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Echoes of Empire: Literary Insights into the select verses in the Akbarnāma of Abu'l Fazl

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Abstract

Abu'l Fazl's *Akbarnāma* and *Ā'in-i-Akbarī* are considered as significant documents of the Mughal regime, particularly during the tenure of King Akbar. Commissioned in 1590, Abu'l Fazl's *Akbarnāma* and *Ā'in-i-Akbarī* serve as didactic treatises articulating Akbar's kingship through *akhlaqī* (ethical) frameworks. They are treatises considered as "lesson books" for moral and administrative guidance, projecting Akbar as a warrior and as a divine patriarch of his empire. The present study examines the literary significance of the poetic compositions interwoven within these narratives, quite importantly in the initial chapters, exploring how they enhance the aesthetic and ideological dimensions of Akbar's imperial representation. The poem functions as a panegyric that elevates the divine origin of speech and knowledge while locating their earthly embodiment in the monarch Akbar. Within this opposition, the sovereign emerges as a ruler whose power exceeds temporal governance, extending into the cosmic order and influencing the celestial and the human destiny alike. The tone intertwines mystical reverence with imperial grandeur and the king is presented as an axis of divine order whose presence brings illumination and guidance. Discursively, the text constructs a hierarchy where divine truth grounds all knowledge and power, acknowledging human limitations yet inspiring awe before the exalted status of the sovereignty. It reaffirms the interconnection between spirituality, kingship, and cosmic harmony central to the medieval South Asian traditions.

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Introduction

The *Akbarnāma* is a detailed Persian biography of Akbar, written by Abu'l Fazl, one of his top advisors. It was both a historical record and a tribute to Akbar's regime. The work has three parts: Akbar's genealogy and early reign, later years until 1602, and a detailed description of the empire's administration and culture. The volumes include beautiful illustrations of the monarch hunting, fighting, and leading pilgrims, emphasizing his close nexus with the wild and the civilised world. This paper focuses on the verses written in the initial sections for praising the greatness of the emperor and a possible re-reading of those by making use of the tools of literary analysis.

Literature Review

Several studies focus on the political and social background of Akbar's reign. Balkishan Sivaram (2006-07) presents a model to understand Mughal power, especially through its ceremonies and symbols. His aim is to help readers grasp its

importance in Indian history by examining the meanings behind actions and expressions during that time. Harbans Mukhia (2020) discusses Abu'l Fazl's ideas, highlighting his view that reason should guide religion rather than blind faith. Abu'l Fazl redefined religion by promoting "universal peace" (*sulh-i kul*) to overcome religious conflicts. His thoughts were influenced by the poet Kabir and Sufi ideas. Najaf Haider (2016) views Abu'l Fazl as one of the most advanced thinkers in medieval India, exploring his opinions on social hierarchy and the role of money. C.H. Prasad (2021) emphasizes Akbar's legacy of strong but fair government, religious tolerance, and liberal tax policies that helped common people prosper. Akbar's love for art led to a blend of Indian and Persian styles, best shown in buildings like the Taj Mahal. He proved that tolerance is a strength, not weakness, shaping Indian society by separating religion from politics. Vipin Kumar (2017) gives an account of Akbar's early life, rise to power at age of thirteen, and later period of reign. It has been identified that not many the research gap in this context is the

less analysed verses taken from the *Akbarnāma*.

