

THE AIN-I AKBARI, THE TURCO-PERSIAN TRADITION OF IMPERIAL GOVERNANCE AND THE CRISIS OF LEADERSHIP IN CONTEMPORARY SOUTH ASIA

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Introduction

Leadership studies is one of the more recently demarcated areas of academic inquiry and public discourse that is being pushed by the United States and its allies as a possible remedy to the ills that plague the human condition. It includes relatively harmless inanities such as youth parliaments, youth in governance seminars and papers and leadership skills building tours for young and old alike. It also includes more pernicious and wasteful exercises that involve courses and trainings for administrators from developing countries encouraging them to ape private sector entrepreneurial leadership best practices or learning to reproduce on command the latest mantras churned out by their Western benefactors. Often these efforts are made under the rubric of some variant of the modernization theories that emerged in nineteenth and early and mid-twentieth centuries. These theories are not necessarily grounded in empirical and historical appreciations of the societies they seek to modify. They are for the most part “theodices – narratives of providence and redemption – presented in the jargon of social science.”¹

The jargon itself has steadily evolved into an obstructive rather than elucidatory medium. A diverse range of individuals and groups have contributed to this process and propounded irrational and sometimes utopian solutions and perspectives. These lead, as in the case of post-modernism, to the dead end of hyper-subjectivity and denial of reality or, as in the case of Marxism and its neo-conservative nemesis, to an equally irrational and often more dangerous, absolute certainty.² The central lesson of the Enlightenment appears to be lost on both its irreconcilable critics and its most fanatical adherents. That lesson was, and is, that though rationality is an imperfect medium for negotiating between complex and evolving social realities and our subjective individualities; it is the only one that is capable of producing tentative conclusions that can serve as the basis of further improvement. Rational understanding and prescriptions are always subject to the principle of falsification and need to be continuously revised in light of new evidence and improvements in logic and rhetoric.³

In order to address major problems in a part of the world as complex as South Asia, the first step ought to be acquiring knowledge of the historical experience of the region. Applying Western leadership theories developed in the

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blur of the past thirty years to the crisis of leadership in South Asia will, at best, do no harm. More often, the material asymmetry between the donor and recipient means that the former is in a position to use patronage and the lure of acceptability to successfully sell its Panglossian prescriptions.⁴ In Pakistan, one of the prescriptions sold to the Musharraf regime (October 1999 - August 2008) was the devolution of power to local governments. The scheme was originally articulated by the World Bank in the triumphal atmosphere of the early 1990s and pushed through in Pakistan with the assistance of local collaborators in the NGO community. A few years into the scheme's implementation, its erstwhile local proponents found it to be deeply flawed and an outright danger to the effectiveness of the state.⁵ That the histories of countries like Pakistan are littered with failed utopian formulas that ended tragically and inflicted irreparable harm upon the fabric of state and society did not, it seems, disqualify the providers of such harmful advice.⁶

One major aspect of the crisis of leadership in South Asia in general and Pakistan in particular is the tendency of rulers and their advisors to fall prey to the theodices impressed upon them by Western governments. Sheer ignorance of one's own historical experience facilitates the process whereby foreign experts can run circles around their intellectually deprived though superficially Westernized counterparts in the developing world. By neither knowing nor understanding the historical antecedents that have shaped the outcomes confronted in the present, the ability of these elites to resist irrational tutelage is minimal. The price paid is that as the elite fails to successfully deal with major problems, it loses the confidence and respect of its own people and depletes both the legitimacy and the effectiveness of the state. There is, of course, no excuse for such ignorance, and the stakes are far too high for the situation to be allowed to remain as it is.⁷

A most integral component of the South Asian conception of leadership and statecraft is the Turco-Persian legacy which reached its height during the Timurid imperial age in South Asia (1560-1707).⁸ Akbar (r. 1556-1605) laid the foundations of Timurid dynastic rule in South Asia. Akbar's administrative reforms, major policy challenges, achievements, failures, and perspectives on government, can be accessed through a number of sources, one of the most important and voluminous of which is the *A'in-I Akbari* of Abu'l Fazl Allami.⁹ This eclectic work provides access to Akbar's ideals, the ethos of the Timurid Empire, its organization, and the qualities of its absolute ruler. It also contains a large amount of economic data on prices, commodities and agrarian output in sixteenth century India. Although at places tedious and overwhelmingly detailed, the *A'in-I Akbari* is one of the basic primary sources that relate to the nature of state power and leadership in South Asia. It is insufficient to merely observe that since 1947 the exercise of power in the region has become increasingly personalized, arbitrary and in some respects dynastic. The quality of South Asia's contemporary leadership is more akin to the degenerate later-Timurids (1707-

1857) than to the likes of Akbar. This difference, however, furnishes the essential notion upon which the *A'in-I Akbari* is founded – the concept of true leadership.

Emperors True and False

The basic principle around which the Timurid Empire was organized was that the entire country was the property of the emperor.¹⁰ From this patrimonial premise the rest flowed logically. The servants of the state were the personal servants of the ruler. They were organized into quasi-rational bureaucratic hierarchies for the enforcement of their master's claims. Beneath the elite imperial servants were a mass of lesser gentry, government functionaries and ordinary people.¹¹ The latter normally lived in the rural hinterland in small, relatively insular and sub-political village communities and provided the sustenance, extracted in the form of rents, that paid for the standing army (250,000 strong), local militias, and the administrative elite of 1,338 *mansabdars* below the rank of 200, 163 ranked 400-200 and 252 from 5,000 to 500.¹² Although far greater in actual territorial extent, the core region of this empire lay in the 750,000 square mile Indo-Gangetic plain.

