

ESSAYS ON INDIAN HISTORY

Pre-Colonial to Post-Colonial

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War in Illustrations: Akbar Nama Paintings

Ankan Purkait

In 1585 when the capital shifted from FatehpurSikhri to Lahore, Akbar was in a position to project himself as the invincible ruler of Hindusthan, the *Shahinshah*. Without any loss of time Akbar commissioned both compilation and illustration of *Akbar Nama*, the Book of Akbar. The thrust area of this project was to document or record minutely the Empire building process of Akbar i.e. how it was built in by incorporating various elements and by giving them proper position in the imperial hierarchy both through war and diplomacy. Once we use the term empire building process a question comes to the foreground that whether the Mughal Empire was a structure or a process. Aligrah historians like Irfan Habib are of the opinion that Mughal Empire was a grand structure with a number of officials and departments and each of which was well knit in a proper administrative hierarchy. The emperor being the apex body of this imperial structure enjoyed all the services as everything in this grand structure moved from the periphery to the core or we can say from the bottom to the top of the super structure. On the other hand Cambridge historian like J F Richards keeping in parity with Habib opines, "Buoyed by the conquest and plunder, Akbar and his advisers built a centralising administration capable of steady expansion as new provinces were added to the empire. The Mughal Empire presided over a system that moved money, commodities, men and information throughout

the empire... Building on this foundation Akbar's successor oversaw steady growth in the imperial effectiveness, power and resources throughout the seventeenth century."¹

In this given structure if we try to analyse the Mughal Empire then we shall overlook the process of evolution the empire has gone through since its inception till its decline in 1857. If we try to analyse a time period in history within a given structure then we would ignore the process through with the structure itself has evolved in the long run. Talking of the Mughal empire, even if we accept it as structure, how the structure was formed, how the various institutions of the empire evolved in the long run and how the definition, meaning and functioning of those institutions and departments changed in the long run. We should be cautious because "we should not assume that such institutions played the same part at various moments in Mughal History; while appearing to be solid structural elements that define an essential part of the state, they too evolved both over time and space."² The major problem with this structural element was that it analysed the Mughal Empire on the fiscal ground and gave more emphasis how the social surplus was collected through a well-knit tax nexus and how that surplus was enjoyed by a hand full of people. Apart from this there are other elements which have to be studied to understand the empire building process of the Mughals in India. One such element is the war and war strategies which have evolved throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and was the major factor in making the boundaries of the empire dynamic rather than static. Another such element is the Mughal School of Painting which also evolved throughout the same time period. And this evolution of painting was not only on the stylistic ground, which incorporated various indigenous and non-indigenous elements to form a unique Mughal style, even the meaning and language of the painting produced in the Mughal atelier changed from time to time.

Considering the later element we can say Mughals were attuned to the Persian culture when they arrived in India. They inherited the legacy of the Timurs and its cultural ethos which reflected through their paintings and the structure of the atelier. Akbar was visionary

from his early years as revealed by his first painting project in his atelier. He himself learnt painting from one of the first directors of the atelier Abdussamad. *Hamza Nama* the first project was the pleasant memory of the young Emperor which connected him to his past. The painting atelier at Agra and FatehpurSikhri experimented with various genres and subject matters and moved towards its maturity. Thus they refurbished the *Chandayana* style *Tutinama*, illustrated *Panchatantra* through a new way of subdued violence, through *Anwar-i-Suhaili* and many other projects. At the same time the empire was kept on expanding through new alliances and strategies. This was also the time of emperor's introspection and his search of his roots. Thus he commissioned the *Timur Nama* project. Later this search produced *Babur Nama* and *Tarikh-i-Alfi*. The matured emperor now wanted to grasp the nerve of his subjects and their cultural ethos through *Razm Nama* and *Ramayana* and dictated all his councillors to do the same. As has been mentioned earlier when the capital moved from FatehpurSikhri to Lahore with early two projects, now the invincible Emperor with his halo was now confident enough to order for *Akbar Nama*, the book of Akbar.

