

# Hunting and Royal Leisure under Akbar: A Study of the Ain-i-Akbari and Akbarnama

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## Abstract

This paper examines hunting and royal leisure under Akbar through a close reading of Abu'l Fazl's Ain-i-Akbari and Akbarnama. It argues that hunting was not merely a recreational pursuit but a significant component of Mughal kingship and courtly culture. Imperial hunts provided opportunities for administrative inspection, interaction with local conditions, demonstration of martial courage, and the exercise of royal authority. The highly organised hunting establishment, involving specialised officials, trained animals, hunting techniques and systems of reward, further reflects the institutional character of the imperial court. At the same time, hunting could become a space for spiritual reflection and ethical restraint, particularly during the remarkable qamurgha hunt of 1578 near Bhera. The study also considers falconry, pigeon keeping and other forms of animal-based recreation to highlight the wider culture of royal leisure. Overall, hunting reveals the interconnectedness of recreation, governance, imperial display and spiritual experience under Akbar.

**Keywords:** Akbar, Imperial Hunting, Royal Leisure, Mughal Kingship, Ain-i-Akbari, Akbarnama.

## Introduction

Hunting occupied an important place in the political and cultural life of the Mughal court under Akbar. Although it was undoubtedly a form of royal recreation, the accounts of Abu'l Fazl in the Ain-i-Akbari and the Akbarnama suggest that its significance extended well beyond personal amusement. The imperial hunt brought together recreation, martial activity, administrative inspection, royal authority and, on certain occasions, spiritual reflection. Akbar's hunting expeditions also depended upon an elaborate establishment of officers, attendants, professional hunters and trained animals, along with specialised methods for capturing and training game. Hunting, therefore, provides an important perspective from which to understand both Akbar's personality and the wider culture of Mughal kingship.

The two works of Abu'l Fazl complement each other particularly well in this respect. The Ain-i-Akbari provides detailed information about the organisation of the imperial hunt, the personnel associated with it and the methods used for capturing and training different animals. The Akbarnama, on the other hand, records particular episodes from Akbar's life in which hunting became associated with courage, governance, justice and spiritual experience. Read together, these sources reveal that hunting under Akbar developed into a carefully organised institution of the imperial court while continuing to serve as an important form of royal leisure.

## I. Hunting as Royal Leisure and an Instrument of Governance

Abu'l Fazl makes a clear distinction between hunting pursued simply for pleasure and hunting as practi-

sed by Akbar. In the Ain-i-Akbari, he observes that superficial observers might regard the killing of animals merely as a source of enjoyment. Akbar's purpose, however, is presented differently. Hunting served as a means of acquiring knowledge and enabled the emperor to inquire, without prior notice of his arrival, into the condition of the people and the army. He could also examine matters relating to taxation, sayurghal lands and affairs connected with the imperial household. According to Abu'l Fazl, such journeys also enabled Akbar to raise up the oppressed and punish the oppressors.<sup>1</sup>

A similar interpretation appears in the Akbarnama. Abu'l Fazl explains that Akbar valued hunting because it allowed him to acquire knowledge of the events of the world without the awe inspired by royal majesty and without the intervention of intermediaries whose interests might influence their accounts. Hunting thus provided an opportunity to put down oppressors and exalt those who were otherwise neglected or held in contempt.<sup>2</sup> The similarity between the two accounts is significant. Abu'l Fazl consistently presents hunting not merely as an activity of enjoyment but as one that could contribute to the emperor's wider responsibilities as sovereign.

This administrative dimension is also evident in specific episodes associated with Akbar's hunting journeys. During an expedition towards Nagor in 1570, Akbar learned that the prosperity of the town depended upon three reservoirs- Kaidani, Shams Talao and Kukur Talao; and that the silting of one of them had caused a severe water shortage, leading some inhabitants to leave the city. He ordered the tank to be cleared and restored, thereby addressing the immediate crisis. The episode demonstrates how a hunting journey could provide the emperor with direct knowledge of local conditions and an opportunity to intervene in matters affecting the welfare of his subjects.

