

Akbar's Doctrine of Rule – A Fresh Look

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The Mughal, or Timurid, empire that was founded by Zahir ud-Din Muhammad Babur between 1526 and 1530 was by the seventeenth century the most powerful empire the subcontinent had ever known. Underlying it were the superior military capabilities of a generation of Central Asian soldiers, but it owed much to the reign of Jalal ud-Din Muhammad Akbar (r.1556-1605) when the institutions that defined the regime were set firmly in place and the heartland of the empire was defined; both of these were the accomplishment of Akbar. It was Akbar's works that laid the foundation for the good fortune of a series of long-lived and competent descendants.

Muslim rulers, prior to the rise of Mughals had struggled for over three hundred years to impose their authority over the majority Hindu population. These unsuccessful regimes were marked by rebellions and constant resistance. The emperor Akbar understood the inefficiency of prior Muslim rulers and knew that, if his dynasty were long to survive, he must first legitimize his rulership in the eyes of the majority of his subjects, the Hindus, as well as in the eyes of possible Mughal adversaries. Indeed, his re-imagining of court practices, revision of the land revenue system and the introduction of a variety of administrative transformations should be viewed as tools serving the larger objective of legitimizing the new Mughal sovereign. Akbar's legitimizing actions became his principles that eventually provided the Indian subcontinent with a more efficient form of government than it had enjoyed under earlier Muslim dynasties.

I

Akbar began the task of establishing the legality of Mughal rule by freeing himself from existing methods of kingship. In doing so, he chose a course of action that took him away from the Muslim standard practice for

rule, but retained his Muslim beliefs and synthesized Islamic political philosophy and practice with its Hindu counterpart, a path smoothed by the syncretism ruling style that was a part of his Mongol heritage. To separate himself from the failed past standards of Muslim rule, Akbar waged war against the *mullahs* (experts in Muslim religious matters) for control over social and political policy in his empire. Akbar's drive to establish his full control over the *mullahs* demonstrates clearly that one of his objectives was to create a multi-cultural state by incorporating Hindus into all levels of government, as opposed to an orthodox *mullah* government which imposed their version of orthodox Islamic polity and their personal opinions into all of the subjects. His efforts include the function and rewards given out to tax collectors in a manner which won the support from the Hindu masses while reassuring the Mughal elite of Akbar's good will by assuring them stability.

Akbar served both ends by re-positioning longstanding court rituals and pre-existing Muslim conceptions of the ruler. Akbar cultivated a personal relationship with each *mansabdar* (rank holder) and employed a generous policy of incorporating into his imperial administration Hindu chieftains who had previously been engaged in a military coercive relationship with prior Muslim rulers. Furthermore, Akbar sought to end the inefficient military coercive method of tax revenue and establish a system in which all officials were willing participants in the new Mughal administration.

To establish his new vision for the rule of Hindustan, Akbar had to deviate from existing ruling standards so that his legislative policies and administrative reforms could be implemented as envisioned. He first had to break from some of the traditional responsibilities and privileges of a Muslim ruler, so that he could have full reign over his empire. Islamic law delegates the

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responsibilities and privileges of the monarch as the ruler of the land, the right to preserve order for all people on that land regardless of religion, to conquer in the name of Islam, the protection of Islamic standards, and to rule according to the *Shari'ah* (Islamic law) as interpreted by the *mullahs* and based on *fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence).

Akbar's interpretation of law included actions that obtained support from the Hindu population by deviating from the Muslim belief in the protection of Islamic standards. One such action was the abolition of the *jizyah* (1564), the capitation tax paid by non-Muslims as protected people of the Mughal state. (Streusand 28) The *jizyah* was a symbol of inferiority because it had been a formal law establishing Muslims as the ruling people and Hindus as second class subjects through taxation. (Streusand 114) The effects of repealing the *jizyah* were very important because it did away with a hierarchical society based on religious divisions and created a common class of subjects. Other changes made to the existing law helped to break down the social divide, such as the abolition of the pilgrimage tax (1562), which solely applied to Hindus because it was part of their faith to go on set pilgrimages in their lifetime. Akbar also allowed all forms of public prayer worship to take place, allowed non-Muslim temples and churches to be built or repaired, banned the slave trade, and allowed for open conversion to or from Islam, although he did outlaw forced conversions of slaves to Islam. He also prohibited the slaughter of animals on certain days which aided in his pursuit to gain the consent of the Hindu majority.