Literary Texts

The *Akbarnāma*-literally the Book of Akbar-constitutes a seminal Persian biographical chronicle of Akbar, the third Mughal emperor. The text represents not only an elaborate historical record but also a conscious project of imperial legitimation. Completed over a period of seven years, the work originally circulated with illustrated manuscripts that epitomized the distinctive aesthetic of the Mughal School of painting, thereby fusing narrative historiography with visual representation. Structurally, the *Akbarnāma* is divided into three volumes. The first volume functions as both genealogy and chronicle, situating Akbar within the Timurid lineage while tracing the events from his birth and accession to the throne through the initial seventeen years of his reign. The second volume extends this narrative, covering the subsequent decades of Akbar's rule until the forty-sixth regnal year. The third volume, known as the *Ā'in-i-Akbarī*, departs from narrative history to foreground the administrative, cultural, and intellectual architecture of the empire. This section incorporates perspectives on geography, cosmography, and aesthetic theory, rendering the text as a compendium of cross-cultural epistemologies within the Mughal imperial order. Often perceived as "lesson books" for moral and practical instruction, these works-supported by lavishly illustrated manuscripts-projected Akbar as warrior, ruler and divine father of his imperial household. The literature part praises Akbar's divine wisdom and power, showing how his speech was seen as a sacred force that shaped reality. The poem highlights Akbar as a spiritual and political leader. The tonal register of the poem merges mystical reverence with imperial grandeur, effecting a discursive balance between spiritual humility and political glorification. The monarch is constructed as the axis mundi, the living centre of divine order, whose presence ensures renewal, radiance, and guidance for his subjects. At the level of discourse, the poem relies on elevated symbolic expression to articulate a hierarchy in which divine truth underpins all manifestations of knowledge and power.

Background

Jalaluddin Muhammad Akbar (1542–1605), often mentioned in the history as Akbar the Great, occupies a pivotal place in the political and cultural historiography of Mughal times. The son of Nasiruddin Humayun and grandson of Babur, the founder of the Mughal dynasty, Akbar inherited the throne in 1556 at the age of fourteen, following Humayun's death. By the time of his own death in 1605, the Mughal Empire had expanded to encompass nearly one million square kilometers, consolidating its position as one of the most formidable polities of its time. Akbar's early accession foregrounds the precarity of dynastic succession and the vulnerabilities of an emergent empire. The initial decades of his reign were characterized by an intensive process of military consolidation and territorial incorporation, through which he secured northern and central India under Mughal hegemony. A decisive moment in this consolidation was the Second Battle of Panipat, where Akbar's forces defeated King Hemu (Samrat Hemu Chandra Vikramaditya). Parallel campaigns against the Pashtun successors of Sher Shah Suri further neutralized external threats, underscoring Akbar's strategic use of warfare to dismantle competing sovereignties. Thus, Akbar's reign emerges not merely as a chronological extension of the Mughal lineage but as a formative moment of

imperial self-fashioning-where dynastic legitimacy and military prowess intersected to produce a durable imperial order. This political and military consolidation provided the necessary foundation for the cultural and intellectual projects that would later be articulated in the monumental chronicles of his reign. Under Akbar, the ruling class combined intellectual skills with military abilities. They were educated in Persian and Arabic literature and also excelled in warfare, adopting advanced weapons and strategies. Court life included hunting, artistic patronage, and grand ceremonies. In order to establish the veracity of the arguments, a few passages are given here under to illustrate the literary part of the paper. The source is that of Henry Beveridge's translation of *The Akbar Nama of Abu-l-Fazl*.

Select Verses from the Text for Analysis

What a Word was that whose utterance
Unveiled the eighteen thousand!
No feast equals it in intoxicating power;
No rival comes nigh it in supremacy.
It is the initiator in the workshop;
It sits enthroned in the palace.
'Whatever reaches the heart of the wise,

The heart utters to the tongue and the tongue rehearses to the ear.

The path is from the adit to the exit of hearts;
Expression and audition are its arena.
In reason's observatory the tongue and the ear
Are the rising and setting of speech's moon. (Introduction, 3)

Letters and dots are the desert sand in Thy perfect path.
In the universe of Thy wisdom, the city of speech is but some market-booths?
The warders of jealousy at Thy door, smite the understanding,
'With blows of astonishment in front, and strokes of ignorance from behind. (Introduction, 6)

Wherever discourse? deals with the knowledge of God,
Our thoughts' praise becomes dispraise.
Behold rashness, how it boils over with daring!
Can a drop embrace the ocean?
Think not that it is even a single letter of the Book,
For the Letter is muslin and the Book moonlight.
How long wilt thou be an embroidery of speech?
Stay thy foot here, with the acknowledgment of humility.
(Introduction, 7-8)

Though the foot of Speech be long of stride,
Thy curtain-stone hath shattered it.
Though Speech be fat and lusty,
It is lean when it reaches Thy table. (Introduction, 9)

