Tirmizi’s calendar was issued in 1592 and apparently bears an Ilahi date alone. But there is a slightly later farman in a copy contained in an eighteenth-century collection of documents relating to Biqgram: this gives 21 Tir 37 Ilahi and 2 Shawwal 1000, both corresponding to 12 July 1595 as the date of issue. This suggests that till this time it was customary to use both dates, Ilahi as well as hijri, in some imperial farman.

Subsequently, Akbar’s farman tended to omit the hijri dates altogether. Of some sixteen farman after 1592 calendared by Timrizi, only three bear hijri dates in addition to Ilahi; only one has a hijri date alone. The last would have to be checked for the decipherment of its date. It would, indeed, seem from the farman conferring land-grants on the temples of Vrindavan and Mathura issued on 19 Shahrvar 43 Ilahi/24 Safar 1000, both corresponding to 11 December 1591, that the Mughal chancery had by now shifted completely to Ilahi dates, with no mention of hijri dates even as a convenient mode of cross-checking.  

74 Sharif-i ‘Usmani, CAS in History, Aligarh, MS, ff.57b. 589. In its text the farman also gives a double date for the presentation of Qazi Kamal before Akbar, 19 Azar 36 Ilahi/24 Safar 1000, both corresponding to 11 December 1591. Tirmizi, calendaring this farman as his Doc. No.86 (pp.67-8), omits the Ilahi date altogether.


76 See T. Mukherjee and I. Habib, PIHC, 48th (Goa) session, pp.238-40. (The Christian dates given as equivalents to the Ilahi in this paper need correction.) Akbar’s farman issued to Kaikubad Parsi of Nausari also carry only Ilahi dates. See Documents Nos.1 and 2 in The Parsees at the Court of Akbar, pp.93 and 119.

Akbar’s contribution to the establishment of Mughal authority in Hindustan on a firm basis has engaged the attention of modern historians for a long time. Some of the recent researches on Akbar, however, have tended to focus on the factors contributing to the rise of his policy of religious tolerance based on the principle of sulh-i kulu, or ‘Absolute Peace’. Akbar’s ‘religious policy’ is often viewed in these studies as being linked to his transformation of the nobility into a composite ruling group including within its ranks a fairly large number of Shi’as and Rajputs. There has been far less concentration on the nature of Akbar’s personal world outlook and of the ideological influences that went to shape it and his religious policy in the last twenty-five years of his reign. Athar Ali has recently re-examined this aspect in his article ‘Akbar and Islam’,1 which in turn has given rise to several significant questions bearing on the basic character and motivations of Akbar’s ‘religious policy’. Perhaps the two most relevant questions are: (a) To what extent did Akbar’s personal world outlook influence his religious policy? and (b) What was the response of the different sections of his subjects to his religious views and, more importantly, to the measures adopted by him. These questions assume special significance in view of the contemporary testimony of Baduni and the Jesuits suggesting that, from 1581 onwards, Akbar had ceased to be a Muslim. Shaikh Ahmad Sirhind’s insistence that Akbar’s tolerant attitude towards the non-Muslims stemmed

1 Athar Ali, ‘Akbar and Islam’ in Islamic Society and Culture: Essays in Honour of Professor Aziz Ahmad, ed. Milton Israel and N.K. Wagle (New Delhi, 1983).
basically from his hostility to Islam further underlines the significance of his personal beliefs for a proper assessment of Akbar’s policy of religious tolerance. In this paper an attempt is made to trace the development of Akbar’s world view from his accession in 1556 to his death in 1605. While doing so, I shall also be focusing on the two questions identified above. To the extent permitted by the new evidence that I plan to present in this paper, I shall also be suggesting a reconsideration of some of the positions taken by Athar Ali.

II

The textbook explanations for Akbar’s natural inclination towards religious tolerance, in terms of his being influenced by the broad-mindedness of his parents and teachers of Sunni and Shi’a persuasions who had no use for sectarian bigotry, undoubtedly appeal to common sense. But it may be pointed out that the supposition of some of the textbook writers that Akbar’s mother, Ḥamīdā Bāno Begam, was a Shi’a has no basis. On the contrary her brother, Mu’azzam Beg, became involved, in 1546, in the Sunni bigots’ assassination of Humayūn’s wazīr Khwaja Sulṭān Rushdī, an Iranian and Shi’a. This strongly suggests that he and possibly the other members of the family, including Ḥamīdā Bāno, were Sunnis. It cannot, however, be denied that Akbar’s tutors including the two Irani Shi’a’s, Bairam Khān and Mīr ‘Abdu’l ῥaṣīf Qazvīnī, and the Sunni Tūrānī, Mun’im Khān, were largely above sectarian prejudices. About Mīr ‘Abdu’l ῥaṣīf Qazvīnī, it is asserted by Abu’l Ḥaʃīf al-Ḥāfiẓ that for his rejection of sectarian prejudices he was condemned by bigots of both the sects. So far as Bairam Khān is concerned, notwithstanding what some of the eighteenth-century Persian chroniclers, like Khāʃī Khān and Shāh Nawāz Khān, write of his sectarian partiality (ta’ṣṣāb), contemporary evidence presents him as a person who, seemingly, did not attach much significance to the Shi’a-Sunni divide. On the other hand, Mun’im Khān counted among his closest friends ‘Alī Quli Khān, who was well known for his Shi’a beliefs. It is, therefore, reasonable to imagine that the contribution of these early teachers and counsellors of Akbar to his natural inclination towards religious tolerance was not inconsiderable.

In a discussion of the influences that made Akbar’s mind receptive to ideas promoting religious tolerance, one must also take into consideration the cultural ethos of the Timurids down to Humayūn’s time. Timūr is reported to have respected all religions alike. This climate of religious tolerance appears to have by and large persisted in the Timurid polity down to the time Akbar came to the throne. The Timurid cultural ethos perhaps had something to do with the considerable influence that the Yaʃā-i Chingezī continued to exercise on the minds of the successive Timurid rulers (with the doubtful exception of Abū Sa’id Mirzā) down to Akbar’s time. According to ‘Alau’dīn Aṭā’ Juwainī, the Yaʃā-i Chingezī required the ruler ‘to consider all sects as one and not to distinguish them from one another’. It was in pursuance of this principle that Chingiz Khān, in Juwainī’s words, ‘eschewed bigotry and preference of one faith to another, placing some above others’. The climate of

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2 For a thorough examination of Badāu’in’s and Shaikh Ahmad Sirhindī’s assessment of Akbar, in addition to Irfān Ḥāḥib’s memorable piece, ‘The Political Role of Shaikh Ahmad Sirhindī and Shāh ʿAlī Wāfīlīl (Proceedings of Indian History Congress, Aligarh, 1960 23rd Session), reference may also be made to Athar Abbas Rizvī’s pioneering work, Muslim Revivalist Movements in Northern India in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries (Agra, 1964) and his more recent study, Religious and Intellectual History of Muslims in Akbar’s Reign (New Delhi, 1975).


