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Henry Miers Elliot Edited by John Dowson

Excerpt

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HISTORIANS OF INDIA.

XLII.

AKBAR-NÁMA

OF

SHAIKH ABU'L FAZL.

[ABÚ-L FAZL 'ALLÁMÍ was the son of Shaikh Mubárah, son of Shaikh Khizr, who emigrated from Sind to Hindústán. Shaikh Mubárah was born at Nágor, and at an early age gave evidence of great intellectual powers. He became one of the most learned men of the time, and was conspicuous during the reign of Akbar for his great erudition and his liberal opinions on religious matters. He had several sons, two of whom rose to the greatest eminence and celebrity. The eldest, Shaikh Abú-l Faiz, better known as Faizí, was the most popular poet of the time. He was a great favourite and the constant companion of Akbar, who gave him the title of "Prince of Poets." His compositions are still held in very high estimation, as second only to those of Amír Khusrú, the acknowledged chief of Indian poets.

Abú-l Fazl was the second son, and was born on the 14th January, 1551. He was educated under his father's care, and was a devoted student. His range of reading was extensive, and before the age of twenty he had obtained the reputation of being a deep and critical scholar. His attainments afterwards gained for him the high-sounding title of 'Allámí.

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Faizí's poems early attracted the attention of the Emperor, who invited the young poet to his Court while he was engaged in the siege of Chitor, in the twelfth year of the reign. Faizí soon became an established favourite, and enjoyed great influence. By his means Abú-l Fazl was introduced at Court in his seventeenth year. His abilities were immediately recognized, and every year he grew in favour and in power, until he rose to the office of Prime Minister, and became a *mansabdár* of 4000. In the position of courtier and minister he enjoyed the unbounded confidence of the Emperor, and he discharged his duties, both as a civilian and a soldier, with distinguished ability and success. In the following pages some passages will be found relating to his services in the Dakhin, and an incident connected with the siege of Ásir deserves to be here recorded to his honour. Bahádur Khán, the holder of this fortress, was desirous of gaining the favour of Abú-l Fazl, hoping by his influence to avert the Emperor's displeasure. He therefore sent him some rich presents. Abú-l Fazl returned the presents with the following statement: "I have made a vow not to accept presents till four conditions are fulfilled. 1. Friendship. 2. That I should not value the gift too highly. 3. That I should not have been anxious to get a present. 4. Necessity to accept it. Now, supposing that the first three are satisfied in the present case, the favour of the Emperor has extinguished every desire in me of accepting gifts from others."

Both Faizí and Abú-l Fazl imbibed the liberal opinions of their father, and carried them to greater extremes. They were reviled by the faithful as heterodox, as apostates, as heretics, as free-thinkers, as perverters of the truth and deceivers of the faithful. Akbar's tolerance, his early doubts, and his inquiries into the principles of other religions, had shown themselves before the brothers were introduced at Court. But if they did not kindle the fire, they fanned it and kept it alive. In them the Emperor found congenial minds, with feelings and opinions similar to but more decided than his own. With them he

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held frequent converse, and indulged his partiality for theological discussion. The result was that he and they, mutually influencing each other, progressed through various phases of scepticism and credulity, until they finally arrived at the rejection of Islám, and the establishment of the "Divine Faith," described as "Divine Monotheism." At the head of this new religion stood Akbar himself; next after him came Abú-l Fazl and Faizí.

Prince Salím, afterwards the Emperor Jahángír, had a great dislike of Abú-l Fazl. The minister served his master too faithfully, and thwarted the ambitious views of the heir so successfully, as to make himself an object of hatred. "He was no friend of mine," wrote Jahángír in his Memoirs, and he took an opportunity to remove the man he feared and hated. The Prince had more than once shown signs of rebellion, and of an intention to assume independence. In the forty-seventh year of his father's reign his ambitious designs displayed themselves more distinctly, and excited much distrust in the mind of the Emperor. At this time Abú-l Fazl was in command in the Dakhin, and Akbar, desiring the support and counsel of his trusty minister, sent him an urgent recall. Abú-l Fazl obeyed the summons immediately, and set out for Ágra with only a slender escort. This afforded the opportunity for making an end of him. A Bundela Rájá, named Bír Singh, was incited by the Prince to waylay the minister, and kill him. Abú-l Fazl had warning of his danger, but refused to turn aside. On Friday, the 4th Rabí'u-l awwal (12th August, 1602), he was attacked by the Bundela, about six *kos* from Narwar, and after a short but gallant resistance he fell dead, and his head was sent as an acceptable offering to the Prince. Early in the reign of Jahángír, the murderer received high promotion, and Jahángír in his Memoirs avows and justifies his having procured the murder by promise of reward. Akbar's grief at the death of his minister was unbounded, and he took active measures to bring Bír Singh to punishment. The murderer was hunted from place to place,

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and had several hair-breadth escapes ; but the death of the Emperor put an end to his danger, and opened the road to reward and honour.