For young Akbar at the age of thirteen painting and illustrations were a kind of pastime and entertainment after the exhaustion of the war and battle field. With the passage of time painting no longer remained only a medium of entertainment, it became an imperial language through which Mughals claimed their political legitimacy. Historians like Amina Okada tried to trace the states legitimacy in Mughal paintings. As Deborah Levine says "Most brilliantly sustained, whether as image or as visual propaganda, these *Akbar-Nama* paintings were commissioned almost simultaneously with the creation of the text. Painted around the year 1590 or slightly later, they mirror Akbar's achievements as recorded at the zenith of his career and breathe an atmosphere of relentless energy."³ The importance of the *Akbar Nama* illustrations lay in the fact that they give us both a chance to visualise the strategic superiority of the Mughals in the battle field and how these illustrations themselves were a part of war and diplomacy.

As historian Andrew De La Garza is of the opinion that "The Mughals often found diplomacy to be a better option than combat, but this choice was a luxury granted to them by their position of increasing strength. That commanding position was won by earlier success on the battlefield."⁴ Being a part of war diplomacy the *Akbar Nama* illustrations became a visual language which celebrated the martial victories of the Emperor himself and created awe around the emperor by making him the hero of all the incidents delineated through paintings and illustrations. As many as four copies of the "*Akbar Nama* were illustrated by the artists of the imperial *karkhana*. It is the royal copy, placed in the state records, in accordance with a *hakum* recorded in 1605 by Emperor Jahangir in his own hand that has been presented with such taste and discrimination in this exceptionally pleasing volume." This shows that the several copies of the *Akbar Nama* illustrations were made and was distributed to celebrate the imperial might and grandeur. Considering Mughal Empire as a continuous process where boundaries of the empire continuously expanded war and war strategies become an integral part of this process. Thus war, war strategies, celebrations of victory and the prostration of the infidels become a very common subject for the *Akbar Nama* illustrations.

The most important part of the *Akbar Nama* illustrations lay in the fact that they are the contemporary visual records of the incidents. Delineation of war or panels of war in architectures and paintings of pre Akbari period are very common but their historicity is always subject to question. As Prof Ratnabali Chatterjee says that we can point out a major stylistic change in the Mughal miniature paintings since 1590 onwards. The portrait of the emperor dressed in the royal garb no longer remains a proto type of a ruler. Now Akbar could be seen as Akbar himself, he could be easily differentiated from other high ranking officials and royal personages. Here it is worth remembering that before Akbar the portraits of the Mughal emperors were not easily discernible.⁶ "Indeed, in observing the subtle stresses and visual contrasts employed by court painters to differentiate the image of Akbar-the living emperor and patron-from the figures of his father and less immediate

forebears, we are made vividly aware of how the greatest ruler of Mughal India willed himself to be seen.”⁷

Moreover we know that Mughals maintained a kind of moving capital, even when they moved for a military campaign they moved with all the entities associated with the royal court such as the harem, the market place, the chroniclers, painters and many more to mention. Geeti Sen in her book mentions that there were four painters with Akbar on his Gujarat campaign. Even AbulFazal in *Ain-i-Akbari* regarding the encampment of the army mentions “Behind their tents, at some distance, the office and workshops are placed, and at a further distance of 30yards behind them, at the four corner of the camp, the bazar.”⁸ This workshop is actually the Mughal *Karkhana*, atelier being a part of that *karkhana*, which actually satisfied the luxurious demand of the Mughal mansabdars and officials. As Monserrate says “he has built a workshop near the palace, where also are studios and work rooms for the finer and more reputable arts such as painting, goldsmith work, tapestry-making, carpet and curtain-making and the manufacture of arms. Hit her he frequently comes and relaxes his mind with watching at their work those who practice these arts.”⁹ Another incident from the reign of Humayun also makes it clear that artists were always present in Mughals war camps. It is said that once Humayun while resting in his tent after a day long war, a multi feathered bird flew into his tent, and then he immediately called for an artist to replicate the bird.¹⁰ Sometimes the artists held dual position, in day time they kept themselves busy in the battle field and at night they amused the emperor with their artistic skill. As AbulFazal says, “Many mansabdars, ahadis, and other soldiers, hold appointments in this department.”¹¹ From all these references it becomes clear that *Akbar Nama* illustrations can be treated as a visual record of the historical incidents, in this case especially war and war strategies.

