-Firdaws Makani* (Conqueror of the World Abiding in Paradise). *Ghufran-i-qubab* (Cupola of Pardon or Absolution) and *Jahانباني Jannat-i-Ashyani* (Guardian of the World whose Nest is Paradise) were used for Humayun. Hamideh Bannu Begum was addressed as *Maryam-Makani*. There is some uncertainty about the date of Hamideh Bannu's new name.<sup>24</sup> *Maryam* means Mary and the epithet may be rendered in various ways - she who dwells with Mary, is of the household of Mary, and who is of equal rank with Mary.

The point to be noted is the frequency with which these traditionally marked, and sacred, names are used in the accounts written in Akbar's time. Even in Gulbadan Bannu Begum's memoir, the reader finds a continuous application of posthumous honorific names for Babur and Humayun. In the same way, Nizam al-Din Ahmad continuously refers to Akbar as *Khalifa-i-Hak* (Divine Caliph), Babur as *Firdaws Makani*, Hamideh Bannu Begum as *Hazrat Maryam Makani*, Humayun as *Jannat Ashyani*, and the royal consorts as *hazrat-i-sarqarah-i-saltanat* (Majestic, Highnesses, Veiled Ones of the Kingdom).<sup>25</sup>

The language of the contemporary chronicles transfers the sacredness of the emperor to everything around him. Akbar's court came to be described as the "sublime court," *darbar-i-mutalla*,<sup>26</sup> a "sublime cortege," *mawjib-i-mutalla*, a "sublime threshold," *astan-i-mutalla*, *darbar-i-izadi*, a "fortunate and prosperous court," *darbar-i-dawlat va iqbal*,<sup>27</sup> and/or "holy court," *darbar-i-mutalla*.<sup>28</sup> In the same way, the Shahinshah's family were a "sublime family," *dahmni-vala*,<sup>29</sup> his *haram*, the "haram of fortune," *Shahistan-i-Iqbal*,<sup>30</sup> and his women, "the veiled ones of the curtains of fortune," *nigah guzin-i-sarvady-i-dawlat*,<sup>31</sup> "chaste secluded ladies," *pa'leh geyan*, *'iffat-i-qubab*,<sup>32</sup> and/or "cupola of chastity," *'iffat-i-qubab*.<sup>33</sup> (The word "fortunate" in these phrases has the implication of "blessed by God.")

<sup>23</sup> *Akbarnama*, II, p. 404; Maulawi, *Akbarnamah*, II, p. 271.

<sup>24</sup> Henry Beveridge suggests that Hamideh Bannu's title must be translated as "rank" or "station," and not "household," for it was given to her in her lifetime. See *Akbarnama*, I, p. 33, n. 1. Annette Beveridge suggests that Hamideh Bannu's other name was given posthumously (Hunoyun, p. 83, n. 1). According to S. A. I. Trimzi, the title was bestowed upon Hamideh Bannu after her marriage. Trimzi, *Mughal Documents 1526-1627* (Delhi, 1989), p. 30. For a discussion on posthumous titles, see, W. M. Thackston (trans.), *The Jahangirnama: Memoirs of Jahangir, Emperor of India* (New York, 1999), p. xiii.

<sup>25</sup> *Tabaqat*, II, pp. 78, 96, 110 and 559.

<sup>26</sup> *Akbarnama*, II, p. 413; Maulawi, *Akbarnamah*, II, p. 278.

<sup>27</sup> All the terms from "sublime court" onwards may be found in *Akbarnama*, II, pp. 413-425.

<sup>28</sup> Maulawi, *Akbarnamah*, II, pp. 278, 281, 283, 284, and 285.

<sup>29</sup> *Akbarnama*, III, p. 116; Maulawi, *Akbarnamah*, III, p. 83.

<sup>30</sup> *Akbarnama*, II, p. 426; Maulawi, *Akbarnamah*, II, p. 289.

