

# 'How to Read Akbar in Today's India?'

*Allahu Akbar: Understanding the Great Mughal in Today's India.* New Delhi. Bloomsbury. 2019. pp.332. Price INR 595/-

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Mughal emperor Akbar has had an eminently honourable career in 20th century India, until recently. Even 'right-wing' voices would compare the 'tolerant' Akbar with the 'intolerant' Aurangzeb. Lately, however, Akbar has been consistently attacked as a foreign oppressor, particularly as the perpetual rival of Rana Pratap, who is hailed for virtually having led a national liberation movement. The most egregious manifestation of this demonization was a 2016 tweeter post by Shaina N C, a National Spokesperson of the ruling BJP at the time. She appeared to compare Akbar with Hitler. She had been lending her voice to a demand that the Akbar Road in Delhi be named as Rana Pratap Road. Ms N C wondered whether Israel would ever have a road named after Hitler. If so far Akbar had been the paragon of tolerance, he was now made to appear as the ultimate embodiment of intolerance. Journalist-author Manimugdha Sharma, who read history in university, resolved to write a new biography on Akbar against this context.

The book is an interesting experiment in how to write history for an essentially popular audience. Sharma was introduced to history through "the historical" genre of narratives, such as novels, cinema or TV serials. These present history virtually as a rousing performance by sharply etched individuals, as though they were alive and active in the present. This also often involves taking liberties with available sources and appears to collapse present concerns with past imperatives. Professional historians are wary of the 'historical' as a genre since this involves presenting history in a less objective and more involved, manner. While they do not disapprove of it, since it involves the objective of reaching out to the people at large, they express concern at how history is open to abuse in the hands of unscrupulous operators looking

to simply arouse popular passions. The "historical" as a genre is almost always biographical, or personal, in that it always focuses on individual characters, as opposed to the larger, impersonal forces that professionally grounded practices of history writing and teaching prefer. The more the tension between professional history writing and the "historical" grows, the greater the risk of history being employed to arouse unwelcome passions. The 2016 vilification of Akbar by amateur enthusiasts was a representative example.

Sharma's intervention proposes to humanize Akbar, as a bold and passionate character and leader, without appearing to stretch credible sources. His Humayun is "forever mystified by the stars and planets", not unlike the contemporary Indian householder, working hard to reclaim his lost fortunes, even as he cannot forsake a belief in astrology and star gazing. The first chapter that narrates the devotion of Mughals (since Babur) to astrology and which journalist Vir Sanghvi had once characterized as a peculiar Indian reality, at once grounds the core argument of the book. The Mughals were an Indian dynasty and they conducted themselves in ways that resonated strongly with contemporary Indians.

In the second chapter, Sharma introduces Todarmal Khatri, the legendary finance minister of Akbar, previously a petty Hindu officer under Sher Shah, who built a reputation by taming the fierce Gakhar tribesmen of the Punjab with clever money management. Likewise, he compares Bairam Khan's decisive crossing of a swollen Sutlej in 1555, with similar decisions by Alexander of Mecedon in 324 BC and Abdali's crossing of the flooded Yamuna in 1760. Humayun's generous attribution of the victory of Mughal forces at Machhiwara (1555) is compared with the common practice of an indulgent father favouring his son over more deserving candidates. Abul Fazl is once similarly compared with the pliant press

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in contemporary India. When Bairam Khan appeared to concentrate power in his hands, Sharma recalls the PMO in India today. Akbar's appointment of a eunuch named Itimad Khan as a financial administrator reminds him of a 2017 advertisement in which a eunuch is shown as bringing up an orphan. When he writes that "ifs are not for historians to indulge in", the author's intent cannot be clearer. This is a book addressing the popular imagination of Mughal India in contemporary times, without taking liberties with credible sources.

Throughout the book, Sharma uses this technique of what would otherwise be called anachronistic comparisons. Such strategies of reading form the core of popular history. Common men and women do not recall pasts in a neatly chronological manner. They more easily recall episodes which appear to resonate with their present and appeal to their emotions. Sharma's Akbar is an impetuous man. He was ruthless to Hemu yet fancies taming wild elephants for sport and decides to befriend Rajputs once he sees them standing firmly before a rampaging wild elephant. Yet, he is not given to mindless bloodletting and does not hesitate to publicly execute his foster brother Adham Khan when he becomes a threat to his supreme authority. Sharma's chapter of Akbar's religious initiatives since 1570s is particularly instructive. He shows that a Hindu raja had sufficient freedom in the Akbar's court to once claim that Allah too

loved cows since this is mentioned in the first chapter the *Quran*. Akbar himself had begun to "question and doubt" the conventional wisdom on Islam. Even Badauni, the orthodox chronicler, dismissed prayers and fasts as vain, acknowledging only "reason" as the only true basis of religion. More importantly, Sharma is clear that Akbar's rationality was entirely Indian. He argues, with historian Harbans Mukhia, that Akbar's religiosity was premised not so much on an absolute superiority of reason but on a belief in equal rights of people of all religions, as voiced, for instance, by bhakti saints such as Kabir.

In this, Akbar is seen to presage the more liberal and tolerant among India's recent leaders, such as Jawaharlal Nehru. The Mughal age is repeatedly illustrated with examples from contemporary India and with analogies from well documented historical episodes from other times and places. In doing this, Sharma opens up fresh space in contemporary history writing. In combining within his narrative, episodes from past and the present in a seamless fashion, he emphasizes the necessity of approaching the genre of the historical with a critical attention to available, credible source material. Alongside, he highlights the inescapable reality that the average consumer of the 'historical' recalls pasts in manners distinct from professional historians. As such, this book throws up an enriching challenge to both professional historians and the lay reader.