5 Akbarnāma, II, p.20.


7 Mun’im Khān’s close relations with ‘Ali Quli Khān ‘Uzbek and Bairam Khān are discussed in my The Political Biography of a Mughal Noble: Mun’im Khān Khān-i Khānān 1497-1575, New Delhi, 1973, pp.59, 85, n.3.

8 For the continuing influence of Yaʃā-i Chingezī in the Timurid polity down to Humayūn’s reign, see The Political Biography of a Mughal Noble, Introduction, pp.IX-XIV.

religious tolerance promoted within the Timurid polity by the influence of Yāsī-i Chingezi is also highlighted by the absence of persecution of Shi'as in the Timurid principalities.

The increasing presence of Shi'a Iranians in the nobility after Humāyūn's return from Iran (1545), without giving rise to Shi'a–Sunni tensions in any appreciable measure is eloquent testimony to the Mughal empire in India, being, from the beginning, a very different type of state from the Sultanates it replaced in different parts of the Indian subcontinent. It is worth noting that, before the induction of a large number of Iranian Shi'as in Humayun's service, in no other state ruled by a Muslim dynasty did the Shi'as and Sunnis coexist in the nobility in such remarkable amity. The Safavid empire, where the rulers, claiming to be the imāms of the Islamic community the world over, severely repressed elements suspected of Sunni leanings, was no exception to this rule. Thus it might be safely suggested that the influence of the Yāsī-i Chingezi, to the extent it survived in the Timurid polity till the middle of the sixteenth century, was an important element in Akbar's cultural heritage, inducing him to be broadminded towards other religious beliefs. Akbar's intolerant attitude towards the Shi'as and Mahdavis during the sixties may conversely be explained as a partial consequence of the erosion of the influence of the original Mongol tradition with the passage of time.

For a proper appreciation of the way Akbar's world outlook gradually evolved and of his becoming, from around 1581, strongly committed to the principles of suh-i kul, it is also important to keep in view some of the traits of his personality recorded by contemporary observers.

According to Monserrate, Akbar had 'a somewhat morose disposition' to which he attributes the latter's excessive interest in 'various games'. That Akbar's extraordinary interest, during his early years, in hunting and elephant fights verged upon obsession is borne out even by Abū'l Fazl. Abū'l Fazl obviously finds it embarrassing to report Akbar's senselessly endangering his life repeatedly in hunts or while witnessing elephant fights or tackling mast elephants. He has devoted a whole chapter in the Akbarnāma to Akbar's 'inclination for elephants'. At another place, noticing Akbar recklessly endangering his life by mounting a mast elephant in 1561, Abū'l Fazl has quoted a not very bright saying of Akbar from this period, suggesting that he thus endangered his life deliberately: 'If he had displeased God in any manner, 'may that elephant finish us, for we cannot support the burden of life under God's displeasure.' This, incidentally, also points to Akbar's being vaguely dissatisfied and apologetic about his own conduct in society as well as in religious matters at this time.

This psychological factor in Akbar's personality also appears to have manifested itself in the occasional fits of depression and melancholy that he is reported to have suffered down to 1578. The last fit of this nature is reported from 1578; it came in the midst of a hunting expedition. On this occasion Akbar fell unconscious for some time. It appeared, according to Abū'l Fazl, as if he was dying. That these fits, which were characterized by Abū'l Fazl and by Akbar himself as spiritual experiences, recurred down to 1578 and are not reported from the subsequent period when Akbar had developed a new world view identified with suh-i kul, goes to suggest that these had something to do with the mental tensions of the earlier phase of his life.

The dichotomies of Akbar's religious beliefs and intellectual commitments during the seventies are illustrated by the perplexing questions that he is reported to have posed to the Muslim religious divines during the first phase of discussions in the 'Ībadat Khāna (1575-8). These uncertainties and dichotomies were partly also fed by Akbar's general inquisitiveness and questioning temperament as well as by his eagerness to conform to an accepted code of ethical and legal behaviour, a trait of personality that he seems to have inherited from his father. Two scientific experiments made by Akbar in the seventies illustrate his questioning temperament in general. 'Arif Qandahārī mentions his not very successful attempt at cross-breeding a male deer with a barbari goat. This experiment produced a non-productive hybrid deer. The other experiment,

82 Akbar and his India

83 Akbar's Outlook

13 Antonio Monserrate, Commentary on his Journey to the Court of Akbar, tr. by J.S. Hoyland and annotated by S.N. Basu, Calcutta, 1922, p.197.
12 Akbarnāma, II, p.152.
Muslim elements as a pious Muslim committed to defending Islam against infidelity. Rizqullah Mushtaqi, a well known Shaikhzada of Delhi, writing around 1580, says that Akbar was sent by God to protect Islam from being suppressed by Hemu. In one of his passing remarks, Badaini suggests that during the early years of his reign Akbar was under the influence of the Naqshbandiya order.

However, it seems that his attitude towards Hindu religious rites and forms of worship was no longer contemptuous and hostile after 1562, when he married the daughters and nieces of a number of Rajput chieftains. Badaini says that during Akbar's early youth ('unfiwin-i shabab), he used to perform hom, a form of fire worship in the company of his Hindu wives. Akbar was perceived by many of his contemporaries in these years as being not averse to performing Hindu rites, his Islamic orientation notwithstanding. This impression is reinforced by measures like the announcement of the abolition of Pilgrimage Tax (1563) and jizya (1564) or the establishment of an in'am grant for the support of a temple at Vindravan (1565).

