

**The Power Politics of Culture: Akbar Iahabadi and the
Changing Order of Things**

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PREFACE

I must begin by thanking the Principal and the authorities of the Zakir Husain College for making me the fourteenth Zakir Husain Memorial Lecturer. It is an honour to be counted among the company of scholars and intellectuals like Romilla Thapar, Irfan Habib, Namvar Singh, Somnath Chatterji, and others equally distinguished. I hope my talk here today will live up to the standard set by my illustrious predecessors.

Also, it is in itself an honour for one's name to be connected, even if indirectly, to Dr Zakir Husain. Not having been formally associated with Aligarh Muslim University, I never had the privilege of coming in close contact with him, but his name, like those of Mahatma Gandhi, Abul Kalam Azad, and Jawaharlal Nehru on the one hand and of Muhammad Iqbal and Hasrat Mohani on the other, was a household name for us who were born in the 1930's and who grew up amidst the bustle and clamour of our struggle for freedom. I still remember my thrill and awe when as a young boy I got to read Rashid Ahmad Siddiqi's short book called *Zakir Sahib*. The only thing that to my mind excelled the author's urbane wit and sparkling prose was the personality of Zakir Sahib himself as depicted in that memorable book.

In his nationalistic outlook, his erudition, his sophistication, Zakir Sahib stood for all the best and noblest traits in the Indo-Muslim character. Akbar Iahabadi too was, in his own way, the epitome of Indo-Muslim culture and it seems appropriate to devote a Zakir Husain Memorial lecture to Akbar Iahabadi, especially at a time when many of our traditional values of liberal and secular thought are in a state of siege from two contradictory tendencies in our culture: blind, uncritical imitation of Western styles of life and thought in the name of globalization and determined efforts to impose neo-fascistic, totalizing ideas on education, culture, and politics in the name of nationalism. I therefore hope to have made this essay more than just a homage to the memory of these two great Indians.

1.

Most of us are familiar with the main circumstances of Akbar Ilahabadi's life. So I'll recapitulate them here but briefly. Born Syed Akbar Husain in 1846 at village Bara in the trans-Jamna area of Allahabad district, young Akbar received his early education from Syed Tafazzul Husain, his father. They came from a family of Sayyids that had long settled in that part of the country. Conservative, middle class, and proud, they had preserved their traditions of classical learning, but were not in the most prosperous of circumstances. Akbar Husain was obliged in 1863 to find clerical employment with the builders who had contracted to bridge the Jamna not far from his native village. In the mean time, he acquired a good knowledge of English at home and sat the Lower Courts' Advocates' examination in 1867. He cleared that examination without difficulty and in 1869 he was appointed *Nai'b Tahsildar*, a comparatively low grade Revenue Dept appointment under the British. He soon quit that job to sit the High Court Advocates' examination. He passed that examination too without difficulty and enrolled as a lawyer at the High Court of Allahabad. In 1880 he was appointed *Munsif* (a medium grade Judge). He progressed steadily to become a Sessions Judge in 1894, then acting District Judge at Banaras. In 1898 the British made him *Khan Bahadur*. It was a highly regarded title, considered just below that of a Knight of the Empire. He took retirement in 1903, and settled to a life of poetry and semi-reclusive comfort, though beset by poor eyesight and bad health, in a vast house built by him near the Kotwali in Allahabad.

Toward the end of his life he was much attracted by Gandhi and his movement for political independence and Hindu-Muslim unity. He wrote a long series of brief poems called *Gandhi Nama* (The Book of Gandhi) to embody his ideas on these matters. He died in 1921, at the peak of his reputation as a powerful, socially and politically engaged voice on the Indian literary scene.

2.

Akbar has had a bad press over the past five decades or so. He had immense prestige and a commanding reputation during his lifetime. A list of his friends and admirers reads like an Indian Who's Who of the decades between 1880 and 1920. Despite Akbar's bitter opposition to his ideas and agenda, Sir Syed Ahmad Khan liked and respected him so much as to have had him posted to Aligarh so as to be better able to enjoy his company.¹ Iqbal once wrote about a she'r of Akbar's that it

¹ See Preface in Sahil Ahmad, Ed., *Ruqa'at-e Akbar*, Allahabad, The Urdu Writers' Guild, 1997, p. 18. This collection of Akbar Ilahabadi's letters was first published from Lahore by Muhammad Nasir Humayun, with a Preface by Sir Shaikh Abdul Qadir. Sahil Ahmad has reissued it with additions and copious notes.

encapsulated the central idea of Hegel's philosophy, "condensing Hegel's ocean into a drop."² Madan Mohan Malaviya had him write poems on Hindu-Muslim unity.³

Akbar's poetry remained popular, or perhaps gained even more admirers and adherents over the score or so years following his death. His *Kulliyat* (Collected Works) was published in three volumes during the period 1909-1921. It was reprinted many times during and after Akbar's lifetime. The first volume had run to eleven printings by 1936. The second saw seven printings by 1931, and the third was printed five times by 1940. Yet things are very different today. The *Gandhi Nama* (1919-1921) was printed only once, in 1948, and has long been out of print. Akbar was planning a fourth volume of his *Kulliyat*. But volume III itself was a long time in coming and could be published only in August, 1921, a few weeks before the poet's death. Ishrat Husain, his son and executor, did nothing to bring out the fourth volume, or even the *Gandhi Nama*. Muhammad Muslim Rizvi, Akbar Ilahabadi's grandson published the latter, in 1948. Some uncollected verses are to be found in *Bazm-e Akbar*. Some of the unpublished poems appear in an edition brought out by Sarvar Taunsavi from Maktaba-e Shan-e Hind, Delhi. Sadiqur Rahman Kidwai uses some of those in his selection from Akbar. According to Kidwai, a fourth volume of the *Kulliyat* did come out from Karachi in 1948. It doesn't seem to have reached many people in India and has anyway been long out of print in Pakistan as well.

The Maktaba-e Shan-e Hind edition is by no means authoritative or scholarly. The National Council for the Promotion of Urdu proposes to bring out a comprehensive, though not critical and scholarly edition now. Akbar's fame as our greatest satirical poet remains undented, but his readership has declined and he has been almost uniformly criticized by Urdu critics for what is seen as his opposition to Progress, Science, and the Enlightened Way of living and thinking.

There are at least two more reasons—one literary and the other non-literary—for Akbar's rough treatment, I almost said ill treatment, at the hands of our critics. The literary reason is the lowly place that comic and satirical verse occupied in the literary canon in the eyes of Urdu critics. Doubtless, Urdu has an immensely rich tradition of such verse, but Urdu critics of the early part of the twentieth century were brought up to believe in Matthew Arnold's dictum of "high seriousness" being the ineluctable quality of poetry. I well remember my chagrin and the feeling of being let down when as a young student of English

² Iqbal's letter to Akbar Ilahabadi, dated December 17, 1914, in *Kulliyat-e Makatib-e Iqbal*, Vol. I, Ed., Muzaffar Husain Barani, New Delhi, Delhi Urdu Academy, 1991, p. 320.

