

Excerpts from the Biography of Emperor Akbar of India

Jalaluddin Muhammad Akbar, also known as Akbar the Great (1542–1605), was the greatest of the Moghul Emperors of India. Not only was he a successful military leader, defeating both the Aghans who had temporarily unseated his father from his throne and, at the Battle of Panipat, a coalition of Hindu princes, but he initiated the collection and compilation of art and literature from many regions of the world. Above all, he was a religious moderate who respected Hindu temples, married a Rajput princess, and attempted to found his own syncretic religion, as well as holding debates between holy men of many different religions. He commissioned a biography, from which the following excerpts are taken.

Source: *Biography of Emperor Akbar*, A'in Akbari, trans. by H. Blochmann, 1927.

Focus Questions:

1. What aspects of the harem and the kitchen are emphasized in the documents? How might a critic of Akbar's have interpreted these passages? (Note that he had a reputation for loving women and alcohol.)
2. What do the excerpts tell us about Akbar's daily life? How easy was the job of running a large empire as an absolute monarch?
3. What key elements of Akbar's religious beliefs do the passages reveal? How might these have been received by devout Muslims? Hindus? Why was an image of holiness important to Akbar? Can we tell if it is more than just an image?

THE IMPERIAL HAREM

His Majesty is a great friend of good order and propriety in business. Through order, the world becomes a meadow of truth and reality; and that which is but external, receives through it a spiritual meaning. For this reason, the large number of women—a vexatious question even for great statesmen—furnished his Majesty with an opportunity to display his wisdom, and to rise from the low level of worldly dependence to the eminence of perfect freedom. The imperial palace and household are therefore in the best order.

His majesty forms matrimonial alliances with princes of Hindustan, and of other countries; and secures by these ties of harmony the peace of the world.

As the sovereign, by the light of his Wisdom, has raised fit persons from the dust of obscurity, and appointed them to various offices, so does he also elevate faithful persons to the several ranks in the service of the seraglio. Short-sighted men think of impure gold, which will gradually turn into pure gold; but the farsighted know that his Majesty understands how to use elixirs and chemical processes. Any kind of growth will alter the constitution of a body; copper and iron will turn to gold, and tin and lead to silver; hence it is no matter of astonishment if an excellent being changes the worthless into men. "The saying of the wise is true that the eye of the exalted is the elixir for producing goodness." Such also are the results flowing from the love of order of his Majesty, from his wisdom, insight, regard to rank, his respect for others, his activity, his patience. Even when he is angry, he does not deviate from the right path; he looks at everything with kindly feelings, weighs rumours well, and is free from all prejudice; he considers it a great blessing to have the good wishes of the people, and does not allow the intoxicating pleasures of this world to overpower his calm judgment.

His Majesty has made a large enclosure with fine buildings inside, where he reposes. Though there are more than five thousand women, he has given to each a separate apartment. He has also divided them into sections, and keeps them attentive to their duties. Several chaste women have been appointed as daroghas, and superintendents over each section, and one has been selected for the duties of writer. Thus, as in the imperial offices, everything is here also in proper order. The salaries are sufficiently liberal. Not counting the presents, which his Majesty most generously bestows, the women of the highest rank receive from 1610 to 1028 Rs. per mensem. Some of the servants have from 51 to 20, others from 40 to 2 Rs. Attached to the private audience hall of the palace is a clever and zealous writer, who superintends the expenditure of the Harem, and keeps an account of the cash and the stores. If a woman wants anything, within the limit of her salary, she applies to one of the Tahwi-lda-rs (cash-keepers) of the seraglio. The Tahwi-lda-r then sends a memorandum to the writer, who checks it, when the General Treasurer makes the payment in cash, as for claims of this nature no cheques are given.

The writer also makes out an estimate of the annual expenditure, writes out summarily a receipt, which is countersigned by the ministers of the state. It is then stamped with a peculiar imperial seal, which is only used in grants connected with the Harem, when the receipt becomes payable. The money itself is paid by the cash-keeper of the General Treasury to the General Tahwi-lda-r, who on the order of the writer of the Harem, hands it over to the several Sub-Tahwi-lda-rs for distribution among the servants of the seraglio. All moneys are reckoned in their salaries at the current rate.

The inside of the Harem is guarded by sober and active women; the most trustworthy of them are placed about the apartments of his Majesty. Outside the enclosure the eunuchs are placed; and at a proper distance, there is a guard of faithful RAjpUts, beyond whom are the porters of the gates. Besides, on all four sides, there are guards of Nobles, Ahadi-s, and other troops, according to their ranks.