However, during the same period, he had a manifestly suppressive attitude towards the Muslim sects condemned by the orthodox as heretical. The Iranian nobles, mostly Shīʿas, were encouraged and used against the discontended Turānis throughout the sixties. But at the same time their freedom to profess and practise their faith was sought to be restricted.

15 Wāqiʿī-i Mushtaqi MS, Br. Library, Or. 1929, f.94a.
17 Munakhab u't-Tawārikh, II, p.261. Lowe's comment that hom was a substitute for some juice offered by Parsees (Munakhab u't-Tawārikh, tr., Calcutta, 1924, p.269, f.n.1) is obviously a slip. Badaini's reference here is to a Hindu rite. For a more viable explanation see John T. Platts, A Dictionary of Urdu, Classical Hindi and English, reprint, New Delhi, 1977, p.1242. This term is explained as denoting 'an oblation with clarified butter, a burnt offering, a sacrifice', etc.
19 For the improvement in the position of Indian nobles during the sixties, see my article, 'The Nobility under Akbar and the Development of His Religious Policy', Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society, 1968, p.31, & f.a.7; and The Political Biography of A Maghul Noble, pp.xvi-xvii.
of *fanā* and *waḥdat u'l-wujūd*. Already by 1573, Akbar had come to regard Shaikh Mu'inuddin Chishti as his spiritual preceptor. In one of his conversations with Miyan Mustafa Bandagi, Akbar is reported to have declared: ‘Hazarat Khwaja Mu'inuddin Chishti is my preceptor... Any one who says that he was misguided (gumrāh) is an infidel. I shall kill the person saying this with my own hands.’ This is confirmed by Badāūnī’s testimony to the effect that by 1577 Akbar was regularly practising the spiritual exercises prescribed in the Chishti *silsilah*. Some time after 1575, he even tried to learn the art of performing *chīla-i ma'kūs* [concentrating on God while suspended head down in a well for forty days and nights], from Shaikh Chayā Laddha.

The influence of pantheistic Sufi doctrine of *fanā* seems to have provided an impetus to Akbar’s interest in philosophy. In the company of Shaikh Mudfrāk, Abū’l Fażl, Ghāzi Khān Badakhshi, Hakim Abū’l Fath and other rationalist thinkers, during 1578-82, he eventually became familiar with the systematic exposition of the doctrine of *waḥdat u'l-wujūd* by Ibn al-'Arabi in a larger philosophical perspective. As Irfan Habib points out, the pantheism of Ibn al-'Arabi, despite lacking a rational basis, was capable of becoming a strong ideological challenge to the post-Ghazālī conventionalism in Islam. It was this quality of the impact of Ibn al-'Arabi's ideas on Akbar and, more importantly, on his socio-political perceptions during 1578-82, that is characterized by Abū’l Fażl as the elevation of ‘intellect (khirad)’ to a ‘high pedestal (buland pāigī)’. The idea suggested by Ibn al-'Arabi that all is not a part of divine reality is an illusion, in turn, led Akbar to the notion that all religions are either equally true or equally illusory, a suggestion that was bound to be sharply denounced by all the shades of orthodox opinion as a deviation from the true path. It was equally unacceptable to the Jesuit fathers then present at the court. Commenting on Akbar’s assurance in 1581 to Jalāl Roshani of the freedom to practice his cult, Monserrate observed:

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23 Muntakhab u't-Tawārīkh, III, p.321.
26 *Majālis*, Maktaba Ibrahimia (Haidarabad), A.H. 1367, p.58.
27 Muntakhab u't-Tawārīkh, II, p.201 and III, p.110.
'the King cared little that in allowing everyone to follow his religion he was in reality violating all'. The emergence of this new ideological trend at the court seems to have confused many of the quite learned people regarding Akbar's world view. 'Abdu'l Qādir Badā'uni for instance viewed the intellectual climate at the court around 1581 as the triumph of Shi'ism over orthodoxy. This was, in any case, another decisive point of departure in Akbar's world view, taking him much farther away from the accepted Islamic beliefs and practices than was ever possible within the parameters of the pantheistic notions of Islamic mysticism.

III

The development of Akbar's world view subsequent to his being deeply influenced by the pantheistic philosophy of Ibn al-'Arabi is identified with the concept of sulh-i kul (absolute peace). This concept was formulated by him, or for him by Abū'l Fazl, in such a manner that it was elevated from the status of a mystic notion alluding to the state of fana to that of a concept denoting a principle capable of promoting amity among divergent groups in a culturally pluralistic situation. In a revealing restatement of Alberuni's famous passage criticizing Brahmins for their intellectual insularity, Abū'l Fazl has tried to project the idea that social strife was caused in India primarily by the absence of the spirit of sulh-i kul. He goes on to suggest in the same passage that the absence of the spirit of sulh-i kul in India was caused mainly by the preponderance of an attitude of imitation (taqlīd) and by the suppression of intellect and reason.

After 1581 Akbar's identification with sulh-i kul tended to make him part company with the mainstream tendency of orthodox Islam in so far as there was no place in his vision for the prescribed prayers and the unquestioned acceptance of prophethood. It was much closer to the teachings of the contemporary Nirguna Bhakti sects which criticized both Hinduism and Islam for being formalistic and divisive. The conceptualization of man's relations with God articulated by Akbar in one of his less well-known statements reveals its proximity in certain important respects to the one found in the teachings of Nirguna Bhakti. Replying to a query from Murād in 1591, Akbar tells him:

Devotion to the Matchless One (Bechūn) is beyond the limits of the spoken word whether in respect of form (jism), material attributes (jismāniyat), letter (harf) or sound (saut). Devotion to the Matchless One is (also) matchless. If God so wishes, (you) shall enter into the private chamber of this wonderful divine mystery. At present, the auspicious preamble (to the discourse on the subject) is this that he (Murād) may decorate with agreeable sincerity and praiseworthy actions the page of his disposition (sa'dha-ī khāṭir) and endeavour for gaining our pleasure so that with this blessing this other fortunate house of devotion (to God) may be opened (to him).

Emphasis on the absoluteness of Divine Reality and a subtle suggestion, in this passage, that one could reach it not through formal prayers, but only by cultivating the self and with the help of a preceptor, recall to mind the teachings of Kabir and Nānak.