³ Akbar Ilahabadi, *Kulliyat*, Vol. III, Allahabad, Asrar-e Karimi Press, 1940, p.154.

literature nearly half a century ago I read Arnold's pronouncement that Dryden and Pope were the classics of English prose, not of English poetry. Even if my teachers didn't entirely endorse this opinion, they unhesitatingly held Dryden to be a poet of the second rank. This, coupled with the strictures of Muhammad Husain Azad on the satirical and scurrilous poetry of eighteenth century Urdu poets, especially Sauda (1706-1781) to the effect that it was "offensive to good taste"⁴, was enough to make Urdu critics suspicious of all satiric and comic verse. Akbar's passionate engagement with political and social questions in his poetry wasn't enough to redeem his position. It would be a rare Urdu critic today who would put Akbar among the first ten Urdu poets.

A. A. Surur is one of the few critics who acknowledged the seriousness of Akbar's purpose, and the force of his vision. In a perceptive early essay, Surur said, "One may not agree with his [Akbar Ilahabadi's] ideas, but one can't help smiling at his verses, and being often obliged to give serious thought to them, and that's what he aimed at."⁵ Yet even Surur, in spite of a lifelong admiration for Akbar was unable to commit himself on the place of Akbar among the greatest of Urdu poets.

The other reason has to do with the obvious cleavage between Akbar's life and political opinions. In his poetry he presents himself as an implacable enemy of all things British. Yet he himself was a fairly senior member of the British official establishment and was apparently quite proud of the high regard in which Thomas Burn, one time Chief Secretary to the Government of U.P. held him⁶. He even wrote an adulatory qasida on the golden jubilee of Queen Victoria (1887) at the request of "Mr. Howell, Judge"⁷. He sent his son Ishrat Husain to England for higher education and on his return suffered him to enter the civil service under the Government of U.P. as Deputy Collector. All this sits ill with the humiliating scorn and trenchant castigation that he pours over the British and the West and their admirers.

It is possible that Akbar was conscious of the contradiction. Perhaps this sense of duality in his personal life⁸

⁴ "[C]losing the eyes of modesty and opening the mouth of shamelessness he [Sauda] said such wild things that even Satan would ask for a truce." Muhammad Husain Azad, *Ab-e Hayat*, Trs. Frances Pritchett in association with Shamsur Rahman Faruqi, New Delhi, OUP, 2001, p.153.

⁵ A. A. Surur, "Akbar, Shakhshiyat aur Art" in his *Tanqidi Ishare*, Aligarh, Nazir Ahmad & Sons, 1942, p. 87.

⁶ Akbar, *Kulliyat*, Vol. III, p. 157.

⁷ Akbar, *Kulliyat*, Vol. I, Allahabad, Asrar-e Karimi Press, 1936, pp. 207-08.

⁸ A similar tendency to harbour self-contradiction can be seen in Akbar Ilahabadi's religious beliefs. He himself was a devout Sunni, but his second wife whom he loved to the exclusion of the first, was Shi'a. Still, he seems to have become more and more anti-Shi'a with age. On the other hand, he married his son Ishrat Husain to a Shi'a girl whose

makes his denunciatory voice so much more vehement, his disavowal of Western and British mores and systems so much more passionate. Certainly, he knew that no one could really swim against the current, but the tragedy according to him was that those who swam with the current too were drowned. The Indian, in trying to fashion himself like a modern [British] creature, gave up his past, his traditions, his belief systems, but could not really become the modern Western individual that Macaulay had expected him to become. The following verse is poignant in its tragical bitterness:

*They became votaries of the Time
And adopted the style of the West.
In their ardent desire for a second birth
They committed suicide.⁹*

The Urdu original has a powerful ambiguity owing to a peculiarity of our grammar, which permits sentence construction without an explicit subject. So the original can be read as having any or all four of the subjects: I, You, They, and We. In a longer poem he expresses the same dilemma with a sense of personal defeat and loss, though the protagonist of this poem too could well subsume the whole Muslim community:

*Akbar, if I stick to the old ways,
Sayyid tells me plain: This hue
Is now sleazy. And if I adopt
The new style, my own people raise
A Babel of boots and shouts.
Moderation? It doesn't exist
Here or there. All have stretched their legs
Beyond all limits. One side insists
One mustn't touch even a lemonade
Bottle; the other side is keen
To summon the Saki, "Hey! A stoup of wine!"
One side regards as unclean
The whole book of management,
Skill, and sound policy. For the other,
The bag of English mail is God's own word.
Majnun's soul suffers from double trial:
Laila's company and separation both*

father was originally a Sunni but had converted to Shi'ism after taking a Shi'a wife. Akbar used to be exercised at rumours that Ishrat too had converted to Shi'ism. Ishrat Husain denied this to his father in a letter to him, written in English. Once Akbar requested the famous jurist and scholar Sir Shah Muhammad Sulaiman to advise Ishrat Husain that he desist from imbibing the influence of Shi'ism. Shah Sulaiman gave an ambiguous reply, saying, "I'll comply with this request of yours only when you broach the issue in Ishrat's presence." Akbar wanted Muhammad Aqil, one of Ishrat Husain's sons, to go the Nadva at Lucknow, a manifestly Suni educational institution. Nothing seems to have come of this proposal. See Qamaruddin Ahmad Badayuni, *Bazm-e Akbar*, Delhi, Anjuman Taraqqi-e Urdu (Hind), 1940, pp. 25, 27, 161, and *Ruqa'at-e Akbar*, pp. 24-25.

⁹ Akbar, *Kulliyat*, Vol. II, Lucknow, Adabi Press, 1931, p. 30.

*Are catastrophic.*¹⁰

Hostile critics (and nearly all of Akbar's modern critics are hostile) ignore poems such as these, and stress only those which according to them show him up as a blind, unreasoning hater of the New Light, or deliberately perverse in his backwardness and love for a past that was generally unsavoury, and in any case dead or dying. And these are the views not of those alone who might have regarded the British rule as a blessing, or a necessary stage in the march of historical forces, but also of those who were out of sympathy with the Raj.

The sub text, and sometimes the explicit strain in most modern criticism of Akbar is that he may have been a good poet of satire and may have been extremely popular in his day, but the values, ideas and ideals that Akbar held as valuable suffered a decisive defeat in his lifetime itself. Thus when the values that provide the prop of belief and conviction to his poetry are gone, his poetry must inevitably make room for others. Akbar's negative agenda and therefore his poetry, critics say, can have no strength or validity in the modern age.

But it is entirely false to reason that the defeat or demise of the group, party, or ideas targeted by a satirist necessarily makes the satire invalid or obsolete. No satirical text from Aristophanes through the Sanskrit and Arabic polemical poems and individual lampoons to the poems and prose of Swift and Jafar Zatalli would be intelligible or even extant today if the satire died with its subject. Another point to be noted here is that Akbar's attitude toward the issues of his day, and especially towards issues of "progress" was not so unilinear and uncomplicated as his critics would like us to believe. He is a very complex poet and he cannot be read like the morning newspaper. All of Akbar's fears and dire predictions were not just the fancies of a diehard conservative.