The author of the *Ma-ásiru-l Umará* writes as follows in his Memoirs :

“ It has often been asserted that Abú-l Fazl was an infidel. Some say he was a Hindú, or a fire-worshipper, or a free thinker ; and some go still further and call him an atheist ; but others pass a juster sentence, and say that he was a pantheist, and that, like other *Súfis*, he claimed for himself a position above the law of the Prophet. There is no doubt that he was a man of lofty character, and desired to live at peace with all men. He never said anything improper. Abuse, stoppages of wages, fines, absence on the part of his servants, did not exist in his household. If he appointed a man whom he afterwards found to be useless, he did not remove him, but kept him as long as he could ; for he used to say that, if he dismissed him, people would accuse him of want of penetration in having appointed an unsuitable agent. On the day when the sun entered Aries, he inspected his whole household and took stock, keeping the inventory with himself, and burning last year's books. He also gave his whole wardrobe to his servants, with the exception of his trousers, which were burnt in his presence.

“ He had an extraordinary appetite. It is said that, exclusive of water and soup, he consumed daily twenty-two *sírs* of food. His son 'Abdu-r Rahmán used to sit at table as *safarchi* (head butler) ; the superintendent of the kitchen, who was a Muhammadan, was also in attendance, and both watched to see if Abú-l Fazl would eat twice of one and the same dish. If he did, the dish was sent up again the next day. If anything appeared tasteless, Abú-l Fazl gave it to his son to taste, and he to the superintendent, but no word was said about it. When Abú-l Fazl was in the Dakhin, his table luxury exceeded all belief. In an immense tent, 1000 rich dishes were daily served up and distributed among the *amírs* ; and near it another large tent was

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pitched for all-comers to dine, whether rich or poor, and *khichrī* was cooked all day, and was served out to any one that applied for it.

“As a writer, Abú-l Fazl stands unrivalled. His style is grand, and is free from the technicalities and flimsy prettiness of other *munshis*; and the force of his words, the structure of his sentences, the suitableness of his compounds, and the elegance of his periods, are such that it would be difficult for any one to imitate him.”

Other native writers have expressed similar opinions, and Mr. Blochmann, to whom the above translation is owing, says, “It would be almost useless to add to this encomium on Abú-l Fazl’s style. ‘Abdu-lla, King of Bukhárá, said that he was more afraid of Abú-l Fazl’s pen than of Akbar’s arrow. Everywhere in India he is known as the great *munshi*. His letters are studied in all *madrasas*; and though a beginner may find them difficult and perplexing, they are perfect models. But a great familiarity, not only with the Persian language, but also with Abú-l Fazl’s style, is required to make the reading of any of his works a pleasure. His composition stands unique, and though everywhere studied, he cannot be, and has not been, imitated.” Yet attention may be called to the just criticism recorded by Ináyatullah, the author of the continuation of the *Akbar-nāma*, who says that the later volumes of this work were considered more laboured and abstruse than the first.¹ The style is certainly more complicated and ambitious, and many unusual and even foreign words are employed, so that unwearied attention is required to seize and follow up the meaning of the author.

Abú-l Fazl was author of several works of repute. On his introduction to the Emperor, he presented a Commentary on a *Surat* of the Kurán, which he called *A’yatu-l Kúrsi*. But Badáúni does not fail to record that “people said it was written by his father.” The *Maktúbátu-l ‘Allámí*, more commonly called *Inshá-i Abú-l Fazl*, is a collection of letters written by Abú-l

¹ See *infra* next Article.