It is again very much like the contemporary Bhakti cults that in Akbar's system there was strong emphasis on the role of a preceptor. As he tells Murād in the above passage, the latter could hope to have access to Divine Mystery only with the help and guidance of Akbar, who was in the position of his preceptor. The status of preceptor in Akbar's system, in turn, began to be perceived as that of the insān-ī kāmil (Perfect Man) of Islamic mysticism.

This new world-view reflected itself with its distinct tilt towards rationality as well as (with all its inconsistencies) towards the norms of moral behaviour that Akbar prescribed, not only

29 Commentary on his Journey to the Court of Akbar, pp.132-3.
30 Muntakhab u't-Tawārikh, II, p.211, where Badā'uni accuses Mullā Muhammad Yazdi, who had arrived from Wilāyat (Iran) only recently, for trying to attract Akbar towards Shi'a beliefs. In III, p.74, while commenting on Shaikh Mubārak's career, he suggests that it was the 'Iraqis' or Iranis (Shī'as?) who came to dominate Akbar's court-circle about this time.
31 A'in-i Akbarī, III, pp.3-4.
for his personal devotees (arbāb-i irādat), but also for ordinary members of the court elite. It is also revealed majestically in Abū'ī Fazl’s theoretical expositions on the concept of kingship. He defines kingship dually, as farr-i īzād or Divine Light, and as originating in a social contract between society and the ruler. In addition to these are Akbar’s sayings and other documents reproduced by Abū’ī Fazl, projecting a new set of cultural values rooted in rational experience but not violating the spirit of sulh-i kul. Some of these values appear astonishingly ‘modern’, and are imbued with compassion.

This is for example suggested by Akbar’s numerous observations recorded by Abū’ī Fazl reflecting on the duty of the ruler to work for the welfare of the common people or highlighted by statements revealing Akbar’s deep respect and concern for women. I should like to reproduce his reply to Murād (1591) for the transfer of a dāk-chaukī man, Bahādūr, to his camp. Akbar recorded the following order: ‘Bahādūr’s wife is not agreeable to his going (there). If presently we (are able to) persuade her, we shall send Bahādūr as well. Otherwise after a few days we shall depute him to carry a farmān by dāk-chaukī. Then you may detain him (there).’ The regard here for Bahādūr’s wife’s opinion and to his vague hope that he might eventually succeed in persuading her to change her mind are quite revealing, especially since the person concerned was a mere dāk-chaukī messenger. Similarly, one of his sayings where he ridicules Hindu men for seeking salvation in the other world by inducing their wives to perish in fire and the one in which he criticizes Muslim personal law for the daughters’ receiving ‘a smaller share in the inheritance, although it is better that the weaker should receive a large share’, are refreshingly original and compassionate.

Akbar’s strong disapproval of meat-eating is also rooted not in his religious beliefs but basically reflects his natural compassion for living beings (jāndārān). He shames the meat-eaters for having converted ‘their inner sides, where reside the mysteries of Divinity, into a burial ground of animals’. And, again: ‘I wish my body, made of elements (jism-i ‘unsārī), was big like that of an elephant so that these flesh-eating ignorant ones would have satisfied their hunger with my flesh, and so spared other living beings’. What is important about this sentiment is that it is not sought to be supported by any religious sanction or appeal. This is one of those cultural norms recommended by Akbar that seem to carry the imprint of his very private reflections not fully assimilated in the structure of beliefs and ideas that he was trying to evolve. These were his reflections not as the Insān-i Kāmil or Pir-i-Murshid of the official discourse, but as a very sensitive and intelligent private man who had missed the opportunity of receiving formal education.

Akbar’s socio-religious outlook, based on sulh-i kul, developed, and created ideological space for itself, largely through a polemical dialogue with mainstream Islamic orthodoxy within the framework of comparative religion. At an ideological plane the tendency identified with sulh-i kul was critical of Hindu beliefs and practices as well, but this aspect remained all the time in the background, possibly because none of the Hindu sects thus criticized responded to the challenge. The reaction of orthodox Muslim theologians was generally sharp. It was this continuing polemic between a large section of the orthodox theologians and the protagonists of sulh-i kul which continued for about twenty-five years (roughly the second half of Akbar’s reign), that appears to have given rise to a widely held belief towards the end of Akbar’s reign that he was very hostile to Hindus.

57 Har Sih Daftar, Nawal Kishore, 1862, p.123.
58 Akbar’s rejection of ‘divine incarnation’ (fulūū) theory is reflected, as suggested by Aḥṭar Aḥṣan (‘The Religious World of Jahāngīr’). Proceedings of Indian History Congress, Calcutta, 51st Session 1990, p.298, f.n.57), in the saying that in India no one sets a claim to prophethood because of the theory of divine incarnation. Abū’ī Fazl’s calling Todar Mal a simpleton (sāda lauh) for his attachment to his private idols and his disapproving references to Todar Mal’s bigotry (kīna tozī) are pointers to the ideological reservations that existed between him and Todar Mal. The Dabīštān-i Mazāhib quotes a well argued statement of Akbar criticizing Brahmins for believing in the doctrine of incarnation.
to Islam and was trying to undermine its position within the Mughal empire. Badāūnī and Shaikh Ahmad Sirhindi seem to represent the more extreme or outspoken reaction of this genre. It should, however, be kept in mind that the exaggerated reaction of Badāūnī and Shaikh Ahmad Sirhindi was not fully shared by many, even perhaps a majority, of the contemporary orthodox ‘ulamā. A large number of such persons noticed by Badāūnī himself in the third volume of Muntakhab u’t-Tawārīkh as men of great piety and learning are also mentioned as maintaining close contacts with Akbar’s court during the time when the polemics of the supporters of suḥ-i kūl against orthodox Islam were at its height. This is also suggested by some of the occasional statements of the most eminent theologians of the time, Shaikh ‘Abdu’l Ḥaq Muḥaddis, and his son, Shaikh Ṣūru’l Ḥaq. Although both of them were critical of some of the new ideas promoted by Akbar, yet seemingly they did not share the alarmist view of Akbar’s policies taken by Badāūnī. As late as 1605, Shaikh ‘Abdu’l Ḥaq could find it possible to conclude his book, Tārīḵ-i Ḥaqqī, with a prayer where Akbar is referred to as the reigning Pāḏshāh, who was expected to act as the defender of Islam. In the same year, Shaikh Ṣūru’l Ḥaq went out of his way in remarking that Akbar’s motives in encouraging religious discussions were misunderstood by the common people.39 These passages obviously imply an assessment of Akbar’s role as king and of his motives in starting religious discussions, qualitatively different from those of Badāūnī and Sirhindi.