Akbar ruled with a social and religious toleration that was relative, not absolute, and was based on his concept of absolute peace or *sulh-i-kull* (for the general good of all people) which built on his liberal views of religion. Akbar took the Sufi mystic notion of *sulh-i-kull* and transformed it to become a principle denoting amity within a culturally pluralistic India. (Iqtidar Alam Khan 88) Muhammad Abdu-l Baki, in his history of Akbar's reign, states: "Akbar extended toleration to all religions and creeds, and would recognize no difference between them, his object being to unite all men in a common bond of peace". (Elliot 242) *Sulh-i-kull* was to become his method for judging what was legally right or wrong within his empire and was created because Akbar understood that he was trying to build political institutions for a predominately non-Muslim society. Thus, in his empire, the beliefs and opinions of the orthodox *mullahs* were not to be the critical test for his rule because he wanted all of his subjects to be judged equally before the law. (Richards 2002:7)

The culmination of Akbar's legal policy was reached

in 1579, when *mahzar* or "Infallibility Decree" was issued. It came with much criticism from orthodox *mullahs* in court because Akbar proclaimed himself to be the interpreter of law and no longer desired for the *mullahs* to interpret and design the law. Through his conflict with the *mullahs* he freed himself from the confines of traditional Muslim rule that was dictated by *Shari'ah* as interpreted by the *mullahs*, leading historians like Sri Ram Sharma to conclude: "Akbar's greatest achievement lay in liberating the state from its domination by the *mullahs*". (Sharma 19) This rule free from *mullah's* control meant that everyone in the empire, from the emperor to the subjects, had a social freedom never experienced before under Muslim rule in Hindustan. Literally, the *mahzar* designated Akbar as "one capable of individual legal reasoning, a just ruler, the ruler of Islam, commander of the faithful, and the shadow of God over the two worlds". (Streusand 115)

A common misinterpretation of the *mahzar* was that it was an official edict by Akbar proclaiming himself to be infallible. Thus, the decree has commonly been mislabeled as the "Infallibility Decree". However, the *mahzar* was not solely a despotic move to obtain ultimate power, but heavily drew upon Akbar's liberal religious views, which in turn affected his views on social leadership. By issuing the *mahzar* Akbar was not claiming to be infallible, but was claiming that when the religious divines disagreed he would become the judge and not the *mullahs*. (Sharma 33) The orthodox *mullah* historian Badauni states: "The object of this declaration was to establish the complete superiority of the *Imam-i adil* (just leader) over the *Mujtahid* (chief lawyer); and to make his judgment and choice on diverse questions, so that no one could reject (his) command in either religious or political matters". (Elliot 531-32) In this way Akbar was proclaiming himself to be the *Mujtahid* of Hindustan in order for his vision of *sulh-i-kull* as a social policy may prosper. In effect, the decree only took away the right of orthodox *mullahs* to persecute others for their opinions. (Sharma 34) This meant that he no longer relied on the Muslim population in his empire for support; the indigenous Hindus now began to be recognized as part of the population and not just a source of revenue or exploitation. Sri Ram Sharma refers to Akbar's rule as "a despotism that left a wide margin to its citizens' choice". (184)

This decree proclaiming Akbar as the ruler of Islam and not the current *Khalifah* over the Islamic world upset many orthodox *mullahs* in his court. Still, it was not unique in the thought or actions of his Mughal lineage. Since the defeat of the Ottoman sultan in Baghdad in 1258, a puppet

