

Threads of Sovereignty: Clothing as Political Expression in Akbar's Court

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Abstract

This paper examines how Akbar used clothes and jewellery to project power and strengthen his political authority. In Mughal court, clothing was not only meant for appearance; every garment carried a political meaning. Using sources such as Akbarnama, Ain-i-Akbari, and Mughal miniature paintings, this study explores how dress became an important medium through which Akbar expressed imperial authority. Whether it was the jama or the use of zardozi embroidery, these were not simply items of dress; they also functioned as symbols of imperial authority. It argues that clothing and jewellery were not only decorative but also played a role in shaping and displaying power. It also highlights how clothing and jewellery reflected Akbar's policy of Sulh-i-Kul and his efforts to present himself as an inclusive ruler. The study concludes that clothing and jewellery were not merely decorative but played a significant role in expressing imperial identity, legitimacy, and royal power in Akbar's court.

Keywords: Akbar, Akbarnama, Clothing, Sovereignty and Political Expressions.

Methodology and Sources

This paper relies on both written and visual sources to study the topic. Written sources include the Ain-I Akbari and Akbarnama, which provide detailed information about clothing and fabrics. These sources suggest that clothing was carefully managed and held a prominent place in the Mughal court. Visual sources, such as miniature paintings, are also helpful as they show how clothes were worn and how people in the court were represented. Another painting, Akbar Presiding over Religious Debates in the Ibadat Khana, shows the Pearl Mala. The long necklace visible is a Hindu-style mala, used as a symbol of Sulh-i-Kul (Universal Tolerance). Another important painting, A Courtier (Late Shahjahan Album), provides evidence that Akbar's personal style influenced the clothing of the Mughal elite and later generations. In addition to these historical records, this paper also draws on modern scholarly analysis. This paper also draws on the research of Gouri Dey, whose work on Mughal textiles helps explain the technical side of the fabrics used. Similarly, the study Evolution of Dress During the Mughal Period, published in the RJPSSs journal, analyzes how clothing style changed over time. The study follows a material culture approach, which looks at clothing as something that can reflect identity and power. One limitation is that most of the information comes from royal sources, so it may not show the complete reality. However, these sources stay valuable for understanding how authority was represented during Akbar's reign.

Research Gap and objective

While many historians have already done an excellent job explaining the economics of the *karkhanas* and how textiles were produced, they focus on craftsmanship. There is a real lack of discussion on what these

clothes meant in a political sense. Although we know how the fabrics were produced, there is limited discussion of how clothing helped Akbar express authority and maintain the hierarchy of his court.

Objective: To analyze how Akbar's clothing choices were strategically used to express and reinforce political authority, cultural identity, and economic control during his reign. This includes examining the symbolic meanings of garments, the integration of textiles into the Mughal court, and the connection between clothing and Akbar's political philosophies such as Sulh-i-Kul.

Literature review

To understand how clothing functioned as a political tool in Akbar's court, this study builds on several key historical perspectives. One of the main sources used in this study is Gouri Dey's thesis,¹ *Fashion and Designing under the Mughals*, which argues that fashion was far from random; it was a highly organized state industry. Her research on the *Toshakhana* and *karkhanas* provides evidence that Akbar used garments such as the *Chakdar Jama*, to create a distinct imperial image. The work of Dr. K.D. Sharma and Swati Sharma in the *RJPSSs*² journal also supports this argument. They describe clothing as a reflection of civilization, where dress expressed rank, economic status, and religious identity. Their analysis is useful for showing how Akbar's attire blended Persian and Indian styles, visually representing his policy of *Sulh-i-Kul* (Universal Tolerance) by creating a combination of diverse cultures that everyone in the empire could recognize. Broader historical studies by Irfan Habib³ focus on the economic production of textiles, while John Irwin's⁴ work highlights their artistic beauty.

