

Governing the body and the state: Akbar's vegetarianism through the lenses of coeval literary sources

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Studies on Akbar's religious outlook are often interspersed with shades of bias. A large number of analyses focus, for instance, on the emperor's private spiritual attitudes, which brings the authors either to emphasize their bizarre or even freakish aspects;¹ or, on the contrary, to highlight Akbar's tolerance as both a token of his innate open-mindedness and a primary source of inspiration for administrative activities.² Scholars' cultural background may also be a source of prejudice: Muslim communalist historians tend to accuse Akbar of apostasy,³ while Indian scholars often perceive in his measures elements of proto-secularism⁴ and even national identity – to the point that, as it has been observed, 'Akbar was reassessed in ways as diverse as the historians who reassessed him'.⁵

Problems in interpretation are also linked to the fact that Akbar's religious politics has generated sharply conflicting viewpoints since his very times, as it is demonstrated by the dramatic conceptual distance between the works of two of his most illustrious courtiers: in fact, while Abū al-Faẓl's panegyric narrative⁶

1. See e.g. V. A. Smith: 'The whole scheme was the outcome of a ridiculous vanity, a monstrous growth of unrestrained autocracy. (...) The Divine Faith was a monument of Akbar's folly' (Smith 1919², 222).

2. See e.g. M. Roychoudhury: 'Toleration was the basis of the whole system' (Roychoudhury 1941, 305). Victorian intellectuals were instrumental in popularising the notion of Akbar's tolerance. See e.g. Tennyson's poem *Akbar's Dream*, that 'grants the authority of toleration's origin to India not Europe – Akbar's "tolerance of religions and abhorrence of religious persecution", says Tennyson, "put our Tudors to shame"' (Stevens–Sapra 2007, 392).

3. Hodgson 1974, 61.

4. See e.g. Sen 2005, 18–19, 273–74, 287–88.

5. Hodgson 1974, 61.

6. Abū al-Faẓl was the author of the monumental *Akbar-nāma* (*The Book of Akbar*), a work on the history of Akbar's reign in three volumes (see Beveridge 1897–1939); and of the

celebrates the emperor's enlightened rule, Al-Badāoni harshly criticizes Akbar's 'heretical attacks on orthodoxy'.⁷ Another intrinsic contradiction lies in the fact that, although it is difficult to find in the history of the whole Indian subcontinent a monarch so interested in religious knowledge and personally involved in spiritual enquiries, these elements do not implicitly authorize interpretations that attribute to Akbar's religious sensibility any choice where religious issues were at stake.

Many instances occurred throughout his reign: from his famed marriage in 1562 to the daughter of the Hindu Rājā Bihār (or Bihārī) Mal of Amber, to the measures by which Akbar lifted the fiscal imposition on Hindu pilgrimages (1563) and immediately later (1564) abolished the *jiziyā* – the tax imposed on non Muslim people. Although many scholars have attributed these choices to the emperor's resolution to be 'a father to all his people', Hindu and Muslim alike, and to follow the path of religious tolerance,⁸ other historians have rather interpreted them as moves of political and administrative nature⁹ connected to the widely established custom of marriage alliances or to the large set of reforms progressively implemented from the 1560s, that eventually brought about, in 1583, a complete reorganization of the state¹⁰ – a process that is often forgotten or underestimated by historians.

Yet the most interesting example of a governmental measure that is usually given an almost exclusively religious interpretation is perhaps the enactment of the *mahzar* ('petition' or 'declaration') in 1579, which gave the emperor the right to choose among conflicting opinions in religious matters and authorized him to formulate new ordinances according not only to Qu'rān, but also to 'universal goodness'.¹¹ This act placed him, *de facto* and *de iure*, above any religious authority – which has led some scholars to affirm that Akbar intended to assert himself as 'both pope and emperor'.¹² It should be observed however, that the purport and the potential consequences of this initiative were far more significant in relation to the international context, than within the internal political-religious arena. At the time, in fact, Akbar already possessed an almost total influence over the court's religious authorities, as it is demonstrated by the simple

Ā'in-i Akbarī (*Akbar's Regulations*), a detailed account of Akbar's institutions (see Blochmann–Jarrett 1873–1907).