Khalifah had been established in Egypt, and subsequently in the subcontinent. The *khutbah* had been read in the same puppet *Khalifah*'s name ever since. Although not much importance was given to it, reading the *khutbah* in the name of the same *Khalifah* did establish authority to the rest of the Islamic world of the Indian Sultanate's rule because they were conquering in his name. This included the two Mughal rulers prior to Akbar, Babur and Humayun, who did not attach any importance to the *khutbah* being read in their courts giving reverence to the Ottoman Sultan. (Tripathi 125) By Akbar's move away from this 300-year-old tradition, he was proclaiming a new era of dynastic rule in the subcontinent. Because the *khutbah* proclaims the political allegiance of the region in which it is read, this action meant that Akbar was establishing the Mughal Empire's legitimacy to the rest of the Islamic world as the just rulers of the Indian subcontinent.

Akbar's doctrine of rule was also justified to his subjects through his actions inspired by his religious beliefs. Early on in his life he was very inquisitive about his own faith as well as that of others and wanted an understanding of the religious doctrine because he could not accept blind faith. His early inquisitiveness was shown through his practice of not only allowing his Hindu wives and the Hindus in his harem to perform Hindu fire rites in the palace, but by also taking part in them. (Elliot 530) Prior to this exposure, Akbar had religious influences from his turbulent early life which gave him exposure to thoughts and beliefs that many young orthodox Sunni Muslims did not have. One influence came during his life in exile from his father's political friendship with the Shi'a majority empire of Persia. Humayun eventually won back his throne with the help of these Shi'as and took on some Shi'as as imperial officials. (Sharma 16) Bayram Khan was another Shi'a influence on Akbar as his regent during his first years of rule. Khan did not impose his religion on the imperial court, but did introduce more Shi'as to the court. These examples of Humayun and Bayram Khan demonstrate that Akbar was not the first of the Mughals to introduce people of other faiths to the imperial court. Nor was he the first to make a synthesis of Muslim Sunni, Shi'a, and Sufi beliefs.

Influence from other faiths led to Akbar's eventual beliefs in mysticism and, in turn, Sufism. He was especially intrigued with the Chishtiyyah order in India, including Shaikh Salim Chishti, who sanctified Akbar in conceiving his first son Salim (later Jahangir), and Shaikh Mubarak Nagawri. The influence of Sufi doctrines beginning around 1571 changed Akbar's world view

drastically. (Iqtidar Alam Khan 86) His outlook on Islam turned away from orthopraxy and towards the overcoming of worldly desires and urges while still preserving the fundamental doctrines. One influential aspect of the Sufi doctrine on Akbar was the belief in the transcendent unity of religions while understanding the unique distinctions of each religion. His mystic religious beliefs fused well with his belief of equality and his law policy of *sulh-i-kull*.

In his mission to legitimize his rule to the Hindu majority, many orthodox *mullahs* at the imperial court viewed Akbar as having denounced *Allah* and his move towards sun prostration as apostasy. However, Sri Ram Sharma claims that Akbar did not worship the sun as a god, but thought it was the most powerful manifestation of God, which shows that Akbar remained a Muslim. (Sharma 42) Akbar still believed in the worship and supremacy of *Allah*, but did not agree with the judgment of orthodox leaders or the orthopraxy of Islam. On one occasion, to discover which doctrine, Christian or Muslim, was superior Akbar suggested a test to prove which of the two laws was superior. He suggested that "the Fathers and the *mullahs*, the former holding their holy scriptures, and the latter their Qur'an, should enter a fire together, and those who were not burnt should be regarded as the possessors of the true law". (Father Du Jarric 30) Neither the *mullahs* nor the priests followed through with the request, citing that they did not need to be presumptuous and tempt God. This led Akbar to conclude: "Man's outward profession and the mere letter of Islam, without a heartfelt conviction, can avail nothing". (Elliot 60). This event provides insight into how *mullah* orthodoxy had failed Akbar's inquisitive nature because it showed that these men who claimed to be superior would not actually apply their beliefs. Akbar states: "I have forced many Brahmins to adopt the religion of my ancestors; but now that my mind has been enlightened with beams of truth, I have become convinced that the mist of self-opinion has gathered round you and not a step can be made without the torch of proof". (Elliot 60-1) These words mark the turning point of Akbar's move away from rule as a strict Muslim emperor and to a multi-cultural Muslim leader.