Akbar's hunting journeys could thus function as an extension of his administrative concerns. Such expeditions enabled him to gather information about local conditions beyond the immediate court environment and reinforced his image as a ruler attentive to justice and public welfare. Hunting, therefore, was not simply an escape from the responsibilities of government; it could also provide a setting in which the emperor observed local problems and exercised his authority in response to them.<sup>3</sup>

The relationship between hunting and government is expressed particularly clearly during one of Akbar's elephant-hunting expeditions. After a successful chase in which a herd of nine elephants was captured, Akbar remained in camp the following day and attended to administrative affairs. Abu'l Fazl describes administration, significantly, as the "real kind of hunting".<sup>4</sup> The expression gives the activity a wider political meaning. While the capture of elephants provided the emperor with enjoyment and pleasure, Abu'l Fazl presents the conduct of administration as a more substantive form of royal activity. The connection between recreation and royal responsibility is also evident in the account of Akbar's hunt near Mathura. Akbar travelled there with a select party and, on one occasion, hunted seven tigers in a single day. Five were killed with arrows and firearms, one was captured alive, and another was caught through the combined efforts of a number of bahadurs. Yet Abu'l Fazl does not present the episode only as a demonstration of hunting skill. He adds that during the same hunt Akbar "joined worship with pleasure and became distributor of justice".<sup>5</sup> Hunting could thus coexist with religious observance and the exercise of royal justice. Leisure, in Abu'l Fazl's representation, did not necessarily remove the emperor from the responsibilities of kingship.

At the same time, hunting clearly remained a source of enjoyment and excitement. During an elephant hunt in the forests of Narwar, the imperial servants were divided into several groups, each placed under a great officer and provided with several tame elephants. Akbar himself participated in the expedition with his companions and enjoyed the sport of hunting elephants. On another occasion, the sighting of a

herd containing more than seventy elephants delighted him, and he interpreted the encounter as an auspicious omen of great future successes.<sup>6</sup> Similarly, when huntsmen reported that more than 250 elephants were roaming in a nearby forest, Akbar immediately proceeded towards the area and ordered his servants to surround and drive the animals. Abu'l Fazl describes the event as an extraordinary spectacle that inspired both enjoyment and admiration among those who witnessed it.<sup>7</sup>

Hunting was also closely integrated into imperial travel. The Akbarnama records the royal cavalcade moving stage by stage while Akbar continued "hunting and shooting" along the way.<sup>8</sup> After another elephant-catching expedition, he proceeded towards Gwalior while continuing to hunt during the journey.<sup>9</sup> The chase was therefore not always a separate excursion undertaken solely for amusement. It could form part of the emperor's movements, combining travel with recreation and the exercise of royal authority.

## II. The Imperial Hunt: Organisation, Practices and the Image of the Royal Hunter

The Ain-i-Akbari provides extensive evidence for the highly organised character of hunting under Akbar. An imperial hunt required careful planning and the participation of numerous officials and attendants. When Akbar departed for a hunting expedition, qarawuls, associated with the Mir Shikar or Master of Hunting, surrounded the hunting area. Grandees and other members of the establishment waited at designated places, while officers, Khidmatiyas and other servants were stationed at different distances around the imperial hunting ground. Access to the emperor was carefully controlled, and generally only those required to render services during the chase were permitted to approach him. As the hunt progressed, Akbar gradually reduced the size of his immediate entourage and sometimes continued alone or with only one or two companions.<sup>10</sup> Even in an activity associated with leisure, therefore, the hierarchy and discipline of the Mughal court remained clearly visible.