Akbar was in fact one of the few to realize at that time in our history that Syed Ahmad Khan's reformist schemes had much in common with Macaulay's agenda. The "Indian Renaissance" was really a powerful current of shallow modernization. The Anglo Oriental College at Aligarh had very little "Anglo" and even less "Oriental" about it. For all his strength of mind and good intentions, Syed Ahmad Khan wasn't equipped to create a unified system of modern scientific inquiry and religious faith. An independent intellectual adoption of the attitudes and world-view of the scientific-heuristic world of contemporary European enlightenment so ably represented by the British was something quite different from a servile, comprador approval of and active participation in the administrative-imperial apparatus of the colonial British. But

¹⁰ Akbar, *Kulliyat*, Vol. I, pp. 161-62.

British policy in India consisted in making sure that the two came together, as a package. This was a truth that may not have been apparent to many Indians of that time. Aside from Akbar and Iqbal there is hardly anyone in our cultural history of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries who articulated this truth so eloquently. Akbar was relentless in his assertion that it was wishful thinking to believe that the two attitudes could be practiced in mutually exclusive realms.

In his own way, Akbar admired Syed Ahmad Khan. He valued his sincerity, his industry, and his devotion to the cause of education, especially the education of the Indian Muslims. Contrasting Syed Ahmad with his “sons”, both physical and intellectual, Akbar found little to admire the sons, while the Old Man of Aligarh did often tug at his heart. It is not without reason perhaps that the very first piece in Akbar’s *Kulliyat* is a ghazal which contains the following three verses:

*Indeed, what a wonderful guide
Our Master proved to be!
He lost the way to the Ka’ba and the Church
Was never found.*

*Though the College kept intact
The colour on his face,
In regard to hue of the heart,
The son couldn’t match the father.*

*Sayyid rose, government Gazette in hand
And came back with millions;
Shaikh went round exhibiting the Qur’an
And didn’t get a penny.¹¹*

As we can see, the first verse is a summing up of the entire Indian dilemma and the contradictions that the effort at resolution of the dilemma entailed. Syed Ahmad Khan is the obvious target, but there are larger social and moral implications here. The second verse pays oblique but clear tribute to Syed Ahmad Khan by implying that his heart was in the right place and blames the sons for losing the spiritual and intellectual heritage of the father, while the third one indicts him for changing the Muslims’ way of life and thought from Qur’anic to British.

In a short poem mourning the death of Syed Ahmad Khan (1898) Akbar stressed the dead leader’s industry and integrity:

*All of us do nothing but talk, Sayyid
Was a man of action. Never forget
The difference between one who talks
And one who acts. Let people say, oh Akbar*

¹¹ *Kulliyat*, Vol. I, p. 1.

*What they will. I declare: May God
Have mercy upon him, he was a man
Of many merits.¹²*

Soon after he became a judge of the High Court at Allahabad, Syed Mahmood, the son of Sir Syed Ahmad Khan, finding that Indian judges of High Court were allowed pay and privileges inferior to those of the British judges, submitted a memorandum to Government, demanding that for the purpose of pay, perquisites, and conditions of service, he should be treated on par with British judges. He based his claim not on the principle of equity and fair play, but on the fact that he was to all intents and purposes an Englishman by virtue of his long sojourn in England, his English education, and his complete absorption of the English language, culture and ethos¹³. Akbar Ilahabadi, who was himself in the Judicial Service of U.P. at that time, would have known or heard of this and would have felt his worst fears realized in the conduct and the mindset of Syed Mahmood. He would also have known or heard of the later intransigencies of Syed Mahmood, and the arrogant hostility to him of his Chief Justice, John Edge. Syed Mahmood was ultimately obliged to resign his judgeship.

All this would have amply vindicated Akbar in his own eyes. He would have been galled to see that Mahmood, scion of a distinguished and ancient family, who was brought up according to the best traditions of Indo-Muslim culture, and who had vast knowledge of Urdu, Persian, and Arabic, should choose to stress the British side of his personality to the exclusion of the Indo-Muslim one. No wonder that Akbar's short poem on the death of Syed Mahmood in 1903 though briefly elegiac, has a bitter triumphalism too:

*Neither Theodore Beck remains now
Nor Sir Syed; a sigh arises
From the hearts of friends. There was
Some consolation so long as Mahmood
Was there. Today he too departed this world
For paradise. Admonition, weeping, said:
To your senses! Oh you who are greedy
For pomp and power and splendour,
Obliterated is the stamp of Ahmad and Mahmood
"There's no God but God" is all
That remains.¹⁴*

Akbar's contradictions thus were of his age. And there is no doubt that toward the end of his life he was groping toward a

¹² *Kulliyat*, Vol. I, p. 199.

¹³ See David Lelyveld, "Macaulay's Curse: Sir Syed and Syed Mahmood" in A. A. Ansari, Ed., *Sir Syed Ahmad Khan, A Centenary Tribute*, Delhi, Adam Publications, 2001.

¹⁴ Akbar, *Kulliyat*, Vol. I, p. 185.

resolution of his inner paradoxes. He was, in the idiom of the age, a “government servant” and then a “pensioner judge” for most of his life, and didn’t find it in himself to enter active politics in open support of Gandhi and the freedom movement, though he never ceased to attack the British and their government and their cooperationists in no uncertain terms. A poet, after all, is not expected to wield a stick or lead a suicide squad. Many years before *Gandhi Nama* he wrote in two separate verses:

*Were Akbar not the Government's concubine,
You would find him too among Gandhi's gopis.*¹⁵

For himself Akbar uses the word *madkhublah*, which means exactly what I say in translation: a kept woman. For Gandhi’s followers, he uses the word *gopi*, which means one of the myriad legendary female lovers of Sri Krishna, and thus suggests the extraordinary, almost superhuman charisma that Gandhi possessed. There are other meanings too, but I’ll mention just one here: Akbar sees Gandhi as the principle of fecundity and creative liberation, and India as the female principle, to be fecundated by Gandhi. Now the other she’r:

*Little Buddhu too is with
The Honourable Mr. Gandhi; though he is
But a pinch of dust on the road
He is the storm's companion.*¹⁶

“Little Buddhu” (*Buddhu Mian*) is one of Akbar’s favourite metaphors for the Indian Muslim. Maulana Muhammad Ali is reported to have been slightly miffed at this she’r, suspecting that “Buddhu Mian” here stood for him, and that Akbar was making gentle fun of him. Akbar is reported to have disabused Muhammad Ali of this notion. There is a she’r in *Gandhi Nama*, which suggests that here “Buddhu Mian”, was none other than Akbar himself:

*The word “Buddhu” was actually
A matter of prudence,
What I actually meant it to mean
Is hidden in my heart.*¹⁷

Akbar didn’t let *Gandhi Nama* see the light of the day. He is reported by Maulvi Qamaruddin Ahmad to have said to him that he regarded open opposition to the British as both harmful and futile. “And after all, what could my poems achieve, nothing”, he is said to have added. Toward the end of his life (in February, 1921) he remarked to Qamaruddin that he wasn’t

¹⁵Quoted in Qamaruddin Ahmad Badayuni, *Bazm-e Akbar*, p. 158. Akbar didn’t put this she’r in his *Kulliyat*, for obvious reasons, yet it is one of his most famous verses.

¹⁶ Qamaruddin Ahmad Badayuni, *Bazm-e Akbar*, p. 64. Akbar didn’t include this she’r too in his *Kulliyat*.