<sup>31</sup> *Akbarnama*, III, p. 205; Maulawi, *Akbarnamah*, III, p. 145.

<sup>32</sup> *Akbarnama*, III, p. 205; Maulawi, *Akbarnamah*, III, p. 145.

<sup>33</sup> *Akbarnama*, III, p. 569; Maulawi, *Akbarnamah*, III, p. 385.

The texts reverberate a time, and a royal environment, of sacred-spiritual associations. The language of these chronicles and memoirs conveys the sense of omnipotence that came to surround the third Mughal ruler. This sacred apex of the empire – the emperor – is cast on to every thing around him in such a way that the entire environment is radiated with his halo, so to speak. The sacred underpinnings of the genealogy drawn up in the *Akbarnama*, like the sacred invocations of language commonly employed for Mughal men and women, glow with the same kind of effervescence.

#### Abu-l-Fazl's construction of Akbar's genealogy

"The King of manifestation and reality, the leader of religion and realm," as Abu-l-Fazl called Akbar, needed no ordinary genealogy. Such a king did not need to draw on vital, noble connections for legitimacy. He, who was divinely selected as the leader of the sacred and profane, was above such requirements. Thus the family tree was drawn to place at its center the all-important birth of Akbar: the center came at the end, as it were.

The chronicler explains that it is by the extraordinary weddings that take place after various planetary conjunctions that a unique child is born:

The man of experience knows that many years must elapse before a ruby develop in the embryonic sac of the mine and arrive at maturity, so as to be fitted for a royal diadem... it was after thousands of years had been spent, womb after womb, in the cradle of preparation, that the broodery of existence was bestowed on her Majesty Alanqua, so that she might become worthy of that world-illuminating Light.<sup>34</sup>

Abu-l-Fazl presents here the notable Mongol ancestor of Akbar, Alanqua, existing for a momentous purpose: that of the preparation for the birth of Akbar at the right time and place. He simultaneously alludes to the Timurid-Chingizid lines as well.

Genealogies are important legitimizing instruments. Royal families everywhere have constructed glorious genealogies for themselves.<sup>35</sup> We noted in chapter 4 how Babur took special care to delineate his noble ancestral connections in the *Baburnama*, suggesting a subtle inclination for the Timurid side, without, however, completely negating the Chingizid blood in his veins. Humayun followed suit, keeping his reverence for both lines, though for him the practice of the methods laid down by his forefathers was more crucial than the invocation of their names alone.

<sup>34</sup> *Akbarnama*, I, pp. 34, 36, 37.

<sup>35</sup> As illustrate examples of works on Western royalty and questions of genealogy, see Paul Magalhães (ed.), *The Perception of the Past in Twelfth-Century Europe* (London, 1992); Gabrielle M. Spiegel, *The Past as Text: The Theory and Practice of Medieval Historiography* (Baltimore, 1997).

A genealogy of this kind was not enough for Akbar's purposes. Babur and Humayun had to lay the foundations of kingship in a land and among peoples who were unknown to them, distant from their earlier stomping grounds in Central Asia and Afghanistan. Akbar, working in the context of new imperial formation, looked for more than such claims of high connections or inheritance. He needed a larger declaration of grandeur and uniqueness in the interests of imperial power.

What happens in Akbar's reign is the proclamation of empire in the form of a great, settled polity, whose fixed center – the provider of good, and the font of all power – is Akbar. This makes for a very different spirit from the evocations in the *Baburnama*, for instance, where several generations of the *khandan* of Timur and Chingiz Khan are called upon at every step.

A central feature of this increasingly stable Mughal polity was Akbar's own distinguished presence. This is displayed forthrightly in the claims made about the sublime nature of the monarchy. Though a distinguished genealogy may be seen at work in the creation of Akbar's empire, one has a sense of it being peculiarly inverted. It appears as if it is not Akbar who derives legitimacy from a distinguished lineage, but the lineage itself that derives legitimacy from him. In other words, the fact that the emperor is magnificent, and extraordinary, makes his predecessors look extraordinary too. He is the reason for the existence of that distinguished lineage, not the other way around. It is wondrous because of him.