IV

I should like to conclude this paper with a few comments on the doubt raised by Athar Ali regarding Nīmātullāh and Muhammad Sadiq’s testimony corroborating Badāūnī’s and Sirhindi’s allegations that Akbar had adopted a repressive attitude towards the practitioners of orthodox Islam.

39 See translations of the relevant passages of Tārīḵ-i Ḥaqqī (p.181) and Zubd u’t-Tawārīkh (p.191) in Elliot and Dowson, VI.


Athar Ali doubts the veracity of these statements by pointing out that an exceptionally large mosque was built by Mān Singh at Raj Mahal in 1592. Regarding this mosque he also quotes the popular tradition recorded in the Archaeological Survey’s report that the structure ‘was originally intended for a temple, but was afterwards turned into the Jama Masjid for fear of the Emperor’. He seems to argue that the reports pertaining to the closing down of mosques could have been an exaggeration of the difficulties caused by the reduction in ‘the flow of financial patronage’ to Islamic institutions. He thinks that ‘given Akbar’s own religious views’, a persecution of the practitioners of orthodox Islam does not appear plausible.

There is now available some more rather firm evidence supporting Badāūnī’s and Sirhindi’s version in its essentials. This evidence needs to be taken into account before one makes up one’s mind on the position taken by Athar Ali.

Before I come to an examination of this additional evidence, it may be considered whether the building of a mosque by Mān Singh at Raj Mahal in 1592 is much relevant to the present discussion. One might suggest that the restrictive attitude with regard to Islamic practices and institutions mentioned by Badāūnī and Sirhindi might have appeared at a time later than 1592, perhaps around 1600.

There is an explicit reference to the attempt at closing down the mosques and prohibiting namāz in congregation in a ‘farrān’ issued by Prince Salim, during his rebellion of 1601, to local ḥākim (governors, etc.). Its text is reproduced by Rafi’u’ddin Ibrāhīm Shīrāzī in his Tażkiratu’l Mūlūk. As I have argued elsewhere, although Rafi’u’ddin Ibrāhīm Shīrāzī (d.1626) wrote his book at Bijapur early in the seventeenth century, he sometimes reproduces new information and documents on the history of Akbar’s reign, the veracity of which cannot be reasonably doubted.42 Salim’s ‘farrān’ of 1601 reproduced by him seems to be one such piece. It reads: ‘At the instigation of some mischeivous persons, my father has abolished the arrangements for the maintenance of khaṭīb, muʿazzin and imām

in the mosques and has prohibited the performance of namāz in congregation. He has converted many of the mosques into store-houses and stables. It was improper on his part to have acted in this manner. They [recipients of the 'farmān'] should resume the paying of stipends for the maintenance of the mosques, the khaṭīb, the muʾazzīn and imām and should induce people to offer prayers. Anyone showing slackness in this respect would be duly punished.\(^{43}\)

This 'farmān' leaves little doubt that towards the turn of the century there was a general impression that in some of the mosques namāz in congregation was prohibited by Akbar's orders. That Salīm should try to win the sympathy of the Muslims by playing upon this issue during his rebellion is quite understandable. It also suggests that, in Salīm's perception at the time (1601), the feeling of hurt among Muslims over Akbar's attitude towards Islam was so deep and widespread that many of them could be roused to support him against his father over this issue.

A story narrated by 'Abdūr Bāqī Nahāvandī in Maʿāṣir-i Raḥīmī (compiled, 1614) offers corroborative evidence. He reports that after Dānīyāl's appointment to the newly conquered 'sūba of Deccan and Khandesh' (1601), Akbar had written to him ordering him to destroy the jāmā masjid at Asīrgarh 'and raise [in its place] a temple on the pattern of Hindus and [other] infidels of Hindustān'. According to this story, however, Dānīyāl was wise enough 'not to enforce that order by ignoring it and whiling away the time' so that 'the demolition of a mosque and building of a temple in its place during the time of the kings of Islam was avoided'.\(^{44}\)

Regarding this story one may note that it was recorded by 'Abdūr Bāqī Nahāvandī in the context of his employer 'Abdūr Rahīm Khān-i Khānān's role in the Deccan as the aṭīq of Dānīyāl. There is thus an implicit suggestion in the manner this story is recorded that the credit for ignoring Akbar's extraordinary order should partly go to the Khān-i Khānān who was then next in command to Dānīyāl. This story is not recorded by any other known authority. Possibly 'Abdūr Bāqī Nahāvandī's source of information for the story was 'Abdūr Raḥīm Khān-i Khānān himself. Moreover, such a story being recorded in a text identified with 'Abdūr Raḥīm Khān-i Khānān tends to suggest that at the time of its writing (i.e. 1614), Akbar's restrictive measures against orthodox Islam around 1601 were such common knowledge that an allusion to it in a historical text's passing observation was not expected to be considered offensive by Jahāngīr as well as his courtiers.

In the memorandum already cited, containing orders recorded by Akbar on requests and queries sent by Murād from Malwa some time in 1591, we find a query by Murād to the effect that if some one in his camp was found performing prayers 'in the manner of imitating theologians (fuqāḥā-i taqlīd shīʿār)', whether he was to be 'forbidden' or was to be 'left in his ways'. Akbar's response suggests that a person performing namāz was considered deserving 'admonition' (nāṣihāt) by his superior so as to 'help' him to come to 'the path of reason' (rūḥ-i 'aqīl). But Murād is also warned that such a person is not to be forced to abandon his rites of worship, as this would amount to violation of sulh-i kul.\(^{45}\) This document clearly points to two aspects of the situation: firstly that some of the princes/nobles commanding armies or administering different regions were not clear in their minds, around 1591, if they should prohibit the performance of namāz offered by individuals serving with them, and, secondly, that official policy at this time (1591) was for the Mughal administrators to 'admonish' but not pressurize such persons to bring them 'to the path of reason'. One might suggest that this was perhaps the beginning of the drift towards a situation that, some time prior to Salīm's revolt in 1601, led to a general impression that Akbar had withdrawn all support to maintenance of mosques, and even ordered the destruction of some.