¹⁷ Akbar, *Gandhi Nama*, p. *ye*, p. 45.

worried about losing his pension. If he wanted to earn money, he could earn more than his pension by devoting himself actively to the cause of the nation. It was just that he didn't have the physical health and strength to stand the hardships of the jail. He also quite candidly admitted that he didn't have the fortitude to oppose the Government, and that he was concerned about his son getting into trouble because of his nationalistic poetry.¹⁸ Yet in the *Gandhi Nama* he lets himself go, putting the following shēr as its epigraph, declaring Firdausi's great epic *Shah Nama* (The Book of Kings) to be obsolete and abrogated:

*The revolution is here:
It's a New World, a new tumult,
The Book of Kings is done
It's the age of 'The Book of Gandhi now.'*¹⁹

Akbar was strongly conscious of the immense fascination that the culture of the politically victorious has for the politically vanquished. As numerous examples in contemporary life and letters amply demonstrated, the vanquished people could be made to unconsciously strive for identification with the ruling elite by the insertion of popular and powerful icons of alien culture into their day to day life. The pulls and counter-pulls exerted themselves as much, if not more, through culture as through politics. Akbar's great insight was his early identification of the colonizer's culture with his politics, his administration, and his regulations. That's why he replied through his poetry, traditionally the greatest cultural weapon that one could command in Indo-Muslim society. That's why he equates his *Gandhi Nama*, a series of short or very short and politically overt poems with *Shah Nama*, a literary masterpiece of an entirely different kind. The *Shah Nama* is devoted to acquisition of space, and subjugation of alien realms and peoples by kings; *Gandhi Nama* essentially celebrates the efforts of a subject people to drive out the conqueror from the space wrongfully occupied by him.

It's fashionable today for us to talk of cultural and economic colonization of the third world by the capitalist-imperialist West in a post-colonial scenario of globalization. For all its trendiness, this notion of the cultural hegemony of the West represents hard realities on the ground level in countries like India. Akbar was perhaps the first to appreciate the political power of cultural icons:

*Though Europe has great
Capability to do war,
Greater still is her power
To do business. They cannot everywhere
Install a gun, but the soap*

¹⁸ Qamaruddin Ahmad Badayuni, *Bazm-e Akbar*, pp. 146, 163-164, and p. 164n.

¹⁹ Akbar, *Gandhi Nama*, p. 1.

*Made by Pears is everywhere.*²⁰

Improved means of communication go side by side with improved ways of doing business, and new ways of loving and living:

*Nowhere now the hands
Of frenzied love tear at the collar
Separating thread from thread;
Now it's Majnun's hands, and the Pioneer,
And news despatched by wire.
Shirin has contracted to supply milk
At the commissariat; and Farbad
Is building a railroad through the mountain.*²¹

*Lovers of peris now
Are enchanted by the Ms,
Frenzy once made them rip their clothes
They're now sewing blazers.*²²

*I took her to bed and later
Took my leave, saying:
"Thank you."*²³

4.

The mode of British rule in India was often described by the British civil servants themselves as the rule of law, and benevolent, though despotic. One of the chief methods of despotism, however benevolent, is a pronounced propensity for over-regulation. Akbar regarded the constricting effect of British over-regulation as cultural invasion inasmuch as it forced the people to change their lifestyles. He often uses the English word "License" as a metaphor for the over-regulation:

*Eyes
Watching every step,
License
Demanded at every turn,
Oh Akbar, I finally gave up strolling
In the park.*²⁴

*Just the license is enough
To give you honour on the road,
Just have a license on you,
Put away the sword.*²⁵

²⁰ *Kulliyat*, Vol. II, p. 63.

²¹ *Kulliyat*, Vol. II, p. 68.

²² *Kulliyat*, Vol. II, p. 15.

²³ *Kulliyat*, Vol. II, p. 54, "Thank you" in English in the original.

²⁴ *Kulliyat*, Vol. II, p. 94.

²⁵ *Kulliyat*, Vol. I, p. 255.

*Don't ask: "Are you Piru, or
Are you Harbans?" Whatever
This slave is, he is
Without license.²⁶*

In Akbar's changing world there is not just the sense of loss at things which are gone. The vanquished and subjugated Indian, becoming a part of the colonial administrative system, tries to out-Herod Herod, and shows himself up as even more oppressive than the British benevolent despot:

*When buttons were stitched onto the waist-wrap
And western pants grew out of the dhoti,
A corporal and six was posted at every tree,
And a law sprouted in every field.²⁷*

Where Akbar's poetry has seemed most annoying to modern critics is his apparent rejection of even such obviously useful and progressive things as running water supplied to homes through pipes, the printing press, the newspaper, and the railway train. A casual reading would indeed leave us puzzled, or sad, at Akbar's refusal to permit, far less welcome, even such essentials of modern life and enlightened living. But Akbar was not in fact protesting against the signs of progress: he was protesting against the signs of enslavement and the destruction of Indian cultural values and lifestyles that such enslavement guaranteed above the putative guarantee of progress and improvement in the quality of life. In addition to the comfort (though it was enjoyable by only a few), he also saw water tax, and muck, and stagnating puddles and pollution accompanying piped water. He saw the disappearance of wells, and the desuetude of the river as a source of water for day to day consumption as an undesirable sequel of the establishment of water works in the cities. He was also keenly conscious of the adverse environmental and economic effect of the new measures on urban life:

*The plague, and the fever, the bug and the mosquito
Are all nurtured in the muck
That surrounds the municipal tap;
The flow from the municipal tap
Is something, cleanliness is
Something else again.²⁸*

*Tears are such great things:
They do good to the heart's tillage:
Water tax is now proposed
To be levied on the weeping eye.²⁹*

²⁶ *Kulliyat*, Vol. III, p. 84.

²⁷ *Kulliyat*, Vol. III, p. 19.

²⁸ *Kulliyat*, Vol. II, p.12.

²⁹ *Kulliyat*, Vol. II, p. 85.

*Is it the flow and surge
Of civilization or the deluge?
What need is there for the tap
When there's a well in the house?*³⁰

The symbolism of the domestic well whose water is native, pure, and controlled, against the municipal tap that supplies intermittent water to homes and street corners need not be laboured. What is more important to my mind is the cultural effect that the change portended for Akbar. Those of us who are familiar with our folk songs about Krishna and Krishna's *gopis* at the well or river bank, and with songs of drawing and conveying home the water from wells and rivers in general will easily appreciate the feeling of cultural loss, the sense of desecration and denigration of community values and lifestyle that commercially controlled and supplied water would have produced in the mind of anyone sensitive to those values.

The well was not just a well in the Indian mind, nor was the river just a river. For one thing, well water and river water was free. Even in the village where caste-segregation was common, those who were entitled to draw water from a well did so without payment, without let or hindrance. Then, both quality and quantity of the water were within reasonable power of the drawer: it wasn't like the impersonal, unknown source from which the tap water came, and on which there was no control of the consumer in terms of quantity and flow. And lastly but perhaps most importantly, there was the religious, social and cultural value of the well and the river as a locus for emotional and spiritual commerce.