Akbar's lasting belief in Islam is also apparent through his repeated actions as emperor that supported his monotheistic belief in *Allah* and showed that he always considered himself to be a Muslim, regardless of others' opinions. (Sharma 41-2) Many times throughout his life that he would test the Divine Will by deliberately tempting death. Akbar offers an explanation for his actions, stating that if we have displeased God in any

way, "may the elephant finish us, for we cannot support the burden of life under God's displeasure". (Abul Fazl 1989, 11: 234-35) Those people opposing Akbar's religious views pointed out that his move to understand other religions, combined with his sun worship, were revolutionary actions that demarcate his move away from Islam. Yet, Akbar's inquisitiveness and unorthodox Muslim thought were not unique to his lineage. He was not the first Mughal to recognize the spiritual importance of the sun. Humayun's mystic beliefs and faith in astrology led him to first synthesize the idea of the sun with the Divine light of God.

Akbar's religious beliefs reached their culmination with the development of his own interpretation for religion, the *Din-i-Ilahi*, which literally means "divine faith" or "religion of God". No official or subject was forced to convert and discipleship predominately remained inside the palace walls. The basic premises to accept the emperor's faith were that each disciple must repudiate the bonds of orthodox Islam and give reverence to *Allah* directly. This meant that followers of his religion were to no longer be considered as Hindu or Muslim, but solely as a disciple of Akbar. The disciple must swear to be willing to sacrifice life, property, religion, and honor in the service of the Master (Akbar). (Richards 2002:307) Thus, the function of the *Din-i Ilahi* was a system of loyal discipleship rather than a new religion.

In the above context, Akbar's religious beliefs and pursuits should be seen as personal ideas that he wanted to develop for his own welfare as well as the general welfare of the empire, with the latent motive of aiding in the establishment of the Mughal supremacy over his subjects. His progressive religious views synthesized well with Hindu tradition and aided in his goal of legitimizing his rule to Hindus. Concurrently, Akbar's religious views were close enough to Islamic doctrine for dissenters to only speculate whether he had abandoned Islam or not. By always walking a middle ground with his religious beliefs and practices, Akbar was able to win over much of the non-Muslim population while sustaining sufficient, although at times waning, Muslim support.

II

Akbar had in place a policy of incorporating his opponents into his imperial administration by treating them generously and providing them with lives much better than their previous ones as autonomous warriors. He would offer new opportunities for imperial service to many of the defeated nobles, their kinsmen, and most other pre-existing state positions. (Richards 2002:10) The newly incorporated officials would become *zamindars*

(local level land-holders), and some would even be promoted to high-ranking *mansabdars* (imperial rank holders). The importance of Akbar's incorporation policy was that the emperor did not have the concern of implementing imperial policy at the village level, which allowed him to direct all his energy towards the expansion and legitimization of his rule throughout the whole of the empire. Incorporation also symbolized his former opponents' status as willing subjects to Mughal superiority that recognized the Mughal Empire's legitimacy.

Once he had incorporated his opposition into the imperial administration, Akbar had to develop a way to maintain their loyalty to him and the Mughal Empire. He needed to create a lucrative system that the people whom he was conquering would find appealing so that they would want not only be a part of it, but also to uphold it. To do this, Akbar developed an elaborate system of daily, unchanging ritual that created a lasting sense of legitimacy by incorporating many methods allowing subordinates to easily recognize the sovereign. Ritual was a tool to overcome many of the pre-existing loyalties of Hindu chiefs and prior Indo-Muslim rulers that had been incorporated into the empire by making them become a physical extension of Akbar. F.W. Buckler states: "The [emperor] stands for a system of rule of which he is the incarnation, incorporating into his own body by means of symbolized acts, the person of those who share his rule. They are regarded as being parts of his body...and in their district or their sphere of activity they are the [emperor] himself". (Buckler 177; Shivram 2006) This means that Akbar ruled a theater state because the person who was the Mughal emperor was irrelevant. What mattered to the dynasty was that the local officials identified themselves with the position of the Mughal emperor, both physically and symbolically.

