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Akbar's religious world: the two reconstructions in Mobad's *Dabistān*

Irfan Habib

Professor Emeritus, Aligarh Muslim University, Aligarh, India
Email: profirfanhabib@gmail.com

Abstract

In the early 1650s in Mughal India 'Mobad' (Kaikhusrāu Isfandyār) wrote a remarkable work, titled *Dabistān*, devoted to a description of the world's major religions. He adopted an avowedly objective approach that he strives to maintain throughout. An account of the religious tendencies under Akbar is offered in a long concluding chapter, dedicated to Islam. The account is given in two nearly totally different versions. In Version A, Akbar is credited with supernatural powers, with many anecdotes offered of their exercise. In Version B, all such anecdotes have been deleted and replaced by an extensive account of inter-religious debates held under Akbar, in which Christian (and Jewish) objections to Islamic traditions figure prominently. This version also seems to have been the major source of the belief current in later times that Akbar established a sect of his own under the designation of *dīn-i ilāhī*. In both versions the section on Akbar closes with the insightful observation that Akbar's policy of forming a nobility composed of diverse racial and religious elements was designed to protect the monarchy from any possibility of a unified aristocratic opposition.

Keywords: Akbar; Kaikhusrāu Isfandyār; *ilāhīs*; Chitr-rūp

By any account the work titled *Dabistān*, by an author styling himself 'Mobad', completed in India in or after 1653, represented a remarkable feat for its time. It attempted a description of the major religions of the world, including Zoroastrianism, Hinduism, Jainism, Sikhism, Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, in that order, not forgetting, in the case of some of these religions, their numerous sects and schools. The author expressly aspired to pursue objectivity and impartiality in representing what each faith (including its various sects) stood for.¹ It is not surprising that not only did the work become so popular in India that a large number of manuscript copies of it have survived, but also that it was printed in moveable type by Nazar Ashraf in Calcutta as early as 1809, and then translated into English by D. Shea and A. Troyer as *Dabistan, or School of Manners*.² There followed lithographed editions, carrying the same Persian text, issued from Bombay (Ibrahim b. Muhammad, 1875) and Kanpur/Lucknow (Nawal Kishor, 1877 and 1904). More

¹ See, for an appraisal of the work, M. Athar Ali, 'Pursuing an elusive seeker of universal truth', *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 9.3 (1999); reprinted in M. Athar Ali, *Mughal India: Studies in Polity, Ideas, Society and Culture* (New Delhi, 2006), pp. 216–218. The author gave his work the title *Dabistān* ('School'), but it has become universally known as *Dabistān-i Mazāhib* ('School of Religions'), the title carried by all the printed Persian texts of the work.

² D. Shea and A. Troyer, *Dabistan, or School of Manners* (London, 1843), 3 vols.

recently, the text carried by the lithographed editions has been reprinted in Tehran, with the second volume containing notes by the editor.³

One important advance came with Malik's Teheran edition. The author was finally identified as Kaikhusrau Isfandyār, alias Mirza Zulfiqar, the (grand)son of Azar Kaiwan (d. 1618 in Patna), founder of the 'illuminationist' (Ishrāqī) school within Zoroastrianism, with quite an extensive amount of literature to its credit.⁴

A study of the various manuscripts of the work has resulted in a distinction being made between two versions of the work, termed 'A' and 'B'.⁵ It happens that in some parts, for example, that containing the description of Islamic sects, the two versions differ widely, this certainly being the case with the accounts relating to Akbar. Here Version A contains a number of stories involving the intervention of supernatural powers that are missing in Version B.⁶ Notable among these is a story narrated to the author by Ganesh Man, a close disciple of the Vedantic seer Chitr-rūp or Chitrarupa.⁷ Chitr-rūp is said to have told Ganesh Man that when Jahangir was a prince he began to defy Akbar's authority in Akbar's later years. Akbar appeared suddenly in Jahangir's presence, warning him of severe consequences, and then vanishing. Jahangir was so shaken by this apparition of his father that he made use of the occasion of the death of Akbar's mother, Hamida Banu (Maryam Makani), to come to Agra (from Allahabad) to offer his condolences but really to submit to Akbar. According to Ganesh Man, Chitr-rūp further told him that while Akbar now forgave him, he also predicted that when king Jahangir would have to concede authority to someone else, this being a prophecy, according to Chitr-rūp, of the subsequent ascendancy of Nur Jahan Begam.⁸ There was thus apparently a widespread inclination in some circles, including apparently the reclusive confidant of Jahangir, Chitr-rūp ('Jadруп') himself, to credit Akbar with such spiritual attainments as to be able to command supernatural powers. This is, at least, the picture presented in *Dabistān's* Version A. It is possible, however, that the author of *Dabistān* convinced himself subsequently that these stories involving myth and miracle were best avoided, and in his Version B, carried by all the printed Persian editions, these are dropped, except for one story about Akbar's ability to speak as a newborn infant.⁹

