

Pedagogy in Akbar's Reign: A Big Historical Perspective

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This paper looks back at the reign of Emperor Akbar with a fresh perspective of Big History. When one is undertaking such an endeavour, there is an apprehension of crossing rigid boundaries of disciplines that have been set. In this case, there is a tendency to adhere to the sensibilities of the 'serious,' traditional historian, but, most importantly, staying true to the methodology of the discipline, while taking the leap with a new perspective. So, interestingly enough, while this paper looks at some of the educational reforms brought about by Akbar (from the perspective of Big History), this paper itself becomes an exercise in Big History.

Akbar, the third Mughal Emperor, came to the throne at the very young age of twelve in the year 1556 CE. After the four-year regency of his guardian and military commander, Bairam Khan, Akbar took up his responsibilities as a ruler. While on one hand we see Akbar as a powerful Emperor, on the other hand we see a different facet of Akbar when he took certain measures, such as abolishing the *jizya* [pilgrimage tax] and establishing an '*ibādathkhāna* [House of Worship] where dialogue between religions could take place.¹ Akbar's reign is known for its openness, magnanimity, and inter-faith dialogue. It is a very well-recorded period of history.

For this paper, two sources of Akbar's reign have been considered. One is the *Muntakhab-ut-Tawārikh* [Selection of Chronicles], written by courtier and historian Abdul Qādir Badaūnī, while the other is the *Āin-i-Akbarī* [Laws of Akbar] by companion and historian Abu'l Fazl. Both are important primary sources for the period and yield crucial information, as both the authors were the contemporaries of Akbar.

The first text was written by 'Abdul Qādir bin Mulūk Shāh bin Hāmid Shāh. He was better known as Badaūnī, the location where he came to settle later in his life. His significance lies in the two works that he wrote: the well-known *Muntakhab-ut-Tawārikh* and the less perused *Najātur-Rashīd* [Salvation for the Faithful]. The *Muntakhab-ut-Tawārikh* is a controversial work that was written in secret by Badaūnī. It places him in an important position among historians of the 16th century.

Muntakhab-ut-Tawārikh is a work of history written in three volumes. The first begins its narrative in the year 977, during the reign of Subuktegin, founder of the Ghaznavid dynasty, which became an empire that stretched from Afghanistan into India; it then covers the history of the Indian subcontinent until the reign of Humayun, the second Mughal emperor and father of Akbar. The second volume is the one that has been read by historians with great interest. It describes the reign of Emperor Akbar, under whose service Badaūnī worked and whose reign he saw in detail. It is also the fact that the *Muntakhab-ut-Tawārikh* was written in secret that lends to its importance.

Badaūnī saw himself as an orthodox man who was writing to protect Islam from the 'travesty' into which he believed Akbar had turned the religion. Interestingly enough, it is this very attitude that made Badaūnī record details that help us recreate a clearer picture of the time. It comes as a wonderful surprise that one of the biggest critics of Akbar ended up giving one of the best testimonies of the openness and tolerance of his reign. The third volume of the *Muntakhab-ut-Tawārikh* contains biographies of learned people, a valuable source with which to study the intelligentsia and literati of the time.

bu'l Fazl, on the other hand, was a much-celebrated author. His work, *Akbarnāma* [Book of Akbar], is a rich and detailed account of Akbar's reign commissioned by Akbar himself. Being the official court chronicler, Abu'l Fazl had access to all the Mughal documents and archives, which lends to the richness of his work. The *Āin-i-Akbarī* was originally part of the *Akbarnāma*, but it is now published separately. Even when treated as a distinct work, the *Āin-i-Akbarī* is a *magnum opus* by itself. It contains not just the court laws but also the accounts of various departments and provinces, Akbar's sayings, and even recipes! It's a statistician's delight because of the meticulous data. The 19th century translator of the *Āin-i-Akbarī*, Heinrich Blochmann, compared it to a modern-day gazette or statistical compilation. It is the *Āin-i-Akbarī*, and specifically the *Āin* [law] on education, that holds importance for this paper.

Before we proceed to compare the information given by these two authors, a word of caution needs to be said. History is a discipline that relies heavily on the authority of a text. While the written word is easier to verify and compare than, say, oral histories or artefacts, the motives that drive the writing of a text place it in uncertain, murky territory. The task of a historian is, therefore, a difficult one: events must play out in order for a later historian to gauge earlier historians and their history. Similarly, for authors, one must apply the same critical method. An author, and their work, is the product of their time and circumstances. In many ways, Abu'l Fazl's success was opposite of that of Badaūnī. They had an almost poetic relationship.