The remarkable concentration of wealth and power that the apparatus made possible placed enormous strains upon the intellect and character of the emperor and his servants. It was here that Abu'l Fazl drew worthy distinctions between two very different kinds of leaderships within the patrimonial tradition of which he was himself a product and proponent:

Silly and short-sighted men cannot distinguish a *true* king from a *selfish* ruler. Nor is this remarkable, as both have in common a large treasury, a numerous army, clever servants, obedient subjects, an abundance of wise men, a multitude of skilled workmen, and a superfluity of means of enjoyment. But men of deeper insight remark a difference. In the case of the former, the things just now enumerated, are lasting; but in that of the latter, of short duration. The former does not attach himself to these things, as his object is to remove oppression and provide for everything which is good. Security, health, chastity, justice, polite manners, faithfulness, truth, and increase of sincerity, etc., are the result. The latter is kept in bonds by the external forms of royal power, by vanity, the slavishness of men, and the desire of enjoyment; hence, everywhere, there is insecurity, unsettledness, strife, oppression, robbery.¹³

The personalized and proprietorial nature of the state granted, a considerable variation of outcomes flowed from the quality of leadership. Before the emperor could govern others, he had to possess the moral and intellectual strength, the rational will, one could say, to govern himself. Self-restraint in the exercise of power was the supreme virtue that a sovereign could possess. Knowing when to stop was indispensable to the ruler's success and made the difference between a

lasting imperium of enduring value and a transient spectacle of ultimately self-destructive hedonism and impulsiveness. The arbitrary power of the autocrat could do great harm if wielded immaturely and great good if exercised with discretion and judgment in accordance with the ruler's enlightened self-interest.

At the core of the ruler's enlightened self-interest was detachment from atmosphere of pomp and pageantry that pervaded the corridors of power. For the selfish ruler, power was the source of procuring enjoyment, a means of inflating one's ego and indulging one's caprices. For the true ruler, however, these trappings, luxuries and refinements, were no more than pleasant distractions from the deadly serious task of exercising power over the vast and discordant multitudes that inhabit his empire. The ability to resist taking the fruits of power for granted was the key to ensuring that they were always in abundance. Abu'l Fazl, like Kautilya, Confucius, Aristotle and Machiavelli, "...understood that politics rests on apparently paradoxical truths. Peace depends on war. Freedom on order. Stability on change. Liberty on violence. Security on fear."¹⁴ One of the many paradoxical truths embraced by the Turco-Persian tradition of imperial governance, which was also in harmony with Ancient Indian practices, was that the ruling class of the Timurid mega-estate comprised the servants of the emperor.¹⁵ Knowing how to choose the imperial servants and give them assignments were some of the emperor's main functions on which practically everything else depended.

The Imperial Servants

However energetic, the emperor remained a remote figure. Royal tours and inspections were often specially crafted occasions that left little room for spontaneity. The public durbar, in an empire of a hundred million subjects, hardly registered in the collective consciousness. For millennia, "...rural poverty and caste exclusiveness", combined with a seemingly interminable succession of selfish rulers, meant that "Those millions situated in the latter circumstances knew the state mainly as an agency of extortion."¹⁶ Outside the capital and its immediate vicinity, it was the ruler's servants, not the ruler himself, who exercised power.¹⁷ That this power was exercised in the ruler's name and with his sanction made it imperative that the quality of the imperial servants be as high as possible. Since the concept of the public interest did not exist per se, the merit of the servants was gauged by the effectiveness and dexterity with which they executed their master's orders and gave him advice.

The arbitrary power of the ruler and the benefits to be obtained by earning his favour contributed to another paradox. This was that the ruler, with all his spies and advisors, may well be the least well informed individual in the government. Such an unfortunate condition was likely to arise when the ruler reacted intemperately or malevolently towards those who told him unpleasant truths.¹⁸ While public criticism of the ruler was indeed unpardonable and amounted to treason and sacrilege, the ability to provide honest feedback in

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private was the mark of a good imperial servant.¹⁹ The *true* king was “forever searching after those who speak the truth, and is not displeased with words that seem bitter, but are in reality sweet. He considers the nature of the words and the rank of the speaker.”²⁰ The emperor’s most faithful servants were those who dared point out, in confidence, when he was about to go off without his clothes, while forming a tightly disciplined and obedient phalanx around the ruler in public. Disagreements between the imperial officers, however, were allowed and sometimes encouraged as an instrument of royal manipulation and control.

The emperor’s *omrahs* or high-ranking *mansabdars*, needed to possess certain qualities in order to be admitted to the imperial fold. Amongst these, “ardent devotion” to the emperor and “consuming” hostility towards his enemies were the most important.²¹ Bravery in battle and forthrightness were also vital ingredients, given the highly militaristic nature of the Timurid Empire.²² The highest ranking noble, or *vakil*, acted as the dean of the imperial servants and was “the emperor’s lieutenant in all matters connected with the realm and the household.”²³ The *vakil*, as the head of the imperial service, helped set the emperor’s agenda and advised him in the recruitments, promotions and transfers, what would today be called personnel management.²⁴

In this sense, the *vakil* was the equivalent of the cabinet and establishment secretaries in contemporary India and Pakistan. In addition to wisdom and discretion, the *vakil* had to treat his subordinates with respect, be intimately acquainted with administrative technicalities and be familiar with the working of all the other departments of the state. More than any other officer, the *vakil*’s conduct would shape how the other imperial servants viewed their master. The *vakil* was, after all, the chief interpreter and enforcer of the imperial will. The *vakil*, along with the vizier, or chief financial officer (*diwan-i ala*), and numerous other officials, constituted the highest tier of the state apparatus.²⁵ This top tier was required to acquaint itself with the work of other departments and reported directly to the *vakil* or vizier or, if so instructed, to the emperor himself.²⁶

Almost equal in rank, and perhaps greater in actual power than the *vakil*, was the vizier who, as just indicated, was the chief financial officer. The vizier is described as “in reality a book keeper.”²⁷ This book keeper, however, was not to be trifled with. He was entrusted with the financial administration of the realm and coordinating with the provinces. The revenue collectors, assessors, accountants, provincial financial administrations, *jagirdars*, *zamindars*, merchants and artisans, all answered to the vizier in one way or the other, who was, in turn, directly accountable to the emperor.