This seems, however, to have been a brief phase. The attempt to discourage namāz in congregation and compliance with other decrees of Islam was apparently given up by Akbar before Aʾīn-i Akbarī was completed by 1601. This is attested to by a casual statement of Abūl Fāzīl in the Aʾīn-i Akbarī where he talks of Akbar practising 'external as well as spiritual


\(^{44}\) Maʿāṣir-i Raḥīmī, II, ed. Hidayat Husain, Calcutta, 1925, p.474.

\(^{45}\) Akbarnāma, MS. Br. Library, Add. 27,247, f.404a.
austerities in the worship [of God] which render silent the slanders [spread] by the ritualists of this age [rasmiyān-i rozgār']. Blochmann reads this passage as suggesting that Akbar occasionally joined 'public worship in order to hush the slandering tongues of the bigots of the present age'.

This rather loose rendering of the relevant line is not implausible. In the above passage, the expression, riyyāt-i ʿūlū (external austerities) is perhaps an allusion to the observance of namāz by Akbar which, according to Abūʾl Faẓl, silenced the 'slanderous' criticism of Akbar by rasmiyān, or those who considered the form or ritual of worship as of primary importance. It is a candid admission of the fact that, towards 1601, Akbar's beliefs and his attitude towards namāz were being widely criticized. This, perhaps, made him concerned about the reaction of common Muslims, forcing him to soften his attitude towards Islam during the last four years of his reign.

The hurt that was seemingly caused to Muslims by Akbar's hostile attitude to Islam during 1591-1601 was, apparently, healed considerably in the last four years of his reign. At the time of his death, in any case, there were no signs of widespread discontent against his policies among Muslims as well as among a majority of orthodox theologians. On the other hand, at the time of Akbar's death in 1605, the impression of even a theologian like Abūʾl Ḥaqq Muḥāddīṣ and Shaikh Nāruʾl Ḥaqq in 1560 also in the light of this possible softening in Akbar's attitude towards Islam during the last four years of his reign.

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appears as the patron, or is referred to by name or at times can even appear as himself being the poet-composer (that is, the chap being of Akbar and not of Tansen), as has been already noted above. Like other dhrupad texts composed in honour of kings, these too are often mediocre from the literary point of view.

Conclusion

Taking all these diverse materials, we can attempt to reconstruct one aspect of Akbar's life, but also one facet of the legend of Akbar for posterity. In medieval Indian history the rulers who encouraged belles-lettres, architecture, painting and performing arts like music and dance, of both Indo-Persian and Indian inspiration, Akbar represents the archetype of the perfect patron, whose endless curiosity appealed to the imagination of artists from various walks of life. Among them, talented poet-composers responded in plentiful vernacular lyrics compiled in repertoires which are the extant artifacts of their prolific creativity, enduring in the memory of living musicians. For the most gifted ones, the extraordinary power of their music and their close association with the emperor carved out a place for them in the cultural history of India.

One has to begin with, the Arabic-Persian tradition in which Akbar's background especially lay. India had two names, the Arabic 'Hind' from Ancient Iranian 'Hindu' (the Avestan variant of Vedic 'Sindhu'), whence the Greek 'India' also came; and the later Iranian 'Hindostan', created by the Iranian tendency of adding '-stan' as a suffix to territorial names (Tukharistan, Sijistān, Gurjistān, etc.). As outsiders, the Iranians were prone to consider India to cover all territory east of the Indus, whence the two names.

In the eleventh century the scientist Abū Raihān al-Bīrūnī, in his celebrated Kitāb al-Hind (1035) was able to offer a precise geographical definition of the country of al-Hind: 'limited in the south by the above mentioned Indian ocean, and on all three other sides by the lofty mountains, the waters of which flow down to it.' By his study of Sanskrit scientific and sacred texts, al-Bīrūnī is aware also of a problem in the perception of the territory. The inhabitable world extending southwards from Himavant is Bhrātavarśa, which is the centre of Jambu-dvipa. Al-Bīrūnī says that there was an assumption that Bhrāta-varśa comprises the entire inhabitable world, while in actual fact, the parts named and ascribed to it are located in al-Hind alone. To al-Bīrūnī, the 'Hindus' as inhabitants of this country, had an identifiable single higher culture, with Sanskrit as its language, which he made it his business to study and interpret, critically and without bias. He thus saw a firm cultural unity, reflected in an arrogant insularity on the part of the Hindus, which he regretted characteristically on account of the obstruction it raised to the study of their culture by an outsider.

Once the Ghorian conquest and the establishment of the Sultanate, had implanted over a large part of India another culture in parallel existence with the Brahmanical, the clear-cut all-exclusive identification of the Brahmanical culture and India, so natural for al-Bīrūnī, could no longer be sustained. Yet the concept of Hindostan for the same limits as in al-Bīrūnī survived, sometimes with culturally neutral qualities. This is most visible in 'Īsāmī's ode to India (1350), which begins:

Blessed the splendour of the country of Hindostan,
For Heaven itself is envious of this scented garden.

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8 'Īsāmī, Futūḥu's-Salāṭīn, ed. A.S. Usha, Madras, 1948, pp.604-5. 'Īsāmī was writing at Daulatabad in the Deccan and thus understood the whole of India by 'Hindostān'.
9 Ibid., p.465. 'Īsāmī is here speaking of Muhammad Tughluq's army confronting the Mongol troops of Tārāmāshṭīn.
11 Ibid., pp.151-61.
12 Ibid., pp.162-66.
13 Ibid., pp.166-67.
14 Ibid., pp.168-170.
to envision India as a country with a composite culture specific to itself, to which a member of a Turkish Muslim immigrant family like Amir Khusrau can proudly proclaim his allegiance, and which has adopted Persian as one of its own languages.