7. Ranking–Haig–Lowe 1884–1925, Vol. II, 338 (year 992).

8. Cf. Burn 1957, 81–82.

9. It has been aptly observed that pre-Mughal Sultans already recurred to implicit tolerance towards the non-Muslim population as a 'political expediency' (G. T. Kulkarni 2000, 158). On *jiziyā* see for instance A. R. Kulkarni 1996, particularly 156–57. The author sees the reintroduction of the *jiziyā* enacted by Aurangzeb more as a fiscal than as a religious measure.

10. Cf. Roychoudhuri 1941, 220–24.

11. For the whole text of the document see Ranking–Haig–Lowe 1884–1925, Vol. II, 270–72.

12. Smith 1919², 178. See also Burn 1957, 123.

fact that they all – albeit not always gladly, as Al-Badāoni remarks¹³ – agreed to sign the ‘declaration’. Akbar’s attention was rather drawn towards the external boundaries of his empire. Since the *mahzar* stated that the emperor, in his capacity as *Imām-i ʿādil* (‘Just governor’) is superior to the *Mujtahid* – the Shiite religious authority who interprets canonical law – and, at the same time, attributed to him the caliphal title of *Amīr al-Muminīn* (‘Guide of the faithful’), it implicitly placed him above any *external* religious power and – what counted most – outside the sphere of influence both of the Shiite Safavid monarchy in Persia and of the Sunnite Ottoman Caliphate.¹⁴

In addition to it – as it has been rightly observed¹⁵ – this initiative should be seen within the frame of the complex relationship between Akbar and his stepbrother Mirzā Hakīm, sovereign of the Timurid state of Kabul. This is another issue that is often forgotten or downsized by colonial and contemporary historians, who usually dismiss Hakim as a weak-willed ruler¹⁶ or a narrow-minded Muslim fanatic – at least partially drawing from the coeval accounts produced at Akbar’s court. Yet, for almost two decades, Mirzā was perhaps the most resolute antagonist of Akbar’s rule, representing not only a competitor for dynastic succession, but also the centripetal force that attracted Islamic orthodox authorities discontented with, or marginalized by Akbar’s positions on religious issues. The *mahzar* was thus enacted against him as well as against the Islamic opposition that continued to coalesce in some centres, with the aim of publicly sanctioning the emperor’s primacy in the domain of Islamic doctrine. Evidence for this interpretation may be considered here, since a few years later Akbar ‘threw all caution to the wind, abandoning even the slightest pretence of being an orthodox-minded Sunni-Muslim ruler or even someone who was mindful of Islamic religious opinion. Thus, starting in 1582, Akbar began initiating disciples into a religiously eclectic imperial cult – the *silsilah-i muridān* (circle of disciples), commonly referred to as the *Din-i Ilahi* (Divine Faith)’.¹⁷ All this happened only three years after the declaration of his doctrinal infallibility, and immediately after he had conclusively defeated Mirzā Hakīm.

Apart from the Sunni representatives, whose role at court both coeval sources and contemporary scholarly works tend perhaps to overemphasize, other actors were present on the religious scene. The dynamics developed by these other figures, were decisive in carving Akbar’s religious policy, as it is shown by various sources (including some outstanding pictures and miniatures) which describe the regular presence at court of religious dignitaries belonging

13. Ranking–Haig–Lowe 1884–1925, Vol. II, 270.

14. International circumstances were favourable to Akbar’s move. On the subject, see also Buckler 1924, 602–4.

15. See Faruqui 2005.

16. Cf. Smith 1919², 190–91.

17. Faruqui 2005, 518.

to different faiths and diverse cultural areas, as well as the long debates the emperor had with them¹⁸ – a process in which we could even detect elements of what has post-modernly been termed as ‘reverse transculturation’.¹⁹

Within this scenery of religious interplay a place apart must be reserved for the representatives of Sufism. Indian Sufis have traditionally played a prominent role in Indian Muslim courts, almost constantly opposing the orthodox personnel charged with religious-administrative responsibilities. A vast literature has amply dealt with this topic,²⁰ to which I would add the data that may be gathered from coeval Sufi literary sources, and particularly from Sufi Avadhi poems – basically love stories (*premākhyān*) that elaborate on local narrative themes. Through a political decryption of Malik Muhammad Jāyasī’s *Padmāvat* (1520–1540)²¹ – one of the greatest achievements in world literature – we can detect for instance a condition of trilateral confrontation involving (1) the sovereign, (2) the orthodox personnel at court, and (3) the ascetics.²² Through these dynamics a concept of kingship is outlined that is conspicuously different from, and in some passages radically antithetical to, that expressed by the Islamic orthodoxy.