How important the well was in even large cities like Delhi is reflected in Ghalib's letters. In a letter of 1860/1861 addressed to Mir Mehdi Majruh, Ghalib wrote:

Qari's well has dried up. All the wells at Lal Diggi have suddenly become entirely brackish. So one could somehow drink the brackish water, but those wells now yield only warm water. Yesterday I rode out into the city to inquire into the state of the wells....In brief, the city has become a wilderness. And now, if the wells disappear and fresh water becomes rare like a pearl, this city will turn into the wilderness of Karbala.³¹

Such was the state of Delhi after the destruction of buildings and monuments carried out by the British after they reoccupied Delhi in September 1857, and the demolitions effected by them in 1859-1861 in the name of modernization and progress. Tap water couldn't replace all the wells, and wasn't tax-free like well water anyway. The drying out or the disappearance

³⁰ *Kulliyat*, Vol. III, p. 13.

³¹ Khaliq Anjum, Ed., *Ghalib ke Khutut*, Vol. II, New Delhi, The Ghalib Institute, 1985, p. 524.

of wells was not just inconvenience, it was the prelude to a new kind of dependency, a new kind of life where water could not be drawn at will, but had to be awaited; the taps must flow for the water to reach the people. It was no longer a natural resource, but a man made artifact.

Akbar Ilahabadi once said the following she'r of his to Qamaruddin Ahmad:

*None of the taps run, and the house
Is on fire, one must run now
There's no more time to think.*

He then commented upon the she'r as follows:

Some time ago fire broke out in some shops in the Chowk area. The taps were stopped at that time and the people suffered heavy losses by the fire. I was moved by that thought and composed my she'r. What can one say? The Sahib

Rules over food and water.

Had the wells been there, as there were in the former times, the fire could have been brought in control in good time. And just look at the altered organization of the cities: the ruling class and the rich are in the Civil Lines, for the poor to eke out their existence, there are squalid pockets of the city, set aside from the rest. The idea is that the rich and the poor should not be in the same place; thus they would have no fellow feeling, no empathy for each other's state.³²

Rivers were even more dynamic sources of cultural strength and continuity in India. Water from different rivers was believed to have different properties and was valued in terms of both sanctity and salubriousness. It was not unknown for people to hand carry on their travels the water from the Ganga, or any other river that they favoured. Even a hard headed Sultan like Muhammad Tughlaq (r. 1325-1351) had his favourite Ganga water carried to him every day a thousand miles away to the Deccan.³³

The great Mughal Emperor Akbar invariably drank Ganga water, and it was carried to him every day regardless of the distance when he was far from the river itself. Abul Fazl tells us

³² Qamaruddin Ahmad, *Bazm-e Akbar*, pp. 132-133. The she'r in question is to be found in the *Kulliyat*, Vol. III, p. 42. The line of verse that occurs in Akbar's conversation is in the *Kulliyat*, Vol. III, p.130.

³³ "In 1327 when Sultan Muhammad Tughlaq established Daulatabad as the second capital of the Sultanate, he ordered Ganges water to be carried to Daulatabad, a distance of forty days' journey from North India, for his personal use." See Ibn-e Battuta, *Rehla*, trs. Agha Mahdi Husain, Baroda, The Oriental Institute, 1953, p. 4.

about waters from the Ganga and other rivers used in the Emperor's kitchen.³⁴

The Mughals were in fact apparently more conscious of issues relating to environment and water pollution than their European counterparts. M. Afzal Khan says that Akbar created the office of water taster on account of his "predilection for good water." In early seventeenth century we find Jahangir commenting adversely on the Gujarati practice of storing rain water in underground cisterns (he calls them *birka*), saying that water not exposed to fresh air for many months is bound to become unhealthful. He said, "The evils of water to which air never penetrates, and which has no way of releasing the vapour are evident."³⁵

Nearer our time and place, here is Ghalib, eloquently praising the water of the river near Rampur:

How can I have the tongue to thank God for the water?
There is a river, called Kosi. Holy is the Lord! Kosi's
water is so sweet that anyone who drank it could imagine
it was a lightly sweetened drink: clean, light, easy on the
system, digestive, quick to be absorbed in the body.

The water, Holy is the Lord! There is a river, just three
hundred paces from the city. It's called Kosi. Doubtless
some underground current from the stream of the Elixir
of Life is a tributary of it. Well, even if such is the case,
the Elixir only extends life, it could never be so sweet.³⁶

It is the loss of these protocols and being deprived of
these waters and their cultural reverberations that Akbar was
lamenting:

*Obliged to drink water from the tap
And to read texts set in type,
Suffering from the flux
And conjunctivitis; Help!
Oh Good King Edward, help!*³⁷

³⁴ "Whether at camp or on march, His Majesty drinks Ganges water...In the cooking of food, water from the Jamna, and Chenab, and rain-water is used, mixed with a little of Ganga water." Abul Fazl, *The A'in-e Akbari*, Vol. I, Ed., H. Blochmann, p. 51, Reproduced in Shireen Moosvi, *Episodes in the Life of Akbar: Contemporary Records and Reminiscences*, New Delhi, The National Book Trust, 1998, p. 100. I am obliged to Professor N.R.Farooqi, of the University of Allahabad, for the information about Muhammad Tughlaq, and the citation from Abul Fazl.

³⁵ See "Environment and Pollution in Mughal India" by M. Afzal Khan in *Islamic Culture*, Volume LXXVI, No. 1, January, 2002, pp. 104-105. I am grateful again to Professor N.R. Farooqi for bringing this text to my attention.

³⁶ Letter dated February 1860, to Hakim Ghulam Najaf Khan, and letter dated February 1860, to Mir Mehdi Majruh, in Khaliq Anjum, Ed., *Ghalib ke Khutut*, Vol. II, pp. 630, 517.

³⁷ *Kulliyat*, Vol. I, p. 239.

The supreme irony of the appeal to King Edward VII is too good to need comment. The protest against typesetting the reading material is not just because the typefaces were generally small, and harder to read than books calligraphed by expert calligraphers. The matter had to do more with mass production and quality control. In the pre-print age, one often commissioned books to be copied by a calligrapher, and one generally supervised the job personally. On account of the one-time nature of the work, the calligrapher could ensure uniformity of style, ink, and general layout of the work that he was producing. More important, the copier or the commissioner made sure, at least in theory, of an error free copy. With the advent of the printing press and mass production, errors became extremely numerous, for the quality control ensured by the author/commissioner's personal supervision was no longer there. The author or the commissioner of the printed work had no real control over it, but was still held liable for the numerous errors that printed texts now routinely contained.

Ghalib tried to maintain a measure of quality control during the printing of some of his works. His letters on that subject reflect his concern, and his anguish over the printer's excesses:

"Let the ink be bright black, and uniform throughout", Ghalib pleads to Har Gopal Tafta who was supervising the printing of *Dastanbu*.³⁸ Now this is about an edition of his Urdu Divan:

I saw each and every proof. The copywriter was someone different from the middleman who used to bring the proofs to me. Now I find that all the errors are just as they were. That is, the copywriter didn't incorporate the corrections at all.³⁹

In a letter to Junun Barelvi, Ghalib laments that people blame him for typos, and "do not envisage the possibility of error in printed texts. The poor author is indicted for the copy writer's mistakes."⁴⁰

Thus in his mock-protest against the typeset text, Akbar is actually protesting against the culture of mass production which lowers aesthetic standards, makes coldly impersonal what once was a work of art and mindlessly permits errors to

³⁸ Letter dated September 7, 1858, in *Ghalib ke Khutut*, Vol. I, 1984, p. 292.