A noteworthy development which was bound to affect the perception of India as a country with cultural and social institutions of its own, was the growth of a Muslim community within India, distinct from the Muslim communities of other countries. The orthodox theologian and historian ‘Abdu’l Qadir Badāūnī, in his work on ethics written in 1590-91, acknowledges with manifest regret that marriages for limited periods and speedy divorces (by the husband) are permitted by Muslim law and sanctified by precedent, but then comments: ‘What good custom have the people of India that they shun this practice and regard it (divorce) as the worst word of abuse, so much so that if some one is called ‘‘talāqī’’ (divorcer), he, out of folly, would be ready to fight to death’. 17 Clearly, Badāūnī thought that Muslims in India had a way of life different from Muslims of other countries, one example of it being their thinking very ill of any one divorcing his wife. Whether this outlook was influenced by the absolute permanence of marriage in Hindu law cannot be said for certain; but the recognised existence of a distinct Indian Muslim custom is unmistakable here.

Almost simultaneously came the recognition of India as an entity for historical purposes. It began with Badāūnī’s friend, Nizām’uddin Ahmad, who in 1593-94 completed his Ṭabaqāt-i Akbari, designed to give the annals separately for nine regions of India (Delhi, Deccan, Gujarāt, Malwa, Bengal, Jaunpur, Kashmir, Sind and Multan). Such a departure from dynastic history in favour of a general history of India is something for which Nizām’uddin has surely not received adequate credit. He inspired a series of works including Badāūnī’s history, but notably Muhammad Qāsim Fīrīstā’l’s celebrated Gulsan-i ʻIbrāhīmī (1609-10), where the attempt is extended to reconstruct even the pre-Islamic history of the country. Even if the conception of history is rather narrow here, calling for little more than a grouping of separate dynastic histories (labouriously compiled), the constant underlying assumption of the

historical unity of India is remarkable. 18 The concept of India had thus gone much beyond a purely geographical one in the Indo-Muslim tradition with which Akbar obtained familiarity first. Though born in India (1542), Akbar’s boyhood was spent in Afghanistan, until 1555, and he himself spoke later of his ‘arrival in India (‘Hind’). 19 But he developed an increasing interest in the language and customs of his subjects. In 1563 confronting Adham Khān, he used a Hindi word of abuse still living with us. 20 He composed verses in Hindi, containing, in the words of the official biographer, ‘colourful conceits’. 21 Imitating ‘the loyal Indians’, he let grow his hair, rather than cut it short; 22 and he never grew a beard. His love for Indian tales made him commission the translation of Singhāsan Bataūsī even before 1571-72. 23 But it is in October 1578 that, for the first time, we find him referring with affection and pride to the people of India (‘Hind’). In an assembly at the Court Akbar ‘praised the truth-based nature of the people of India, whose women, however hard the life they might have borne (with their husbands), show the greatest affection and love for their husbands once they are dead’, and went on to refer to the self-sacrifice offered by Indian women as satī. At the same time Akbar condemned the pusillanimity of men of ‘Hindostān’ who allowed or encouraged such acts by their women. 24 Since Muslims did not practise anything remotely resembling satī, the identification of Indians and India largely with Hindus and Hinduism both in the friendly and censorious aspects is unmistakable.

A similar identification tended to occur when Akbar began to acquire familiarity with the religious beliefs of the various schools of Hinduism. In 1578, again, two Brahmans, Purushottam and

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18 There is a faint earlier glimmer of it, though, in ‘Īsāmī, who says that ‘Alā’uddin Khāli filled, while Muḥammad Tughluq ravaged, ‘Hindostān’ (Futuh- u’s Salāṭin, p.605).
19 Abū’l Fazl, Āṭī-i Akbari, ed. Naval Kishore, Lucknow, 1892, III, p.188: ‘When we arrived in India, our heart was attracted to the elephants’.
22 First version of Akbarnāma, B.L.: Add. 27,247, f.294a.
Devi(?), introduced him to these complexities, leading him to believe that transmigration of souls was an essential element of Hinduism. In his sayings, as reported by Abü’l Fażl, Akbar shows a grasp of the doctrine of transmigration of souls, and the consequence which such a belief led to in India: divine incarnation. Thus he observed: ‘In India (‘Hind’), no one set forth a claim to Prophethood: this is because the claim to Divinity has had precedence here’.

We see in these statements a pride in India tempered with a critical spirit. If India is to be identified by the currency of certain customs and beliefs, it is not necessary that these be accepted. Akbar thus adds a new component to the vision of India, that of reform. His prohibition of satī, and of pre-puberty marriages, his demand for equal inheritance for the daughter, his condemnation of slavery and slave trade, all suggest the rejection of some of the burdens of the past. From India seen as a cultural unity, and then as a cultural diversity undergoing synthesis, we have with Akbar the first vision of India undergoing moral or social improvement. It was linked to a bold rejection of traditionalism.

He is reported as saying:

The pursuit of reason (‘aql) and rejection of traditionalism (taqlid) are so brilliantly patent as to be above the need of argument. If traditionalism was proper, the prophets would merely have followed their own elders (and not come with new messages).

One could almost say that with Akbar we begin to have in a rudimentary form a pre-modern vision of modernization of India, a patriotism without revivalism. But for what, in greater detail and depth, India meant to Akbar and his circle we have to go to his principal spokesman, Abü’l Fażl.

There is no doubt that Abü’l Fażl was more conscious of the geography of India than any previous writer. In the north he considered the great mountain ranges to separate India from Turān (Central Asia) and Iran, on one side, and China (‘Chīn and Māchīn’), on the other. The following passage from his pen was to serve long as an aid to the arguments of those British strategists who would place the ‘scientific frontier’ of the Raj across the heart of Afghanistan:

Intelligent men of the past have considered Kabul and Qandahar as the twin gates of Hindostan, one (Qandahar) for the passage to Iran, and the other for that to Turān. By guarding these two places, Hindostān obtains peace from the alien (raider) and global traffic by these two routes can prosper.

It is significant that Abü’l Fażl considers India to be a peninsula, for he says that the sea borders Hindostān ‘on the east, west and south’. He, however, claims that Hindostān also included ‘śarāndīp (Sri Lanka), Achīn (in Sumatra), Malūk (Malaya), Malāgha (Malacca) and many islands’, so that ‘the sea cannot really demarcate its limits’. This too is a rather expansive concept of India – anticipating the ‘Greater India’ concept of later days – which one can hardly endorse. But probably Abü’l Fażl meant no more than that the sea could not prevent Indian cultural influences from reaching certain overseas territories; and this in itself was an interesting statement for him to make.

