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Abul Fazl's Conception
of Monarchy

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Abul Fazl, while writing the history of Akbar, it seems, felt the need of giving justification to the actions of his monarch. That Akbar was an ideal monarch could be established by setting down standards for the institution of monarchy which would well square with his actions. Though the institution of monarchy had entered into Islamic civilisation long before Abul Fazl and other Muslim theologians came forward with their justifications for the institution, yet the idea that sovereignty essentially belonged to Allah and that the rulers were no more than His servants on earth, had persisted in the Islamic conception. Abul Fazl in his conception of monarchy, however, tried to give a fresh interpretation.

Abul Fazl started his discussion with the need on the cause of existence of a monarch. He pre-supposed the evil nature of man which tends to corrupt as a result of his greed, selfishness and lust, and to keep them in order, according to him, monarch is a necessity. According to Abul Fazl, "If royalty did not exist, the storm of strife would never subside, nor selfish ambitions disappear. Mankind, being under the burden of lawlessness and lust, would sink into the pit of destruction ; the world, this great market place, would lose its prosperity, and the whole earth become a barren waste. Royalty is a remedy for these. A king is the origin of stability and possession."¹

Here Abul Fazl is obviously drawing upon *Mahabharata* for his interpretation. In *Mahabharata* the warrior-sage Bhishma traces the origin of kingship to the absence of order among the mankind in the remote past.² The people being without a king, points out the sage, met with destruction by devouring one another, like the stronger fish devouring the

1. *Ain-i-Akbari*, (henceforth simply *Ain*.) Tr., Vol. I, p. 2
2. *Shantiparva*, XII, 67.

weaker ones in water. The people gathered together and tried to stop the abuses by mutual agreement which having failed they collectively waited on Brahma, the creator, and prayed for a lord who would protect them and whom they would honour collectively. Thus came the king into being who restored order by striking terror into the hearts of the evil doers and forcing the people to follow the *dharma*. Thus Abul Fazl's statement, that Royalty is a remedy and that a king is origin of stability and possession, is almost identical with that of the *Mahabharata*.

^aThe ruler in Islam was not the peoples master but only held in trust for the Supreme Being. Abul Fazl, however, considers his monarch as divine. According to him "Royalty is a light emanating from God, and a ray from the Sun, the illuminator of the universe, the argument of the book of perfection, the receptacle of all virtues.³ It is communicated by God to kings without the intermediate assistance of anyone. At another place Abul Fazl says "Kingship is a gift not bestowed till many thousand good qualities have been gathered together in an individual."⁴ The extent to which Abul Fazl's ideas are in conformity with Indian mythology can be seen from the following instance given in detail in the *Mahabharata*. According to the story, it was in the time of Prithu, the seventh in the generation of the line of rulers,⁵ that true

3. *Ain*, I, (tr.) p. 3.

4. *Akbar Nama*, II (tr.) p. 285.

5. According to the mythological story, the first was Virajas the mind-begotten son of the Great God. He and his son and grandson were ascetics and thus could not carry out the work. The fourth and the fifth were good but the former was deficient in *dandamit* and the latter was self-indulgent, the sixth called Vena was swayed by passions of anger and hatred and was unrighteous towards his subjects. Vena was killed by the sages who churned his right arm out of which came out Prithu, the seventh ruler in the line.

kingship came into existence. The Divine sanction was set upon Prithu when Vishnu Himself fixed the king's status so that no one else could sure pass him, and still more when He entered the king's person by means of His ascetic power.⁶

Thus, like Prithu Abul Fazl's monarch also gets the Divine elements directly out of which naturally came his authority over the subjects. Monarchy being a light emanating from God and communicated by him directly, has many inherent qualities which automatically enter into the possessor of this light. According to Abul Fazl, a monarch, because of the Divine light in him, possesses besides others, the following qualities.

1. A paternal love towards his subjects :

Thousands find rest in the love of the king : and sectarian differences do not rise the dust of strife. In his wisdom the king will understand the spirit of the age and shape his plans accordingly

2. A large heart :

The sight of anything disagreeable does not upset him. His divine firmness gives him the power of requital, nor does the high position of an offender interfere with it. The wishes of the great and small are attended to and their claims met with no delay at his hands. Akbar himself is said to have expressed that "We by virtue of our being the shadow of God, receive little and give much. Our forgiveness has no relish for vengeance."⁷

3. Daily increasing trust in God :

When he performs an action, he considers God as the real doer of it, so that a conflict of motives can produce no disturbance.

6. U. N. Ghoshal, *Indian Political Ideas*, (1966), p. 195.

7. *Akbar Nama*, III (tr.) p. 136.