The vizier and his subordinates needed to be well versed in mathematics, accounting, record keeping, land surveying, agriculture, and mercantile issues. Circumspection and integrity were as important as a high degree of technical proficiency. Given that the vizier oversaw the land revenue settlement, rates of pay to the army and bureaucracy, commercial taxes and policy, he and his staff

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could at the stroke of a pen determine the economics of existence for millions of imperial subjects. While the *vakil*'s behaviour reflected upon the emperor within the narrow circle of a few hundred, or at most a thousand, senior officers, the vizier's conduct determined in large measure what the subjects thought of their ruler.

Effective leadership also depended upon the qualities of intellect and character shared by the emperor's companions. These included those attached to the court by virtue of their excellence in the arts or sciences as well as friends and family members with whom the ruler enjoyed interacting. Their purpose, in the court of a *true* king, was to engage in a constructive conversation and excite the imagination and intellect of the ruler. Abu'l Fazl warned, however, that in the court of a *selfish* ruler the imperial hangers on would exacerbate his vices and "...inundate the world with a deluge of calamity so that numbers are driven by the flood of misfortunes into the current of utter extinction."²⁸

The lesson to be learnt was that if the light that illuminates is directed incorrectly or criminally, it can easily turn into the light that blinds. The *true* king knew that the wisdom of one man was limited and the shared insights of those in many ways more learned and wiser than himself would elevate the standard of government. That is, while the ruler did not have to be the most intelligent or learned, he had to be sufficiently secure in his own intellect and pragmatic enough to recognize, reward, and benefit from the wisdom of others. The exercise of sovereign power could proceed smoothly only if the ruler constantly educated himself so that he may be able to educate others.

The ruler's intellectual exertions were every bit as important as his administrative and martial endeavours. It was a matter of the greatest pride for the ruler to be in the company of the learned men and intellectuals of his time.²⁹ Akbar, states Abu'l Fazl, sought such companionship and was a voraciously keen student. Akbar divided the learned men of the empire into five broad categories. The first were true philosophers who had command over all fields of knowledge, lay and spiritual, and were confident enough to debate and discuss uninhibitedly.³⁰ The second category included those who were genuinely pious men of any and all faiths and who had attained mystical insights into the human condition through prayer, meditation, self-abnegation, and travel.³¹ The third category consisted of empiricists who excelled in logic and observation.³² The fourth category comprised sceptics who, without exposing themselves by articulating clear-cut arguments of their own, probed the weaknesses in the arguments of others.³³ The fifth category was made up of those who never dared pass "beyond the narrow sphere of revealed testimony" and were "bigoted" in their attitudes and worldview.³⁴ The orthodox ulema fell into the fifth category for opposing Akbar's free thinking and religious tolerance.

Abu'l Fazl also advised the *true* king to be aware of the five kinds of men in general. The "*sagacious man*" was prudent, intelligent, and helpful to others.

Such generous and wise persons were “the fittest...for a king to consult in state affairs” and employ in responsible positions.³⁵ Second was “*the man of good intentions*” who, though earnest, ambitious, and intelligent, lacked the generosity and wisdom to be truly helpful to others.³⁶ Third was “*the simple man*”, who was in essence a morally sound mediocrity with limited ambitions and little capacity.³⁷ Such persons made good servants and could be employed as lower level functionaries. Fourth was “*the inconsiderate man*” who was absorbed in selfish pursuits, with an opportunistic morality that could be guided towards improvement by a wise ruler.³⁸ Finally, there was “*the vicious man*” who actively sought to harm others in the pursuit of his interests and would bring the “whole world to grief” if placed in a position of authority.³⁹

A *true* king felt comfortable in the presence of the wise, the well-intentioned and the simple. For the inconsiderate, a sort of benevolent disdain was in order. For the vicious, the ruler would be punitively vicious in return. A *selfish* ruler, however, preferred to surround himself with the inconsiderate and the vicious and thus hastened his own downfall and ensured his infamy. It was “the light” of the *true* king’s “wisdom” that discerned “the worth of men” and kindled “the lamp of their energy.”⁴⁰ The ability to “regulate business” in accordance with “the rank and character of men, by the light of insight and penetration”⁴¹ was critical not only for the management of the imperial servants and companions in attendance upon the emperor but also for those employed far away from their master’s direct supervision.⁴²

Kaghazi Raj: The Empire at Work

One of the major commonalities that bind the often discordant perspectives on the Timurid Empire is that it was a highly centralized state that operated by measured delegation of power, subject to imperial confirmation or review.⁴³ This government “can be defined only as a bureaucracy” that was abuzz with paperwork and remote decision making.⁴⁴ One of the major advantages of the complex *mansabdari nizam* with its elaborate grading structure was that it gave the ruler “a freer hand in rewarding talent without hurting the feelings of those who had come to enjoy prestige and seniority.”⁴⁵

The most important field officers were the provincial viceroys or *sipah salars*.⁴⁶ These governors were the almost omnipotent sub-sovereigns charged with the care of “The troops and the people of the provinces.”⁴⁷ The major functions of the provincial viceroys were to maintain order, dispense justice and suppress rebellions. The viceroys also maintained their own networks of spies and informers alongside a clandestine service that reported directly to the emperor. In this regard, the viceroy maintained several different types of spies that generated intelligence reports about the same subject.

The provisioning and training of the troops as well as their deployment were related to the maintenance of order. The construction of roads, barracks,

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caravanserais, guard posts, soup kitchens and repairs to existing infrastructure also fell under the category of vice-regal duties.⁴⁸ Taking care of mendicants and ascetics, who travelled largely unhindered and knew quite a bit about the localities they frequented, and promoting agriculture and trade, were additional functions. The viceroys reported directly to the emperor and were for all practical purposes the co-equals with the provincial revenue ministers who reported directly to the vizier.

Below the viceroys were the *faujdar*s or garrison commanders appointed as imperial overseers for several districts. If cultivators, *jagirdars*, *zamindars*, ordinary criminals, or imperial servants, rebelled against the sovereign or refused to send their share of the revenue to the treasury, it was the local *faujdar* who spun into action as judge, jury and executioner.⁴⁹ In the event of rebellion, serious disturbance or recalcitrance in meeting obligations to the state, the *faujdar*(s) concerned were instructed to submit detailed reports on the problem to the viceroy.