³⁹ Letter dated August 8, 1861, to Mir Mehdi Majruh, in *Ghalib ke Khutut*, Vol. II, Ed. Khaliq Anjum, 1985, p. 521.

⁴⁰ Letter dated May 8, 1864, in *Ghalib ke Khutut*, Vol. IV, Ed., Khaliq Anjum, 1993, p. 1511. Note that for the calligrapher employed at the Press, Ghalib consistently uses the term "copywriter" (*copy nigar* in the original); he doesn't consider him a proper calligrapher, far less a calligrapher-artist such as were people like Navab Fakhruddin Khan, Ghalib's regular calligrapher. I may mention here in passing that calligraphy was one of the noble arts in premodern India. Bahadur Shah Zafar himself was a calligrapher of excellence.

proliferate. It is for these reasons that Akbar dislikes photographs and the phonograph too: they separate the subject from his/her attribute. Printed photographs are worse, for they are copies of a copy:

*Now what occasion could there be
For me to boast about my album?
Your photograph has now become
All too cheap: Even the painter cannot
Have a sight of you. From just a photo
Are now your pictures made.⁴¹*

*Why wonder if my friends
Are parted from me; in the age
Of the phonograph, the voice
Is parted from the throat.⁴²*

A similar tension, or perhaps even worse, prevails with the telephone, for not only is it impersonal, but in permitting avoidance of eye contact, it makes refusal of requests easy:

*Now how could one hope
For the eye of compassion, when
The telephone is the only
Means of conversation?⁴³*

Akbar saw the newspaper too as a weapon of cultural invasion. He equated British business with British information. Worse still, by virtue of it being a vehicle for the promotion of commerce through advertisement and aggressive salesmanship, the newspaper was also a medium of disinformation. It was culturally deleterious in other ways too: it had immense even if false prestige and made Indians eager to be seen in print on its pages:

*Real goods are those that are made in Europe,
Real matter is that which is printed in the Pioneer.⁴⁴*

*Okay, so give me nothing from your purse,
But please do print my name in the paper;*

*Whoever you look for, you find them
Settled at the door of the Pioneer:
For God's sake, Sir, do print me on some page!*

*The true state is not bidden
From the eyes of the world;
Print in the paper whatever you please.⁴⁵*

⁴¹ *Kulliyat*, Vol. III, p. 20.

⁴² *Kulliyat*, Vol. III, p. 10.

⁴³ *Kulliyat*, Vol. III, p. 17.

⁴⁴ *Kulliyat*, Vol. II, p. 62.

⁴⁵ *Kulliyat*, Vol. I, p. 254.

*The letter from home says: Yesterday
His fortieth day rites after death
Were done; The Pioneer reports
The patient is doing well.*⁴⁶

*I have now no desire for Paradise and its Lote tree
Nor do I long for the heavenly spring of Kausar,
I lust only for publication
In the Pioneer.*⁴⁷

*Give me too a couple of pages from the paper,
But not the one that contains medicine ads.*⁴⁸

This last one is particularly interesting. With characteristic astuteness Akbar notes that the newspaper, by printing advertisements in fact deviates from its true function. Early newspapers in England were nothing more than accounts of parliamentary debates. It was only in the nineteenth century, in the shadow of the industrial revolution and because of the vast blue collar readership that the revolution spawned, that newspapers began to contain “sensational” news stories and reports of crimes, criminal trials, and similar juicy stuff. Advertisements came still later, when the industrial revolution led to the assembly line and mass production and glut. Thus the newspaper, from being a politically educative medium, became a player in big business and aggressive salesmanship.

It seems that the feeling that a newspaper was not the proper place or medium for advertisements was shared by a number of Indians in the nineteenth century. Ratan Nath Sarshar’s *Fasana-e Azad* (1880) is a serio-comic narrative of the picaresque type in four volumes. It is not a text notable for being in sympathy with what the author apparently saw as the effete Indo-Muslim culture of the nineteenth century. In what is almost the opening scene of *Fasana-e Azad* we find Azad, the main character, talking to a “nautch girl”:

Azad: Today Professor Locke Sahib is to give a lecture on the nobility and superiority of the holy Sanskrit tongue. This revered old gentleman is very holy, pious, a uniquely learned man, unmatched in the present times, and famous through all realms and cities.

Chhammi Jan: May God protect me! Really, by the holy Lord, how uncouth you are. What bad taste indeed! Hey, what’s all this about the Professor Sahib being famous? I have grown to this age and put me on oath if I ever at all

⁴⁶ *Kulliyat*, Vol. I, p. 68.

⁴⁷ *Kulliyat*, Vol. I, p. 226.

⁴⁸ Sadiqur Rahman Kidwai, Ed., *Intikhab-e Akbar Ilahabadi*, New Delhi, Maktaba Jami’a, 1984, p. 153. This she’r doesn’t find place in the *Kulliyat*.

heard his name. And is he in any case more famous than Dumni Khan?⁴⁹

It doesn't need an Edward Said to read the sub-text here: The worth and value of Sanskrit (read Indian culture) is only as much as is determined by the European (read British) men of learning. Azad represents the modern man who has grasped this truth. The woman (read the effete Indian culture) is perverse and doesn't awake to its real worth even when the European (read colonial master) takes pains to study and interpret that culture. In fact, this culture is stupid as well as decadent. It refuses to believe that the learned European savant could be more famous than a local music master.

These were some of the cultural-political presumptions that Akbar had to contend with. Going back to newspapers, later in the *Fasana-e Azad* we find Bahar, Azad's friend, disapproving the appearance of a "Situations Vacant" advertisement in a newspaper and Azad explaining to him the uses of a newspaper:

Bahar: May God grant you success. But say listen, is this not a newspaper? If so, what occasion could there be in it for complications like vacancies, emoluments, applications? A newspaper should contain accounts of battles and wars, or discussion and disputation on matters scientific and political, and not such kinds of complications and fuss.

Azad: Then my dear Sir, you never did read a newspaper. Revered Master, a newspaper is an admixture of fragrances. It is the young people's tutor, affectionate adviser to the youth, touchstone of the experience of old men, chief member of the government, friend to the businessman, loyal companion to the manufacturer, advocate of the people, ambassador of the public at large, adviser to policy makers; a column full of banter about the affairs of the country, another column full of disputation on social matters; brilliant poems on some page, notices and advertisements on another. English newspapers have things of myriad varieties and native papers imitate them.⁵⁰

Needless to say, here Azad is the modern man: he revels in the salesmanship, the jack-of-all-tradeness, and the lack of privacy (note the bit about tutoring and advising the young and the very young), that marks the newspaper. It is for him a replacement for education and a desirable engine of mind control. And those are precisely the reasons for Akbar's disapproval of the newspaper.

⁴⁹ Ratan Nath Sarshar, *Fasana-e Azad*, Vol. I, New Delhi, National Council for the Promotion of Urdu, 1986, p. 15, [1880].

⁵⁰ *Fasana-e Azad*, Vol. I, p. 163.