The hierarchy of the court was also reflected in the organisation of the hunt itself. With Akbar's permission, high-ranking nobles were given the first opportunity to participate, followed by lower-ranking troopers and footmen, while royal women could also accompany these expeditions. The privilege of participating in the hunt was therefore organised according to rank and status rather than being merely recreational. In this sense, the hunting ground could function as a temporary extension of the Mughal court, reproducing its hierarchical order beyond the formal palace environment.<sup>11</sup>

The Ain-i-Akbari describes a remarkable variety of methods used in elephant-catching. Abu'l Fazl also credits Akbar with developing new and effective methods of hunting. In the case of elephant-catching, he discusses established techniques such as the khedda, chor khedda, gad and bar. He then describes a method attributed to Akbar in which female elephants were stationed at several points while wild male elephants approached them and gradually entered an enclosure, where they were subsequently captured. A similar concern with technique appears in the capture of leopards. Earlier hunters used deep pits covered with grass, but these could injure the animals or allow them to escape. Abu'l Fazl states that Akbar introduced shallower pits fitted with specially constructed trapdoors, through which leopards could be captured without being hurt. On one occasion, no less than seven leopards were caught. Such descriptions portray the emperor not simply as a participant in hunting but as someone personally interested in improving its methods.

Akbar's involvement extended from capture to the systematic training and maintenance of animals. Leopards that had previously required two or three months of training could, according to Abu'l Fazl, be trained excellently in only eighteen days under Akbar's attention. The scale of this establishment was

considerable. Two hundred keepers were employed for the khasa leopards, while one thousand leopards were maintained in the imperial park. They were organised into sets and ranks, given individual names and transported on elephants, camels, horses, mules, carts and litters. Particularly valued animals could be displayed with considerable ceremony. The famous leopard Samand-manik, for example, was carried with much pomp while a naqqara was beaten before it.

The trained leopards themselves were taught different techniques for pursuing deer. Abu'l Fazl describes methods such as uparghati, rahni and muhari, each involving a different method of using the leopard in pursuit of its prey. Akbar is also credited with introducing the chatmandal, in which hunters concealed themselves near places frequented by deer and released leopards in several directions in a manner resembling the qamurgha. These details reveal the specialised knowledge that had developed around the imperial hunt.

Hunting also became a competitive activity within the court. Grandees were permitted to place wagers on selected khasa leopards, while the men employed to train and keep the imperial leopards received presents when the animals displayed exceptional skill. Competition also developed around the hunting of deer, with grandees placing bets according to the number of deer brought down. The skins of deer were often given to poor people as part of money presents. The imperial hunt thus involved not only the emperor and the quarry but also a wider social world of nobles, officials, trainers and attendants.

Other animals were incorporated into this elaborate hunting culture. Akbar imported hunting dogs from different countries, particularly from Kabul, gave them names and even had them ornamented. Abu'l Fazl remarks that these dogs could attack different kinds of animals and that some could even be used against tigers. Deer themselves could also be tamed and trained to assist in capturing wild deer. Abu'l Fazl notes that Sultan Firuz-i Khalji had practised this form of hunting earlier, but Akbar "reduced this manner of hunting to a proper system." Under this system, more than two hundred people could participate in deer hunting at the same time.<sup>12</sup>

The imperial hunting system also included the capture of buffaloes and hunting with hawks and falcons. Abu'l Fazl describes different methods of catching wild buffaloes, including the use of ropes and snares near places frequented by them. In one method, a female buffalo was used to attract a wild male, allowing a hunter to approach and fasten its foot; another method involved placing snares around ponds and attacking the animals with spears. Hunting with hawks and falcons was also an important part of Akbar's hunting practices. Abu'l Fazl notes that Akbar trained several kinds of falcons and gave them individual names. The birds were carefully inspected, classified according to their hunting performance, and maintained by a specialised establishment of Mansabdars, Ahadis and other soldiers. Their food, prices, training and rewards were also regulated, while Mir Shikars supervised the hunting establishment and received presents according to their rank and performance.<sup>13</sup> Thus, falconry, like other forms of imperial hunting, was organised through a structured system of training, classification, supervision and reward.