This concept of kingship would have greatly appealed to the great Mughal emperor. We do not go as far as to image a direct influence of Avadhi Sufism on the evolution of Akbar’s political strategy. Yet there is evidence²³ of the strict correspondence between the values expressed by Sufi Avadhi poems and those upon which local or specific forms of coeval Islamic government were based. Among the latter we might quote the extraordinarily innovative experiences represented by the Sharqī (the ‘Easterner’) Sultanate of Jaunpur²⁴ (1394–1483) and by the rule of the Afghan sovereign Śer Śāh Sūrī, who had won the Delhi kingdom from Akbar’s father Humāyūn, giving his state an administrative structure and a political consistency which were to prominently inform Akbar’s model of governance.

Indeed, various other elements allow us to hypothesize an ideological ‘consonance’ between the Sufis of Avadh and the Mughal emperor, one of which is surely represented by the strong links that Akbar established with the Chistiya order. As it is well known, for many years Akbar showed warm devotion to Sufi saints and ascetics, in particular to Śaikh Salim Chisti of Sikri: he named his first son after him, then he chose to build the new capital Fatehpur close to Sikri. Less debated are perhaps the reasons that moved the emperor to establish a

18. See Roychoudhuri 1941, Chapt. V, 121–213.

19. Cf. Stevens–Sapra 2007, 379–411.

20. One of the latest publications on this subject is Aquil 2012.

21. Ed. Agravāl 19803; Italian translation and Introduction, Milanetti 1995.

22. See Milanetti 2008 (2012).

23. See Milanetti 2006.

24. See Saeed 1972.

strategic alliance with the Chistiya order – some of which can be put in relation, once again, with the threat represented by his half-brother Mirzā Hakīm: ‘(...) in their eclectic and accommodating religious and spiritual practices, the Chishtis were the perfect bridge between the Indic and Islamic elements within Akbar’s realm. The last was an especially crucial point because an important source of Akbar’s political legitimacy – vis-à-vis the Mirza – was his willingness to embrace the multi-ethnic and multi-religious nature of his empire’.²⁵

Correspondingly, from its very outset the Sufi poetical tradition of Avadh was associated with the Chistiya *silsilā*. Maulānā Dāūd, the author of *Candāyan* (1379), and the first known representative of this school, was the disciple of Śaikh Janaidī (Zainu’d-Din),²⁶ a disciple of the great Chisti saint Nasiru’d-Din ‘Cīrāgh-i Dihlī’. Śaikh Qutban, the author of *Mrgāvātī* (1503), was associated with another famous Chisti saint, Śaikh Muhammad ‘Isa Tāj of Jaunpur. Malik Muhammad ‘Jāyasī’, the author of *Padmāvat*, was deeply inspired by the millenarist currents of Islam, which were particularly widespread in Avadh and had an enormous influence on the religious debate at Akbar’s court. Yet among his many spiritual preceptors, the first and foremost name he mentions in the poem is that of Saiyad Aśraf, ‘my beloved teacher, (...) a Sovereign in this world (*jahāmgīr*), as pure as the moonlight’, who ‘belongs to Cīstī’s lineage’.²⁷

In Jāyasī’s poem, kingship takes on a peculiar form, since it is presented neither as something given once and for all, nor as a function to be negotiated between different actors. The poem in fact expresses strong disapproval of the alliance between the monarch and the representatives of the ‘official’ religion that in the text is covertly described in reference to Gandharvasen’s Hindu court.²⁸ Rather, kingship is conceived as a dimension to be reached through an itinerary where royal splendour and asceticism, *yog* and *bhog*, self-sacrifice and enjoyment, could be reciprocally modulated and elaborated, until the very ‘substance’ (*sār*) of kingship ‘emanates’ – one might say – from the whole monarch’s being.²⁹ *This* concept of kingship is exactly what the visual, ritual or literary narratives produced at Akbar’s court were meant to portray and circulate. We argue that without taking into account *this* concept of kingship, any analysis of Akbar’s vegetarianism (or other forms of asceticism, physical challenges, interior prowess, he carried out) is bound to fall short.