The newspaper for Akbar is essentially a materialistic device, (note the “this worldliness” of the typical newspaper’s contents listed by Azad to his friend above). Its main purpose is not education; its main purpose is furtherance of business, and of the administrative and political interests of the colonizer. In a letter to Padm Singh Sharma Akbar equated the newspaper with many other things which he said were divisive and fissiparous:

Each and everyone is now absorbed with and drunk upon the wine of self-regard. Council, Committee, Police Station House, Newspaper, these things are everywhere. So what need there is for developing mutual love [between Hindu and Muslim] and practicing brotherhood?⁵¹

An even stronger embodiment of the British government’s cultural/political/economic idea was the railway engine, and the goods train:

*Oh Akbar, those who place
Their faith and trust in the
Goods train, what fear
Could they have of an overload of sin?*⁵²

*This age is an enemy
To tranquility and prayer:
There aren’t the wonted birds in trees
Nor that youthful lush green look
Upon the jungle. The holy man of the forest
Is now below the railroad;
In place of the tamarind tree, the signal’s pole,
And instead of the dove, the railway engine.*⁵³

The poet’s environmental concerns are at least as urgent as the cultural ones. Elsewhere, he parodies a famous she’r from a ghazal:

*Someone passed this way a little while ago:
The footprint’s insolent beauty tells all.*⁵⁴

This delightful verse becomes, in delightful but also somewhat grim parody :

A railway engine passed this way

⁵¹ Letter dated 9 February 1913, in Akbar Ilahabadi, *Ruqa’at*, Ed., Sahil Ahmad, p. 126.

⁵² *Kulliyat*, Vol. III, p. 8.

⁵³ *Kulliyat*, Vol. II, p. 56.

⁵⁴ This is an extremely famous she’r, but its provenance is not quite settled. Many people regard Hakim Momin Khan Momin (1800-1852) as its author. But it doesn’t find a place in Momin’s *Divan*. Arsh Gayavi relates an anecdote according to which the second misra’ of the she’r was composed by Mir Husain Taskin, a disciple of Momin, who then composed the second misra’ and gave it away to Tahsin. See Arsh Gayavi, *Hayat-e Momin*, facsimile edition in a special number of “Nigar-e Pakistan”, Karachi, August 1990, edited by Farman Farthpuri, p. 40. The book was originally published in 1347 A.H. [=1928/29].

*A little while ago. The darkness
Of the air tells all.*⁵⁵

The railway engine imparts an arrogance, an overweening
confidence to modern man:

*The Shaikh doesn't lend his ear
To the discourse of the New Light,
Blow into his ears the steam
Of the railway engine.*⁵⁶

*What does the divine path count for
Before the railway engine?
What does the flute count for
Before the water buffalo?*⁵⁷

Akbar returned to the theme of the railway engine again
and again, reserving some of his bitterest satire for it. Clearly, he
saw it as an extremely potent medium for exploiting the
colonized people and for making a statement of power:

*This one sweats and is softened
By that one's vapour-steam,
Europe has strapped Asia
To the railway engine.*⁵⁸

I have refrained from commenting upon the subtlety, the
metaphoric reach, the outrageously funny word play in Akbar's
use of language, for it is difficult to put across, far less translate,
in English. Yet I can't resist saying a few words about the above
she'r where Akbar has outreached even himself. A literal
translation of the above quoted she'r's second misra' would be:
"Europe has put Asia to the railway engine." Here "put to the
railway engine" is like the English "put to the sword". Its
appropriateness is greater in the Urdu because in Urdu one says,
talvar/talvaron par rakh lena, or *talvar/talvaron ki barb par rakh lena*
(to put to the sword, or to put to the sharp edge of the sword),
and by extension, we have, *banduqon/raiflon ki barb par rakh lena*,
golion ki barb par rakh lena (to kill by sustained gunfire). Akbar
extends the metaphor further; treating the railway engine as a
weapon of destruction, he says, *injan pe rakh liya hai*. The creative
ingenuity barely conceals the bitterness implicit in the metaphor⁵⁹.

*Machines edged out the good people:
Pigeons flew away
At the booting of the railway engine.*⁶⁰

⁵⁵ *Kulliyat*, Vol. I, p. 251.

⁵⁶ *Kulliyat*, Vol. I, p. 254.

⁵⁷ *Kulliyat*, Vol. I, p. 243.

⁵⁸ *Kulliyat*, Vol. III, p. 104.

⁵⁹ A. A. Surur has commented upon Akbar's artistry and his brilliant use of language. This, according to Surur, is in itself justification enough for us to continue reading his poetry. See "Akbar Ilahabadi ki Ma'naviyat" in his *Kuch Khatbe Kuch Maqale*, Aligarh, Educational Book House, 1996, pp. 70-71.

⁶⁰ *Kulliyat*, Vol. II, p. 46.

*Our young people say:
In the path of progress we don't need
The guidance of Khizr over the routes
Where the railway reaches.⁶¹*

5.

Akbar Iahabadi and Muhammad Iqbal are our first, and by far the greatest postcolonialist writers. Both of them knew intimately the British system of life and thought, and neither of them found himself much impressed by the West. This is extremely remarkable, given the very nearly unqualified admiration for the West among late nineteenth and early twentieth century Indian intellectuals.⁶² Iqbal had first hand knowledge of Western culture and philosophy, and his opposition to the West was mostly on philosophical and intellectual grounds. Akbar too wasn't entirely a stranger to Western philosophy and scientific thought, as his letters to Abdul Majid Daryabadi amply demonstrate.⁶³ But his main concern was about practical matters relating to the social, political, and religious issues of modern India. As against Iqbal, who thought he had practical and philosophical solutions to the predicament that the Indian in general, and the Indian Muslim in particular found himself in, Akbar seems to have come to the conclusion that nothing much could be done. The cancer in the Indian body politic had metastasized everywhere. On November 2, 1912, Akbar wrote to Padm Singh Sharma:

You know the trend of our times. Avidity for false honour and deleterious pleasures rules everyone's heart. Under the name of national progress and development, effort is being made for things that are certain to cause fragmentation of the society.⁶⁴

Sometime in 1917 Akbar wrote to Syed Sulaiman Nadvi that his poems were "not meant to prevent the revolution: they were memorials of the revolution." Then he quoted the following she'r of his:

*Understand the poetry of Akbar to be
The memorial to revolution:*

⁶¹ *Kulliyat*, Vol. II, p. 98.

⁶² Iqbal's long Persian poems *Asrar-e Khudi* and *Rumuz-e Bekhudi*, translated into English by R. A. Nicholson, had been well received in the West. Akbar wrote to Sir Shaikh Abdul Qadir on April 21, 1921, "I value Iqbal not because he is well thought of in the court of the West:

*I desire a glance from my own heart,
I am not crazy about the adulation
Of friend or foe."*

See *Ruqa'at-e Akbar*, pp.115-116. I couldn't find this she'r in the *Kulliyat*.

⁶³ In *Ruqa'at-e Akbar*, pp.144-190.

⁶⁴ *Ruqa'at-e Akbar*, p.119.