Introduction

In the Mughal court, clothing was more than a matter of personal appearance. It reflected a person's rank, authority, and position in the imperial court. Under Emperor Akbar, clothing became a powerful language used to express authority, rank, and even complex political ideas. Every part of the emperor's appearance from the fabric of his robe to the stones in his jewellery was a carefully planned choice that carried a much deeper meaning. Akbar developed a distinctive style that combined Central Asian, Persian, and Indian traditions. This was not only an artistic choice but also reflected his policy of Sulh-i-Kul, which encouraged harmony among different religious communities. Material culture played a significant role in expressing political ideas and strengthening imperial authority. Although many historians have focused on the political history of the Mughal Empire, clothing has not always been fully analyzed as a serious political tool. For example, famous scholars like Irfan Habib have focused a lot on the economic side, such as how the *karkhanas* (workshops) worked and how textiles were produced. Others, like John Irwin and Margaret Hall, have looked at the craftsmanship and artistic features of Indian textiles, but they mostly treat them as beautiful art objects. Even art historians like Catherine Asher and Milo Beach, who include clothing in their studies of Mughal paintings, do not always dive deep into the political role these items played. By using a "material culture" approach, this paper tries to look at these objects differently, seeing them as things that shape political power. This paper examines Akbar's clothing and jewellery to analyze their connection to his political perspective.

¹Gouri Dey, *Fashion and Designing under the Mughals (Akbar to Aurangzeb): A Historical Perspective* (Doctoral thesis, University of North Bengal, 2015).

² K. D. Sharma and Swati Sharma, "The Imperial Costumes of Mughal Era," *Research Journal of Philosophy & Social Sciences*, 43, no. 1 (2017): 233–241.

³ Irfan Habib, *The Agrarian System of Mughal India, 1556–1707*, 2nd ed. (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999).

⁴ John Irwin and Margaret Hall, *Indian Painted and Printed Fabrics* (Ahmedabad: Calico Museum of Textiles, 1973).

Imperial Wardrobe and Karkhanas

During Akbar's reign, the imperial wardrobe was more than a place where clothes were stored. It was a well-organised system. It related to the karkhanas, where garments were made, stored, and supervised. This shows that clothing was taken seriously and was carefully managed as an important part of the state. Akbar had 120 suits in his wardrobe, which were arranged into 12 bundles, each meant for 12 months⁵. This arrangement ensured that suitable clothes were available throughout the year. It reflects the careful planning of the emperor's wardrobe. There were also caretakers for the wardrobe. Nasim-ud-din Hasan Kurktarak and Shida Beg were the keepers of the wardrobe. They handled managing and maintaining the imperial wardrobe. The terms used for these officials were tahwildar and kuruktaraq. The word tahwildar means the person in charge, while kuruktaraq means the keeper. Here, kuruk means fur and tarraq means keeper. Their duty was to keep the garments safely stored, properly arranged, and ready whenever needed. They also maintained order in the wardrobe system. Akbar's reign was marked by a highly systematic approach to manufacturing and the formalization of court dress codes. This was achieved through the expansion of specialized workshops known as Karkhanas. These included the Toshak Khana, which handled apparel, the Farash Khana for carpets, the Zargar Khana for goldsmiths, and the Chirabafi Khana, which focused specifically on weaving shawls and scarves. The scale of this operation was massive; historical records suggest that Akbar employed approximately 11,000 tailors⁶. The wardrobe was managed in a systematic manner. Rather than just being stored, textiles were carefully organized based on their price, color, and weight. Each garment carried a label recording the date it entered the imperial collection. Beyond simple coordination, Akbar also used clothing to create social order. He introduced a convention where Muslims tied their jama under the right arm while Hindus tied theirs under the left. This practice made religious identity easy to recognise and helped maintain order in the imperial court. It also shows how Akbar used dress as a practical tool for court administration. The imperial wardrobe was therefore more than a place where clothes were kept. It formed an important part of the Mughal administrative system and reflected Akbar's political authority.

Clothing: Form, Function, and Hierarchy in Akbar's Court

Akbar was a trendsetter who knew how to use fashion to spread his ideas. He took traditional Mughal attire, which was heavily influenced by Ottoman and Persian traditions, and altered it to suit the Indian climate and culture. His most iconic innovation was the Chakdar Jama, a four-pointed skirt that he restyled into a formal gown by removing the side slits⁷, rounding the hemline, and increasing the skirt's fullness. He also introduced the Chakman, a coat made of "dara wax cloth"⁸ that was light, attractive, and waterproof. Even his spiritual philosophy was reflected in his clothes. Despite the empire's wealth, Akbar often favored woollen garments, which were traditionally associated with Sufi practice. Ultimately, Clothing in Akbar's court was not just for wearing but had both practical and symbolic importance. It helped in showing a person's rank, identity, and position in the court. The way a person dressed clearly reflected their status and role in the Mughal hierarchy. The main garment worn by Akbar was the Jama, which was a long flowing robe tied on one side. Under Akbar, the jama became more standardised,

⁵ Abū al-Faḍl 'Allāmī, *The Ā-in-i Akbarī*, trans. H. Blochmann, Vol. 1 (Calcutta: Royal Asiatic Society of Bengal, 1939), p. 91.