Both were taught together by the same teacher, Shaikh Mubārak Nāgori, and both took service in the Mughal court at the same time. Their futures, however, could not have been more different. While Abu'l Fazl rose to heights, Badaūnī did not achieve such success. Abu'l Fazl wrote the official chronicle of the empire, but Badaūnī wrote his work in secret.² Their works were a product of their different proximities to Emperor Akbar—Abu'l Fazl's close proximity versus Badaūnī's lack of it. Both must be considered

with caution. One must read Abu'l Fazl with a pinch of salt because he was too close to the emperor, while Badaūnī's words must be received with caution because he blamed Akbar and Abu'l Fazl for his failures.

Therefore, while truth in itself is an elusive concept, it becomes even more fickle for a student of history. One may hope to capture it somewhere between the discourses created by Abu'l Fazl and Badaūnī. The attempt in this paper would be to collect the information scattered in both the texts and compare the opinions of the two authors to understand what reforms in education were made by Akbar and finally look at it from a big-history perspective.

There is another disparity that arises between the two writers. While on one hand, Abu'l Fazl, a meticulous chronicler, lists the events, measures, imperial orders, and reforms of Akbar's reign in a systematic manner, Badaūnī makes his reader toil. His account is passionate, and he himself is moody. Badaūnī does not care for the reforms nor for a systematic account. He wants to tell a story, of his being relegated to the side-lines in the court and how he suffered all life because of it. Thus, information in the *Muntakhab-ut-Tawārikh* is not only scattered but often in-



Figure 1: Grayscale of a school scene, Sultanate of Malwa, central India, from *Miftah-ul-Fuzala* [Key of the Learned], an illustrated dictionary by Muḥammad Dā'ūd Shādiyābādī, c. 1490, held by the British Library, no. 3299.

direct. It is for this reason that we look at his work first and try to reconstruct the education system. Then we undertake the easier task of locating the information in Abu'l Fazl's text.

Mughal education formally began when a child reached the age of four (4 years, 4 months, 4 days to be precise), marked with a ceremony called the *Bismillāh Khwāni*, in which *Bismillāh* [In the Name of Allah] was written on a tablet [*takhtī*] and the child was made to read it.³ There were two ways for a child to receive education: home schooling and/or attending an educational institution such as a *madrasa* or the shrine of a *sufi*.

Badaūnī tells us about Mir Fathullah Shirazi, who taught the children [*aṭfal*] of amirs and would go daily to the houses of the royal family [*ba manazil-i-muqarraban*]. He tutored the slave of Hakim Abu'l Fath and the son of Abu'l Fazl as well as various other children of the *umara* [nobles]. Badaūnī reports on the subjects that Shirazi taught these children—writing [*naqt-o-khat*], to draw circles [*daira*] or geometry, and alphabet [*abjadham*].

From Badaūnī's description, Mir Fathullah Shirazi must have been a proficient tutor, who was much in demand, as it appears that his timetable was quite full from teaching so many of the royal and aristocratic children and those of their servants. Confirmation of this can also be found in Abu'l Fazl's *Akbarnāma*.⁴ Thus, schooling at home appears to have been one of the primary ways for a child to start their education.

The other way of imparting education to young boys of course was to send them to *madrasas*. A famous *madrasa* of the time that Badaūnī informs us about was the *Khair-ul-Manāzil* or *Madrasa-i-Begum* established by Māham Anagā, the foster mother of Akbar, where students would have lodgings. He talks of a similar centre at Agra, which was situated in the hospice of a *sufi* named Shah Mīr. Thus, *madrasas* and the hospices of Sufis acted as residential centres of education.⁵

While the locations and manners of provision of education to children is interesting, more crucial is the type of subjects that were taught. In this case, fortunately, we repeatedly get the names of topics throughout Badaūnī's narrative. These repetitions are enough to make a reader confident of drawing a conclusion that there was a standardization of subjects taught both at home and in *madrasas*. These subjects were grammar, *fiqh* [jurisprudence], logic, and philosophy. Just when one starts to wonder if it would be too bold to refer to this list as a curriculum, Badaūnī provides us with terms that for all intents and purposes indicate the presence of such a well-organized sys-

tem of education.