Once investigations in writing were complete, the *faujdar* was instructed to give the disgruntled elements in the area under his supervision one last chance to come to their senses and submit to the imperial will in exchange for clemency. If the power of argument failed to dissuade those embarked on the path of rebellion, the local *faujdar*, by this time reinforced and mobilized, was to apply the argument of power and restore the writ of the emperor. Akbar's instructions were clear – those who rejected his entreaty to return to obedience were to be crushed, their properties, lives and honour were forfeit and subject to expropriation in order to reward the imperial servants.⁵⁰ Of course, one-fifth of the confiscated wealth of the rebels was to be sent to the royal treasury.⁵¹ Once the operation was completed, an account of events, complete with details of the valorous conduct of the officers and men who distinguished themselves, was submitted to the viceroy for onward communication to the emperor.⁵²

Given that the *Akbarnama* records over 140 rebellions,⁵³ the *faujdar*s were kept quite busy and had plenty of opportunity to distinguish themselves in battle. This process of pacification and re-conquest strengthened the cycle of expropriation upon which the empire depended and kept the military employed and satisfied. As no public criticism of the ruler could be tolerated and supreme religious and political authority was vested in the emperor, "his writ could only be questioned through rebellion."⁵⁴ So long as the ruler and his servants were effective and highly motivated, the atomized nature of Indian society prevented rebellions from coalescing into mortal threats to the imperial state.⁵⁵ This fragmentation extended to the *zamindars* as well. As a class, the *zamindars* were "so fatally divided" along caste, kinship, religious, ethnic, and/or geographic lines, that they could "never form into a united governing class and create an empire" or, so long as the central authority remained strong, successfully challenge those empires that existed.⁵⁶

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The *mir'adl* was the emperor's main judicial officer in the provinces and charged with the investigation of disputes, gathering evidence and arriving at a decision.⁵⁷ Under certain circumstances the investigation and adjudication processes could be separated with a *qazi* appointed to conduct the former.⁵⁸ The *kotwal* or city/town magistrate/governor maintained security forces and spies in the urban area under his charge. The spies were there to monitor the movements of goods and people and keep a watchful eye on the guild masters, brokers, and merchants.⁵⁹ Maintaining registers filled with such useful information was the *kotwal's* duty. The importance of this was great as the Timurid ruling class generally preferred to live in urban areas, or keep their families there, and rely on intermediaries who came and went for managing their *jagirs* and assignments.

The *aml-guzar* or collector of revenues was instructed to "consider himself the representative of the lord paramount and establish himself where everyone may have easy access to him without the intervention of a mediator."⁶⁰ Knowledge of mathematics, agriculture, land surveying, and assessment of crop yields, and good writing skills were the technical prerequisites for this post. Given that this position entailed extensive touring, the collector was most intimately acquainted with the actual condition of the people. Under the collector came the *bitikchis*, *qanungos*, *patwaris*, *zabit*, *munsif*, surveyors, *thanadars*, village headmen/*panchayats* and ordinary cultivators. Once the collection process was completed, preferably in cash, the revenues were to be deposited with the *khanazadar* or treasurer and physically secured by the governor.⁶¹

Maintaining a record of all this government activity, along with other occurrences, was a major responsibility of the government. Abu'l Fazl observes that "Keeping records is an excellent thing for a government; it is even necessary for every rank of society."⁶² The recorders of information were the *waqi'a-nawis*. Akbar kept fourteen of them on his personal staff to write down his instructions, present reports flowing in from the provinces and other departments, and noting down the daily routine of the emperor.⁶³

The thousands of recorders in the provinces and districts performed the function of generating reports on just about everything that happened – from marriages and births to rebellions, changes in the administration and any other "extraordinary phenomena."⁶⁴ Since the emperor and his senior servants could hardly be expected to digest the thousands of pages generated on a weekly basis, the *ta-liq a nawis*, or writers of abridgements, were employed to summarize texts. Summaries on important matters that went to the emperor or senior functionaries had to be signed by the postmaster, the news recorder concerned, and the chief of protocol.⁶⁵

In addition to the formal channels of reportage, numerous informal conduits remained open at all times. Spies, informers, wandering ascetics, casual agents, and spies that spied on their colleagues in the intelligence community cohabited uneasily as the emperor's confidential servants. The postmaster was responsible

for routine intelligence gathering although the provincial viceroys, revenue ministers, *faujdars*, and city magistrates all maintained their own intelligence retinues. The attainment of proficiency in the administrative and intelligence spheres was essential to the success of the Timurid Empire in its favourite activity – war.

Ashab-us-Saif (Men of the Sword): The Empire at War

Drawing into its ranks the best and brightest from all over the Muslim world, the Timurid Empire in India was a smaller but more sustainable version of the Eurasian empire founded by Amir Taimur.⁶⁶ Though Akbar's empire was far less violent and far better at administration than the one founded by his illustrious Central Asian ancestor, it was animated by a militaristic ethos. Martial strength was applied against local malcontents in numerous small-scale operations. Force was also applied against rival powers within South Asia and its immediate neighbours. In 1556, when Akbar became emperor, the Timurid Empire in India was one of about twenty states jostling for influence. In 1605, as Akbar lay on his deathbed, his empire stretched from Kabul to the Arabian Sea in the west, Burma in the east, and had broken through into peninsula India. Akbar led the Timurid Empire to the status of paramount power and until the 1720s it retained this position.

The imperial army that accomplished this lasting feat numbered, “exclusive of the soldiers that are allowed” to the *faujdars*, *zamindars* and tax collectors, 200,000 cavalry, and 40,000 infantry inclusive of musketeers and artillery.⁶⁷ Other than the imperial army, an estimated four million men were kept under arms as light cavalry, local militias, guards, armed retainers, and the like.⁶⁸ The gunpowder contingents of the military were of particular importance in the eyes of Akbar who considered them “wonderful locks for protecting the august edifice of the state; and befitting keys for the door of conquest.”⁶⁹ The artillery included heavy guns that required several elephants to haul and could be used to batter down major fortifications, medium guns that a single elephant could move, and light guns that individual artillery men could carry.⁷⁰ Akbar understood that artillery ensured that in any argument he got to have the last word and it was “carefully distributed over the whole kingdom.”⁷¹

The regular imperial army and the locally maintained forces worked in tandem. The former conquered enemy lands, defended the frontiers and protected the emperor. The latter garrisoned conquered lands, pacified them, helped with the routine administration, provided the logistics and communications for the regular army when it was ordered to move, and acted as a manpower reserve. The military patronage dynamic that emerged guaranteed that the state was the largest employer, and endemic turbulence at the local level and almost continuous warfare on the frontiers did not alter the macro outlook. The empire was at peace *because* it was either preparing for war or at war.

