

The Administration of Akbar: Foundations of Mughal Governance and Statecraft

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Abstract

The Mughal Emperor Akbar (reigned 1556–1605) stands as one of the greatest administrators in Indian history. His reign marked the consolidation of the Mughal Empire through political stability, efficient governance, and a vision of unity amidst diversity. This paper examines Akbar's administrative system, focusing on its central, provincial, and military structures, revenue reforms, and religious policies. Drawing on the writings of Abul Fazl and modern historians such as Irfan Habib and Satish Chandra, it highlights how Akbar's policies blended Persian, Turko-Mongol, and Indian traditions to create a strong centralized state. The study concludes that Akbar's administration laid the foundation for a unified Indian polity and became a model of inclusive governance that influenced later empires.

Index Terms / Keywords: Akbar the Great, Mughal Empire, Administration, Mansabdari System, Ain-i-Akbari, Revenue Reforms, Todar Mal, Centralization, Religious Tolerance, Sulh-i-Kul

Introduction

Akbar, the third ruler of the Mughal dynasty, ascended the throne in 1556 at the age of thirteen after the death of his father, Humayun. Under his rule, the Mughal Empire transformed from a fragile kingdom into one of the most powerful and enduring empires in South Asian history. His reign was characterized by political unification, administrative innovation, and a deep sense of justice and tolerance. Akbar's administration was not merely a continuation of Turko-Mongol governance; it was a creative synthesis of Indian traditions, Islamic jurisprudence, and Persian bureaucracy. His aim was to create a stable, centralized, and efficient government capable of managing the diverse population of India. The foundations of this administrative system ensured peace, prosperity, and cultural flourishing during what historians call the "Akbarian Age."

Literature Review

Several historians have extensively analyzed Akbar's administration.

- **Abul Fazl**, Akbar's court historian, in his *Ain-i-Akbari* and *Akbarnama*, provides the most detailed contemporary account of the empire's political and administrative organization.
- **Irfan Habib** (1963) emphasized the rational, secular, and revenue-centered nature of Akbar's governance, describing it as a "bureaucratic monarchy."
- **Satish Chandra** (1997) highlighted the balance Akbar achieved between central authority and local autonomy, as well as his efforts toward religious tolerance.
- **Vincent Smith** viewed Akbar as a benevolent despot and a philosopher-king who pursued the ideal of *Sulh-i-Kul* (universal peace).

Together, these sources provide a multifaceted understanding of Akbar's rule — as both pragmatic and visionary, administrative and moral.

Central Administration

Akbar's government was organized along four main divisions, each headed by an important minister under the emperor's supervision. This framework combined the old Persian model with Indian administrative needs.

1. The Emperor

Akbar was the supreme head of the empire, combining both civil and military authority. Though autocratic in principle, he exercised power with consultation and justice. He presided over the court, reviewed petitions, and personally monitored military campaigns and revenue reports.

2. Wazir (Diwan-i-Ala)

The Wazir was the chief minister responsible for finance and revenue administration. The most famous Wazir under Akbar was Raja Todar Mal, who introduced the *Dahsala* system, assessing land revenue based on ten years' average produce and fixing tax rates accordingly.

3. Mir Bakshi

The Mir Bakshi managed military affairs, personnel records, and appointments. He supervised the *Mansabdars*—officials who combined civil and military responsibilities—and maintained discipline within the army.

4. Sadr-us-Sudur

This office looked after religious matters, grants to scholars (*madad-i-ma'ash*), and the administration of justice in religious cases. However, Akbar reduced clerical power and promoted secular governance.

5. Mir Saman

He was in charge of the imperial household, workshops (*karkhanas*), and royal expenditure.

Provincial Administration

To maintain effective control over the vast empire, Akbar divided his territory into **Subas** (provinces), each governed by officials who replicated the central model at the local level.

- **Subedar (Governor)** – the head of the province responsible for law and order and revenue collection.
- **Diwan** – managed the financial affairs.
- **Bakshi** – handled military organization.
- **Qazi and Mir Adl** – administered justice.
- **Kotwal** – maintained city security.

Each Suba was further divided into **Sarkars**, **Parganas**, and **Villages**, ensuring efficient control over every part of the empire. This hierarchical system balanced central authority with local administration, preventing rebellion and ensuring uniform governance.

The Mansabdari System

One of Akbar's greatest administrative innovations was the **Mansabdari System**, which structured the empire's civil and military bureaucracy.

- **Mansab** means "rank" or "position."
- Every officer was assigned a numerical rank (*Zat*), determining personal status, and a second rank (*Sawar*), indicating the number of cavalry he must maintain.