Whenever Begams, or the wives of nobles, or other women of chaste character, desire to be presented, they first notify their wish to the servants of the seraglio, and wait for a reply. From thence they send their request to the officers of the palace, after which those who are eligible are permitted to enter the Harem. Some women of rank, obtain permission to remain there for a whole month.

Notwithstanding the great number of faithful guards, his Majesty does not dispense with his own vigilance, but keeps the whole in proper order.

THE IMPERIAL KITCHEN

His Majesty even extends his attention to this department, and has given many wise regulations for it; nor can a reason be given why he should not do so, as the equilibrium of man's nature, the strength of the body, the capability of receiving external and internal blessings, and the acquisition of Worldly and religious advantages, depend ultimately on proper care being shown for appropriate food. This knowl-

edge distinguishes man from beasts, with whom, as far as mere eating is concerned, he stands upon the same level. If his Majesty did not possess so lofty a mind, so comprehensive an understanding, so universal a kindness, he would have chosen the path of solitude, and given up sleep and food altogether; and even now, when he has taken upon himself the temporal and spiritual leadership of the people, the question, "What dinner has been prepared to-day?" never passes over his tongue. In the course of twenty-four hours his Majesty eats but Once, and leaves off before he is fully satisfied; neither is there any fixed time for this meal, but the servants have always things so far ready, that in the space of an hour, after the order has been given, a hundred dishes are served up. The food allowed to the women of the seraglio commences to be taken from the kitchen in the morning, and goes on till night.

Trustworthy and experienced people are appointed to this department; and all good servants attached to the court, are resolved to perform well whatever service they have undertaken. Their head is assisted by the Prime Minister himself. His Majesty has entrusted to the latter the affairs of the state, but especially this important department. Notwithstanding all this, his Majesty is not unmindful of the conduct of the servants. He appoints a zealous and sincere man as Mi-r Baka-wal, or Master of the Kitchen, upon whose insight the success of the department depends, and gives him several upright persons as assistants. There are also treasurers for the cash and the stores, several tasters, and a clever writer. Cooks from all countries prepare a great variety of dishes of all kinds of grains, greens, meats; also oily, sweet, and spicy dishes. Every day such dishes are prepared as the nobles can scarcely command at their feasts, from which you may infer how exquisite the dishes are which are prepared for his Majesty.

In the beginning of the year the Sub-treasurers make out an animal estimate, and receive the amount; the money bags and the door of the store-house being sealed with the seals of the Mi-r Baka-wal and the writer; and every month a correct statement of the daily expenditure is drawn up, the receipt for which is sealed by the same two officers, when it is entered under the head of the expenditure. At the beginning of every quarter, the Di-wa-n-i buyu-ta-t and the Mi-r Baka-wal, collect whatever they think will be necessary; e.g. Sukhda-s rice from Bhara-ji, Dewzi-ra rice from Gwa-lia-r, Jinjin rice from Ra-jóri- and Ni-mlah, ghi- from Hisa-r Fi-ru-za; ducks, water-fowls, and certain vegetables from Kashmi-r. Patterns are always kept. The sheep, goats, berberies, fowls, ducks, etc., are fattened by the cooks; fowls are never kept less than a month. The slaughter-house is without the city or the camp, in the neighbourhood of rivers and tanks, where the meat is washed, when it is sent to the kitchen in sacks sealed by the cooks. There it is again washed, and thrown into the pots. The water-carriers pour the water out of their leather bags into earthen vessels, the mouths of which are covered with pieces of cloth, and sealed up; and the water is left to settle before it is used. A place is also told off as a kitchen garden, that there may be a continual supply of fresh greens. The Mi-r Baka-wal and the writer determine the price of every eatable, which becomes a fixed rule; and they sign the day-book, the estimates, the receipts for transfers, the list of wages of the servants, etc., and watch every transaction. Bad characters, idle talkers, unknown persons are never employed; no one is entertained without a personal security, nor is personal acquaintance sufficient.