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Fazl to kings and chiefs. The *Ayár-i Dánish* is a translation of the Arabic *Kalila o Damna*. He was also the author of some smaller and less known works. The greatest of his productions was the *Akbar-nāma*, in two volumes, and the *A'in-i Akbari*, which is considered to be its third volume. The *A'in*, or Institutes, may, however, be regarded as a distinct work. A translation of it by Gladwin was published in the year 1800; but although a very meritorious production for the time, it was imperfect and often incorrect. The first volume of a new translation by Mr. Blochmann, of the Calcutta Madrasa, has just been published. It is a precise and admirable version, and is enriched with numerous notes, which testify to the deep learning and great research of their author. It includes also a series of memoirs of all the nobles and notable persons of Akbar's Court. When the work is complete, the translation will be well worthy to rank with the original. The purely historical part of the *Akbar-nāma* comprises in the first volumes an account of the ancestors of Akbar from Tímúr to Bábar. It has a full history of the reign of Humáyún, of which a few Extracts will appear in the following pages. The history of the reign of Akbar is given in full, year by year, from the accession of the Emperor to the end of the forty-sixth year of the reign, A.D. 1602. Many Extracts have been taken from this part of the work.

The *Akbar-nāma* enjoys a much higher reputation in India than in Europe. The passage above quoted from the *Ma-ásiru-l Umará* is a fair and temperate expression of Oriental judgment. Sir Henry Elliot, whose opinion coincides with that expressed by Elphinstone, and adopted by Morley, gives an unfavourable verdict. He says, "The authority of the *Akbar-nāma* is not rated very high in Europe, and Abú-l Fazl is not for a moment to be compared, either in frankness or simplicity, with Comines, Sully, Clarendon and other ministers who have written contemporary history; for though he was a man of enlarged views and extraordinary talents, yet, as Elphinstone remarks, he was a professed rhetorician, and is still the model of the unnatural style which is

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so much admired in India. He was, besides, a most assiduous courtier, eager to extol the virtues, to gloss over the crimes, and to preserve the dignity of his master and those in whom he was interested. His dates and his general statements of events are valuable; but he requires constant attention, not so much to guard against his barefaced partiality, as against the prejudice which he draws on his favourites by his fawning and fulsome adulation of them, and against the suspicions which he excites by his dishonest way of telling a story, even in cases where the action related was innocent or excusable. His narrative is florid, feeble and indistinct, overloaded with commonplace reflections and pious effusions, generally ending in a compliment to his patron. 'Every event that had a tendency to take from his goodness, wisdom, or power, is passed over or mis-stated, and a uniform strain of panegyric and triumph is kept up, which disgusts the reader with the author, and almost with the hero. Amidst these unmeaning flourishes, the real merits of Akbar disappear, and it is from other authors that we learn the motives of his actions, the difficulties he had to contend with, and the resources by which they were surmounted. The gross flattery of a book written by one so well acquainted with Akbar's disposition, and submitted, it appears, to his own inspection, leaves an impression of the vanity of that prince, which is almost the only blot on his otherwise admirable character.'"¹

A careful examination of the whole of the book, and the translating of many passages, compel the Editor of this work to withhold his assent from this unqualified condemnation. It is true that in certain passages Abú-l Fazl attributes to Akbar a prescience which approaches to prophecy and powers almost supernatural; but, as Price observes, his veneration for the Emperor amounted almost to adoration. Apart from these occasional blemishes, his faults are those of the rhetorician rather than of the flatterer, and his style ought to be judged by an Oriental standard, not by a contrast with the choicest of Euro-

¹ This is quoted from Elphinstone.

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pean memoirs. But though the Editor had arrived at this judgment, he might have hesitated to express it here, had it not been confirmed by the independent opinion of a competent authority. In the preface to his *A'in-i Akbari* but just arrived in England, Mr. Blochmann says: "Abú-l Fazl has far too often been accused by European writers of flattery, and even of wilful concealment of facts damaging to the reputation of his master. A study of the *Akbar-náma* will show that the charge is absolutely unfounded; and if we compare his works with other historical productions of the East, we shall find that while he praises, he does so infinitely less, and with much more grace and dignity, than any other Indian historian or poet. No native writer has ever accused him of flattery; and if we bear in mind that all Eastern works on Ethics recommend unconditional assent to the opinion of the king, whether correct or absurd, as the whole duty of man, and that the whole poetry of the East is a rank mass of flattery, at the side of which modern encomiums look like withered leaves, we may pardon Abú-l Fazl when he praises because he finds a true hero."