Badaūnī lauds a certain scholar, saying he was learned in the *'ulūm-i-mutadāwila* [*ulūm*: branches of learning/sciences; *mutadāwila*: common/customary]. Similarly for another, Shaikh 'Abdul Haq Dehlvi, Badaūnī writes that Dehlvi used to give instruction in the *'ulūm-i-rasmia* [*ulūm*: branches of learning/sciences; *rasmia*: customary]. Praising Shaikh 'Abdul Ghani of Badaun, he says that Ghani became a disciple of Shaikh 'Abdul 'Azīz and studied from him, *tamām kutub-i-muta'arif-i-mutadāwil* [all the well-known and customary books].⁶

The use of a terms such as *'ulūm-i-mutadāwila* [customary branches of learning] signifies that there were certain common subjects/themes that were followed to impart instruction. Likewise, use of the phrase, *tamām kutub-i-muta'arif-i-mutadāwil* [all books in the common/ordinary course of education] indicates that not only were there common subjects, some prescribed or favoured books were used by teachers. The term, *'ulūm-i-rasmia*, which literally translates as 'customary,' implies knowledge used for official or bureaucratic purposes and suggests that other practical and official skills, such as *inshā'* [composing letters and documents] and *siyāq* [accountancy], were taught. The usage of these terms suggest that some standardization of subjects in the form of a curriculum had taken place and had been in practice since long before.

Two contemporary authors substantiate this information through their research. Muhammad Zaki in *Organisation of Islamic Learning Under the Sayyids and Lodis* and Mohammad Mujeeb in *The Indian Muslims* both note that there was a curriculum standardised by Sikandar Lodi (1489–1517). The kind of subjects that were generally taught under this curriculum were law and theology, Arabic grammar and syntax, Islamic law [*fiqh*] and the principles of jurisprudence, *tafsīr* [exegesis of the *Qur'an*], *hadith* [traditions of the prophet], *kalām* [scholastic philosophy], and *mantiq* [logic].⁷ Thus Badaūnī and his peers were taught according an educational system that was formulated around 1500.

It also seems from Badaūnī's description that these traditional subjects were divided into two categories: those that required application of the mind and those that required learning by rote. For example, in the case of Miyañ Vajihuddīn Ahmadabadi, Badaūnī writes that he was a good scholar who had knowledge of all branches of study: those that required application of reasoning and those that were to be learnt by heart [*ulūm-i-aqli wa naqli*]. He calls Miyañ Ḥātim of Sambhal a scholar of both perceptive and received knowledge [*ālim-i-jāmi māqul wa manqūl*]. For many others, he uses similar terms, which indicate two cat-

egories of topics, those learned by heart and probably without an understanding of the subject, and those that required the exercise of reasoning and mental faculty. It seems that law, theology, and *hadith* [traditions of the Prophet] were *ilm-i-naqli / manqūl* topics, while *kalām* [scholastic philosophy], mathematics [*hisāb*], logic [*mantiq*], and grammar were *ilm-i-ʿaqli / mʿāqūl* subjects.⁸ It was this system of learning by rote that Akbar had sought to change when he proposed reforms in pedagogy. It comes as no surprise that Badāūnī takes good care to show his displeasure with the changes that were brought about.

Badāūnī says that learning of Arabic was looked down upon as for a crime, while *fiqh* [jurisprudence], *tafsīr* [commentary on the *Qurʿan*], and *hadith* [traditions of Prophet] were disfavoured. In contrast, the study of *nujūm* [astrology/astronomy], *hikmat-o-tibb* [medicine], *hisāb* [mathematics], *sher* [poetry], *tārīkh* [history], and *afsāna* [storytelling and writing] were given precedence. He notes that in the year 1586 it was ordered that everyone should give up the study of Arabic and instead should take up astrology/astronomy, mathematics, medicine, and philosophy. While one can trust Badāūnī to be dramatic in his choice of words, his information hints towards an imperial effort of regulating education. The testimony of this measure can be confirmed by the *ʿAin* on education given by Abūʿl Fazl.⁹