Among the various forms of organised hunting, the qamurgha, derived from a Mongol hunting tradition, offered an especially powerful display of imperial organisation. Large territories could be enclosed and animals gradually driven into a restricted space under the supervision of imperial officers. During the 1578 hunt, animals were driven across the twenty-five-kos stretch from Girjhak to Bhera, while officials supervised different sectors of the operation. Such arrangements transformed the hunt into a visible demonstration of the emperor's capacity to mobilise men, organise territory and coordinate resources on a substantial scale.<sup>14</sup>

Alongside this institutional organisation, the Akbarnama constructs a powerful image of Akbar as an exceptionally courageous hunter. During a journey through the territory of Narwar, a tiger accompanied by five cubs appeared on the route of the imperial cavalcade. Akbar reportedly advanced alone towards the animal and killed it with a single stroke of his sword. Abu'l Fazl identifies this as the first beast of prey personally attacked by the emperor.<sup>15</sup> The dramatic language surrounding the episode transforms a hunting encounter into a demonstration of royal courage, physical strength and self-confidence.

Such accounts should also be understood as representations of kingship rather than merely as records of hunting success. The Narwar episode was considered important enough to be represented in an illustration of the Akbarnama. Text and image together projected Akbar as a fearless ruler capable of personally confronting dangerous animals. His mastery over wild beasts consequently reinforced a wider imperial image of strength, command and martial authority.<sup>16</sup>

The Mathura tiger hunt reinforces this martial image. Akbar's success against seven tigers, including the capture of one alive, allowed Abu'l Fazl to present him as a ruler capable of confronting and overcoming dangerous animals.<sup>17</sup> The Ain-i-Akbari records similar incidents. On one occasion, while hunting near Toda, Akbar killed a tiger that had brought down one of the hunting party, thereby saving the man's life. During a qamurgha chase, another tiger attacked Akbar, but he shot it through the head and killed it. On a further occasion, when a tiger struck its claws into a man, Akbar shot the animal through the body and released the unfortunate man.<sup>18</sup> In such narratives, courage is joined by a protective dimension: Akbar does not merely confront dangerous animals but is also shown intervening when the lives of his followers are threatened.

The imperial hunt therefore worked on several levels. It was a carefully regulated institution involving specialised knowledge and personnel, a form of courtly entertainment and competition, and a setting in which the emperor's martial qualities could be displayed. Through Abu'l Fazl's narrative, mastery of the hunt became closely associated with mastery expected of a sovereign.

### **III. Hunting, Spiritual Experience and the Culture of Royal Leisure**

Although hunting involved the pursuit, capture and killing of animals, Abu'l Fazl's portrayal of Akbar introduces an important ethical and personal dimension to the imperial hunt. The emperor is repeatedly represented as placing limits on particular methods of hunting. In tiger hunting, for instance, several devices and traps were traditionally employed, but Abu'l Fazl states that Akbar disliked such methods and preferred confronting the animal openly with bows or matchlocks. Similarly, he disapproved of practices in which deer were attracted through music or song and then killed. Akbar also refrained from hunting on Fridays in fulfillment of a vow made before the birth of his eldest son.<sup>19</sup> These details allowed Abu'l Fazl to distinguish between the emperor's participation in the chase and methods of hunting that he regarded as deceptive or undesirable.

The spiritual dimension of hunting emerges particularly clearly in the famous qamurgha hunt conducted near Bhera in April 1578. Akbar ordered his nobles and officers to enclose the wild animals over a vast area extending approximately twenty-five kos between Girjhak and Bhera. What began as an elaborate imperial hunting expedition, however, acquired a deeper spiritual significance in Abu'l Fazl's account. He portrays Akbar not merely as a participant in the hunt, but as a seeker of truth whose experience in the wilderness became associated with introspection, the search for Those around Akbar interpreted the experience in different ways. Some believed that the emperor had encountered a pious ascetic, while others thought that he had received communication from a holy spirit. Still others were convinced that

the beasts of the wilderness had conveyed divine secrets to him. These interpretations reflect the manner in which Abu'l Fazl presents the hunting ground as a setting for Akbar's spiritual search, where the experience of the wilderness became associated with divine knowledge and enlightenment.