The most important aspect of ritual was the show of power. All proceedings were conducted in an elaborate and repetitive manner for the purpose of placing overwhelming reverence in Akbar's subjects and, more importantly, in the imperial officials. Akbar made the important addition of many aspects of ritual from the Hindu style of kingship which made the Mughal emperor legitimately recognizable to all in the empire, both Hindu and Muslim. This included such rituals as the *jharuka darshan* (visits to the balcony each morning to show him to the general public gathered below), *Tuladan* (which entailed the emperor being weighed on auspicious occasions and that weight in gifts being given to the needy) and his style of *darbar* (visits to the *Diwan-i 'Am*, the Hall of Public Audience). (Streusand 135-36).

More importantly, the ritual show of power was a

regular affirmation of the stability of the empire, whether it was from a palace balcony or an imperial encampment on the move. Because of the vast system of imperial officials and the trade that began to boom from the land revenue system, news of the emperor or empire in distress would spread rapidly. Also, many of these officials were formerly autonomous and would jump at the chance to regain their former status. Thus, Akbar needed to constantly show the success of the empire in order to prevent any malicious news from spreading to regional officials. This ritual relationship between Akbar and his officials and subjects was the essence of the Mughal Empire and was constantly in the precarious position of walking a tightrope. Douglas Streusand states that "the Mughal Empire existed as long as regional power holders defined themselves as Mughal *mansabdars*"). (173)

Most of the daily ritual interaction between Akbar and his officials occurred during the *darbars*. At the *Diwan-i 'Am*, the unchanging daily system of rituals reaffirmed the emperor's personal relationship to each official, while also reaffirming his authority over the empire. *Mansabdars* were an essential part of the Mughal court. In theory, all of these ranking officials were to serve for one month at the imperial court, so all could experience the grandeur of Akbar's court and learn the proper court etiquette. While at court, they were required to perform guard duty at least once a week and to perform in all court rituals). (Streusand 145) When the *mansabdars* were not at court, the reciprocal exchange of gifts still occurred regularly by way of imperial messengers. When *mansabdars* received robes and promotions, they would prostrate to the imperial decree and the messenger who brought it as though they were the Akbar himself). (Streusand 143)

The daily process of imperial ritual experienced in attending Akbar's court meant that *mansabdars* were assigned roles, both passive and active, in a wide range of ceremonies. These actions included all officials standing, disarmed and alone with no attendants, in rows based on rank during court proceedings. Standing by rank served the purpose of reminding all officials, many of whom were previously autonomous chieftains, of their new inferior status within the empire. By being stripped of their guards and weapons they were reminded of their own weakness without the protection of the emperor, as well.

The most important and elaborate ritual was the reciprocal exchange of gifts, which symbolized the close personal tie between the emperor and the *mansabdars*. (Richards 2002:13) The gifts transformed the officials into extensions of Akbar's body and provided external marks of their status. (Streusand 152) The different levels of gifts exchanged were indicators of each official's status in the

empire. Higher status in society became synonymous with deep prostration to the emperor; the deeper the prostration, the higher the status. This meant that the greater the present given to Akbar, then the higher the rank of the giver. Those officials who did not give the right amount or those who did not send anything at all were punished, for "failure to send it [the present] meant disruption of the relationship which the gift exchange stated". (Streusand 144)

Akbar employed a lucrative policy of incorporation for defeated, formerly autonomous opponents. This incorporation brought them into the Empire, but did not legitimize Mughal rule to them. A powerful tool in Akbar's principle to legitimize his rule was the incorporation of rituals drawn from pre-existing Hindu methods for kingship, which strengthened his relationship with the former Hindu chieftains. Through the unchanging daily ritual interaction between Akbar and his *mansabdars* in court, Akbar was able to solidify his hold over the empire while assuring all of his subjects of the empire's welfare. Thus, imperial ritual was an administrative tool which formed the "cohesive glue" to allow the codependent *mansabdari* and land revenue systems to operate without fail. The *mansabs* symbolically became visual signifiers of Akbar throughout the empire, serving the larger purpose of affirming the effulgence of the empire to all of its subjects.