In every country, but especially in Hindustan, boys are kept for years at school, where they learn the consonants and vowels. A great portion of the life of the students is wasted by making them read many books. His Majesty orders that every schoolboy should first learn to write the letters of the alphabet, and also learn to trace their several forms. He ought to learn the shape and the name of each letter, which may be done in two days, when the boy should proceed to write the joined letters. They may be practised for a week, after which the boy should learn some prose and poetry by heart, and then commit to memory some verse in the praise of God, or moral sentences, each written separately. Care is to be taken that he learns to understand everything himself; but the teacher may assist him a little. He then ought for some time to do daily practise in writing a hemistich or verse. [This way he] will soon acquire a current hand. The teacher ought especially to look after five things: knowledge of the letters, meaning of words, the hemistich, and the formal lesson. If this

method of teaching be adopted, a boy will learn in a month, or even in a day, what it took others years to understand, so much so that people will get astonished. Every boy ought to read books on morals [*akhlāq*], agriculture [*falāḥat*], measurement [*masāḥat*], geometry [*handasāh*], astronomy [*nujūm*], physiognomy [*ramal*], household matters [*tadbīr-i-manzil*], the rules of the government [*siyāsat-i-madan*], medicine [*tibb*], logic [*mantiq*], physical sciences [*ilm-i-tabii*], spiritual sciences [*ilm-i-ilāhi*], as well as history [*tārīkh*], all of which may be gradually acquired. In studying Sanskrit, students ought to learn the *byākaran* [grammar], *niyāi*, *bedānta* [Vedanta] and *patāñjal* [yoga]. No one should be allowed to neglect those things which the present time requires.¹⁰

We must realise that even Abūʿl Fazl cannot be absolved from the charge of being dramatic. While Badāūnī's reaction was to disagree with Emperor Akbar's methods and opinions, Abūʿl Fazl's would try to show them to be highly efficient. For Abūʿl Fazl, His Majesty's suggestions in the learning process were so good that they would teach a boy how to write within a matter of a day. Thus, the probabilities of a true account are most likely to be found between sighs of exasperation and disapproval uttered by Badāūnī and the fawning admiration of Abūʿl Fazl. It is this revised curriculum that we can examine from a big-history approach.¹¹

It is important to note that Sanskrit studies were also being encouraged, which indicates a watershed moment in historical cultural awareness. The dominance of a language for scripture has been seen numerous times in history, and, in this way, Arabic was the language of Islam. However, it became irrelevant for a person who is not a native speaker; it can even become a barrier. Arabic had no deep roots as a language of the Indian subcontinent and it appears that this was understood by an emperor in 16th century Mughal India. Not only that, Akbar seems to have also understood the relevance of Sanskrit as the language to understand the past of his empire. As Abūʿl Fazl's wrote, 'No one should be allowed to neglect those things which the present time requires' This indicates that an emphasis was being placed on an education relevant to the time. With this understanding, a translation bureau was established by Akbar that undertook translation of Sanskrit texts such as the *Ramayana*, *Mahabharata*, *Singhasan Battisi*, *Panchatantra*, etc.¹²

Thus, Akbar sought to revise a curriculum that had re-

mained more or less the same for the previous 86 years. Yet these reforms in education might seem to be appearing in a vacuum. There is a need to contextualize them and to see the bigger picture: a big-historical picture.

Akbar came to the throne at a very young age and grew into the crown that was placed on his head. After his father's untimely death, he had the task of consolidating the empire. After much of the territory was conquered, Akbar embarked on a journey to rule with tact and diplomacy. He sought to bring change to governance, the court atmosphere, and its policies. His court was a place for not only open dialogue but a space where one could even crack a witticism at the expense of the emperor.

He sought to have dialogue and debates among different religions so that he could arrive at a higher conclusion: There is truth in all faiths. When seen with the other measures that Akbar undertook, we witness openness and reform. Among these progressive efforts were his attempt to abolish *sati* [burning widows on their husband's funeral pyre], abolishing the *jizya* [religious tax on non-Muslim subjects] and the pilgrimage tax, the translations of Sanskrit works into Persian, and establishment of a Mughal school of painting.¹³

This approach is an historical parallel to that which can be found in big-history classrooms today. It is importune for the author of this paper to place herself on the cusp of various disciplines she has interacted with in her academic span. It begins with the understanding of history as a holistic discipline. Furthermore, the methodology of history emphasizes that events do not happen in a vacuum or as accidents. This reasoning brings us to two assertions: firstly, history by nature is an inter-disciplinary subject and, secondly, there is fluidity in historical events.

Equipped with historical methodology, one can say that the present and future are informed by our past. They take shape through the decisions that the humans of the past have made and how the world changed as a consequence of them. This idea emerges when one imagines the past and the present to be in constant interaction with each other. The classroom then becomes the physical space where this conjugation takes place, especially the big-history classroom.