Major Price has given, in his "Retrospect of Mahommedan History," a copious abstract of the *Akbar-náma* for the interval between Tímúr and Akbar. He has also translated elsewhere the account of the capture of Chítór. Major Stewart has translated the account of the taking of Surat. There is in MS. in the Library of the Royal Asiatic Society an abridged translation of the whole work by "Lieut. Chambers, of the Madras Army." This translation was used by Elphinstone for the purposes of his History; and the Editor of this work has had the benefit of it during a portion of the time that he has been at work upon the *Akbar-náma*. The translation of the Extracts which follow this have all been made by the Editor.

A lithographed edition of the *Akbar-náma*, in three quarto volumes, was printed at Lucknow in 1867, at the expense of the Rájá of Pattiála. It is a handsome and costly work, and it is greatly to be regretted that its literary value is by no

means commensurate with the money expended upon it. Gross and obvious errors abound in it, and there are many passages wanting. In one instance the annals of six months of one of the most important years of the reign (the 17th) are altogether omitted. The Editor has used this edition, and it being the only one published, he has referred to it in the following Extracts. But his chief reliance has been on an excellent *Shikasta* MS. belonging to the Royal Asiatic Society. He has also had the use of a fair MS. belonging to the Library of the India Office, and of other volumes containing only portions of the work. A new edition of the work is promised for the *Bibliotheca Indica*.

The *Akbar-nāma* has been translated into Hindústání by Muhammad Khalíl 'Alí Khán, under the name of *Wáki'át-i Akbari*.¹]

EXTRACTS.

REIGN OF THE EMPEROR HUMÁYÚN.

Kálinjar.

(See Vol. V. p. 189.)

[Text, vol. i. p. 152.] Five or six months after (his accession), Humáyún marched to subdue the fort of Kálinjar. He had invested the place nearly a month, when the garrison being reduced to distress, the commander (*hákim*) submitted. He gave twelve *mans* of gold, besides other things, as tribute, and the Emperor, acceding to his entreaties and lamentations, forgave him, and marched away towards the fort of Chunár, with the intention of besieging that fortress.

Rebellion of the Mirzás.

(See Vol. V. p. 189.)

[Text, vol. i. p. 153.] (In the year 940 H., 1533-4 A.D.), Muhammad Zamán Mirzá, Muhammad Sultán Mirzá, with his son

¹ [The materials for this notice have been derived by the Editor from memoranda left by Sir H. Elliot, and from the valuable Memoir of Abú-l Fazl by Mr. Blochmann, printed as an Introduction to his translation of the *Ain-i Akbari*. To that Memoir the reader is referred for further details. See also Morley's *Cat. of the MSS. of the Royal Asiatic Society*.]

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Ulugh Mirzá, broke out in rebellion, and Humáyún marched against them. He encamped at Bhojpúr, by the side of the Ganges, and sent Yádgár Násir Mirzá over the river at the head of a force against the rebels. Yádgár attacked them, gained a victory, and took Muhammad Zamán Mirzá, Muhammad Sultán Mirzá, and Walí Khub Mirzá prisoners. Muhammad Zamán Mirzá was sent prisoner to Bayána, the other two persons were blinded and sent away in disgrace. Muhammad Zamán Mirzá, unmindful of the mercy shown him, pretended to be submissive, and, effecting his escape, fled to Sultán Bahádur, of Gujarát.

Prince Kámrán gets possession of Lahore.

(See Vol. V. p. 189.)

[Text, vol. i. p. 153.] When Prince Kámrán heard of the death of the Emperor Bábar, he left Kandahár in charge of Mirzá 'Askarí, and set off for Hindústán, to see how he might advance his own interests. At that time Mír Yúnas 'Alí, who had been appointed by the late Emperor, was governor of Lahore. Mirzá Kámrán revolved in his mind a scheme for getting hold of Lahore. One night he falsely pretended to have a difference with Karácha Beg, and spoke harshly to him, so that Karácha Beg left the camp of the Mirzá with his soldiers, and went off to Lahore. Mír Yúnas 'Alí was glad of his coming, and showed him much attention; frequently inviting him to his house, and enjoying his society. Karácha Beg watched his opportunity, and one night when they were drinking wine, and the Mír's soldiers were gone to their homes, Karácha Beg seized him, put him in confinement, and placed his own men in charge of the gates of the fortress. He then sent a messenger to call Mirzá Kámrán, who was expecting such a summons, and starting off with expedition, gained possession of Lahore. He took Mír Yúnas out of prison, and offered to make over the government of Lahore to him; but the Mír declined to accept it, and went to the Emperor Humáyún.