Akbar was truly a half-vegetarian, at least from a certain period onward. Abū al-Faẓl quotes several of his sayings on this subject: ‘Were it not for the thought of the difficulty of sustenance, I would prohibit men from eating meat.

25. Faruqui 2005, 514.

26. *Candāyan* stanza 9 (see Gupta 1967).

27. *Padmāvat* I.18.

28. See Milanetti 2008 (2012), 232.

29. See *Padmāvat* XXV.14-15; XXVI.2 ; XXVII.15-26, etc.

The reason why I do not altogether abandon it myself is, that many others might willingly forego it likewise and be thus cast into despondency'. And further on: 'From my earliest years, whenever I ordered animal food to be cooked for me, I found it rather tasteless and cared little for it. I took this feeling to indicate a necessity for protecting animals, and I refrained from animal food'.³⁰ Other sections of the first book of the *Ā'in-i Akbarī* – which interestingly enough are grouped under the heading *Šūfiyānah* ('Living according to the manner of the Sufis') – contain a list of the days when the emperor used to abstain from meat consumption, together with clarifying statements such as the following one: 'If his Majesty had not the burden of the world on his shoulders, he would at once totally abstain from meat; and now, it is his intention to quit it by degrees, conforming, however, *a little to the spirit of the age*'.³¹ These words, we argue, provide clear evidence for both the emperor's strong commitment to vegetarianism and his awareness of the complex dynamics brought about by it.

We have also passages from Al-Badāoni – albeit in a critical perspective – confirming the extent of these practices and calculating the global period of abstention from meat:

The killing of animals on the first day of the week was strictly prohibited, because this day is sacred to the Sun, also during the first eighteen days of the month of *Farwardīn*; the whole of the month of *Ābān* (the month in which His Majesty was born); and on several other days, to please the Hindūs. (...) During the time of these fasts the Emperor abstained altogether from meat, as a religious penance, gradually extending the several fasts during a year over six months and even more, with a view to eventually discontinuing the use of meat altogether.³²

We cannot fully agree with Al-Badāoni where he describes meat abstention as a religious penance. It is true that we have indications showing that preparations without meat 'probably entered the Islamic medico-culinary tradition from indigenous Christian communities (possibly Nestorian) where they were prepared for days or periods of fasting'.³³ Yet these dishes later underwent a marked transformation regarding their content and purpose, since they were basically adopted for medical use. Al-Warraḡ's *Kitāb al-Tabīkh* – the earliest culinary manual in Arabic language, dating from the late tenth century³⁴ – 'presents two

30. Blochmann–Jarrett 1873–1907, Vol. III, Book V, 241.

31. *Ibid.*, Vol. I, Book I, 26, 'The Days of Abstinence' (*Šūfiyānah*), italics added.

32. Ranking–Haig–Lowe 1884–1925, Vol. II, 321–22. *Farwardīn* is the first month of the Persian calendar, starting from March; *Ābān*, or the 'water' month, is the eighth month.

33. Waines 2003, 578.

34. *Ibid.*, 574.

muzawwar [lit. 'counterfeit'] recipes attributed to the Christian physician Ibn Masawayh (d. AD 857), who is possibly the one responsible for introducing the notion of a medicinal use of these vegetarian dishes into the Islamic dietetic tradition'.³⁵

Different reasons for abstention from meat were in any case known to the Indian Islamic tradition. Al-Badāoni himself recounts how the famous Sufi saint Śaikh Burhan (d. AD 1562–3) 'for nearly fifty years [before his death] (...) had abstained from flesh-meat and from most other articles of food and drink'³⁶ – thus implicitly presenting this habit more as an existential choice than an occasional form of self-mortification. To this we can add the case of another Mughal emperor, Akbar's son Jahāngīr, who recounts in his memoirs how, on certain days, he abstained from meat and prohibited the killing of animals in order both to honour his father – who 'used to say it was better on that day that all animals should be free from the calamity of those of a butcherly disposition' – and to celebrate the day of his own accession.³⁷