Big History is a field that uses super-disciplinarity as a tool to prepare minds with a holistic understanding of the world around them. It helps them grow into better problem-solvers by understanding a situation / problem / event from multiple levels, instead of being confined to the compartments of a specific discipline. The instructors for Big History are drawn from various disciplines, where they

bring their own expertise to the classroom in order to provide students with a holistic perspective. They borrow from disciplines such as physics, chemistry, medicine, geography, geology, history, sociology, and political science ... to name a few.

This subject list carries the echo of the syllabus introduced by Akbar. Thus, in that context, teaching subjects such as agriculture, household matters, measurement, medicine, physical sciences, logic, and the other subjects to a student is a very empirical and big-historical approach to education taken by an Indian emperor in the 16th century.

If I may be so bold as to put forth a personal perspective, for me, Big History acts more like a philosophy than as a subject. It is a wholesome view of the past that creates wholesome individuals. It constitutes comprehensive education, combined with introduction to multiple methodologies. Such humans inherit the Earth far more responsibly. We may understand this development in pedagogy as a recent innovation. However, many instances of such innovations and measures can be found in our past, which become lessons for the future. Akbar and his policies are one such example of that.

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Endnotes

1. For more details on this subject as well as history of Akbar's reign, see the following. Rizvi 1975. Rezavi 2008: 24, 195. Habib 1997; idem 2007.
2. For more details, see Majid 2016.
3. Badāūnī informs us of the Bismillāh *Khwānī* ceremony of Prince Salīm (later Emperor Jahangir), who was offered a tablet (*takhta-i-tālīm*) from the hands of Maulāna Mīr Kalān and was made to read the Bismillāh by Mīrak Shāh bin Mīr Jamāluddin. Historian Muhammad Zaki's comments on the education system under Sayyids and Lodis would be noteworthy here: 'The primary education of child usually started with the ceremony known as Tasmiya Khwānī or Maktab ceremony. When the child completed the age of four years, four months and four days he was brought before an 'Ālim or a pious saint. The teacher wrote Bismi'llāh on a piece of wood and the child was made to recite it along with some other verses from the Qur'ān. Then sweets were distributed and formal education started under a teacher.' Badāūnī 1865: 170. Zaki 1977: 2.
4. The scholarship of Mir Fathullah Shirazi is praised by Abū'l Fazl, who says that the Mir possessed such knowledge that if all the books of wisdom in the world were to disappear, the Mir would have written it all again, so much so that what was lost would not have been missed at all. Abū'l Fazl 1873: 401.
5. Badāūnī offers many examples of such centres of education in the biographies of Sufis and theologians given in the third volume of the *Muntakhab-ut-Tawārikh*. Badāūnī 1865: 3, 4, 24, 42, 74, 119.
6. Badāūnī 1865: 107, 111, 114.
7. Mujeeb 1967: 404–408. Zaki 1977: 3. From Badāūnī's own biographical account, it seems that he was taught the same subjects. Majid 2016.
8. Badāūnī 1865: 43, 66–67, 70, 77, 105, 129.
9. Badāūnī, *Muntakhab* II, pp 306–307, p 363. Abū'l Fazl, *Āin-i-Akbarī* I, p 201.
10. I have quoted the translation of Blochmann 1869: 143.
11. Badāūnī 1865: 360–361. It is important to note that we do not find much reference to the education of girls in the above narratives, although we do know that there were learned women in those times from other sources. An example that stands out is Gulbadan Bano Begum, the author of *Humāyūnnāma*, along with some oblique references to learned women from Badāūnī and others, such as Ma-

ham Anaga, a lady qualified enough to act as the *wakil-us-salatanat* and establish a *madarsa*, Salīma Sultān Begum, and a poet called Nihāni. Nihāni means ‘hidden,’ and many women of that period composed poetry under such names to hide their identity. More examples of this could be found in the cases of Salīma Sultān Begum, Nūr Jahān and Zebunnisa, who composed poetry under the name of *Makhfi*, which also means hidden or concealed. It seems that because women were expected to remain under *pardā*, their *nom de plumes* reflected that condition. It is interesting to observe that Salīma Sultān Begum, the senior wife of Akbar, had her own library and was very protective of her books. There was a time when our dear Badāūnī vanished from court for a long time, and he took with him a book that belonged to her. Messengers were sent to him repeatedly to return the book and, when they fell on deaf ears, Badāūnī’s *madad-i-ma’āsh* (stipend from the Imperial court) was stopped until he produced it.

12. For details, see Truschke 2016.

13. For details, see Habib 1997.