Indeed, it would seem that throughout the author of *Dabistān* lacked access to either Abu'l Fazl's *Akbarnāma* or *Ā'in-i Akbarī* or any other history of Akbar's reign, except for Badauni's *Muntakhabu't Tawārikh*, a text highly critical of Akbar's religious views and measures.¹⁰ What he had in his possession from the 'official' side was a collection of Abu'l

³ Rahim Rizazada Malik (ed.), *Dabistān-i Mazāhib* (Tehran, 1983), 2 vols.

⁴ See the article by H. Corbin, 'Āzar Kaywān', *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, vol. III, pp. 183–187.

⁵ See Irfan Habib, 'A fragmentary exploration of an Indian text on religions and sects: notes on the earlier version of the *Dabistān-i Mazāhib*', *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress (PIHC)*, Kolkata session, 2001, pp. 474–491.

⁶ Karim Najafi Barzegar (ed.), *Dabestān-e Mazāheb* (New Delhi, 2010). Version A survives in two recensions, one seemingly shorter than the other; this edition contains the shorter recension.

⁷ Chitr-rūp is called Jadруп (= Chitr-rūp) in Jahangir's memoirs. For this relationship and the seer's identity, see Shireen Moosvi, 'The Mughal encounter with Vedanta: recovering the biography of "Jadруп"', *PIHC*, Kolkata session, 2001, pp. 441–452.

⁸ Barzegar (ed.), *Dabestān*, f. 235a–b. Jahangir had, in fact, used the occasion of his grandmother's death to make his submission to Akbar. See Muhammad Hadi, 'Introduction', *Tuzuk-i Jahāngirī* (litho., Lucknow, 1909), *dībācha*, p. 15. Both *Dabistān* and Muhammad Hadi recall Hamida Banu by her later title 'Maryam Makani'.

⁹ *Dabistān-i Mazāhib* (litho., Kanpur, 1904), pp. 311–312 (henceforth cited as *Dabistān*, Kanpur edn). This edition, like the lithographed text published in Bombay in 1875, follows the text of Nazar Ashraf's edition. It is cited here because of its wider availability. It may be noted that Malik's Tehran edition merely follows the texts of the Indian lithographed editions without necessarily being more accurate.

¹⁰ For the use of Badauni's history by the author of *Dabistān*, see Irfan Habib, 'Abdul Qadir Badauni—a life', Introduction to reprint of the Bib. Ind. edn of *Muntakhabu't Tawārikh* (Aligarh, 2018), vol. II, p. 16. The facts

Fazl's letters, including documents drafted by him, known as *Mukātabāt-i 'Allāmī*. From this he now reproduced two documents (one in part), namely, a set of regulations (*dastūru'l 'amal*) issued in or after 1584 (so dateable only owing to its reference to the *ilāhī* era), relating, among other matters, to the pursuit of a policy of religious tolerance, and an extract from a letter of Akbar to Shah 'Abbas of Iran, sent in 1594, containing a reference to the famous principle of *ṣulḥ-i kul* ('absolute peace').¹¹ Version A of *Dabistān* already uses the word *ilāhī* for the creed of Akbar's spiritual followers, and *ilāhīyān* for his spiritual followers themselves, which perhaps helped to promote the use of the designation *dīn-i ilāhī* for Akbar's creed in modern writing.¹²

In one passage on the oral authority of one Mutlaq Mirak we are told that in AH 1000, being deemed a critical year for Islam, Akbar now held that 'owing to the large amount of differences of opinion, the real faith of Muhammad cannot be established for certain, despite the effort of its interpreters'. People were now offered entry into the fold of *Dīn-i ilāhī* without fear of force or use of compulsion. In common language these dervishes were called 'full-fledged *ilāhīs*'.¹³

Clearly by selecting the passage on *ṣulḥ-i kul* out of the long text of Akbar's letter to Shah 'Abbas, and retaining Akbar's high praise for the concept in its quotation, the author of *Dabistān* recorded his own recognition of the policy of religious tolerance that Akbar had followed. Nevertheless, the author also noted that to Akbar, the disagreements among Muslim theologians strongly suggested that Islam now failed to possess any single or consistent system of beliefs. In this the author goes even beyond Abu'l Fazl's statements about 'Aḥmadī Kesh' (Islam) in the *Ā'in-i Akbarī*, the text of which was not apparently available to him.