The victuals are served up in dishes of gold and silver, stone and earthenware; some of the dishes being in charge of each of the Sub-Baka-wals. During the time of cooking, and when the victuals are taken out, an awning is spread, and lookers-on kept away. The cooks tuck up their sleeves, and the hems of their garments, and hold their hands before their mouths and noses when the food is taken out; the cook and the Baka-wal taste it, after which it is tasted by the Mi-r Baka-wal, and then put into the dishes. The gold and silver dishes are tied up in red cloths, and those of copper and china in white ones. The Mi-r Baka-wal attaches his seal, and writes on it the names of the contents, whilst the clerk of the pantry writes out on a sheet of paper a list of all vessels and dishes, which he sends inside, with the seal of the Mi-r Baka-wal, that none of the dishes may be changed. The dishes are carried by the Baka-wals, the cooks, and the other servants, and macebearers precede and follow, to prevent people from approaching them. The servants of the pantry send at the same time, in bags containing the seal of the Baka-wal, various kinds of bread, saucers of curds piled up, and small stands containing plates of pickles, fresh gin-

ger, limes, and various greens. The servants of the palace again taste the food, spread the table cloth on the ground, and arrange the dishes; and when after some time his Majesty commences to dine, the table servants sit opposite him in attendance; first, the share of the derwishes is put apart, when his Majesty commences with milk or curds. After he has dined, he prostrates himself in prayer. The Mi-r Baka-wal is always in attendance. The dishes are taken away according to the above list. Some victuals are also kept half ready, should they be called for.

The copper utensils are tinned twice a month; those of the princes, etc., once; whatever is broken is given to the braziers, who make new ones.

THE MANNER IN WHICH HIS MAJESTY SPENDS HIS TIME

The success of the three branches of the government, and the fulfilment of the wishes of the subjects, whether great or small, depend upon the manner in which a king spends his time. The care with which His Majesty guards over his motives, and watches over his emotions, bears on its face the sign of the Infinite, and the stamp of immortality; and though thousands of important matters occupy, at one and the same time, his attention, they do not stir up the rubbish of confusion in the temple of his mind, nor do they allow the dust of dismay to settle on the vigour of his mental powers, or the habitual earnestness with which His Majesty contemplates the charms of God's world. His anxiety to do the will of the Creator is ever increasing; and thus his insight and wisdom are ever deepening. From his practical knowledge, and capacity for everything excellent, he can sound men of experience, though rarely casting a glance on his own ever extending excellence. He listens to great and small, expecting that a good thought, or the relation of a noble deed, may kindle in his mind a new lamp of wisdom, though ages have passed without his having found a really great man. Impartial statesmen, on seeing the sagacity of His Majesty, blotted out the book of their own wisdom, and commenced a new leaf. But with the magnanimity which distinguishes him, and with his wonted zeal, he continues his search for superior men, and finds a reward in the care with which he selects such as are fit for his society.

Although surrounded by every external pomp and display, and by every inducement to lead a life of luxury and ease, he does not allow his desires, or his wrath, to renounce allegiance to Wisdom, his sovereign—how much less would he permit them to lead him to a bad deed! Even the telling of stories, which ordinary people use as a means of lulling themselves into sleep, serves to keep His Majesty awake.

Ardently feeling after God, and searching for truth, His Majesty exercises upon himself both inward and outward austerities, though he occasionally joins public worship, in order to hush the slandering tongues of the bigots of the present age. But the great object of his life is the acquisition of that sound morality, the sublime loftiness of which captivates the hearts of thinking sages, and silences the taunts of zealots and sectarians.

Knowing the value of a lifetime, he never wastes his time, nor does he omit any necessary duty, so that in the light of his upright intentions, every action of his life may be considered as an adoration of God.

It is beyond my power to describe in adequate terms His Majesty's devotions. He passes every moment of his life in self-examination or in adoration of God. He especially does so at the time, when morning spreads her azure silk, and scatters abroad her young, golden beams; and at noon, when the light of the world-illuminating sun embraces the universe, and thus becomes a source of joy for all men; in the evening when that fountain of light withdraws from the eyes of mortal man, to the bewildering grief of all who are friends of light; and lastly at midnight, when that great cause of life turns again to ascend, and to bring the news of renewed cheerfulness to all who, in the melancholy of the night, are stricken with sorrow. All these grand mysteries are in honor of God, and in adoration of the Creator of the world; and if dark-minded, ignorant men cannot comprehend their signification, who is to be blamed, and whose loss is it? Indeed, every man acknowledges that we owe gratitude and reverence to our benefac-

tors; and hence it is incumbent on us, though our strength may fail, to show gratitude for the blessings we receive from the sun, the light of all lights, and to enumerate the benefits which he bestows. This is essentially the duty of kings, upon whom, according to the opinion of the wise, this sovereign of the heavens sheds an immediate light. And this is the very motive which actuates His Majesty to venerate fire and reverence lamps.