⁶ Dey, Gouri "Fashion and Designing under the Mughals (Akbar to Aurangzeb): A Historical Perspective" (Doctoral thesis, University of North Bengal, 2015), Chapter I.

⁷ Dr. K.D. Sharma and Swati Sharma, "The Imperial Costumes of Mughal Era," p. 236.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 237.

especially with the right-side fastening, which later became a mark of Mughal identity. It was made from different fabrics like muslin, silk, depending on the season. This made it both comfortable and suitable for the climate while also supporting a royal appearance. Another important garment was the Peshwaz, an ankle-length tunic with a symmetrical silhouette that opened in the front, fastened by gold buttons or jeweled strings. It was usually worn over the jama and was often decorated with detailed embroidery. This garment reflected both cultural influence and high status. The *sidar* and *farji* were shorter coats worn in more formal settings or sometimes in military contexts. These were made from expensive fabrics like velvet and brocade and were often richly decorated. Their use showed authority and importance in the court. The patka, which was a waist sash, was also an important part of clothing. It was not only used to secure the garment but also to hold items like a dagger. This made it both functional and symbolising readiness and status. Layering was an important feature of Mughal clothing. Different garments were worn together in a structured way, which created a clear visual hierarchy. This layering made it easier to identify a person's rank and position in the court. Clothing, therefore, worked as a system through which power and order were visually maintained.

Jewellery and the Politics of Display

Jewellery was an essential part of Mughal court culture and played a key role in expressing power, authority, and identity. It was not only decorative but also had strong symbolic meaning. One of the most important ornaments was the sarpech, which was worn on the turban. It symbolised kingship and divine authority⁹, making the emperor stand out as the supreme ruler. The mala, or necklace, was also particularly important. It was often made of pearls or precious stones and was connected to Akbar's idea of Sulh-i-Kul¹⁰ (universal tolerance). In Mughal miniature paintings, Akbar is shown wearing a pearl mala, which is associated with the Hindu tradition. This reflects his idea of religious harmony and supports his policy of Sulh-i-Kul. By wearing such ornaments, which had connections with diverse cultural traditions, Akbar presented himself as a ruler who accepted and united different communities. Other ornaments like rings and bazubands (armlets) were also commonly worn. These ornaments represented wealth, strength, and royal power. They added to the overall image of authority and control. Jewelry was always worn together with clothing, not separately. Rich fabrics, detailed embroidery like zardozi, and ornaments were combined to create a complete visual image of power. Every element, from garments to jewelry, worked together to show imperial strength and divine kingship. Thus, jewellery was not only decorative but also an important medium for expressing political authority in the Mughal court.

Fabrics and Crafts: State Control and Unity

Akbar made fabric production a well-organised and state-controlled activity. He used it not only to improve the economy but also to bring various parts of the empire together. Textile production was connected to the imperial karkhanas, where fabrics were made, stored, and managed under strict supervision. During the Mughal period, many types of fabrics were used, ranging from light muslin to rich brocade. Silk was mostly used for the emperor's clothing because it showed luxury and high status. Veils were usually made from fine net material. Many fabrics were also decorated with gold and silver threads, making them more attractive. At the same time, materials such as wool, pashmina, and fabric

⁹ Sharma, K.D and Swati Sharma, "The Imperial Costumes of Mughal Era," p. 235.