As already mentioned, there are certain statements in the *Dabistān* that show that while compiling his work, its author was able to make use of the text of 'Abdu'l Qadir Badauni's history, which had for long been kept out of public view, presumably owing to his strong criticism of Akbar's religious views. The *Dabistān's* reference to Abu'l Fazl's translation of a Christian tract with its invocation replacing *Bismillāh* is obviously derived from Badauni, as is the fact of Birbal drawing Akbar's attention to the sun's beneficent qualities.¹⁴ Indeed, a direct reference to Badauni is made when a conversation between him and Abu'l Fazl is referred to, where the latter complained of the lack of written accounts of early prophets and the inadequate notice taken of the Prophet's descendants.¹⁵

derived by the author of *Dabistān* from Badauni can be more precisely traced, as we shall see below, than my words suggest in this introduction.

¹¹ See Barzegar (ed.), *Dabestān*, ff. 247b–252b (text of *dastūru'l 'amal*) and f. 252b (extract from a letter to Shah 'Abbas). For the full texts of these documents, see 'Abdu's Samad (comp.), *Mukātabāt-i 'Allāmī* (Lucknow/Kanpur, 1864), pp. 57–64 (text of the *dastūru'l 'amal*) and pp. 26–33 (letter to Shah 'Abbas, where the passage quoted in *Dabistān* occurs on p. 31). It is surely singular that the author of *Dabistān* should have picked up the reference to *ṣulḥ-i kul* ('absolute peace') from the long epistle to Shah 'Abbas, though the words of praise for the principle ('ever-flowering garden') are not his but Akbar's, or rather of the draughtsman, Abu'l Fazl.

¹² Indeed, Version A of *Dabistān* itself also uses the term *Dīn-i ilāhī* for Akbar's set of beliefs, and even speaks of a conversion to *Dīn-i ilāhī* (Barzegar (ed.), *Dabestān*, f. 231a).

¹³ *Ibid.*, f. 234b.

¹⁴ The passages in Badauni, *Muntakhabu't Tawārikh* (Calcutta, 1864–1869), vol. II, p. 260, in respect of Abu'l Fazl's rendering of a Christian text and Birbal's justification of sun worship are obviously drawn on by Barzegar (ed.), *Dabestān*, f. 238a, which contains practically the same words in a shorter passage. Earlier still, the account of Shaikh Bhawan, a brahmin convert of Islam, with his interpretation of a passage in the *Atharvaveda* and an immediately following passage on Sharif Amuli (f. 137a–b), are again derived from Badauni. See Badauni, *Muntakhabu't Tawārikh*, vol. II, pp. 212–213 in respect of Shaikh Bhawan, and pp. 245–248 in regard to Sharif Amuli.

¹⁵ Barzegar (ed.), *Dabestān*, f. 239a–b. The corresponding passage is to be found in Badauni, *Muntakhabu't Tawārikh*, vol. II, pp. 262–263.

Incidentally, Version A of the *Dabistān* omits any reference to controversies among votaries of various religions arguing with each other in front of Akbar, except for a debate carried on between Sunnis and Shi'as, in which the Sunnis appear to have prevailed in most points of dispute.¹⁶ Nonetheless, it has an interesting statement attributed to Guru Hargobind of the Sikhs, namely, that his father, Guru Arjan Mal, had told him that in AH 1000 (1592 AD) scholars had presented Akbar with a proposal that he should set out to remove the differences of faith among 'the seventy-three sects of Hindus and Muslims'.¹⁷ This would have implied, of course, an effort to create a common religion.