Though we do not have a visual representation of a painter in Mughal war campaign during the reign of Akbar, we have an example from a much later period i.e. during the reign of Shah Jahan. Pl1 the illustration by the Mughal artist Nanha shows that Raja Amar Singh of Mewar, handing over the keys to Shah Jahan, who was leading the

campaign on behalf of his father, the emperor Jahangir. Here we see that the artist has made himself the part of the illustration and is busy in sketching the portrait of Rana. Apart from the literary evidences this painting also makes it clear that artist and atelier was an integral part of Mughal military encampment, thus serving the purpose of visually documenting the Mughal war strategies.

As it has been said earlier that Mughals gave more importance to diplomacy rather than direct combat becomes clearer when we see a number of illustrations from *Akbar Nama* where we see that enemy prostrating before the emperor. One such illustration is the capture of Fort of Mankot, Pl2. Now kept in the Chester Beatty Library, probably not the imperial copy, the illustration shows that the governor of the fort submitting the keys to the emperor. The matter and the purpose of the illustration become clearer when we corroborate it with the description given by AbulFazal in *Akbar Nama*:

HM who regarded the sweets of forgiveness as greater than those of revenge, accepted the representations of the Khan-Khanan, and assigned to SikandarKharid and Bihar as jagirs. The latter sent his son Abdu-r-Rahman along with Ghazi Khan Tannuri, who was one of his confidential officers to the court, the protection of princes, in order that their good services might be the cause of greater favour on the part of the Shahinshah to himself. The agreement was carried out according to the kingly desires. Valuable gift including some choice elephants, such as might be fit for the court, were sent, and on 11 Murad, Divine month, corresponding to Saturday, 27th Ramzan, 24th May 1557, the Keys of the Fort were surrendered to the imperial servants. HM Shahinshah drew the writing of forgiveness over the schedule of his offences, and shutting his eyes to the record of his deeds, gave him leave to depart.¹²

It becomes very clear from the description given by AbulFazal that diplomacy played a very important role because it has been stated that Emperor gave more emphasis to forgiveness rather than revenge. Moreover these illustrations played a dual role. On one hand they directly served the purpose of a visual record and on the other hand they created a visual language which helped in creating awe around

the emperor. As a visual record we see outside the royal tent the choice elephants which were given to Akbar and the governor of the fort carrying a deed as has been mentioned by AbulFazal.

Another such incident where the enemy was forced to prostrate before the emperor rather than direct combat is the capture of the fort of Gagraun PL3.

*“When he halted near the fort of Gagraun which is one of the strong forts of Malwa, it transpired that Baz Bahadur had made it over to one of his confidants and then it had not yet been captured. It was also reported to his majesty that Adham Khan intended to take it in person. One day while his majesty was encamped over there, the conquering heroes had been ordered to invest the fort. When the governor became aware that the Shahinshah was casting the Shadow of conquest over the fort he, inasmuch as he was able and for seeing made the keys of the fort the admicable of his safety and became exalted by kissing the ground.”*¹³

These words of AbulFazal enlivens when we look into the painting. Keeping the fort in the background the artist MadhavKalam delineates the incident where we see Akbar accepting the keys of the fort and the governor kissing the ground.

