

# Akbar

*and the rise of the Mughal empire*

G.B.Malleson

August 19-22, 2009

*When we reflect what he did, the age in which he did it, the method he introduced to accomplish it, we are bound to recognise in Akbar on of those illustrious men whom Providence sends, in the hour of a Nations trouble, to reconduct it into those paths of peace and toleration which alone can assure the happiness of millions.*

Those are the concluding words of Colonel G.B.Malleson<sup>1</sup>, who wrote the book at the end of the 19th century. You might expect of a British military at the height of the British Raj, to produce a rather patronizing account, yet in many ways it is written as a straightforward hagiography, Akbar did no wrong, being an almost superhuman combination of military prowess, moral rectitude, and aesthetic refinement, ascending to the throne at the death of his father Humayun, when he was not yet fourteen. During his teenage years he was under the guidance of his Atalik - Bairam, engaged in reinstating by conquest the realm that had been the achievement of his grandfather Babar<sup>2</sup> but which had disintegrated during the unhappy reign of his father Humayun. At the age of eighteen he took sole command and disbanded his tutor, and instead of dispatching him in the summary way that was the prevalent tradition, he instead sent him to Mecca<sup>3</sup>. While northern India had for centuries been conquered and ravaged by various Muslim warlords, none of them, including the greatest of the all - Babar, had been able to root their empires in the soil, thus rendering their conquests mere formal superstructure liable to be blown away by the passing of their creators. The ambition of Akbar was to do exactly so, i.e. firmly planting the foundations of an empire, as to make it impervious as long as possible to the vicissitudes of history. He realised above all that as there were no common religion, there had to be some other common interest to provide a unity on which the empire could rest. Thus he instituted an edict of religious tolerance, observing that each religion had its good parts and bad parts, and by culling the former and renouncing the latter, a synthesis beneficial to them all, could be achieved. Thus instead of proclaiming that there was but one God and Muhammad was his prophet, the battle cry under which so many Muslim rulers had forcefully converted those they had subjugated<sup>4</sup>, he kept the first part

---

<sup>1</sup> Googling gives no personal information, only references to many of his books, in addition to this, also his book on the Sepoy mutiny of 1857 and other topics related to India. A most prolific and successful writer still in print, yet obscure, nothing in Wikipedia.

<sup>2</sup> Nowadays mostly transcribed as Babur

<sup>3</sup> But before he could set sail, he was stabbed by a dagger in his back, penetrating with its tip all the way through his breastbone.

<sup>4</sup> An ambition somewhat tempered by the tradition of *jizyá*, the tax imposed on infidels

but replaced the second by terming himself as the living representative of the one lord all religions ultimately worshipped. To do so, he did not abstain from the duty of publicly showing his magnificence, a crucial component in the governing of an Eastern people as the greatest of the British Viceroys soon learned (the one time that the author displays a touch of patronizing disdain and maybe as such a clue to the source of his appreciation of the subject of his study), but who in private pursued a life of such modesty and simplicity.

The nomadic tribes of Central Asia have been for a long time the scourge of civilization, descending from their homelands and ravaging the sedate. Looting and plunder do not sustain in the end, and every human encounter, however unfortunate, involves an exchange. And just on a far more modest scales the Vikings graduated from piracy to the building of nations, however ephemeral; the Turks conquered the Arabic empire, and a bit later Mongolian hordes of Djingis Kahn subjected a territory far larger than any one seen before, being followed by other conquests, such that of the Moguls of India, and the later Mongols of China. Babar was an Afghan King with his seat in Kabul, systematically expanding his control, and when pushing down to the Indian peninsula was overwhelmed with the richness of the country, the fertility of its soil, the verdancy of its vegetation, the clemency of its climate, and the rich abound of its wildlife. His tenure of the land was weak, challenged, lost and regained, and before he could properly consolidate, he died, according to legend asking his life to be sacrificed for that of the continuation of his fatally sick son Humayun, who in the process rallied and inherited the empire. However, he could not match the genius of his father, the empire collapsed during his time and he was reduced to a fugitive slowly building up a power base from which he made some partial recoveries of what had once been bequeathed to him. He did come to a petty end though, slipping in a staircase and lingering for a few days until he died. His son Akbar had, as noted above, the responsibility thrown at him before he was even fourteen, and it is hard to believe the accomplishments he achieved in his teens, slowly but surely building up the empire which once was that of his grandfather. For most of his reign he was engaged in warfare, not for its own sake, but in order to establish peace, cynically perhaps seen as the most common excuse for war. He is said to have compensated the peasants for the damage his campaigns caused them (but at times he also ordered the time-honored strategy of the burnt earth) and showed mercy to his vanquished enemies, as long as they had not been former associates and betrayed his trust. To his children he might have been overly indulgent, two of his sons died from over-drink, and the surviving son Salim, in the future known as the mughal Jahangir was a bad character, who more than once tried to overthrow his father in addition to other 'mischiefs'. Having had at least eight wives, one might have suspected a larger brood. To his Persian court in Agra and nearby Fatepuhr-Sikri he collected the sages of his realm, and the author in particular mentions two scholars, namely Faizi and his younger brother Abulfazl (later to be assassinated on the instigation of Abkar's son Salim) whose influence on him were very beneficial as well as crucial.

What is the point of an empire? An empire that endures? It is to keep the peace of the realm, to subjugate local war-lords and provide a stable structure of justice enabling industry and commerce. As such Akbar was successful through a variety of reforms, especially pertaining to taxes, removing some and making those that remained more predictable,

thereby undercutting corruption. In particular by playing up to the Hindu population and marrying into his elite, the Muslim and Hindu elements of his domains were united at least from the top. Needless to say being incorruptible and religiously tolerant, he looked for merit disinterestedly and regardless of religious affiliation, thus attaching to his advisors and commanders, also Hindus, much to the regret of his more adamant members of his Muslim entourage. He spent the nights in intellectual conversations, and used the hotter hours of the day for sleep. He was modest in eating and drinking, and unlike his grandfather Babar, he did not renounce wine altogether, but enjoyed it sparingly. He was a great fan of horse polo, inventing a way of being able to play it in the dark as well. He loved to hunt, and in those days the jungles of India must have been awash in Elephants (of which he had thousands in his army), Rhinoceros, Tigers and also Lions in addition to a varied and colorful background of less spectacular beasts along with birds. So successful was his consolidation that after his death in the early years of the seventeenth century<sup>5</sup> it survived the misgoverning of his son, allowing his grandson and great grandson Aurangzeb to continue, and in fact after the death of the latter, perhaps the most ruthless and militarily successful of them all, it still lingered on until reduced to a purely ceremonial role in Delhi and subsequently effaced as the result of the suppression of the Sepoy mutiny in 1857.

Obviously the book is bound to be somewhat out-of-date pertaining to an older tradition of history mixing facts with myth, yet I suspect that the modern historians probably do not have access to much more documents than did Malleon. Akbar was a contemporary of Elizabeth I in England and Henri IV in France, yet his exploits and life seems to be set much further back in a time of fairy-tale. Mogul architecture still survives splendidly, but it is but stone and mortar, which can at times be strikingly beautiful, but of course only give a partial indication of the grandness and richness of the Mogul court, which must have dazzled contemporary Europeans with its ostentatious display of Oriental Wealth and refinement, only to be marginalized and impoverished during the 19th century, the grand century of European colonialism and supremacy.

August 22, 2009 **Ulf Persson:** *Prof.em, Chalmers U.of Tech., Göteborg Sweden ulfp@chalmers.se*

---

<sup>5</sup> 1542-1605