

UNIT 97 – UPSC - Akbar The Great

India's History : Medieval India : Accession of Akbar - 1556

Akbar - The Great



Akbar "The Great" [1542-1605], was one of the greatest rulers in Indian history. He was born when Humayun and his first wife, Hamida Bano, were fugitives escaping towards Iran. It was during these wanderings that Akbar was born in Umerkot, Sindh, on November 23, 1542. Legend has it that Humayun prophesied a bright future for his son, and thus accordingly, named him Akbar.

Akbar was raised in the rugged country of Afghanistan rather than amongst the splendor of the Delhi court. He spent his youth learning to hunt, run, and fight and never found time to read or write. He was the only great Mughal ruler who was illiterate. Despite this, he had a great desire for knowledge. This led him not only to maintain an extensive library but also to learn. Akbar had his books read out to him by his courtiers. Therefore, even though unable to read, Akbar was as knowledgeable as the most learned of scholars.

Akbar came to throne in 1556, after the death of his father, Humayun. At that time, Akbar was only 13 years old. Akbar was the only Mughal king to ascend to the throne without the customary war of succession; as his brother Muhammad Hakim was too feeble to offer any resistance.

During the first five years of his rule, Akbar was assisted and advised by Bahram Khan in running the affairs of the country. Bahram Khan was, however, removed and for a few years Akbar ruled under the influence of his nurse Maham Anga. After 1562, Akbar freed himself from external influences and ruled supreme.

Akbar's Reign

Thanks to Akbar's exceptionally capable guardian, Bahram Khan, Akbar survived his father's death at a young age to demonstrate his worth. Akbar's reign holds a certain

prominence in history; he was the ruler who actually fortified the foundations of the Mughal Empire.

Areas not under the empire were designated as tributaries. He also adopted a conciliatory policy towards the Rajputs, hence reducing any threat from them. Akbar was not only a great conqueror, but a capable organizer and a great administrator as well. He set up a host of institutions that proved to be the foundation of an administrative system that operated even in British India. Akbar's rule also stands out due to his liberal policies towards the non-Muslims, his religious innovations, the land revenue system and his famous Mansabdari system. Akbar's Mansabdari system became the basis of Mughal military organization and civil administration.

Akbar was a great patron of architecture, art, and literature. His court was rich in culture as well as wealth. In fact, his court was so splendid that the British monarch, Queen Elizabeth I, once even sent out her ambassador, Sir Thomas Roe, to meet the king! Many of Akbar's buildings still survive, including the Red Fort at Agra, and the city of Fatehpur Sikri, near Agra, which has a 10-km long wall encircling it.

It may come as a surprise for many that a great ruler like Akbar actually could not read or write! And yet, he had a tremendous love for learning. During his lifetime, Akbar collected thousands of beautifully written and illustrated manuscripts. He also surrounded himself with writers, scholars, musicians, painters, and translators. His court had the fabled Nine Gems - nine famous personalities from different walks of life. These included music maestro Tansen and intelligent statesman Birbal.



The reign of Akbar was a period of renaissance of Persian literature. The Ain-i-Akbari gives the names of 59 great Persian poets of Akbar's court. History was the most important branch of Persian prose literature. Abul Fazl's Akbarnama and Ain-i-Akbari were complementary works. Akbar and his successors, Jehangir and Shah Jehan greatly contributed to the development of Indian music. Tansen was the most accomplished musician of the age. Ain-i-Akbari gives the names of 36 first-rate musicians of Akbar's court where Hindu and Muslim style of music mingled freely. The Mughal architectural style began as a definite movement under his rule. Akbar's most ambitious and magnificent architectural undertaking was the new capital city that he built on the ridge at Sikri near Agra. The city was named as Fatehpur to commemorate Akbar's conquest of Gujrat in 1572. The most impressive creation of this new capital is the grand Jamia Masjid. The southern entrance to the Jamia Masjid is an impressive gateway known as Buland Darwaza.

Like most other buildings at Fatehpur Sikri, the fabric of this impressive gateway is of red sandstone that is decorated by carvings and discreet inlaying of white marble. Of all the Mughals, Akbar's reign was the most peaceful and powerful.

During his reign, Akbar managed to subdue almost all of India, with the remaining areas becoming tributary states. Along with his military conquests, he introduced a series of reforms to consolidate his power. Akbar practiced tolerance aimed at Hindu-Muslim unification through the introduction of a new religion known as Din-i-Ilahi. He won over the Hindus by naming them to important military and civil positions, by conferring honors upon them, and by marrying a Hindu princess.



He appointed nobles and mansabdars without any religious prejudice. Akbar's religious innovations and policies, and deviation from Islamic dogma, have been a source of debate and controversy. Akbar was a great patron of literary works and scholars. His court had numerous scholars of the day who are well known as "Nauratan".

Akbar himself appointed important regional officers answerable to him. He was able to set up a chain of informers, officials spied on their colleagues and reported any misdeeds or suspicious behaviour back to the emperor. Army commanders were given money with which to pay their soldiers and Akbar kept detailed records of every man's name and description. Even the horses were branded.

Akbar also introduced a new and fairer system of taxation based on carefully estimated tables of crop yields. Tax collectors had their own district tables and used them to work out how much grain the farmers should contribute. This contribution was then converted into its cash value, district by district, because food prices varied in different parts of the empire.

Akbar had three sons Prince Salim, Murad and Daniyal. Prince Murad and Daniyal died in their prime during their father's lifetime. However, Akbar faced problems with Prince Salim and the last four years of Akbar's life were consumed in crushing Salim's rebellion. Akbar fell ill and died of slow poisoning on October 27, 1605. With him ended the most glorious epoch in Indian history.

Akbar's coinage

In the 30th year of his reign, Akbar, who was distancing himself from Islam and searching for a universal religion, replaced the Hegira era dates by the Ilahi era (the "Divine" era) ones, calculated in solar years from the beginning of his reign. He dropped from the obverse of his coins the Muslim profession of faith and the expression "Allah akbar", "God is great" was substituted. He also suppressed his own name, or maybe not: the arabic expression on the obverse could also mean "Akbar is God"



Mughals, Akbar, 1556 to 1605 AD
square silver rupia, dated AH 995 (Hegira era), 1586 AD.



Mughals, Akbar, 1556 to 1605 AD
square silver 1/2 rupia, dated year 40 of the Ilahi era, 1594 AD.



Mughals, Akbar, 1556 to 1605 AD
copper tanka (2 dam), Bairata,
probably one of the heaviest copper coins (40.6 gr) ever struck in India by a Muslim ruler