III

When Akbar became emperor of the Mughal Empire he inherited a land revenue system that did not have great influence upon the local economy. He did, however, understand the abilities of the land revenue system begun by prior Indo-Muslim regimes, such as the ruler Sher Shah Sur. Rather than try to create a new revenue system; Akbar employed the help of his advisers to reform this one. (Malleson 185) Akbar's fiscal reforms had the administrative purpose of stabilizing the village-level peasant population while consolidating regional rule directly under his command. It was imperative that Akbar create a land revenue system and administration that gave the appearance of a cohesive central government in order for all of his subjects to unquestionably view Akbar and the Mughals as legitimate rulers. Here, Akbar's policies show how important Akbar considered support from all classes of the population—not just from the ruling class—in order to legitimize his rule within the empire. The reformations of the land revenue system included reorganizing all of the Mughals' land and correcting the inherent corruption of the system.

Akbar began by reclassifying all land holdings into five categories based on the fertility of the soil. Under the new regulation land tax system, imperial revenue officials, theoretically, gathered reports on the status of the cultivation of each peasant in each village. From the reports, they assessed taxes based on the recorded prices and yields specific to each locality. In 1580, Akbar and his advisers succeeded in the reorganization of the empire on the provincial level of the tax revenue system with the establishment of twelve provinces (*subahs*). (Streusand 113) Each province, by imperial decree, was to have its own administration, consisting of seven posts who were both functionaries of the province and people who reported to the central administration, as well. The governors (*subahdars*) had military control over the region, but not administrative free reign. Through this division between civil and military authority, Akbar had begun to restrict the autonomy of the provincial governors.

Another reform, one which shocked the upper rung of the Muslim hierarchy, was the re-examination of all religious land grants. Akbar analyzed each grant and reassessed them personally. For these reexaminations, Akbar arranged private interviews with the *shaikhs* and *ulemas* (leaders of Sufi brotherhoods and scholars) to decide whether each land grant was valid. He upheld the validity of many land grants if he was satisfied, but those religious leaders who had disciples, held spiritual soirees, or claimed to have accomplished miracles were punished by a withdrawal of their grants. (Iqbal Husain 75) The reassessment of all land grants shows that Akbar wanted to establish from the beginning of his rule the idea that he kept close watch over the religious Muslim authorities, the *shaikhs* and *ulemas*. Akbar's control of the Muslim officials demonstrates the emperor's commitment to establishing Mughal legitimacy in Hindustan and to separating himself from the corrupt, dysfunctional elements of a Muslim-run empire.

The greatest improvement to the administration and land revenue system was the development of the *mansabdari* system, which created a hierarchy of officials, all of whom were exclusively loyal to the emperor. This new system for administration was meritocratic and not based on a religious aristocracy. Previously, the Muslims in India formed the governing class from which all high officials were drawn. However, Akbar ended Muslim superiority in his empire by choosing men on merit, rather than on the basis of kinship, religion, or nepotism, including many very able non-Muslims. (Ahmed 339) The inclusion of Hindus into high posts of the administration was a form of tokenism. Their elevated stature would allow other Hindus who came to court to recognize

Akbar's superiority, as Hindus would already be standing near him. It also expressed to every person that the Mughal Empire was not subject to a harsh, fundamentalist Muslim rule, but was subject to the goal of the equality of all of its subjects.

The hierarchical system of imperial rank existed in Akbar's Mughal lineage, but he viewed it as inefficient for his ideal administration. Babur was the first to bring this Mongol system to the Indian subcontinent. With the exception of the numerical rank, his system had a division between high officials, labeled "great Begs", and lower officials, "Begs". (Moreland 220) All of Babur's officials were members of a regular service, which had formal appointments and promotions, as well. Mirroring the formality of the regular service system before him, Akbar's *mansabdari* system also sought to distinguish levels between rank holders. Akbar differed from Babur's system, however, as he was the first of his Mughal lineage to create the dual status of a separate civil and military rank for each rank holder.