That King of Kings, prop of the sky!
The umbrella of his fortune is the sky's shadow;
Adorning the garden-plot of wisdom and knowledge;
Exalting the throne and the diadem; —
The seat of his power is rich in liberality;
His fortune's shape has an open brow;
His presence is the truth-seekers' cynosure;
His pity a fountain-head for the thirsty;
By a single thought, he has placed under foot
The royal divan and the dervish's carpet.
The nine heavens revolve for his purpose;

The seven stars! travel for his work;
 By wisdom, he is the age's provider;
 By vigilance, the world's watchman;
 His love and his hate, in the banquet and the battle,
 Are brimming cups of wine and blood;
 The kingdom fears his wrath;
 Caesar is disturbed at his frown;
 Heaven in glory, Earth in stability
 Lord of universal reason! Jaldlu-d-din.
 Essence of sunlight and shadow of God,
 Pearl of crown and throne is Akbar Shah.
 May this old world be renewed by him.
 May his star bore the sun's rays. (Introduction, 22-23)

O Lord, by the lamplight of Thy Essence,
 By the ocean pearls of Thy Attributes,
 By those holy Ones (prophets and saints) who come forth like
 pure roses,
 'Whose souls are washed by the fountains of the sun,
 Grant a jewel to my fortune's crown;
 Grant a star to my exaltator's heaven;
 Grant a moonlight to my chamber!
 'Which may disperse the darknesses of the Universe;
 Irradiate my existence by a sun,
 That? the nine heavens may come within my adoration.
 Give perpetuity to my afflicted soul,
 So that, if death come by a hundred ways, I may not die.
 (Chapter 1, 41)

Poles which salutes the two poles of heaven,
 Bridling by discipline the tigers of lust,
 Stalking a8 » lion in the forest of the heart,
 Ocean-drinker of love, the' premier elephant, Ahmad-i-jam,
 Holy be his tomb! (Chapter 2, 52)

And soft-voiced Indian maids,
 Glorious! as Indian peafowl,
 And light-fingered Chinese musicians
 Produced intoxication with wineless cups;
 And dulcimer-players from Khurasan
 Brought ease to laden breasts,
 And singers from the land of 'Iraq,
 Everlasting capturers of joy. (Chapter 2, 58)

Verdant trees with heaven-brushing tops,
 Casting shade o'er the head shadowed by the bird of paradise.
 The melodious singing of the birds of the meadow
 Poured joyous notes over the banquet. (Chapter 2, 60)

The crown of exaltation over the heavens,
 The face of submission on the ground,
 The foot of dominion on the Diwan,
 The head of praise in prostration. (Chapter 2, 62)

O eye! come and behold incomparable glory,
 . Observe this banquet-hall from without and within.
 If you would appreciate the splendour of two worlds,
 Look upon the array of Humayun's feast. (Chapter 2, 62)

The cupbearers seized the goblet of pure wine,
 They made Elijah athirst for the fiery fount;
 'What was this wine that the cupbearer poured into the cup?
 That the Messiah and Elijah grew envious and contended for
 it. (Chapter 2, 62-63)

That very light which is yielded by the world-adorning Sun,
 Is produced from the brows of the sublime Shahanghih,
 That Akbar is allied to Aftab (the Sun),
 Is proved by the evidence of the names. (Chapter 2, 66)

Approach heaven-weighting observer,
 Regard with understanding the connexion of the spheres,
 Look at the beautiful horoscope of the Lord of conjunction,
 Behold the auspicious charter of two worlds,
 Contemplate this glorious rescript,
 Fortune upon fortune, light upon light. (Chapter 3, 69)