But why should I speak of the mysterious blessings of the sun, or of the transfer of his greater light to lamps? Should I not rather dwell on the perverseness of those weak-minded zealots, who, with much concern, talk of His Majesty's religion as of a deification of the Sun, and the introduction of fire-worship? But I shall dismiss them with a smile.

The compassionate heart of His Majesty finds no pleasure in cruelties, or in causing sorrow to others; he is ever sparing of the lives of his subjects, wishing to bestow happiness upon all.

His Majesty abstains much from flesh, so that whole months pass away without his touching any animal food, which, though prized by most, is nothing thought of by the sage. His august nature cares but little for the pleasures of the world. In the Course of twenty-four hours he never makes more than one meal. He takes a delight in spending his time in performing whatever is necessary and proper. He takes a little repose in the evening, and again for a short time in the morning; but his sleep looks more like waking.

His Majesty is accustomed to spend the hours of the night profitably; to the private audience hall are then admitted eloquent philosophers and virtuous Sufis, who are seated according to their rank and entertain His Majesty with wise discourses. On such occasions His Majesty fathoms them, and tries them on the touch-stone of knowledge. Or the object of an ancient institution is disclosed, or new thoughts are hailed with delight. Here young men of talent learn to revere and adore His Majesty, and experience the happiness of having their wishes fulfilled, whilst old men of impartial judgment see themselves on the expanse of sorrow, finding that they have to pass through a new course of instruction.

Abu'l-Fazl Allami's *Ain-i-Akbari*

Abu'l-Fazl Allami's Ain-i-Akbari is a chronicle of the Mughal Emperor Akbar's Court (1556–1605). Originally written in Persian, the work provides much insight into the emperor's reign and the author presents the reader with an ideal of royalty embodied by his patron, the Emperor Akbar.

Source: H. Blochmann, trans., *Abu'l-Fazl 'Allami, A'in Akbari* (3 vols.), (Calcutta, 1927).

Focus Questions:

1. What portrait of Akbar emerges from this account?
2. What does the description of the imperial household say about the Mughal state?

BOOK ONE, CHAPTER ONE

The Imperial Household

He [Akbar] is a man of high understanding and noble aspirations who, without the help of others, recognizes a ray of the Divine power in the smallest things of the world; who shapes his inward and outward character accordingly, and shows due respect to himself and to others. He who does not possess these qualifications, ought not to engage in the struggle of the world, but observe a peaceable conduct. If the

former be given to retirement, he will cultivate noble virtues; and if his position be a dependent one, he will put his whole heart in the management of his affairs, and lead a life free from distressing cares.

True greatness, in spiritual and in worldly matters, does not shrink from the minutiae of business, but regards their performance as an act of Divine worship.

If he cannot perform every thing himself, he ought to select, guided by insight and practical wisdom, one or two men of sagacity and understanding, of liberal views in religious matters, possessing diligence and a knowledge of the human heart, and be guided by their advice.

The wise esteem him not a king who confines his attention to great matters only, although some impartial judges excuse a king that does so, because avaricious sycophants who endeavor by cunning to obtain the position of the virtuous, often remind him of the difference of ranks, and succeed in lulling asleep such kings as are fond of external greatness, their only object being to make a trade of the revenues of the country, and to promote their own interests. But good princes make no difference between great and small matters; they take, with the assistance of God, the burden of this world and the responsibility of the world to come on the shoulder of resolution, and are yet free and independent, as is the case with the king of our time. In his wisdom, he makes himself acquainted with the successful working of every department, which, although former monarchs have thought it derogatory to their greatness, is yet the first step towards the establishment of a good government. For every branch he has made proper regulations, and he sees in the performance of his duty a means of obtaining God's favor.

The success of this vast undertaking depends upon two things; first, wisdom and insight, to call into existence suitable regulations; secondly, a watchful eye, to see them carried out by men of integrity and diligence.

Although many servants of the household receive their salaries on the list of the army, there was paid for the household in the thirty-ninth year of the Divine era, the sum of 309,186,795 dams [Mughal currency]. The expenses on this account, as also the revenues, are daily increasing. There are more than one hundred offices and workshops, each resembling a city, or rather a little kingdom; and by the unremitting attention of his Majesty, they are all conducted with regularity, and are constantly increasing, their improvement being accompanied by additional care and supervision on the part of his Majesty.

Some of the regulations I shall transmit, as a present, to future enquirers, and thus kindle in others the lamp of wisdom and energy.

As regards those regulations which are of a general nature, and which from their subject matter, belong to each of the three divisions of the work, I have put them among the regulations of the Household.