Akbar introduced giving each *mansab* two rank numbers, which expanded the officials' responsibility to the empire into civilian duty. The first rank was the *zat*, the personal numerical rank given to middle and high officials which determined their salary. The addition of the *zat* rank denoted numerically how that official stood in relation to the emperor. The higher the rank, the more important that official's relationship was to Akbar. The second number, the *suwar*, was the numerical rank given to officials denoting the number of soldiers and cavalry the *mansab* was responsible for when called upon. *Suwar* was a trooper rank and was probably introduced in Akbar's fortieth regnal year. (Shivram chapter I) The W.H. Moreland's view (214) that Akbar introduced the double rank, i.e. the *suwar* rank in the eleventh regnal year and acceptance of the existence of the *zat* rank prior to this date is indefensible. This separation between civil and military ranks for each official, ranks that could be changed at Akbar's will, allowed him to maintain a civil hierarchy dependent exclusively on his will while concurrently maintaining the strength of the imperial army.

Akbar limited the power of his *mansabdars* by personally appointing each *mansabdar* and imposing his will over them through legislative procedure. Syed Giasuddin Ahmed states that "officials [in the *mansabdari* system] were bound to the emperor not through serfdom, but through a free and mutual contract". (342) All officials were subject to dismissal or transfer to another region, for Akbar never wanted any official to gain too much loyalty or power in one particular region. This transfer was not without warrant because, in the provinces, the

provincial governor was viewed as the incarnation of the emperor himself, and would gain allegiances in his region as such. Also, every *mansabdar*, theoretically, was chosen personally by Akbar, requiring an elaborate process by which each *mansab* had to be appointed twice. The reason behind Akbar's use of personal appointment was his belief that the imperial eye was sharp enough to discern the merits of every man. Abu'l Fazl states of Akbar that "his majesty sees through some men at the first glance, and confers upon them high rank". (1989 a:1,248)

In Akbar's quest to establish Mughal legitimacy and his own legacy on the subcontinent, he had effectively created an imperial administration which inherently checked itself. Whether the ruler and his judgment were present or not, the Mughal administration would continue to run without major problems. Although the Mughal Empire begun its decline with Shah Jahan's successor and son, Aurangzeb, the *mansabdari* system lasted through British rule and into the mid-1800s.

Douglas Streusand has referred to Akbar's relationship to the village level of his empire as the "Akbari Compromise". (170-71) Streusand's interpretation builds on the idea that Akbar wanted to run the empire with a focus on individual households, achieving this through central officials reporting directly to him on the status of the people. However, he quickly discovered the central administration could not penetrate into the village level due to the long existing regional system of rule backed by a loyal armed peasantry. Therefore, Akbar abandoned his dream of a fully centralized administration and entered into a compromise of keeping the regional rulers in similar positions as they were prior to his rule. Streusand claims that the compromise consisted of regional rulers who need not fear losing their position as long as they maintained the emperor's trust and did not abuse their authority by being disloyal to him.

Akbar inherited a hierarchical system of land revenue that had been developing since the establishment of the Sultanate in the twelfth century. In the land revenue system, the emperor's relationship to the chieftains depended on constant military coercion for tax revenue. This situation perpetuated a never ending power struggle between the state's efforts for a consolidation of power and the chieftains' desire for territorial autonomy. Akbar saw the inefficiency of the existing tax revenue system and sought to reform it in a way that would legitimize the state, ending the need for military coercion while continuing to demand from chieftains' recognition of the central government's superiority, the obedient remit of tax revenue, and the rendering of military assistance. Akbar made the system of regional control more effective because he developed a lucrative policy of incorporation

for his opponents into the Mughal hierarchical administration. He was the first ruler to realize the importance of forging links between the position of the emperor and the chieftains by incorporating them into the imperial hierarchy of administration. (Nurul Hasan 1998: 286) Akbar understood that military coercion was not the right method for consolidation. He obtained the empire's revenue through aggressive diplomacy designed to reduce the chieftains' status to intermediaries for the empire, for which they would receive just compensation. The first step in the reductive process was the introduction of the same generic term (*zamindar*) to refer to all of the holders of widely varying types of landed interests. In doing this, Akbar destroyed the pre-existing hierarchy on the local level, as all persons who were previously in that hierarchy were now equal in the community. From autonomous chieftains to village heads, all possessed the same rank in the view of the Mughal Empire.