Areas outside Timurid control at the time of Akbar's ascension had to be brought into the imperial fold due to the disorder prevalent within them. Gujarat, for instance, was the chief export zone of India and the major entry point for gold and silver bullion. The territory "was virtually divided between seven warring principalities and was a happy hunting ground for every kind of adventurer."⁷² By 1573, Gujarat was appended to Akbar's realm, and Raja Bhagwan Das, for his outstanding role in the military campaign, became the first Hindu *mansabdar* to be invested with a ceremonial banner and kettle drum by the emperor.⁷³ A decade later, Bengal and Bihar were also brought under Timurid rule thanks in part to Akbar's generous treatment of his officers and soldiers. In Bengal, special allowances equal to the entire regular pay of each rank were granted, while in Bihar similar inducements equal to one half the regular pay were instituted.⁷⁴ Officers who produced results were rewarded through tangible and intangible methods. Akbar realized that while men would fight for the sake of money, they could only be motivated to die for the imperial cause out of a sense of honour.

It was in this context that Akbar decided to incorporate the Hindu service nobility of the conquered Rajput states into the *mansabdari nizam*. While the Timurids did not much care for indigenous military technique, they appreciated that the Rajputs, out of a perverse attachment to *dharma*, preferred to die rather than surrender. By gradually assimilating the Rajputs into the ruling elite, Akbar secured for his empire enthusiastic local collaborators. The policy of religious tolerance also served this purpose. Out of his 252 highest ranking *mansabdars*, 32 were Hindus, while out of the 163 middle ranked ones, 25 were Hindus.⁷⁵ The rest of the officers were Turks, Persians, Arabs or Central Asians, linked by a shared Persianized elite culture, and born, for the most part, outside of India.

In terms of strategic policy, Akbar appreciated that his power base lay in the Indo-Gangetic plain and that the major external threat to his dominion lay in Central Asia and Persia. The resources of the Indo-Gangetic plain were far greater than what the Central Asian or Persian empires could muster so long as the frontier was maintained in the territories that now comprise Afghanistan. The material superiority of the Timurid Empire helped ensure brain drain in its favour. Akbar realized that unless overwhelming strategic compulsions so dictated, the hill tribes and marginal peoples were to be left alone. Nominal submission would secure such communities autonomy within the empire. If, however, they disturbed the peace of the settled districts, retribution, though not always swift, would be exemplary.

The Turco-Persian Imperial Tradition and Leadership in South Asia

The Timurid Empire in India was indeed the estate of the emperor who exercised arbitrary power over and through his servants. In an arbitrary and personalized state the absence of effective leadership could and did rapidly condemn the state to failure. The durability of the imperial order depended upon the succession of capable sovereigns. It was here that the Timurids proved

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inordinately fortunate and were able to produce after Akbar three great emperors that in their own way proved effective managers of their estate. While Akbar's empire is no more, its cultural and historical legacies live on in its architectural and intellectual monuments, from the Taj Mahal to the *Ain-I Akbari*. The *Ain-I Akbari* makes it abundantly clear that many of the hierarchical institutions developed by the British had their roots in the Turco-Persian tradition of imperial governance, which, in turn, shared many of its features with the Ancient Indian bureaucratic states. The deputy commissioner, for instance, is the lineal descendent of the Timurid collector of revenues and *faujdar*. There is much that can be learnt from the history of the Timurid Empire in India that is of help in broadening and deepening one's understanding of the many crises that South Asia now faces. One of these crises is the crisis of leadership.

Leadership is vital to the integrity of all states. George W. Bush's eight years in the White House serve as a powerful testament to how even a mature democracy with high levels of institutionalization and multiple formal and informal checks on the power of the executive can be brought to its knees through a combination of deceit and incompetence at the highest levels. In centralized bureaucratic states, such as the Timurid Empire in India or contemporary India and Pakistan, the relative weakness of institutions and powerful indigenous conditioning towards treating the state as a personal estate, dramatically increase the need for qualitatively superior leadership.

It does not really matter whether the leader is democratically elected or not insofar as their leadership qualities are concerned. All that the democratic process does is that it acts as a highly imperfect mechanism for enabling relatively peaceful transfers of power from one party to another that are broadly reflective of shifts in public opinion. In between elections, however, it is the quality of leadership that matters the most. Power that is acquired through legitimate means can be rendered illegitimate if exercised incompetently. On the other hand, power acquired in a manner incompatible with contemporary notions of democratic propriety can gain a measure of legitimacy if wielded in an enlightened and effective manner. The point that South Asia's Westernized elite ought to try and grasp is that it is their success in exercising power for the benefit of the state and the public interest, not the formal mechanism that rotates governments into or out of office that matters in the long run.

It is most often the ruler's subordinates who determine the image of the government in the eyes of the public. The ruler's own enlightened self-interest dictates that his subordinates be men of wide learning and practical accomplishment who can integrate the principles and mechanics of statecraft. The ability to carry on an intellectual discourse founded on curiosity and the desire to draw relevant and timely conclusions is of paramount importance if the ruler wishes to win the respect of those at the highest level of the hierarchy. The ability to ruthlessly and effectively execute well thought out policies and set a personal example of work ethic and regard for duty is critical if the ruler wishes

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to inspire fear in his subordinates. And, the ability to reward success generously, forgive failures when produced by human frailty rather than maliciousness, and honour and praise those who genuinely merit it, are required if the ruler seeks to win the genuine devotion and adherence of his servants. The *Ain-I Akbari* exemplifies the notion of leadership as the ability to simultaneously inspire respect, fear and devotion in one's subordinates, especially those upon whom the ruler must rely to manage his estate and husband its military strength and economic resources.