*He well knows that whatever
Was fated to come, couldn't be prevented.*⁶⁵

“Fated to come” is my translation for *a'i bu'i* which is also used for death. Akbar's use of it suggests that he regarded the coming as well as the staying of the new order as inevitable. He felt that he was at best fighting a rearguard action for an army that had already been routed, for a cause that already been given up as lost. This gives a poignancy as well as bitterness to his voice. His opposition to the Western values, the Western way of governance, and to the insistence on modernization at the cost of radically modifying or even jettisoning the older norms and mores was not a mindless opposition of a diehard traditionalist. He certainly wanted his country to become modern and forward looking, but not at the price that the British were intent upon exacting: he didn't want the materialism, the commercialism, the Hindu-Muslim divide, the Urdu-Hindi divide, the over-regulation, the loss of self-respect, the obsolescence of values, the perversion of history and religion that the British system of modernization entailed.

Some of us today might still feel that in some instances Akbar Ilahabadi was overreacting or simplifying, but there can be no doubting his sincerity, and the basic soundness of his positions: he was not against the railway engine, or the newspaper, or what the British euphemistically described as “public works, public instruction, public welfare”. He was against the destruction of our culture that these things entailed, and he was against the political and economic hegemony that these things stood for. Our subsequent history has vindicated him in many ways.

Sadiqur Rahman Kidwai is an Urdu critic who takes Akbar's laughter seriously. He says that when Akbar laughed at himself, the laughter was that of the defeated person whose sense of defeat underlies his laughter, but there is also the knowledge deep in him somewhere that his “seemingly successful adversaries were destined to face a worse defeat.”⁶⁶ This may be stretching things a bit, for one need not credit Akbar with a prescience that he doesn't need in order to be recognized as a great poet, but there is no doubt his poetry, for all its bitterness of defeat, does have the air of having been produced by a robust mind and spirit. In his encounter with the new age, Akbar was no wilting lily.

⁶⁵ *Ruqa'at-e Akbar*, pp. 36-37. This she'r is to be found in the *Kulliyat*, Vol. II, p. 83.

⁶⁶ Sadiqur Rahman Kidwai, “Poet Who Laughed in Pain: Akbar Ilahabadi” in Christina Oesterheld and Claus Peter Zoller, Eds., *Of Clowns and Gods, Brahmins and Babus*, New Delhi, Manohar, 1999, pp. 83-84.

Ralph Russell also seems inclined to find in Akbar something of an image of his own cool and rationalistic mind when he says that Akbar Ilahabadi is “a poet who looks at the conflict between the New Light and the Old but refuses to give indiscriminate support to either.”⁶⁷ He and Khurshidul Islam are nearer the mark when they say that Akbar, “Is *not* the wooden, unimaginative, obstinate conservative that some have made him out to be....Essentially, he is a man intensely aware of change, and the irresistibility of change.”⁶⁸

The impression that Akbar’s poetry finally leaves us with is of a poet who was sharply aware of the political import of things, a person of great wit and humour who wrote humorous and satirical poetry on social, cultural, and political issues with an almost unbelievable felicity of language and fertility of invention. Also, even those who do not agree with his message cannot fail to be struck with Akbar’s passionate love for his country and his intense dislike, even contempt of the West. During their early encounters with India, Westerners often described the Indian as fastidious and proud, even arrogant, given to looking down upon the Westerner. All this disappears by about the third quarter of the nineteenth century. Most Indians, and certainly the intellectuals, now began sincerely to believe that the intellectual, moral and artistic superiority of the European, especially the British, could not be overemphasized. Akbar Ilahabadi and Sir Muhammad Iqbal stand out as exceptions in our literary history. Perhaps Akbar disliked the European even more than Iqbal. There was certainly more pain and overt passion in Akbar.

Akbar has a number of delightful verses on the Darwinian theory of evolution, which stipulates that man developed from the primates, and nothing shows up his contempt for European thought better than those poems:

*Mansur said: I am God,
Darwin called out: And I, a monkey.
A friend of mine laughed and said,
Everyone thinks up
According to their reach.*⁶⁹

The original is a four-line poem and its last line has been merrily appropriated from a ghazal by the great Hafiz Shirazi (1325?-1398):

*You, my friend, are absorbed
In the thought of the tree of Paradise,
And I, in the thought of her noble stature,
Everyone thinks up*

⁶⁷ Ralph Russell, *Hidden In The Lute*, New Delhi, Viking, 1995, p. 200.

⁶⁸ Ralph Russell and Khurshidul Islam, “The Satirical Verse of Akbar Ilahabadi”, in Ralph Russell, *The Pursuit of Urdu Literature, A Select History*, London, Zed Books, 1992, p. 175. The italics are as in the original.

⁶⁹ *Kulliyat*, Vol. III, pp. 140-141.

*According to their reach.*⁷⁰

A more delightful use of a love-poetry text for entirely non-love purposes cannot be imagined. Akbar was in fact extremely skillful in making such appropriations. He routinely parodied poems and well-known phrases from prose texts, or quoted them out of context to create incongruity which is the soul of humour.

Coming back to Darwin, Qamaruddin Ahmad quotes from Akbar's conversation of January 28, 1921:

If Darwin's theory is correct and the primate was man's ancestor, the Europeans at this stage of their civilization should have exemplified numerous high qualities of humanity. But I am sorry to see that such is not the case,

*What kind of monkey are these, oh Lord?
They evolved and yet didn't become human.*⁷¹

The wheel here has come full circle in the poetry of Akbar Ilahabadi: instead of the European looking down upon the Indian, it is now the Indian again who looks down upon the European.

Akbar was conscious of his status as a poet. He rarely acknowledged anyone's superiority or precedence in finding themes and images.⁷² Later generations may have become inclined to dismiss him as a "joking poet", but he knew his own greatness and rightly regarded himself as an artist with a serious purpose.

Akbar Ilahabadi may have been a blind enemy of progress and enlightenment, as many Urdu critics today believe, (though wrongly, as I hope I have shown above), but apparently he had more self-respect and national pride than his denigrators. As a poet he had a keen eye for detail, extremely sharp wit, a marvellous ear for Urdu poetry's rhythms, and a technical mastery that could be rivalled in his time by Iqbal alone. As an observer and commentator of contemporary life, he evinced an intellectual vigour, an icy scorn, and a searing anger which was unmatched in Urdu poetry since at least the eighteenth century. As a poet and a colonized Indian, he refused to be brow beaten by the promulgators of the new culture and power.

In spite of all this, his was a sad spirit. The loss of his history and culture was heavy over him, especially with the realization that he too was in some sense part of the forces that were taking away his heritage. Perhaps this she'r should stand as the most appropriate epitaph for him:

⁷⁰ *Divan-e Hafiz Shirazi*, Tehran, Shirkat-e Nasabi Kanun-e Kitab, 1328 [=1949], p. 27.

⁷¹ Qamaruddin Ahmad, *Bazm-e Akbar*, p. 165. This she'r is not included in the *Kulliyat*. This must have been an omission, and not a suppression, or Akbar may have intended to put it in his projected volume IV of the *Kulliyat*.

⁷² Qamaruddin Ahmad, *Bazm-e Akbar*, pp. 217-18.

The Power Politics of Culture: Akbar Ilahabadi
By Shamsur Rahman Faruqi

*If you pass by this way you'll see
My village, laid waste
A broken mosque, and by its side
A British barracks.⁷³*

Note

All translations from Urdu and Persian have been made by me.
Originals of Urdu and Persian texts quoted are in the Appendix.

Allahabad,
November , 2001-January, 2002

Shamsur Rahman Faruqi

⁷³ *Kulliyat*, Vol. II, p. 48.