4. *Prayer and devotion :*

The success of his plans will not lead him to neglect ; nor will adversity cause him forget God and madly trust in man,

Abul Fazl was writing at a period when Akbar had come to the realisation that in India, a monarch if he is to be successful must recognise all his subjects as equal and all preference for religion and race should disappear in his kingdom. To Abul Fazl such a stand presented a problem. On the one hand he could not paint Akbar as one who had deviated from the True Path, on the other his ideal monarch was not to be bound by limits fixed by any religion. Abul Fazl, therefore, considered it necessary to explain the entire situation by theorising that : Besides being courageous just, benevolent and forgiving, the king must be above religious differences. They must not withhold him from his duty towards all classes of men. All must have repose under him, so that the shadow of God may confer glory. He must possess an ever increasing love towards all his subjects and must bring choice deliberation to bear upon his work, and do what is proper for the time. He must possess a hatred for blind following of authority (*taqlid*). Let the love of enquiry always precede and reason (*dalil parasti*) be his guide.⁸ Thus, the limits of the boundaries set forth by Islam are pushed further, and the monarch being liberated from the religious limitations the scope of his activities is widened. Abul Fazl laid down that "in spite of these qualities the king cannot be fit for this lofty office if he does not inaugurate universal peace (*sulh-i-kul*). If he does not regard all conditions of humanity and all sects of religion with the single eye. He should not be mother to some and be step-mother to others or else he will not become fit for the exalted dignity."⁹ In Abul Fazl's theory the king was the ruler of mankind, the supreme head of a state in which all religions were to be treated with

8. *Ibid.*, III, (tr.) p. 680.

9. *Ibid.*, II, (tr.) p. 421.

equality. "The sections of mankind who are a divine deposit and treasure must be regarded with the glance of affection. It must be considered that divine mercy attaches itself to every form of creed . . . The Eternal God is bounteous to all souls. Hence it is fitting that kings, who are shadow of divinity, should not cast away the principle" of peace with all.¹⁰

Prior to Abul Fazl, the authors of works on Islamic polity¹¹ tried to explain the position and functions of a monarch in a Muslim Kingdom. The divine fiction had also entered in those expositions but with marked narrow sectarian bias, which certainly was contrary to Abul Fazl's ideal. Thus by the time Abul Fazl was writing, the institution of monarchy was fairly old, and himself being a student of history he was fully conscious of the abuse of monarchical powers by so many kings in the past. To distinguish his ideal king from others, he used the term "true king" for his ideal and "selfish rulers" for others. This distinction, according to Abul Fazl, was due to the fact that all kings were not recipients of 'Divine Light', and not being recipients of this grace they could not be true kings. But, according to Abul Fazl, "silly and short-sighted men cannot distinguish a true king from a selfish ruler," and this was so because "both have in common a large treasury, numerous army, clever servants, obedient subjects, an abundance of wise men, a multitude of skillful workmen and a superfluity of means of enjoyment. . . . However, men with insight

10. *ibid.*, III. Text, 659 ; Ibn Hasan, p. 62.

11. For example in the *Siyasat Namah* of Nizam ul Mulk Tusi and the *Fatwa-i-Jahandari* of Ziaud din Barani, kingship has been placed on divine pedestal. Both these authors have reoriented the Sasanid ideals with Islamic colouring. They, however, conceived the state as consisting of Believers alone, hence by implication their king was to look after the interest of the Believers, the non-believers in such a scheme could have no place.

always discern the difference. In the case of the former, the things enumerated are lasting, but in that of latter, of short duration."¹²

The object of the true king is to remove oppression and to provide for every thing which is good and therefore, he does not attach himself to the material things that are concomitant of monarchy. He uses them, but only as means and not as an end. As a result of this attitude of the True King, security, health, chastity, justice, polite manners, faithfulness and truth pervade the social order. The selfish ruler, on the other hand is kept in bonds by the external forms of royal power, by vanity, the slavishness of men and the desire of enjoyment ; hence everywhere there is insecurity, disturbance, strife, opposition, treachery and robbery.¹³ Thus we find Abul Fazl wanted to say that the complexion of the age depended on the nature of the monarch i.e. the character of society assumed the shape according to as the king happened to be a True King or a False King. The dictum that the king is the cause of the complexion of his age, 'Raja Kalasya karanam' had been current in Indian Political thought from the Mahabharata age.¹⁴ It was believed 'that on the king rests the responsibility for good or bad government, through which according to ancient belief, the complexion of the Yuga (period) in which he lives will be changed for better or worse.' The author of *Sukranitisara* also introduced the same idea in the phrase "Yugapravartako raja."¹⁵ Though it would be rather a hasty generalisation to assert that Abul Fazl has borrowed the idea from the *Mahabharata*, but the similarity in the ideas does suggest the direction from where he was drawing his inspiration.

After having stressed the idea that the complexion of the age depends on the king, Abul Fazl proceeded to explain

12. *Ain.* (tr.) I, p. 2.
13. *ibid*, p. 3.
14. Rangaswami Aiyangar, K.V., *Rajadharma*, p. 102.
15. *Sukranitisara*, IV, i, 11, 90-125 (Tr.) B. K. Sarkar.