The ruler must possess extraordinary vigilance and have a command over the knowledge that he needs to govern. This is the key to guaranteeing that he is not taken in by the unscrupulous sycophants who are naturally drawn to the centre of power and wealth. Akbar was renowned for his command over the minutest details of administration and insisted that his senior servants live up to the same standards. In acting as the chief bureaucrat of the empire, Akbar was being thorough, not petty. He realized, from his father's example, that however great and good one's intentions may be, without firm control over the mechanism of implementation that was the state apparatus, they were unlikely to be ever translated into effects on the ground. Policies may well fail but to misunderstand one's ability and administrative resources was likely to condemn the entire effort to failure from the outset.

Finally, the sovereign had to maintain a firm grip on reality. Encapsulated by luxury, protocol, and yes men willing to trump up successes and explain away failures, India's ruler's had never been particularly successful in this regard. They routinely substituted bragging for achievement and confused conceit born of insecurity with pride founded in accomplishment. For Akbar, keeping his feet on the ground was vital to the successful conduct of government. In order to cultivate a firm grasp of reality, Akbar adopted certain measures. He encouraged his senior officers to disagree with him and advise him freely while in private, to act, in effect, as his mirrors. Akbar presided over an elaborate network of reporters, spies and recorders, to reduce important as well as trivial occurrences to paper and have them brought to his attention. Akbar associated with the intelligentsia and encouraged them to debate each other so long, of course, as they did not openly challenge his right to rule. Last, but not least, Akbar travelled as much as he could, inspected troops and public works, and held audiences with local notables.

The *Ain-I Akbari* establishes that the Timurid Empire was an authoritarian, patrimonial and bureaucratic state. Akbar was not a liberal, democrat, or secularist, or anti-traditionalist, as is sometimes made out even by serious thinkers.⁷⁶ Akbar was, however, a ruthless, enlightened, and pragmatic authoritarian who sought to understand Indian realities and manipulate them in favour of Timurid dynastic rule.

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Since 1947, while South Asia's elites have steadily reverted to the arbitrary and proprietorial exercise of power that is the indigenous practice, they have failed to live up to the qualities of leadership required to operate such states. Instead of ruling like latter-day Akbars, South Asian leaders behave more like Ibrahim Lodhi or Shah Alam.⁷⁷ Even within the arbitrary and proprietorial political tradition of South Asia, there is considerable room for improvement so that the rulers may become enlightened managers of their estates. Unfortunately for the region, its elites are locked into a downward spiral of heedlessness. Unable to internalize the law and rationality based practices of the British Empire in India; they have also proved incapable of understanding and drawing meaningful conclusions from their own historical experience of governance.

The consequences are for all to see – growing systemic dysfunction and administrative breakdown reinforced by irrational tutelage that has convinced many to take seriously varied absurdities. These include the notion that bureaucracy is a colonial institution, or Akbar was the first Indian nationalist, or that the Mauryan Empire was the original socialistic paradise. These failures of leadership have seriously diminished the strategic potential of the region and contributed to the decline of the state. After all, those do not even try to understand themselves and the historical contexts that shape them, have very little hope of being understood or taken seriously by others.

Notes

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- ¹ John Gray, *Black Mass: Apocalyptic Religion and the Death of Utopia* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2007), p. 75.
 - ² Francis Wheen, *How Mumbo-Jumbo Conquered the World: A Short History of Modern Delusions* (London: The Fourth Estate, 2004), is one of the most withering critiques of the latest intellectual fads from Michel Foucault to Francis Fukuyama. Wheen argues that the rationalist and liberal trends of the post-Enlightenment civilization are under siege from both its most vociferous critics (the post-modernists) as well as from those, like Fukuyama, who claim to have unlocked the door to the universal and permanent triumph of the values of the late-twentieth century industrial democracies.
 - ³ Some of the most serious reflection on social experience and the need to frame sound scientific hypotheses, took place in eighteenth century France. Voltaire asserted that the nature of state power, religion and tradition, and education, in that order, determined the human condition. Montesquieu emphasized the role of the natural environment and laws, while Rousseau insisted that "...no people would be other than the nature of its government made it." Henry Steele Commager, *The Empire of Reason: How Europe Imagined and America Realized the Enlightenment* (London: Widenfeld and Nicolson, 1978), pp. 109-110.
 - ⁴ Professor Pangloss is one of the main characters in Voltaire's play *Candide*. Candide, the main character, is a well meaning but not especially bright young man who experiences a series of personal disasters in the course of his travels. Through each disaster, Pangloss continues to insist that the world we live in is the best possible one and that there remain grounds for optimism no matter what happens. Pangloss symbolizes heedlessness and wilful ignorance, which Voltaire associated