Obviously, local influences accounting for the abstention from meat eating in the Indian subcontinent are many and of diverse cultural origins. In particular, court literary and pictorial sources are full of descriptions of the emperor's meetings with the representatives of Hindu and Jaina religions. Especially noteworthy was his relation with the Jaina saint Hīravijaya, who reached the imperial court in 1582 and left behind an enduring imprint of spiritual dignity and asceticism.³⁸ In parallel with Persian court literature, Gujarati literary sources tend to emphasize the role of Jaina saints in shaping Akbar's religious policy and ethical choices, while simultaneously honouring him as the 'omniscient, all pervading, all powerful monarch or as Chakravarty Raja-paramount power'.³⁹ However, it could be observed that Akbar's attention towards Jainism was due not only to his attention for spiritual values, but also – once again – to his political strategy: he was in fact 'the first ruler to comprehend the regional roots of the plural societies of India which contain sub-systems that were distinct from each other. He undertook componential approach, respected regional collective identities, encouraged the development of different traditions, culture, religion'.⁴⁰

Avadhi Sufi poetry offers other interesting clues in order to better frame the values and feelings on which Akbar's vegetarianism could have been based. Jāyasī's *Padmāvat* – which also contains one of the brightest descriptions of a

35. *Ibid.*, 578.

36. Ranking–Haig–Lowe 1884–1925, Vol. II, I.4.

37. Rogers–Beveridge 1909–1914, Vol. I, 43.

38. Smith contends that 'Akbar's action in abstaining almost wholly from eating meat (...) certainly was taken in obedience to the doctrine of his Jain teachers' (Smith 1919², 168).

39. Mehta 1992, 58.

40. *Ibid.*

king turned ascetic, then turned king again – offers a breathtaking account of the seizing and the slaughtering of animals for the royal banquet:

Muttons and fat goats of any size were taken and brought there, and also deer, antelopes, gazelles, blackbucks, and hares. (...) Neither birds such as partridges, quails, herons and cranes, nor peacocks which are so fond of dancing could escape. (...) Instantly the knife fell on their throat, and they began pouring bloody tears, since that very body they had nourished and viewed as their own, turned now to be meat for someone else.⁴¹

This passage, and the moral teaching it conveys, reminds us of the famous episode that took place in May 1578, when ‘Akbar was hunting along the banks of the Jhelum River in Punjab. As the circle of beaters [was] closing around the game, Akbar was suddenly filled with a sublime joy and drawn by a sense of spiritual communion with God. In gratitude for his spiritual illumination, he ordered that the hunt be stopped and the thousands of animals caught up by the beaters be allowed to go free’.⁴² This experience, as Abū al-Faḏl documents, ‘drew him even more strongly to a life of ascetic withdrawal from the world’.⁴³

This and other similar episodes, the ascetic habits that the emperor progressively assumed, and – as mentioned before – the same, controversial creation of the so-called imperial cult, or *tauhid-i ilāhī*, were in fact conveniently elaborated and emphasized by a court narrative that, at least from the 1580s onwards, aimed at presenting Akbar as a ruler endowed with divine light (*farr-i izīdī*), or ‘a ray from the sun’. This gave the sovereign – as Abū al-Faḏl puts it – an almost perfect blend of saintly attitudes: ‘a paternal love towards the subjects; a large heart which implied a sense of discrimination, courage and firmness and [*sic*] attending to the wishes of great and small; and a daily increasing trust in God, and prayer and devotion so that he is not upset by adversity, punishes the tyrant and behaves with moderation and with reason’.⁴⁴ Yet – as I argue – this celebration of the virtues of the ‘perfect man’ (*insān-i kamīl*) should not merely be seen as part of the process of elaborating Akbar’s imperial authority, but also, and perhaps mainly, as a function of the project of circulating and propagating instruments for self-elevation dedicated *primarily to the high ranking officials of the state*. Indeed, Abū al-Faḏl’s two works, ‘the *Akbar-Nāma* and the *Ā’in-i Akbarī* together formed one of the most important means of conveying to a wider court the nature of Akbar’s authority and its meaning for his imperial servants. Abu’l Faḏl made it clear that not only the detailed imperial regulations of the *Ā’in*, but the history set out in the *Akbar-Nāma* was

41. *Padmāvat* XLV.1.