The broad genealogical point made by Abu-l-Fazl in the *Akbarnama* – that the ancestors were privileged and the genealogy awesome only because Akbar was the result of it – becomes the founding ground for the several strands that he entwines in this genealogical grid. Abu-l-Fazl's construction of this genealogical background leading to Akbar's glorious birth is fascinating. The discussion of the virtues of Akbar's mother, for example, is not derived from the mother's lineage, status, or experience. It is rather a statement about a necessary honorable medium that becomes the vehicle for the birth of a perfect son. Since the son was so illustrious, the qualities attributed to the mother – the "auspicious ascension point"<sup>36</sup> for the heavenly birth of Akbar – could of course not be less than extraordinary. So Abu-l-Fazl embodied her with perfection, chastity, modesty, honor, and greatness.<sup>37</sup>

In this context, Abu-l-Fazl's chapter on the Mongol princess, Alanqua, bears reflection for a moment. In Abu-l-Fazl's family tree, Akbar's ancestors included Adam, then the biblical prophets, followed by Joseph and his son, Turk, who became the first Turco-Mongol figure in this genealogy. Thereafter, the genealogist lists the Mongol kings till the ninth generation, when the ruling house was defeated and dispersed by an enemy to find refuge in a mountain valley, Mughulistan. At this point Abu-l-Fazl gives us a full chapter on the divine impregnation of a Mongol princess, Alanqua. She was

<sup>36</sup> *Akbarnama*, I, p. 50.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 50–51.

married to the king of Mughulistan but became a childless widow owing to the premature death of her husband.<sup>38</sup> As the princess lay sleeping one night, a "Radiant Being" of Mongol mythology impregnated her.<sup>39</sup> Triplets were born of this pristine conception: "that day [of Alangoa's conception]... was the beginning of the manifestation of his Majesty [Akbar], the king of kings, who after passing through divers stages was revealed to the world from the holy womb of her Majesty Miryam-makani for the accomplishment of things visible and invisible."<sup>40</sup>

Why is a whole chapter devoted to this little-known Mongol princess, "the cupola of chastity [*yiffat-i qubul*]," as Abu-l-Fazl calls her,<sup>41</sup> in the midst of this detailing of Akbar's lineage? The possible explanations are suggestive, as are the possible sources from which the story of Alangoa's impregnation may have been derived. Some of the features of Alangoa's story closely resemble the story of the virginal conception of Christ. Interaction with Jesuit missionaries could have contributed to this construction, and it may help to recapitulate the circumstances of missionary interaction with Akbar's court.<sup>42</sup>

The first Jesuit mission, under Rudolf Aquaviva, arrived at Akbar's court in February 1580, and stayed in Fatehpur-Sikri for three years. A second mission arrived in Lahore, the new capital, in 1591. Father Jerome Xavier led a third mission to Akbar's court in 1594.<sup>43</sup> As already noted, Monserrate, a member of the first mission, wrote a whole commentary on his visit to Akbar's court. Several passages of this *Commentary* indicate the detailed nature of many of the exchanges between Akbar and the Jesuit priests. On one Christmas, when Akbar visited the fathers, Monserrate wrote: "They [Jesuits] adorned their chapel with rich silken curtains. They made models of the grotto where Christ was born, of the crib in which his mother laid him, and of the mountain on which the shepherds watched. He [Akbar] examined everything, and began to talk about the birth of Christ."<sup>44</sup>

Later in the *Commentary*, recounting the time when Akbar advanced into Kabul to check the troubles with his half-brother Mirza Hakim, Monserrate wrote that Akbar stayed "at the halting-place" until the entire army had crossed the Indus. A Christian priest was called who addressed the king on the importance of the Christian Law, the Psalms and the Gospel, "attributing equal trustworthiness and authority to all three, as being given by God." The priest apparently explained how Christians revered and worshiped the