- with the forces of tradition and reaction as well as some of his rival Enlightenment intellectuals. It is precisely this immunity to reason and evidence, and cognitive dissonance that characterized Medieval Christendom and had to be struggled against for the sake of a new universal civilization. For an excellent collection of Voltaire's works, see Ben Ray Redman, ed., *The Portable Voltaire* (New York: Viking Penguin Inc., 1978), esp., pp. 229-329.
- ⁵ For more on this, see Shahrukh Rafi Khan, Foqia Sadiq Khan and Aasim Sajjad Akhtar, *Initiating Devolution for Service Delivery in Pakistan: Ignoring the Power Structure* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2007). Also see *Devolution in Pakistan: Reform of Regression* (Islamabad: International Crisis Group, 2004). The former is more apologetic while the latter is harsh and scathing in its assessments. Both reach essentially the same conclusion – that the idea was bad to begin with and its cynical and sloppy implementation made things even worse.
- ⁶ One major theme that was addressed during a recent conference of social scientists was that whereas the colonial state was an efficient generator and employer of social sciences research, the post-colonial state, like the Sikh *khalsa raj*, has all but abandoned serious self education and research.
- ⁷ The stakes have escalated not just for developing countries but also for developed ones. For an in depth and absorbing account of the impact that the Bush administration's heedlessness has had on the United States itself, see Ron Suskind, *The Way of the World: A Story of Truth and Hope in an Age of Extremism* (New York: HarperCollins, 2008). Suskind reveals the contempt of the neo-cons for the "reality-based community" and the manner in which the United States has overextended itself militarily and economically while subverting the principles of freedom through changes to its domestic legal structure even as it wages violent struggles to spread those principles abroad. This, argues Suskind, has led to the collapse of the West's moral authority and badly eroded the legitimacy of the world order while decreasing the ability of the United States to employ coercion to sustain that order of which it is the integral part.
- ⁸ "Mughal" is a misnomer. The "Mughals" regarded themselves as being Turco-Persian descendants of Amir Taimur d. 1405.
- ⁹ Abu'l Fazl Allami, *A'in-I Akbari*, trans. H. Blochmann (Calcutta: Calcutta Madrassah, 1873; reprint, Lahore: Sang-e-Meel Publications, 2003). Abu'l Fazl, born in 1551 and murdered in 1602 on the orders of Prince Selim, later to become Emperor Jahangir, was Fayzi's younger brother. Introduced to Akbar in 1574, he gained imperial favour and became one of the principal advisers to the court.
- ¹⁰ Some indication of this can be found in the pattern of agrarian rights. The state assessed revenue directly on the cultivators. It then alienated a portion of these revenues to local notables and government officers. The notables normally stayed within a single locale and were called *zamindars*. They were given rights to collect revenue and keep a share for themselves as commission. The state could sell the rights to collect revenue when it wished and this was a way of raising money. The government officers were normally transferred around every few years to other positions and were in effect *jagirdars*. *Jagirs* were transferable land revenue assignments granted to officers as part of their compensation package. Both *zamindars* and *jagirdars* were components of the state's revenue collection machinery and dependent on imperial favour. Irfan Habib, *The Agrarian System of Mughal India, 1556-1707* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 194-201.
- ¹¹ John Darwin observes that "the difficulty of forming autonomous states on an ethnic basis, against the gravitational pull of cultural or economic attraction (as well as

- disparities of military force), has been so great that empire (where different ethnic communities fall under a common ruler) has been the default mode of political organization through most of history. Imperial power has usually been the rule of the road.” John Darwin, *After Tamerlane: The Global History of Empire Since 1405* (London: Penguin Books, 2007), pp. 23.
- ¹² Abu'l Fazl, *A'in-I Akbari*, pp. 444-451.
- ¹³ Ibid, p. 58.
- ¹⁴ Geoff Mulgan, *Good and Bad Power: The Ideals and Betrayals of Government* (London: AllenLane, Penguin Books, 2006), p. 9.
- ¹⁵ The servant was thus the master or what is today called *naukarshahi*.
- ¹⁶ W. W. Spellman, *Monarchies: 1000-2000* (London: Reaktion Books, 2001), p. 138.
- ¹⁷ The Timurid Empire “possessed a highly unified and systematized bureaucratic apparatus...” that relied heavily on foreign recruits to fill its senior ranks. In 1595, out of 98 highest ranking officers 38 were Turanis, 18 Persians, 4 Afghans, 6 from other parts of the Muslim world, and 16 Rajputs. Indian Muslims numbered 14 out of 98. Athar Ali, *The Apparatus of Empire: Awards of Ranks, Offices and Titles to the Mughal Nobility, 1574-1658* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1985), pp. ix-xx.
- ¹⁸ Raja Dahir, the ruler of Sindh at the time of the Arab conquest (711-12) was harsh with bearers of bad news and reacted abusively to advice when it did not conform to his pre-conceived notions and preferences. He killed the man who informed him of the Arabs crossing the Indus and behaved so badly that many of his own officers fled or defected to the enemy camp. K. A. Nizami, ed., *Politics and Society During the Early Medieval Period: Collected Works of Professor Mohammed Habib*, Vol. 2 (New Delhi: Peoples' Publishing House, 1981), pp. 7-15.
- ¹⁹ In the Timurid Empire “The privilege of actually speaking in the Emperor’s presence was given to very few and would therefore have been greatly coveted as a mark of high status.” Harbans Mukhia, *The Mughals of India* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), p. 87.
- ²⁰ Abu'l Fazl, *A'in-I Akbari*, p. 59.
- ²¹ Ibid.
- ²² Ibid.
- ²³ Ibid.
- ²⁴ Ibid.
- ²⁵ Ibid, pp. 59-60. Other important officers included the in charge of the royal purse, the court’s paymaster, the chief protocol officer, the bearer of the royal insignia, the master of ceremonies, the harbour-master general, the superintendent of the imperial forests, the quarter master general of the court, the private secretary to the emperor, the chief military accounts officer, the chief of imperial stores and provisions, the superintendent of the imperial workshops, and the superintendent of the aviaries.
- ²⁶ Ibid, p. 60.
- ²⁷ Ibid.
- ²⁸ Ibid.
- ²⁹ D. N. Marshall, *Mughals in India: A Bibliographical Survey of Manuscripts* (London: Asia Publishing House, 1967; reprint, 1985) provides some insight into the volume of the intellectual output. Marshall’s survey covers about 2,100 entries, some entries containing multiple works by the same author. Nearly all of the authors are directly or indirectly associated with the state. The survey extends into the later-Timurid period and terminates around the early 19th century. The survey provides a limited glimpse into what managed to survive the chaos of the eighteenth century.
- ³⁰ Abu'l Fazl, *A'in-I Akbari*, p. 451.