Discussion

The poem centres on the divine "Word," speech, and knowledge as supreme forces that transcend ordinary existence. It celebrates both the spiritual and temporal power of Akbar Shah, portraying him as a divinely inspired ruler whose authority mirrors cosmic order. Drawing from Sufi thought, the poem views divine truth as the principle governing both the universe and human life. Through this vision, it fuses spirituality with kingship, presenting Akbar as the earthly embodiment of divine wisdom and justice. Stylistically, the poem employs a free-flowing and symbolic form. It makes frequent use of repetition, parallelism, and rhetorical questions to heighten the grandeur of divine speech and royal power. Elevated diction merges sacred and royal imagery-phrases such as "essence of sunlight," "shadow of God," and "royal divan" demonstrate this fusion. The imagery is cosmic and natural: references to "nine heavens," "seven stars," and "birds of paradise" evoke harmony between the divine cosmos and earthly order. Metaphors such as "speech as the moon" and "the Book as moonlight" further connect expression with illumination and divine revelation. Figures of speech play a crucial role in shaping the poem's meaning. Metaphor dominates, transforming the ordinary into the divine and magnifying the emperor's role in creation. Hyperbole amplifies this praise through extravagant claims such as "No feast equals it in intoxicating power," expressing both reverence and awe. Personification lends human qualities to abstract ideas—jealousy, pity, and rashness become living presences within the spiritual universe. Similarly, synecdoche condenses vast abstractions into tangible forms, as seen when "letters and dots" stand for all written scripture, or "tongue and ear" for the entire act of speech and hearing. Religious and cultural allusions deepen the poem's meaning. By invoking figures such as the Messiah and Elijah, the poet aligns Akbar's rule with prophetic traditions and sacred authority. The imagery of "wine," "banquets," and "cupbearers" symbolizes spiritual intoxication and divine grace, suggesting that true joy comes from divine communion rather than worldly pleasure. The combination of celestial and royal symbols—sun, moon, crown, throne—reinforces the unity between divine and imperial power. At a deeper level, the poem also reflects on the limits of human language in expressing divine truth. While the "Word" is exalted as the source of creation and knowledge, the poet reminds us that human speech, reduced to "letters and dots," is as fleeting as "desert sand." This contrast between sacred revelation and human articulation emphasizes humility and the insufficiency of reason before the infinite. The metaphor of "a drop unable to embrace the ocean" captures the struggle of finite minds to comprehend the boundless divine. The poem's tone alternates between mystical contemplation and royal celebration. It shifts from questions of spiritual understanding—"Can a drop embrace the ocean?"—to images of worldly grandeur—"The

nine heavens revolve for his purpose.” This interplay of humility and exaltation reflects a broader theme: the tension between divine transcendence and human expression. The poet acknowledges that while language seeks to reveal divine knowledge, it can never fully contain it. Ultimately, the poem functions on both spiritual and political levels. It affirms Akbar’s kingship as an earthly reflection of divine order, integrating Sufi mysticism with imperial ideology. Yet, it also voices philosophical restraint, warning against the pride of human knowledge. Through its rich metaphors, symbolic imagery, and rhetorical devices, the poem becomes a meditation on the power and limitations of language-how the divine Word creates, governs, and inspires, yet always remains beyond complete understanding. In conclusion, this poem weaves together cosmic imagery, mystical reflection, and royal praise to explore the relationship between speech, divinity, and sovereignty. It celebrates the transformative power of the Word while humbling human intellect before the vastness of divine truth. By blending the sacred and the secular, it reveals a vision of kingship rooted in spiritual insight and cosmic harmony, where the emperor stands not merely as a political ruler but as a reflection of divine light itself.

Conclusion

The composition articulates a vision in which sacred utterance and imperial sovereignty converge to form a cosmic order. At its centre lies the affirmation that divine articulation surpasses mundane language, functioning as the origin of wisdom, creation, and authority. Human expression, reduced to fragments or fleeting marketplaces, is consistently contrasted with the immeasurable grandeur of transcendent truth. The sovereign, identified with Akbar Shah, emerges as the living mediator of this order, likened to celestial bodies, radiant light, and regal emblems, embodying both spiritual vitality and political dominion. The text draws upon a spectrum of devices: metaphor reduces common signs to insignificance while magnifying divine and royal magnitude; hyperbole amplifies the Word’s irresistible force and the emperor’s universe-wide influence; synecdoche and personification condense abstractions into tangible images, animating qualities such as jealousy or rashness. Allusions to scriptural and prophetic figures root the poem in deeply religious mystical traditions, while symbolism of wine, banquet, and heavenly bodies convey ecstasy, nourishment, and cosmic rhythm. Through abundant imagery-trees, ornaments, music, and celestial motion-the poem fuses mystical reverence with imperial majesty, creating a vision of kingship sustained by divine illumination.

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