"undivided Trinity of Father, Son and Holy Ghost — One God," and how they recognized that Jesus Christ alone, "the Son of God made through the Virgin Mary, as the giver of the Gospel law, to whom all other law-givers, though sent by God, even Moses and David and the other prophets, yield place in humble submission."<sup>45</sup>

Thus particular notions of the Christian miraculous — the conception of "the son of God made through the Virgin Mary," the birth of Christ, and the undivided Trinity — made their way into the discussions of Akbar with the Jesuit missionaries. The records of the Jesuit fathers suggest a remarkable openness of exchange between Akbar and his Christian guests.<sup>46</sup> One might also note the legend that appears on the tomb of Timur, associating Alangoa with the Virgin Mary.<sup>47</sup> However, any hypothesis of a direct connection between Abu-l-Fazl's genealogical sketch and "Jesuit inspiration" must remain tentative, for there were, at the same time, other equally probable sources and points of reference for the court chronicler.

The example of the *Mahabharata*, translated and illustrated in the Akbari atelier as the famous *Razmnama*, may be cited as a case in point. Kunuti, one of the protagonists in the epic, conceives a son by way of an "immaculate conception," and here, precisely through the rays of the Sun. The possibility of Kunuti's episode being the stimulus for Abu-l-Fazl's writing is as large (or small) as the discussions with the missionaries at Akbar's court. It is worth referring in this context to the ancient Rajput practice of tracing aristocratic lineage alternatively from the Sun (*suryavanshi*) or the Moon (*chandravanshi*); recall that Ram himself, the great God/King of the religious epic, the *Ramayana*, belongs to a *suryavanshi* clan. Given the close marital and political relations that Akbar forged with a large number of Rajput principalities, it is not too far-fetched to suggest that Abu-l-Fazl may have been trying to link the new regime of Akbar with the deeply rooted Rajput tradition by constructing an ancestry in which the Sun figures prominently.

Obviously, the inversion of the genealogical tree, as it appears in the *Akbarnama*, could not be a simple overturning. Abu-l-Fazl underlined Akbar's centrality in terms of his extraordinary being. He deployed his information to point to the "divine" inheritance of the emperor. It is in this light that the story of Alangoa's immaculate conception might best be understood. Yet the emperor's unique character could not be demonstrated in a void. Therefore the genealogist drew continuous connections between the emperor and his Timurid-Chingizid ancestors, as well as between the emperor and Qur'anic-mythical exemplars.

<sup>38</sup> The details given above come from *Akbarnama*, I, pp. 143–180. For a detailed sketch of the ancestry of Akbar, see the initial sections of *Akbarnama*, I.

<sup>39</sup> Woods, "Timur's Genealogy," p. 87.

<sup>40</sup> *Akbarnama*, I, p. 180.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>42</sup> Abu-l-Fazl started to collect materials for the *Akbarnama* in 1587, eight years after the Jesuit arrival. Beveridge, *Hunayn*, p. 83, n. 1; *Akbarnama*, I, p. 29, n. 4.

<sup>43</sup> Camps, *An Unpublished Letter of Father Christoval Ce Vega*, p. 7.

<sup>44</sup> Monserrate, *Commentary*, p. 59.

<sup>45</sup> Monserrate, *Commentary*, pp. 136–137. For further detail, see Correi-Alfonso, *Letters*, pp. 34, 42–43.

<sup>46</sup> Correi-Alfonso, *Letters*, p. 34. It has also been noted that there is a considerable influence of Abu-l-Fazl in the accounts of Monserrate and other such visitors (Mansura Haidar, *Makhdum-i-Allami (Inshahi Abul Fazl) Daftar I* (New Delhi, 1998), p. xvi.

<sup>47</sup> Woods, "Timur's Genealogy," p. 88.