- 31 Ibid.
32 Ibid.
33 Ibid.
34 Ibid.
35 Ibid, p. 61.
36 Ibid.
37 Ibid.
38 Ibid.
39 Ibid.
40 Ibid.
41 Ibid.
42 Much of the bureaucratic politics of the Timurid Empire was dominated by promotions and transfers involving moving from the seat of government to the provinces. Athar Ali, *The Apparatus of Empire*, p. ix.
43 Ishtiaq H. Qureshi, *Akbar: The Architect of the Mughal Empire* (Karachi: Ma'aref Limited, 1978); Abraham Eraly, *The Last Spring: The Lives and Times of the Great Mughals* (New Delhi: Viking, 1997); Irfan Habib, *Essays in Indian History: Towards a Marxist Perspective*, (New Delhi: Tulika, 1995); Athar Ali, *Mughul India: Studies in Polity, Ideas, Society and Culture*, (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2007) and Ibn Hasan, *The Central Structure of the Mughal Empire and its Practical Working up to the Year 1657* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 1967), all agree on the bureaucratic and centralized nature of the Timurid Empire.
44 Qureshi, *Akbar*, p. 118.
45 Ibid, p. 197.
46 The provinces of Akbar's empire were: Agra, Ajmer, Allahabad, Awadh, Bengal, Bihar, The Deccan, Delhi, Gujarat, Kabul, Lahore, Malwa, Multan, and Thatta. The empire was subdivided into about 100 divisions known as *sarkars* and some 3,000 districts or *parganahs*.
47 Abu'l Fazl, *A'in-I Akbari*, p. 570.
48 Ibid, p. 571.
49 Local forts and armed retainers were maintained by the *zamindars* to collect revenue and keep the peasants in line. "The country must have been dotted with innumerable such fortresses. They became obnoxious to the authorities only when the *zamindars* used them not for maintaining their rights over the peasants, but for defying the administration." Not surprisingly, "Reports of official action against such forts, described as *qil'achas* and *garhis* abound." Irfan Habib, *The Agrarian System of Mughal India*, p. 204.
50 Abu'l Fazl, *A'in-I Akbari*, p. 572.
51 Ibid.
52 Ibid, p. 573.
53 Abu'l Fazl Allami, *The Akbarnama of Abu'l Fazl*, trans. H. Beveridge, (Lahore: Sang-e-Meel Publications, 2005; original, Calcutta, 1921).
54 Qureshi, *Akbar*, p. 172.
55 The peasants sometimes fuelled rebellions initiated by local officers or renegades, and did on occasion attain a degree of local, caste or sectarian cohesion. However, they never managed to break out of "parochial limits." Habib, *Essays in Indian History*, p. 159.
56 Irfan Habib, *The Agrarian System of Mughal India*, p. 208.
57 Abu'l Fazl, *A'in-I Akbari*, p. 573.

- 58 Ibid. Judicial officers, including *qazis*, were appointed at the provincial and district levels. The military had its own courts and judges.
- 59 Ibid.
- 60 Ibid, p. 574.
- 61 Ibid.
- 62 Ibid, p. 245.
- 63 Ibid.
- 64 Ibid, p. 246.
- 65 Ibid.
- 66 In 1398-99, Amir Taimur invaded South Asia: “Closing in on Delhi” he “swept through the Punjab, driving all before him. He took particular care to take revenge on those who had risen up against his grandson. One by one whole towns and villages emptied in terror as the conqueror approached, put them to the sword and burnt them to the ground.” In December 1398, as Taimur approached Delhi, his 100,000 or so Hindu captives made the mistake of cheering for the Sultanate’s forces in a skirmish. Taimur ordered all 100,000 put to death: “Even the holy men travelling with” his armies “were required to act as executioners, and many were the tears as they sent innocent men and women to their deaths in cold blood.” After having taken Delhi and imposed a huge ransom, some locals attacked Taimur’s victorious soldiers. This led to a general massacre. Khizer Khan, a local notable who swore loyalty (and claimed to be a Sayed) to Taimur, was installed as governor for the Punjab and Sindh. Leaving in his wake sheer chaos and ruination Taimur was satisfied in that “The extraordinary wealth amassed by generations of Indian sultans had vanished in a matter of days.” The Delhi Sultanate would linger on, a shadow of its former self, till Taimur’s descendant, Babur, put an end to it in 1526. Justin Marozzi, *Tamerlane: Sword of Islam, Conqueror of the World* (London: HarperCollins, 2004), p. 263-274.
- 67 Abu’l Fazl, *A’in-I Akbari*, p. 233.
- 68 Ibid, p. 225. This figure probably includes the entire personal retinues of the *mansabdars*, *jagirdars* and *zamindars* as well as guardsmen and just about any fulltime or part-time employee.
- 69 Ibid, p. 126.
- 70 Ibid.
- 71 Ibid. Unfortunately for the Timurids, after Akbar’s successful employment of firearms to conquer much of South Asia, his successors neglected its development so that by the eighteenth century their firearms had fallen behind the Europeans and the Persians.
- 72 Qureshi, *Akbar*, p. 77.
- 73 Ibid, p. 79.
- 74 Ibid, p. 93.
- 75 Abu’l Fazl, *A’in-I Akbari*, p. 451.
- 76 Amartya Sen, *The Argumentative Indian: Writings on Indian History, Culture and Identity* (London: AllenLane the Penguin Press, 2005), is a prime example of this trend. Sen would have his readers believe that liberalism, democracy, constitutionalism, secularism, and modernity, are not imports from the West but have solid foundations in India’s indigenous argumentative tradition. This tradition was consciously and unconsciously distorted by the British and other Europeans in order to define India, like other Eastern cultures, as their antithesis. What Sen conveniently ignores is that while a very small selection of Indian sources may be interpreted as having elements similar to the Western liberal philosophies and institutions, the overwhelming majority cannot be with any honesty spun in that direction. Sen tries

to build arguments on the shoulders of Akbar and Rabindaranath Tagore. Akbar was a pragmatic and enlightened absolutist, while Tagore, like Allama Iqbal, was the very personification of colonial modernity in a sense that Thomas Babington Macaulay would have readily understood and lauded.

⁷⁷ Ibrahim Lodhi was the last of the Delhi sultans, defeated by Babur in 1526. Shah Alam was the last Timurid Emperor who can by any stretch of imagination be said to have exercised some measure of real power. Defeated at the Battle of Buxar by the British, he signed away the rights to collect revenue to the East India Company (led by Clive) in 1765 and came under their protection. At present, the absence of credible leadership is so acute that South Asians really do not have any meaningful choice left. Under the circumstances, democratic elections in India, Pakistan or Bangladesh are akin to asking people to choose between often unsatisfactory contenders to power.