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Akbar The Great Conquered India And Built A Great Civilization

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Akbar the Great made his name as the Muslim conqueror of Hindu India.

The third ruler of the Mughal dynasty, he was a military innovator, a skilled diplomat and an excellent administrator of his vast empire for half a century, from 1556 to 1605.

He was unusual for a ruler of any time or place in being eager to encourage the flourishing of a variety of religions.

"The Mughals were Shia Muslims from Afghanistan, and he was the first to show they were in India to stay for the long term," **Usha Haley**, professor of management at West Virginia University, told IBD. "The clerics wanted him to take a hard line, but he was extremely interested in other philosophies and saw commonality in diversity. He married Hindu women and didn't force them to convert, listening to their families and lifting the tax on Hindus. He transcended his times, which is something very few leaders have ever been able to do, and it was one of the keys to his tremendous success."

Akbar was born Jalal ud-din Muhammad Akbar in 1542 in Sindh, in modern day Pakistan. Descended from the Mongol conqueror Tamerlane, his grandfather founded the dynasty in northern India 30 years earlier, but his father was forced by a rival to flee first to Pakistan, then Kabul, Afghanistan, where Akbar spent his childhood.

He had trouble reading and may have had dyslexia, but he thirsted for knowledge and had books read to him the rest of his life.

As was the custom, he was married to his first wife, a cousin, at age 9. He was an expert horseman and hunter by his teens.

Akbar's father, Emperor Humayan, reconquered the Delhi region in 1555 but a few months later died. His son was 13, so his mother along with his guardian, Bairam Khan, governed in his name.

Over the next few years, rival Muslim powers battled in northern India, and Akbar and Bairam Khan led their forces to victory. At 18, after disputes with Bairam Khan, Akbar fired him and took control of re-establishing central Mughal authority.

Emperor Akbar

"In the spring of 1562, Akbar figured in an adventure which typifies his fearlessness, as well as his providential safety in close combat," wrote S.M. Burke in "Akbar: The Greatest Mogul." "These attributes, together with his intelligence and stamina, made him one of the great conquerors of history."

After pleas for help from Hindu priests near Agra who were being plundered and terrorized by a group of eight villages, Akbar led a force of 200 men on elephants against 4,000. Many times he barely escaped death, until 1,000 of the bandits were killed and the rest fled or surrendered.

"He was a military innovator, reorganizing the army, building new types of fortifications, using matchlock rifles that had an improved lock mechanism, procuring better cannons and developing new elephant tactics," said **Haley**.

One observer wrote that, "like Alexander of Macedon, the emperor was always ready to risk his life, regardless of consequences."

Akbar spent the 1560s winning one victory after another against Muslim and Hindu warlords across northern India. But he always first tried to negotiate peaceful incorporation of new territory, offering imperial responsibilities, marriages and trade to build political relationships. In 1569, he built a new capital near Agra, Fatehpur Sikri ("city of victory").

Uniting East And West

In January 1573, Akbar conquered Gujarat on the west coast and saw the Indian Ocean for the first time. But after returning home, a rebel force of 20,000 revolted in June.

"The emperor decided to quell the rising personally, and he left Fatehpur, traveling at a furious speed in turn by she-camel, by chariot and by horseback," wrote Burke. "The charioteers had been ordered not to slow down even if he, in a state of drowsiness, asked them to do so. A journey that normally took six weeks was covered in 11 days. His force numbered only 3,000, and the enemy was encamped on the opposite bank of a river. They at first refused to believe it was Akbar, whom spies had seen in the capital two weeks before. Akbar placed himself at the head of a reserve force of 100 picked warriors. When his right wing faltered, he saved the situation by charging at the head of his contingent, and the enemy was routed."

The next year, Akbar supervised the construction of 1,000 ships for the invasion of Bengal on the east coast, leading 500 elephants that accompanied the fleet along the banks of the Ganges River.

Over the next three decades, Akbar expanded into central India, northeast into what is today Bangladesh and northwest into Pakistan and Afghanistan. He also established good diplomatic relationships with the Ottoman Empire and Persia.

Flourishing Economy

"By providing security for traders, reducing custom duties, minting coins, improving the fairness of taxes and making collection more efficient, the economy and agriculture thrived under Akbar," said **Haley**. "He developed a far-flung network of correspondents to keep him informed, decentralized administration and developed incentives for people to contribute to society, regardless of religion or ethnicity. He also learned from his mistakes, something America's entrepreneurial culture values."

Akbar's government was collecting income of what today would be \$10.6 billion annually by the end of his reign. By comparison, Elizabeth I of England, who had an almost identical period of reign (1558-1603), was bringing in today's equivalent of \$163 million on average in each of her final years.

According to Money.com's "The 10 Richest People of All Time," Akbar ranks No. 4, controlling a quarter of the world's economic output at that time.

"Akbar's most enduring achievement was to leave behind a system of administration whose framework endures in the subcontinent till now," wrote Burke. "The system of government today is not monarchical, but in other respects is reminiscent of Akbar's. The reason is that his system remained virtually intact during the reigns of his descendants, who ruled India for another 2-1/2 centuries."

"It was the most splendid empire of his age, and Akbar's fame traveled far and wide," wrote Ishtiaq Hussain Qureshi in "Akbar."

Enlightened Culture

Though he was Shia Muslim, Akbar established official tolerance of Sunnis, as well as Hindus, Zoroastrians, Jains and Sikhs, inviting their leaders to discuss philosophy with each other at his court. Jesuit missionaries who visited praised his desire for learning everything and his open-mindedness. Out of this came a synthesis that was an officially supported spiritual and ethical system called Din-i-Ilahi, which prohibited pride, slander, lust and the slaughter of animals.

He participated in the religious festivals of all religions and commissioned the translation of sacred books into the Persian language of the court so others could read them. Akbar let Christians do missionary work and outlawed

slavery, child marriages, infanticide and slavery. He prohibited the Hindu practice of widows being burned on the funeral pyres of their husbands, while legalizing their remarriage.

He also fostered a spirit of imperial unity by developing a new Mughal culture, funding artistic projects that blended Muslim, Hindu and Jain styles. The most famous example is the Taj Mahal in Agra, built by his grandson.

Louis Mountbatten, the last British viceroy of India, spoke to the Constitutional Assembly of Pakistan upon independence in 1947: "When the East India Co. received its charter nearly four centuries ago, your great Emperor Akbar was on the throne, whose reign was marked by perhaps as great a degree of political and religious tolerance as has been known before or since. It was an example by which, I honestly believe, generations of our public men and administrators have been influenced."

Time magazine put Akbar on its list of 25 best political leaders of all time in 2011, noting, "While Christians staggered haltingly toward achieving what we know as the Renaissance, he presided over a flourishing of the arts, sponsoring artisans, poets, engineers and philosophers. ... The ethos of pluralism and tolerance that defined his age underlines the values of the modern republic of India."

He died of dysentery at 63 and is buried in Agra.

Akbar's Keys

Titanic ruler of India.

Overcame: Constant attacks by enemies.

Lesson: Make partners of your opponents.

"Little wonder that he has passed into folklore as a just and benevolent monarch," wrote Ishtiaq Hussain Qureshi.

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