This dual ranking ensured loyalty, efficiency, and flexibility. The Mansabdars were paid through either cash or *jagir* (land revenue assignments). However, these lands remained imperial property, and officers could be transferred anytime, preventing the rise of feudal power centers.

The Mansabdari system thus integrated diverse groups—Mughals, Rajputs, Afghans, and Indians—into one administrative hierarchy, promoting meritocracy and unity.

Revenue Administration

The revenue system under Akbar was scientific, fair, and effective. Raja Todar Mal's reforms were especially noteworthy.

1. **Land Survey and Classification** – Lands were measured and classified into four categories based on fertility: *Polaj*, *Parauti*, *Chachar*, and *Banjar*.
2. **Dahsala System (1580)** – The average produce and price of crops over ten years were calculated, and one-third of the average produce was fixed as the state's share.
3. **Records and Accountability** – Revenue officers maintained detailed accounts in registers called *Patta* (tenant's record) and *Qabuliyat* (agreement form).

This rational system ensured stable revenue collection, discouraged exploitation, and strengthened imperial finances. It became the foundation for later revenue systems under the British.

Military Administration

Akbar maintained a strong and disciplined army organized under the *Mir Bakshi*.

The army included cavalry, infantry, artillery, and navy.

The emperor personally reviewed troops and weapons. Mansabdars had to maintain a specified number of horses and soldiers, whose records were strictly verified.

He introduced the **branding of horses (dagh)** and **descriptive rolls (chehra)** to prevent corruption. This system ensured military efficiency and loyalty to the emperor.

Judicial Administration

Justice was a central concern of Akbar's rule. He acted as the supreme judge and established a system based on Islamic law (*Sharia*), but gradually integrated Hindu customary laws for non-Muslims.

There were two major branches:

- **Civil Courts (Diwan-i-Adalat)** for revenue and administrative cases.
- **Criminal Courts (Diwan-i-Qaza)** for criminal offenses.

Local judges (*Qazis*) were appointed in every province and town. Akbar's sense of justice was famous; he often intervened personally to ensure fairness and protect common people from oppression.

Religious Policy: Sulh-i-Kul

Perhaps the most remarkable aspect of Akbar's administration was his **policy of religious tolerance**, known as *Sulh-i-Kul* (universal peace). Akbar believed that good governance required harmony among all religious groups.

- He abolished the **Jizya tax** on non-Muslims.
- Allowed freedom of worship and protected all communities.
- Established the **Ibadat Khana (House of Worship)** in Fatehpur Sikri for interfaith dialogues among scholars of different religions.

- Introduced **Din-i-Ilahi**, a spiritual movement that sought to combine the best ethical principles from all religions—though it remained limited in influence.

Through this policy, Akbar won the loyalty of Hindus, especially Rajputs, and ensured the unity of his empire.

Economic and Trade Policies

Akbar promoted agriculture, crafts, and trade. Internal trade routes were secured, and customs duties were rationalized. Ports like Surat and Cambay flourished, and coins of uniform standard—*gold mohur*, *silver rupee*, and *copper dam*—were introduced, stabilizing the economy.

The *karkhanas* produced luxury goods for the court and provided employment to thousands of artisans. Akbar's reign witnessed prosperity, urban growth, and increased cultural exchange with Persia and Central Asia.

Challenges and Reforms

Despite its strength, Akbar's administration faced challenges such as corruption among officials and the vastness of the empire. Akbar responded with strict supervision, regular audits, and rotation of officers. His personal energy, intelligence, and sense of justice kept the machinery efficient and responsive.

Discussion

Akbar's administration represented a synthesis of **autocracy and bureaucracy, tradition and innovation**. He created a model of governance based on efficiency, tolerance, and merit rather than birth or religion. His system transformed the Mughal Empire into a centralized yet flexible polity that could adapt to India's cultural diversity.

Modern historians regard Akbar's statecraft as a prototype of good governance, combining secularism, meritocracy, and humanism—values that resonate even in contemporary political thought.

Conclusion

The administrative system of Akbar was the cornerstone of the Mughal Empire's stability and glory. By integrating Persian administration, Indian traditions, and rational reforms, he created an empire that was just, efficient, and inclusive.

His policies—ranging from the Mansabdari system to Sulh-i-Kul—demonstrated his genius in blending politics with moral philosophy. Akbar's vision of unity in diversity laid the foundation for a truly Indian empire, and his legacy endures as a timeless model of enlightened leadership.

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