42. O’Hanlon 2007, 902.

43. *Ibid.*

44. Chandra 2005, 132.

philosophy teaching by example. It was intended “as a lesson book for the instruction of mankind and as a moral treatise for the practical teaching of subjects in the right conduct of life”.⁴⁵ In fact, ‘the code for imperial service was not simply one of loyalty to the emperor, but of constant striving for the qualities that both developed a man’s highest nature as a man, and made him fit for the ultimate form of worship: *imperial service*’.⁴⁶

Once again, these statements call forth an analogy between Akbar’s political vision and the teachings of Avadhi Sufis, since a direct antecedent of the integration of personal edification and public service implemented at the emperor’s court, may be found in the dimension of ‘world orientation’ in which all their poems are set. In a sense, the commitment to worldly duty represents exactly the place where Akbar’s political itinerary and the Sufi spiritual path do meet each other – and where the asceticism that characterizes both the emperor’s attitudes and Avadhi Sufism at large reveals its inner meaning. Several stanzas in *Padmāvat* openly censure asceticism if it is limited to renouncement and self-mortification; on the contrary, ‘world abandonment must be practised at home’.⁴⁷ As mentioned before, Jāyasī’s teachings seem in fact to focus on the necessary integration of inner refinement and world experience, asceticism (*jog/yog*) and enjoyment (*bhog*), as it is shown throughout the whole plot of the poem – from the moment when the hero Ratan’sen, taking the garb of an ascetic, leaves his royal mansion in search of the beautiful Padmāvati, symbol of spiritual perfection, until his return to his kingdom and his death on the battlefield, which brings his *kṣātra dharma* to culmination.

Mañjhan’s *Madhumālātī*⁴⁸ shows similar dynamics. When the two lovers, prince Manohar and Madhumālātī, are finally reunited after a long separation and severe penances, they set forth to come back to Manohar’s kingdom, where he will be reinstated as a ruler. At the same time, Manohar’s return is the necessary condition for his kingdom to recover its harmony and prosperity. On hearing the news, the previously dull and gloomy city of Kanaigiri suddenly regains colour; the members of local society recover their function and activity: ‘All was decorated by the town’s people, each according to his own responsibility. All the palaces were freshly whitewashed. Sandalwood incense was burned in each one. Inside and outside, on gates and ramparts, silken hangings made everything colourful’.⁴⁹ Spiritual experiences – we might comment – are nil if divested of involvement in world activities. The asceticism of Avadhi Sufi poets does not

45. O’Hanlon 2007, 897. See *Ā’in-i Akbarī* III, 251.

46. O’Hanlon 2007, 905. Italics added.

47. *Padmāvat*, L.7.

48. See Behl–Weightman 2000.

49. *Ibid.*, 227, stanza 536.

separate human beings from their daily life; rather, it empowers them to fully live their worldly life.

The ‘philosophy teaching by example’ carried out by Akbar both through his personal behaviour, and the narrative produced at court, pointed in the same direction. Vegetarianism, within the limits we have tried to describe, was part of *this* project. Akbar’s disciples were mainly state officials who ‘agreed to observe particular regulations: a special mode of greeting, alms-giving, periodic abstention from meat and avoidance of those involved in its slaughter’.⁵⁰ On the other hand, it should not be forgotten that, through the promulgation of the *tauhid-i ilāhī* – specifically based on ‘a combination of [Akbar’s] divine illumination and inner attributes’⁵¹ – the whole Mughal dynasty not only strengthened its imperial authority but also gained a halo of sacredness that endured for centuries, giving depth to its political power even during the periods of its decline, until the tragic deposition of its last representative, Bahadur Shah, by the British invaders.

50. O’Hanlon 2007, 906. See *Ā’in-i Akbarī*I, 161.

51. O’Hanlon 2007, 899.

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