Emperor Akbar and the Golden Era in Historiography in the Mughal Reign: A Study

Abstract: Historiography is the study of the processes by which historical understanding and knowledge are attained and shared. The use of historical methods and the writing of history through the perusal of these methods are done through this. The Mughal reign had created a lot of changes in the political and administrative spheres of the Indian subcontinent and no other had been more influential in this than Akbar the Great. It was a golden age for historiographers as he was a true patron. This paper studies the historiographers and their writing that bears testimony to the reign of the great emperor.

Keywords: Historical understanding, Historiography.

INTRODUCTION

The Timurids were known for their ardent love of history and it really flowered in the reign of Akbar in whose four times histories were written besides other works general history. Official histories known as namahs came into being during the Mughal reign and Akbar took great care in the recording of official history. Among the four, two were works that the emperor had commissioned himself. The Tarikh-i-Alfi and the gigantic Akbari namah are the two that he had insisted in writing.

Tarikh-i-Alfi

The monumental Tarikh-i-Alfi (1591) was made to be a comprehensive history of the Islam comprising of the time span of the first millennium. The historiographer Badauni recorded that it was a team of seven scholars with different opinions who had sat together and written the first thirty five years of Islam, the work was corrected by a lot of scholars including Mulla Ahmad of Thatta, Asaf Khan and finally Badauni. The work was comprised of three volumes. Akbar had wanted the work to have a very high amount of objectivity and precision in the details. The emperor himself had supervised the work. He never wanted the myths to take up space in the historical writings.

The history of Babur is based on the Tuzuk-i-Baburi, but that of Humayun and Akbar, as also of Persia, Central Asia and Turkey, are based on the information available in the imperial archives, and on those collected from oral evidence of eminent nobles and other people. (359)

The work is based on strict chronological arrangement and the events are recorded beginning with the first years of Prophet Muhammad’s demise and year by year recordings of events after that. Many historians though believe that proper importance has not been given to other Muslim sultans of India. The work Tarikh-i-Alfi is very important in the sense that it provides details of the initial periods of Akbar’s reign.

Tabaqat-i-Akbari (1593)

Khwaja Nizam ud-Din rose to be the military secretary known as Bakshi under the reign of Akbar and he stated that “history strengthens the understanding of men of education and affords instruction by examples to men of observation.”(360) In his Tabaqat-i-Akbari, he contained the history of nine regions and the thirty eight years of Akbar’s reign in three volumes. The chronological order was maintained with great effort and the focus and attention of his narrative is thrown on Akbar. The one main drawback of Tabaqat-i-Akbari is that it never explained historical causation. At the same time great accolade should be given to him for emphasizing historical events rather than persons.
**Muntakhab ut-Tawarikh (1596)**

*Muntakhab ut-Tawarikh* was written by Mulla Abdul Qadir Badauni who was born in Todah in the year of 1540. He was a man who was strictly orthodox in his religious beliefs and he was against the religious reforms that Akbar had introduced.

He would condemn Akbar and his program for the benefit of posterity in his *Muntakhab* which he wrote in secret lest he should bring down the wrath of the emperor-prophet. The work must have occupied the author for five years before he completed it in 1596. He died the same year.(363)

His work is comprised of three volumes and the first volume is written in a chronological order about the formal history till the reign of Humayun. The narrative has not given the proper proportionate importance to the rulers as some are written more about and the pivotal ones are left out. The forty years of Akbar’s reign is in the second volume and it is chronicled according to the occurrence of events. The third volume comprises of the biographical sketches of different people from Akbar’s court.

The *Muntakhab ut-Tawarikh* is a history written with a vengeance intended to give a true version of the silt-Islamic ‘heresies’ and ‘innovations’ of Akbar’s reign.(Mukhia,111)

He hated the men who supported the ideas of Akbar who set about to create a lot of religious reforms and was disgusted with the different castes and creeds of men who took the office at Akbar’s court which he believed should have been occupied by Muslims alone. Badauni believed that a man acts according to his individual will and motives, not on the backdrop of any historical event. *Muntakhab ut-Tawarikh* was written with too much of focus given to subjectivity and he rebuked through his work the sycophants who surrounded Akbar and even the emperor himself. His judgments were mostly made from a religious point of view.

One has to admit that even though Badauni’s work was highly subjective, it corrected the over laudatory works of other historians of Akbar.

For instance, Badauni’s description of the terrible suffering of the riots which the karori system of land revenue entailed...he tells us of the emperor’s alert mind which speculated on most questions known to man, and on his spiritual yearnings which led him to spend whole nights and long hours of the day in contemplation and meditation.(366)

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**Akbar-namah and Ain-i-Akbari(1602)**

Abul Fazal’s twin work is said to be the greatest among the written histories that are given patronage by kings and financially supported by the state. Abul Fazal was born in Agra in January 1551 and it was his brother, Abul Faizi who presented him to Akbar’s court. Abul Fazal quickly became the alter ego of the emperor and he became Akbar’s high priest of Din-Ilahi.

In form the *Akbar-namah* and the *Ain-i-Akbari* are twin complementary works- the *Ain* describing Akbar’s experiments and institutions; the *Akbar-namah* endeavouring to explain the spirit behind those institutions.(367)

Abul Fazal was a man who was different from other historiographers in the sense that he was rational in the way he approached history. He was with the vision of Akbar who sought to create a country that truly sought to embrace the differences in castes and creeds. Akbar aimed to unify the religious customs of Hindus and Muslims and thought that orthodox beliefs in religion were a thing of past. Abul Fazal was always rational and political in his thought and was never religious. He studied the Hindu culture and offered a very sympathetic picture of understanding. He conducted a vast and very strenuous research in the sense that he took the written testimony of more than twenty people for the writing of one event in his book. Facts were crosschecked and made sure that it was true before writing them in the works. He presented “the revenue of an army and the grades and the duties of a nobility to the shape of a candlestick and the price of a curry-comb” (Sathianather, 234).

The drawbacks of the works were the fact that it was also terribly personal. He had a child like adulation on his emperor and he had even believed that Akbar had super natural powers of commanding even natural elements like rain. Later readers even blame of Abul Fazal to be too poetic and ornate in his language that it destroys the nature of a historiographic work.

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**Reference**


**Secondary sources:**