The most striking outcome was Akbar's decision to abandon the expected slaughter. In thanksgiving for the experience, he ordered the release of many thousands of animals that had been enclosed for the hunt. His officials were instructed to ensure that the animals were not harmed and were allowed to depart according to their natural habits. Abu'l Fazl subsequently connects the episode with Akbar's growing detachment from sensual pleasures and his attraction towards asceticism and spiritual unity.<sup>20</sup> The episode is significant because it complicates any attempt to understand Akbar's hunting simply as an activity centered on the killing of animals. Within Abu'l Fazl's narrative, the emperor could exercise the power to gather and control thousands of animals, but could also demonstrate his authority through restraint, compassion and their release.

The spiritual interpretation of the Bhera episode also had an important ideological dimension. By presenting the emperor's experience in the wilderness as an encounter with divine wisdom, Abu'l Fazl elevated the hunt beyond ordinary recreation. Such narratives contributed to the legitimisation of Akbar's rule and to the construction of an exceptional imperial identity in which temporal authority was associated with spiritual distinction. The portrayal of Akbar as a recipient of divine wisdom thus formed part of a wider process of imperial identity formation.<sup>21</sup>

At the same time, the unusual character of the 1578 episode was not recorded by Abu'l Fazl alone. Nizamuddin Ahmad also described Akbar as experiencing an extraordinary state during the hunt. More significantly, Abdul Qadir Badauni, despite his critical attitude towards Akbar, recorded that a sudden and remarkable change came over the emperor and that Akbar consequently ordered the hunt to be abandoned. Arif Qandhari similarly associated the event with a mysterious "Divine Call." The agreement of writers who differed considerably in their attitudes towards Akbar does not establish the precise nature of his experience, but it does suggest that the episode had a wider contemporary resonance and cannot be treated solely as an invention of Abu'l Fazl's courtly narrative.<sup>22</sup>

The hunting environment could also accommodate other forms of royal recreation. At another point, Abu'l Fazl describes musicians performing while Akbar was in a hunting setting. Their melodies occupied his attention for a time, and the experience is presented as producing an inward and spiritual transformation in the emperor.<sup>23</sup> Hunting grounds, therefore, could function as more than spaces for pursuing animals; they could also provide settings for music, leisure and spiritual reflection, allowing different aspects of courtly life to intersect with the experience of the hunt.

The broader culture of royal leisure is further illustrated by Akbar's interest in pigeons. The *Ain-i-Akbari* describes an elaborate system of pigeon breeding, training and classification. Birds were selected according to their qualities and taught complex movements known as *bazi* and *charkh*. Whereas earlier practice involved releasing eleven or twenty-one pigeons at a time, under Akbar as many as 101 could be flown together. A *khasa* pigeon was said to perform fifteen *charkhs* and seventy *bazis*, a feat that was considered remarkable by spectators.

The scale of pigeon keeping at court was itself remarkable. Abu'l Fazl states that more than twenty thousand pigeons were maintained, of which five hundred were *khasa*, or specially valued imperial birds. Akbar took a personal interest in their breeding, classification and inspection. Different classes were maintained in separate aviaries, while pigeons were valued according to their performance,

appearance and other distinctive qualities. Some pigeons were also trained to carry letters over considerable distances.<sup>24</sup>

Pigeon flying is significant to the study of royal leisure because it shows that Akbar's engagement with animals was not confined to hunting and killing. Breeding, training, observation, display and experimentation also formed part of courtly recreation. Together with hunting and falconry, the maintenance of trained pigeons reveals a wider culture of royal leisure in which entertainment was closely connected with discipline, specialised knowledge and imperial display.

## Conclusion

Akbar's hunting practices reveal a complex relationship between the emperor, the court and the natural environment. The evidence suggests that the significance of hunting lay not only in the activity itself but in the ways it shaped the experience and representation of kingship. The hunting ground became a space where Akbar could act outside the formal court while still maintaining the discipline and hierarchy of the imperial establishment. His personal involvement in hunting techniques, animal training and the treatment of animals further indicates that the activity reflected his individual interests as well as imperial practice. The Bhera episode of 1578 is particularly important because it introduced an element of uncertainty and spiritual interpretation into an otherwise highly controlled royal activity. Hunting, therefore, offers a valuable lens for understanding the multiple dimensions of Akbar's personality and the changing cultural meanings attached to royal leisure in the Mughal court.

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