

## Notes

# The Rationale for Colonialism: *‘Akbar’s Dream’*

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*Akbar’s Dream* [1892] is among the last poems of Alfred, Lord Tennyson – Poet-Laureate of Britain. It was composed when the British Empire was at its apex of territorial expansion and Queen Victoria was the Empress of India. It is reflective of the position of Tennyson as Poet-Laureate – whose ‘official’ task was to celebrate the achievements and other notable events of Britain. Tennyson was an ultra-conservative person who believed that Britain was doing a favour to the peoples they had conquered and subjugated. This was intended for their benefit so as to advance them in the scale of civilization.

The appearance in 1888 of a translation of the *A’in-i-Akbari* by G. Blochmann germinated the idea of this poem in his mind. The *A’in-i-Akbari* is a comprehensive gazetteer of the Mogul Empire at the time of Akbar [r. 1557-1605] and gives valuable information about its administration. The author, Abu’l Fazl, was Akbar’s advisor, counselor and courtier. He enjoyed an unrivalled prominence in Akbar’s court along with his brother, Faizi, who was Poet-Laureate. These two, along with their father Shaikh Mubarak, were extremely talented and they were able to influence the uneducated Akbar in his deviational ideas which he could not have possibly articulated on his own. In 1581, there was the proclamation of the ‘*Din-i-Ilahi*’ – a syncretic compound of Islam with other faiths resulting in the dilution of the recognized face of Islam with its beliefs, practices, commands and prohibitions. The primary innovation was the assumption of the headship of the new ‘faith’ by Akbar in a declaration justifying this called the ‘*mahdar*’. This open heresy was opposed by the *ulema* and the Muslims and resulted in open revolt and disturbed the normal function of the government.

When the information contained in the Persian *A’in-i-Akbari* was made available in Blochmann’s translation and read by Tennyson, the whole idea of issuing a composite faith appealed strongly to Tennyson.

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He saw that the British were ruling over a far larger area in India than Akbar did and its large, discontented population could be held in control by disturbing their belief-systems. The 'new' religion of Akbar had no attraction for Tennyson who was a Christian protestant fundamentalist. He felt that it would be a forceful argument if he could present his own Christianity as the future universal religion. This he could present as the revival of the 'old' religion of Akbar which had died a natural death with him. The advent of the British in India could be presented as a fulfillment of Akbar's stillborn dreams. Accordingly, with the information supplied by Blochmann, Tennyson did his research and composed a long poem to support his thesis.

*Akbar's Dream* begins with an inscription for a temple in Kashmir made by Abu'l Fazl. This was taken from Blochmann. It is more of a poetic paraphrase than a literal translation. Thus Abu'l Fazl:

*ai kih gham-at ra dil-i-mushtaq nishane  
khalq bat u mushgul shud wa tu gha'in az miyane  
Ghay mu'takif ba dayr-am ghay sakin ba masjid  
ya'ni tura mi talabam khane ba khane.*

Translation:

O You whose pain is marked in every heart!

People are engaged with You while You remain invisible!

Sometimes I seclude myself in the temple and sometimes abide in the mosque!

But it is You I seek from place to place!

Tennyson:

O God in every temple I see people that seek thee!

And in every language I have spoken, people praise thee....

Sometimes I search for the Christian cloister and sometimes the mosque

But it is thou whom I seek from temple to temple.

The differences and liberties between the original and Tennyson's version of it are obvious. This is followed by a dialogue between Akbar and Abu'l Fazl 'before the palace in Fatehpur Sikri at night', In reply to a query by Abu'l Fazl, Akbar mentions his worries and mental tribulations. He says that though he has made men 'free' to take swine-flesh, wine and indulge in freethinking, he is opposed. His meeting with Christian missionaries has convinced him of their great belief in peace, love and justice. In spite of all his efforts, the world remained unappreciative of his great unifying creed. However he has a dream in which 'from out the sunset poured an alien race / who fitted stone to stone again and truth / peace, love and justice came to dwell

therein. On this hopeful note, Akbar and Abu'l Fazl go and sing a hymn to the sun-god.

The blatant and unabashed justification of colonialism as the fulfillment of Akbar's stillborn dream is a clever and cunning ploy to deceive his readers. 'The White Man's Burden' was a claim to spread peace, love and justice without actually doing so. The supposed link between the West's 'civilizing mission' and the lonely, unappreciated Akbar placed side-by-side does not convince. The irony of the whole story is that the old-type self-justifying colonialism has died out in an ignoble death and is even a source of embarrassment in its countries of origin. Akbar is forgotten by his beneficiaries and Abu'l Fazl was assassinated on the orders of Prince Saleem. Akbar remains praised for his bent towards Christianity by V.A. Smith [*Akbar*] and Laurence Binyon [*Akbar*]. A balanced picture is seen in I.H. Qureishi [*Akbar*] and K.A. Nizami [*Akbar*].