Version B of the *Dabistān* is undoubtedly the one that readers and scholars have been most familiar with, it being, as it is, carried by all the printed editions of the work and having been rendered into English by Troyer and Shea. Here, in the portion on Akbar, the author seems to have undertaken a thorough edit of Version A. For one, he now weeded out practically all the reports that involved any supernatural action or phenomena, so that the report attributed to the seer Chitr-rūp ('Jadrup'), noted above, is also eliminated. The entire original sub-chapter is reduced to just one passage, where Akbar's foster-brother Aziz Koka is reported to have admitted, on the basis of what his mother told him, that Akbar was able to speak while an infant, 'like Christ'.¹⁸

The next section in Version B is devoted to 'the Discussion among Religions'. The long debate between Sunnis and Shi'as, as set out in Version A, is reproduced here.¹⁹ The reference to Ratan Nath as a source is, however, dropped; moreover, a debate follows between Muslims and Christians, in which Jews also join.²⁰ Now, while it is likely that the arguments exchanged between Sunnis and Shi'as were common knowledge among the literati in India with knowledge of Persian, the reproduction here of arguments that Christians or Jews could offer against Muslim critics, suggests that the author had himself learnt much from the famous Sarmad, a former rabbi, about Judaism and from Catholic priests about Christianity. The meetings with Sarmad took place at Hyderabad in AH 1057/AD 1647, and the author met his sources for Christianity in the same year at Surat.²¹ It is practically certain that the debates between Sunnis and Shi'as as well as between Muslims and Jews and Christians are reconstructed by the author himself on the basis of what he himself had learnt of these faiths. But, if so, the extent of the detail seems remarkable.²²

When we put before us the information on Akbar and the traditions, or even rumours current about him, as recorded in *Dabistān*, especially in its Version A, we must infer that Akbar had, indeed, left a deep imprint on the popular mind. The stories of supernatural influences that Version A contains, at least suggest that there was a large number of people ready to believe in such rumours. Above all, the very fact that the debates among followers of different religions, in which Islam does not come out triumphant, could really thus be set out in a widely circulated work speaks much for the extent of permissiveness in such matters prevailing in the Mughal empire.

¹⁶ Barzegar (ed.), *Dabestān*, ff. 221b–225b. Curiously enough, here in Version A, the author traces his record of the Sunni–Shi'a debate to an aged informant, Ratan Nath, a native of Qandahar, who reported further that the debate took place soon after the overthrow of Hemu in 1556!

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, f. 234b. This statement does not occur in Version B, at least not in this section of the work.

¹⁸ *Dabistān*, Kanpur edn, pp. 311–312. The story is earlier told in Barzegar (ed.), *Dabestān*, ff. 220b–221a.

¹⁹ *Dabistān*, Kanpur edn, pp. 312–316. Cf. Barzegar (ed.), *Dabestān*, ff. 221b–225b.

²⁰ *Dabistān*, Kanpur edn, pp. 316–325.

²¹ Barzegar (ed.), *Dabestān*, ff. 171b, 179b.

²² Even more remarkable is the restraint shown by Muslim transcribers of the *Dabistān* over such matters as the Prophet's miracle of *shaqq al-qamar* (splitting of the moon) which is called into question in the debate, especially in Version B of the *Dabistān*, Kanpur edn, p. 316.

It is noteworthy, finally, that the author of *Dabistān* was acute enough to see a political objective as well behind the policy of tolerance that Akbar had pursued with such determination. If there was only one religious or racial group monopolising the ranks of the nobility, the monarch himself could never be secure from a conspiracy against him by the nobility. But if there was diversity of faith and race among the nobility—‘Europeans, Jews, Iranis, Turanis’, in the author’s rhetorical description—the throne would be safe.²³ We have here only to read ‘Hindu’ for ‘European’ and ‘Indian Muslim’ for ‘Jew’ in the *Dabistān*’s rhetorical formula to name the four major elements that constituted Akbar’s nobility well before he had reached even the middle years of his reign.²⁴ Such religious diversity in the ruling class—Sunni, Shi’a, Hindu—was also, perhaps, unique in the world at that time.

Conflicts of interest. The author reports none.

²³ The statement occurs in Versions A as well as B: see Barzegar (ed.), *Dabestān*, f. 253a–b; also *Dabistān*, Kanpur edn, pp. 340–341.

²⁴ According to the list of *mansab*-holders of 200 and above, furnished in the *Ā’in-i Akbarī*, circa 1595, out of a total of 283 top *mansab*-holders, 93 were Turanis (mainly Sunnis), 75 Iranis (mainly Shi’as), 36 Indian Muslims (mainly Sunnis), and 47 Hindus (of whom 40 were Rajputs). See tables in M. Athar Ali, *The Apparatus of Empire: Awards of Ranks, Offices and Titles to the Mughal Nobility, 1574–1658* (Delhi, 1985), p. xx.

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