Abü’l Fażl displays his patriotism by showering unqualified praise on the people of India:

The people of this country, are God-seeking, generous-hearted, friendly to strangers, pleasant-faced, of broad forehead, patrons of learning, lovers of asceticism, inclined to justice, contented, hard-working and efficient, true to salt, truth-seeing and attached to loyalty.

These qualities, it is worth noting, are assigned to inhabitants of the territory, and not to the followers of any one religious persuasion. But since the majority of Indians were Hindus, Abü’l Fażl claims that ‘all’ (that is, including the Hindus) ‘acclaim the oneness of God’. Though some of them revere images, he argues, this is not really idol-worship, since images are used merely to assist in the worship of God. We are not concerned here with the

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The recognition of India as the birth-place of an important culture, which found its major expression in the Indian ('Hindi') language (i.e. Sanskrit), forms the starting point of a long and accurate survey of it in the latter portion of the A'in-i Akbari, entitled 'Account of Hindostan' (Ahwāl-i Hindostān). There is no indication that he intended the culture to be considered in a sectarian colour: It is characteristic of modern biases that when Abū'l Faẓl begins by stating his intention 'to describe a little of the conditions of this country and survey the opinions of the Indian (Hindi-nazād) seges', the translator renders the last phrase as 'the opinions professed by the majority of the learned among the Hindus'. In fact, Abū'l Faẓl does not begin with religion at all, but with the Indian beliefs in the spheres of astronomy and geography. His attitude in this respect is very similar to that of al-Birūnī, who too was concerned with the entire range of Indian learning. At the conclusion of his survey, Abū'l Faẓl regrets that he did not have time to compare the opinions of the learned of India with those of Greece and Persia. This again suggests, that beyond this regret, at not having been able to proceed as al-Birūnī had done, lay an essentially secular or non-sectarian perception of Indian culture.

There is no doubt that Abū'l Faẓl's description of Indian culture running to about 150 pages of the large folio edition in Persian is an outstanding achievement in detail and accuracy, covering secular learning, religion, ritual and ethnography. The account is largely independent of al-Birūnī and from the point of view purely of information adds much to his account. Abū'l Faẓl professedly derived his knowledge from a large number of Indian texts, through the medium of numerous learned interpreters and translators, but the care and precision he exercised in setting out the information is very greatly to his credit. The survey needs to be analysed, despite Sarkar's rather disparaging remarks, since it tells us how, with what points of emphasis, various beliefs and opinions were held or expressed in India at the time (c.1595).

Abū'l Faẓl has a particular interest in presenting to the Persian-knowing reader the essentials of Indian culture, which is seen, despite its diversities, as a unity. He looks forward to a larger unity so that 'the inner and external conflict should turn into amity, the thorn-bush of enmity and hostility into the garden of friendship and the sounds of reasoned argument should come forth and an informed assemblage be arranged'. He is too scientific and too scornful of 'tradition-bound imitators' to approve of the various Indian beliefs and opinions he surveys. He says, on one occasion, in obvious depreciation of the Indian and Greek views on the habitable world that 'today the truth-inclined learned consider the south [below the Equator] to be inhabited just like the north'.

In other words, Abū'l Faẓl was looking to much beyond a parallel coexistence of cultures or a composite traditional Indian culture, a mere synthesis of traditions. He made his own bow to the cultural compositeness of India, by giving us notices of foreigners arriving in India ('Hindostān') from Adam to Humayūn, and then of the more noted Muslim divines and saints of India, as if these constituted streams that too belonged to India. But such streams had to join together, purified by reason, before the higher unity could be achieved. For this higher ground to be reached, Abū'l Faẓl saw an essential role to vest with the sovereign.

Humayūn's arrival in India after so many travails was to be celebrated, because it led to Akbar's accession, and it was under the aegis of Akbar's justice and judgement of men that 'Hindostān has become the concourse of good men of the seven climes and every one in different ways attains his objects'. The key instrument of the sovereign was the enforcement of Šulḥ-i Kull, absolute...
peace, a means of relief for individuals like Abū’l Fażl himself, as well as for the people at large. For the sovereign is ‘father to humanity. All kinds of people seek comfort from him, and no dust of duality rises forth from the variety of religions believed in by men.’ But at the same time, the sovereign ‘should not seek popularity among people through opposing Reason’. In other words, tolerance of existing beliefs is only one part of the sovereign’s duty; persuasion to follow reason, and so reject traditionalism is a necessary and complementary one.

We can now see that Abū’l Fażl reaches a conclusion which justifies Akbar’s promotion of both rationalism and social reform, in order to construct a ‘Hindostān’ that could stand out in the world. Is this view still so singular that it must be summarily thrown out of court as some scholars are now suggesting?

The sixteenth century in Bengal proved to be a century of turmoil and transformation. While the Portuguese had appeared on the scene at the end of the second decade of the century, the conquest of Gaur first by Sher Shāh and then by Humayūn in the third and the fourth decades ushered in a long struggle between the Afghans and the Mughals, in which the kings of Orissa also became involved. The struggle was temporarily won by Akbar’s general Mun‘im Khān who captured Gaur in 1575. Yet the final pacification came only in the second decade of the seventeenth century.

Along with the arrival of the conquistadors, we have the appearance of the religious reformer Chaitanya, whose brief and meteoric career greatly affected the cultural fabric of Bengal. It would be our endeavour here to analyse in the light of Bengali sources the operation of socio-economic forces which preceded the age of Akbar in Bengal, and the transformation which, as will be argued, took place here in the course of the sixteenth century.

Some scholars had long back accepted middle Bengali literature as a source of the medieval history of Bengal. In 1964 Asutosh Bhattacharyya drew attention to the rich material in the Mangal poems. Others like Tapan Raychaudhuri, Abdul Karim, Sukhomoy Mukhopadhyay and lately Anil Chandra Banerjee utilized these

1 Asutosh Bhattacharyya, Bangla Mangal Kavyer Itihiṣas, Calcutta, 1964.
2 Tapan Raychaudhuri, Bengal Under Akbar and Jahāngīr, New Delhi, 1969 (2nd ed.).
5 Anil Chandra Banerjee, Madhyayuger Bangla o Bangali, Calcutta, 1986.