Apart from diplomacy even in case of direct combat between the Mughals and their enemies the illustrations of *Akbar Nama* play a very important role as a visual record in understanding the Mughal war strategies and the military units. Like that of Babur even during the reign of Akbar the Mughal army largely depended upon the horse archer, artillery and muskets. The greatest achievement of Akbar was that he could make specialised units such as, “sizeable contingent of mounted infantry and the corps of *shamsherbaz*— ‘sword wielders’ swordsmen and martial artists. The gladiator troops included specialists in a variety of fighting styles such as the sword and buckler and the two-handed sword. As their name implies, a few were assigned to the court to serve as palace guards and participate in mock battles and exhibitions of skill, but there were tens of thousands more of them assigned to army units around the Empire.”¹⁴ This strategical advancement of Akbar becomes clearer when we

look into the illustration of Baz Bahadur’s flight during his Malwa campaign. PL4

The total picture space is being dominated by the mounted archers piercing against the fort walls and the movement of the horses are so dynamic in nature that it becomes difficult for a viewer to fix his or her eye at a particular point of the palette. Even a compassionate can hear the commotion of the horses and the crushing of swords. An interesting feature of the illustration is that on left hand side we can see a man blowing a bugle this shows that even musicians accompanied army during the war. William Irvine says, “The beating of drums, accompanied by the playing of cymbals and blowing of trumpets, at certain fixed intervals (Naubat), was one of the attributes of sovereignty. The place where the instruments were stationed, generally at over a gateway, was the *naubat* or *nagqarkhanah*.”¹⁵ The entire picture space would become much clear if we corroborate it with the description given by AbulFazal

*“Of necessity a fight took place; and there was a fierce hand to hand engagement. When news of this was brought to the imperial camp, ‘Abdullah Khan, Qiya Khan Kang and a number of others galloped up and took part in the fight.....A hand to hand fight took place between Qiya Khan and Selim Khan.”*¹⁶

Again in the top corner of the right hand side of the painting we see a group of concubines being captured by the Mughal army. In general for all Mughal campaigns and particularly in the Malwa campaign against Baz Bahadur concubines and dancing girls were a very important part of the war booty. “*He took possession of all Baz Bahadur’s property, including his concubines and dancing girls, and sent people to search for Rumpati.*”¹⁷ Thus taking queue from the lines of IqtidarAlam Khan and corroborating it with the illustration of *Akbar Nama* we can definitely say that apart from the sieges of Chitor and Ranthambor mounted archers played a very important role in most of the Mughal campaigns. IqtidarAlam Khan says, “AbulFazal, no doubt, goes out of his way in characterizing artillery as an instrument of empire building in words reminiscent of the theory of gunpowder empires but the history of Akbar’s military campaigns recorded by him does bear out this characterization.”¹⁸

The siege of Chittor which began in October 1567 was one of the long standing sieges undertaken by Mughal army. Situated on a hilltop the fort of Chittor was considered one of the strongest forts of Rajputana. On arriving near the fort Akbar found that it was difficult to capture the fort by techniques which had been useful in central India and other parts of Rajputana. Thus, like that of Ranthambor, we see rampant use of artillery and gun powder in the siege of Chittor. Initially the Rana's army was in a better position due to their geographical location. Apart from geographical location arms and armaments were also another factor which gave them a much better position than other Rajput states. It was traditionally assumed that Mughals were the first imperial power to use gunpowder in India and had a better control over this technology than other indigenous estates. But it is partly true because both in the illustration PL5 and in the *Akbar Nama* AbulFazal clearly show that both arrows and bullets were shot by the army of the Rana. Keeping in mind the increasing number of death in the Mughal camp Akbar ordered to do two things. One is to find out places and dig out mines and fill them with gunpowder so that the fort walls could be blown out and secondly to make covered way called *Sabat*.

Both digging of mines and the construction of the *sabat* has been clearly depicted in PL5. AbulFazal says, "*The servants of the court girded up their loins of effort for these two works.*"¹⁹ In the illustration we see the persons who were busy in constructing the mud walls of the *sabat* has really girded up their loins for the service of the royalty even the way they guarded themselves against the attack of the Rana's army, while the construction of the *sabat*, by raw hides is very apt. PL6 shows the mishap which had taken place in the Lakhuta Gate while the explosion of a mine. This had actually taken place because a miscalculation had happened in the explosion of the mines. Regarding this particular illustration a question come to the foreground that if the illustrations of the *Akbar Nama* was commissioned to celebrate the martial exploits of Akbar then why such an incident was delineated and was considered by Akbar. The answer is clear if we read the clarification given by AbulFazal, "*thus he had foreseen the accident with his far reaching vision. Kabir Khan and the other superintendents*

of the work formed their own ideas, and the fire ran quickly from one point to two places. But as the thing was fated to occur, planning was of no avail, and that took place which took place."²⁰ Thus it shows that it did not glorify the mishap but it actually showed that if any one ignored the idea of farsighted Akbar, the result was fatal.