Akbar did not hesitate to use force to establish his supremacy over some staunch opponents, although diplomacy was preferred. During the beginning of his rule, he would conquer his opponents by whatever means necessary, which included personally leading his army on campaigns of bloody battles and sometimes enduring long devastating sieges. The power of Akbar and his empire came from one important fact: he always won. Later in his rule, many opposing chieftains began to understand the extent of his power, receiving the positive benefits of his incorporation policy by conceding to him without much bloodshed. In Akbar's policy of incorporation, a chieftain's submission brought the possibility for advancement within the imperial bureaucracy. (Streusand 113) The usual appointment of chieftains was to *mansabdars* who were allowed to rule their territory much in the same way as before.

The new treatment of the chieftains made them depend on Akbar's goodwill for their positions, as opposed to their prior hereditary rights. This dependency for their livelihood, combined with the Mughal-reserved right to transfer officials, meant that the emperor effectively had full control over the former chieftains' territory. (Hasan 287) Akbar was the first foreign ruler of Hindustan to make a direct relationship with the vassals. Prior Indo-Muslim rulers only tried to control the various levels of chieftains, without attempting to penetrate deeper into the multi-layered agrarian system. (Hasan 286) Akbar forged new relationships on the local level in an attempt to undermine the power of formerly autonomous chieftains and to form new allies who would act as imperial spies for the welfare of the state. (Hasan 288)

Akbar's actions on the village level demonstrate his

concern for legitimizing the Mughal Empire to all of his subjects, not just to the bureaucracy. He created a system which ventured deep into the local sphere in order to discover how his policies were being implemented. His generous policy of incorporation left prior autonomous rulers with a comfortable position in the Mughal administration, allowing them to rule over their regions with few changes apart from slightly less power and a new allegiance. As long as they identified themselves as part of the Mughal Empire, prior chieftains were allowed to prosper along with it.

Conclusion

The principles that Akbar employed to legitimize his rule included efforts to centralize all rule in the empire directly under him by reforming the legislative policy, administration and the land revenue system. In the legal sphere, Akbar moved away from the Muslim custom of appealing to orthodox *mullah*'s judgment and relies on his own amicable policy of *sulh-i-kull*. Subjects of the new Mughal Empire were also free to convert to or from religions, as long as it was not a forced conversion. The culmination of Akbar's legal reform policy came with the 1579 *mahzar*, or "Infallibility Decree", which effectively established Akbar's freedom from orthodox *mullah*'s opinion as well as the creation of the legitimate Mughal Empire to the rest of the Islamic World. For his imperial administration, Akbar created the efficient *mansabdari* system. Almost every imperial official from all levels of administration was included in this system, and his status determined his closeness to Akbar, as well as his position in society. The hierarchical *mansabdari* system was indiscriminate of religious affiliation and served the larger purpose of having all in the administration identify directly with the Mughal emperor for their status in the empire, not with a religious hierarchy. Most *mansabdars* were paid by the *jagir* system of salary assignment, in which *mansabdars* collected their own salary from specified regions. This self-generating tax revenue system was efficient for Akbar because he could focus more energy on expanding the empire rather than on running the land that was already incorporated. Life-indoctrinating ritual interaction was the "cohesive glue" which held Akbar's administration together. Some rituals were incorporated from the Hindu style of kingship, which allowed for Hindus to easily recognize the sovereign. Through the ritual interaction, Akbar's subordinates became a visible representative and reminder of the effulgence of the emperor throughout the empire.

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