¹⁰ Shabbir, Jaweria, Dr. Hassan Babar, and Mirza Mohsin Latif, "From the Court to Contemporary: The Enduring Legacy of Mughal Attire and Aesthetics," Global Research Journal of Natural Science and Technology 3, no. 2 (2025), p. 112.

made from wild goat hair (called tus) were also important. They were valued for their softness, warmth, and comfort¹¹. which made them look richer and although silk was considered a symbol of wealth, fabrics made from cotton, wool, and goat hair were also highly valued because of their quality and usefulness. In Mughal India, textiles were important not just for their price but also for their meaning. They were connected to status, identity, and political power. The clothes were often perfumed with rose water, which added to their richness. Some muslin fabrics were so fine that it was said they could pass through a finger ring¹². Because of this, they were given poetic names like “woven air” and “flowing water,” which showed how light and delicate they were. Akbar also supported expensive and skilled embroidery techniques. One important technique was zardozi, where gold and silver threads were used to create detailed designs on fabric. Another technique was aari work, which used fine chain-stitch embroidery¹³. These methods required skilled workers and made the clothes look more royal and impressive. From a political point of view, Akbar’s policies helped connect different regions of the empire. He brought skilled workers like weavers and embroiderers from places such as Iran and Gujarat to the royal court. This helped link local crafts directly to the central government. Because of this, the fabrics used in the court became a clear sign of a strong and united empire. The designs on Mughal textiles also showed this cultural mix. Floral patterns like the gulmotif, including lotus and rose designs, showed Persian influence. At the same time, geometric designs were inspired by Islamic art. Together, these patterns reflected a blend of diverse cultures within the empire. Mughal textile designs were influenced by Persian art, but during Akbar's reign they gradually developed their own style. Persian designs mostly used repeated patterns, stylised flowers, and symmetrical decoration. During the Mughal period, artists started making flowers like the rose, tulip, iris, and poppy look more natural and realistic instead of using only decorative patterns. The *boteh* (paisley) motif was also changed by adding realistic flowers and leaves inside it (Fig.1). This reflects how Akbar's court did not simply copy Persian art but combined it with Indian artistic traditions. As a result, Mughal textiles reflected the cultural diversity of the empire and supported Akbar's idea of Sulh-i-Kul.



Fig. 1. Comparison of the Persian Boteh (Paisley) motif (left) and the Mughal adaptation (right), showing the transition from stylised decorative ornament to more naturalistic floral forms in Mughal textile design.

¹¹ Sharma and Sharma, "The Imperial Costumes of Mughal Era," 239.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Shabbir, Babar, and Latif, "From the Court to Contemporary," 112.

The floral motifs (rose, poppy, and iris) illustrate the increasing preference for naturalistic botanical designs in Mughal textiles. The Akbarnama also mentions many garments that were influenced by Mongol and Turkish traditions. It gives details about the types of fabrics, the colours worn on specific days, and the importance of certain items such as khilat, firman, chilta hazar mikhi, daqu, mi'jar, and the-band. This shows that clothing was not only used for wearing but also had administrative and symbolic importance. Fabrics and crafts during Akbar's reign were not just about fashion or luxury. They related to administration, economy, and politics. Through state control, skilled craftsmanship, and the blending of diverse cultural traditions, textiles became an important symbol of unity and imperial power.¹⁴