Apart from western and central India, the *Akbar Nama* illustration provides us with valuable information regarding the Mughal war strategies in eastern India. As we all know that eastern India consists mostly of marshy land criss-crossed by rivers and rivulets. Keeping in mind its geographical location, Akbar and his army, in the eastern front gave more emphasis on the proper use of boats and elephants. While crossing the Ganges to punish the rebellious brothers Khan Zaman and Bahadur Khan PL7, it is shown that not only Akbar, most of his military personnel are mounted upon an elephant unlike that of other parts of India. More over the size of Akbar and his elephant is much larger, thus serving the dual purpose of eulogising the emperor and giving a pictorial evidence of that particular incident. Again PL8 showing Akbar's expedition to the eastern province provides, 15 June 1574, us with valuable information regarding the management of boats and warships. The painting is so explicitly done that we can even recognise some of the nobles even the animals on board are vividly described.

"One of the wonderful things was that H.M. took along with him two mountain-like, swift as the wind elephants. The first was Bal Sundar, who was put into one boat with two female elephants...the other elephant was called Saman and was fit companion for the other. He was in another boat with two females. The spectacle was an astonishing one. The numerous boat of various kinds, the hoisting of the sky high masts, the tumult of the waves of the river, the force of the wind, the rush of the clouds and the rain, the roar of the thunder, and the flashing of the lightning produced a strange appearance."²¹

From the above analysis of the *Akbar Nama* illustrations we can definitely consider them as a valuable source material in studying the martial exploits of Akbar and his war strategies. Though AbulFazal, the biographer of *Shahinshah*, gives a vivid description of each and

every war and siege, the illustration of those incidents by the court artists make them crystal clear to the reader of the text. Not only regarding the war strategies but even regarding the war logistics paintings provide us with explicit details. The way the cannons and muskets were carried, the construction of the covered way called *sabat* during the siege of Chittor, bridges and many more to mention. The illustrations of *Akbar Nama* even strengthens the argument put forward by IqtidarAlam Khan, that except the siege of Chittor and Ranthambor, the Mughal army mostly relied upon the mounted archers. No doubt, the advance use of artillery and gunpowder was one of the main reasons for Mughal superiority, but it was not the only reason. Even the stylistic analysis of these paintings show that it had a deep rooted diplomatic cause where delineation of war, battles and the submission of enemy was a major subject. Even in the scenes of battles we see the figure of the emperor being much elevated than the other and emperor most of the time dominates the centre of the picture space. The gesture and facial expression of an enemy during his submission, the dead bodies drenched with blood everything a definite political and diplomatic purpose to create awe around the central figure, the *Shahinshah*. “The message communicated is, however, clear and consistent. The innate superiority of the Mughal prince is translated literally by the inflation of his image, which is lifted and placed over and apart from ordinary men.”²²

Last but not the least I would like to draw attention towards the argument put forward by John Syller in his famous article titled “*Codicological Aspects of the Victoria and Albert Museum Akbarnama and Their Historical Implications*.” He is of the opinion that the compilation and illustration of *Akbar Nama* did not take place simultaneously, the illustrations were done much earlier for some other purpose and the text was added to it later. “The evidence of the physical addition of the text to the paintings is astonishingly abundant and obvious. The most easily detectable feature is the irregular edges of the text panels affixed to completed illustrations encompassing text.”²³ To conclude I would like to say that whatever may have been done but the purpose was obviously solved. The wars and battles were visually documented and Akbar was made the *Shahinshah* of

Hindusthan. As AbulFazal says, “An immense was thus formed: those that have passed away have received a new life, and those who are still alive have immortality promised them.”²⁴

Endnotes

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