Miniature Paintings and Visual Analysis

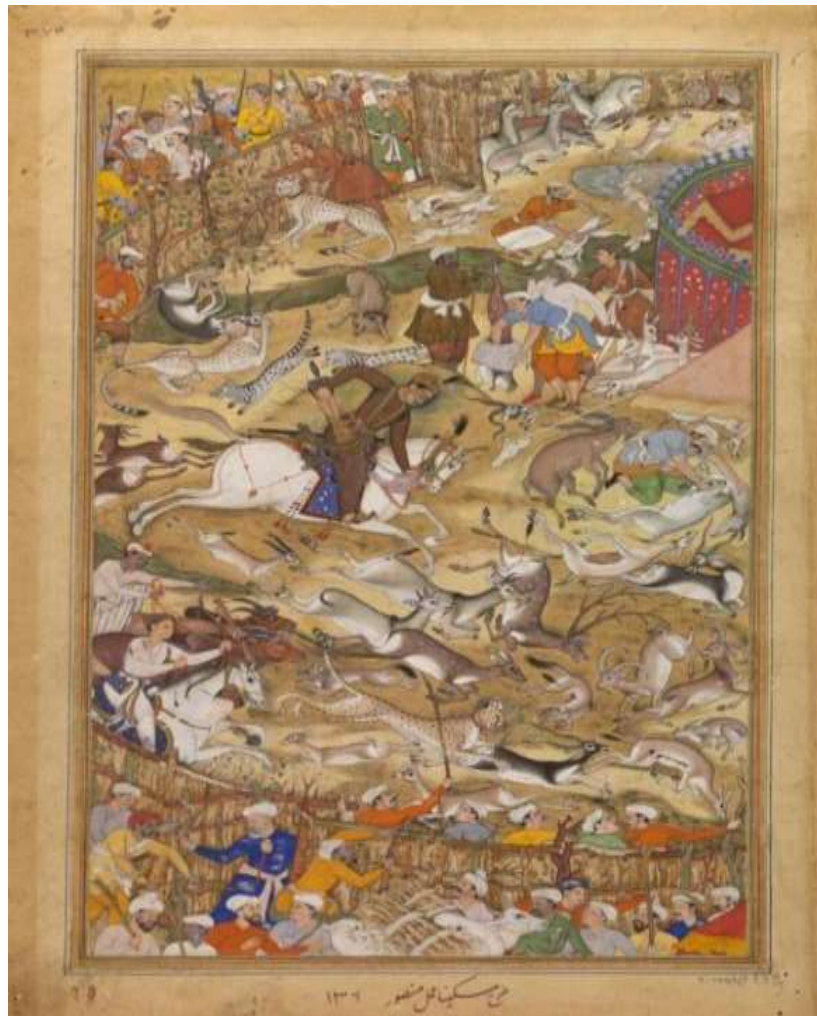


Fig. 2: Emperor Akbar Halts a Royal Hunt (Akbarnama, c.1590). Artist: Miskina.

Source <https://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O9644/akbar-painting-miskina/>

Akbar is shown wearing an embroidered cotton Jama tied on the right side, which became a distinctive feature of Mughal court dress. The Jama, worn with tight green Churidars (Indian leggings) reflects the combination of Central Asian and Indian traditions. His jewelled turban, decorated with sarpech, symbolises his royal authority and high status, even during activities such as hunting. The painting

¹⁴ Abū al-Faẓl 'Allāmī, The Akbarnama, trans. H. Beveridge (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2015).

Emperor Akbar Halts a Royal Hunt (Akbarnama, c. 1590) by artist Miskina shows an elaborately embroidered cotton jama tied, specifically on the right side. Akbar introduced a convention where Muslims tied their jama under the right arm and Hindus tied theirs under the left, making religious identity easily recognisable at court.



Fig. 3: A Courtier (Late Shahjahan Album)

Source: <https://asia-archive.si.edu/object/S1986.402/>

This image shows a noble wearing a light Jama and striped Pajama, reflecting the style introduced during Akbar's reign. The waist sash and traditional Jutties further reflect the status and prestige associated with Mughal court dress. This suggests that Akbar's style influenced the clothing of the Mughal nobility and later generations. Another important painting, A Courtier (Late Shahjahan Album), provides evidence that Akbar's personal style influenced the clothing of the Mughal elite



Fig. 4: Akbar Presiding over Religious Debates in the Ibadat Khana,
Source . <https://www.worldhistory.org/image/12135/akbar-in-the-ibadat-khana/>

This miniature from Akbarnama shows Akbar presiding over religious debates in the Ibadat Khana. Akbar is positioned at the top of the assembly, using his physical presence and attire to mediate between different faiths. The Pearl Mala worn by Akbar is associated with Hindu tradition and reflects his policy of Sulh-i-Kul (Universal Tolerance). By wearing this Indian ornament, Akbar presented himself as a ruler who respected different religious traditions and promoted harmony within the empire.

Conclusion

The research highlights that Akbar's clothing went beyond fashion; it was a key part of displaying his power and managing his empire. Each garment, fabric, and piece of jewelry carried significance. Clothes like the **jama** and **patka** were not only practical but also symbolized rank in the Mughal court. The use of fabrics such as **silk**, **muslin**, and **wool** reflects the sophisticated Mughal textile system. Akbar did not just wear these clothes; he oversaw their production and use. A major finding is the link between clothing and politics. For instance, the **mala** symbolized his philosophy of Sulh-i-Kul, meaning peace and acceptance of all religions. His extensive wardrobe and the officials managing it show that clothing was a serious imperial matter. This study indicates that clothing during Akbar's reign was deeply connected to

culture, politics, economy, and identity, serving as a powerful, non-verbal expression of authority. Akbar's court exemplifies how clothing and material culture were used to express political authority and imperial identity.

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