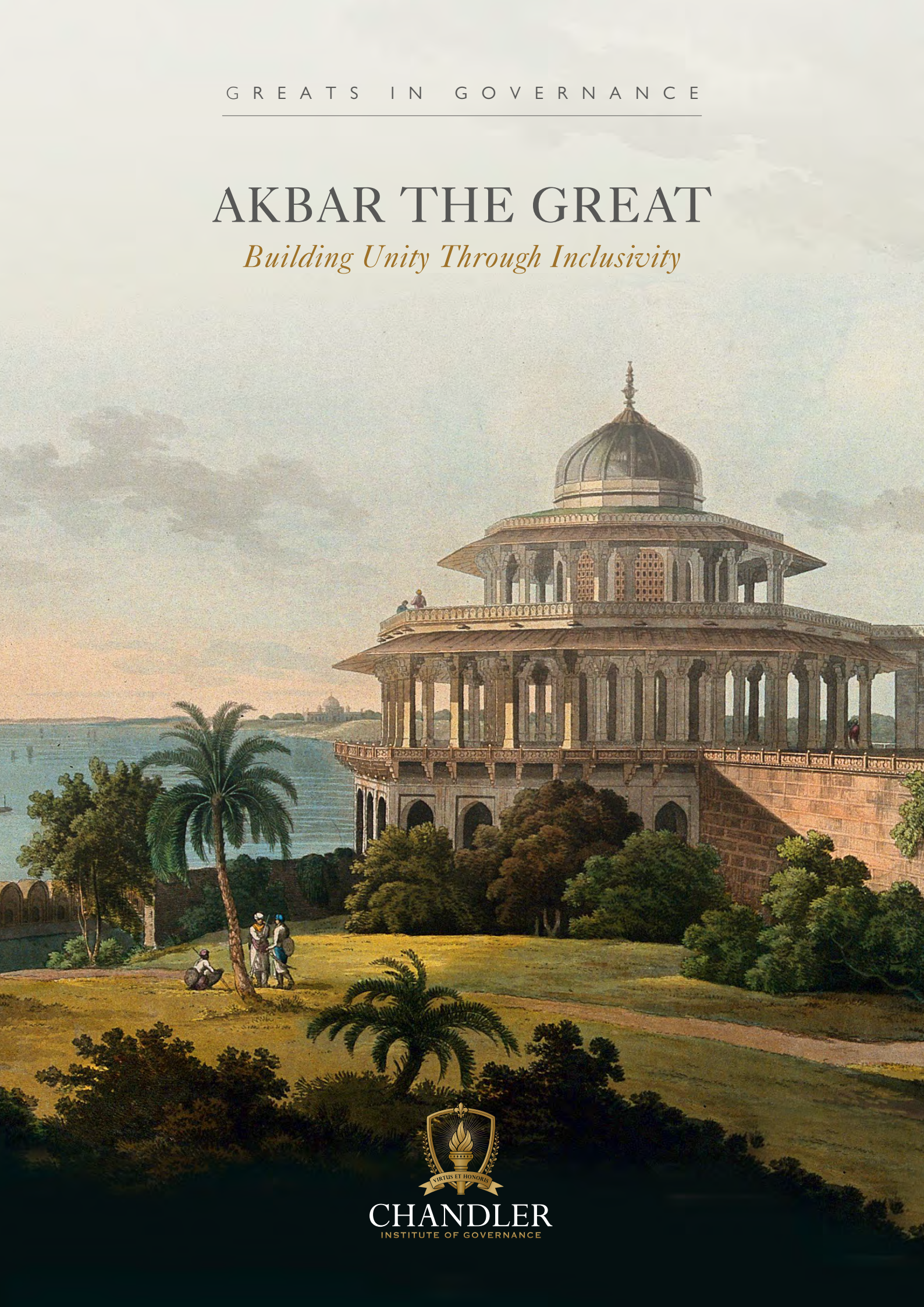
GREATS IN GOVERNANCE

AKBAR THE GREAT

Building Unity Through Inclusivity



VIRTUS ET HONORIS

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Akbar the Great

The title of 'Great' is reserved for history's most exceptional leaders.

When in 1556 Abu'l-Fath Jalal-ud-din Muhammad Akbar, a child of only 14, inherited the contested Mughal domains of the north Indian subcontinent, there was little to indicate he would go on to expand, unite and enrich such a divided realm.

Over the course of his 50-year reign, Akbar built a vast multicultural empire, marked by edicts that promoted inclusivity, unity and accountability.

Akbar's unprecedented fiscal, administrative and cultural reforms bore the hallmarks of a great and visionary leader.

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This illustration depicts an attempt on the life of the Mughal emperor Akbar (r.1556–1605) at Delhi in 1564. Akbar is shown in white on horseback clutching an arrow. His retainers pursue the would-be assassins and kill one of them.

Early Threats, Later Greatness

The year is 1564, the young 22-year old Emperor Akbar rides on horseback through Delhi, returning from a visit to a local shrine. Suddenly the air is pierced by screams of panic and horror. An arrow has struck the right shoulder of the Mughal Emperor - an attempt is being made to assassinate him. Guards scramble through the stalls and shops of the surrounding bazaar in their search for the culprit. In minutes, the man who shot the arrow from the balcony of a nearby madrasa is caught and executed before the wounded emperor. The culprit is the slave of a rebel noble in Akbar's court. Akbar is safe, but the failed assassination attempt underlines the perilous nature of the throne Akbar had inherited.

Eight years prior, Akbar's father Humayun had died in a fatal accident. The Mughals at that point only held a tenuous grip on power and Akbar's ascension could not be taken for granted. The fourteen-year-old Akbar was then in rural Kalanaur, hundreds of miles from the main centres of power, but was quickly proclaimed the third Mughal Emperor. For his coronation, a simple throne of brick and stone was hastily constructed to swiftly reinforce his authority. As the historian Abraham Eraly writes, 'Akbar's inheritance … was precarious, his kingdom as rough and temporary a construct as the throne on which he was crowned'.

The empire then stretched over an area covering parts of modern-day Afghanistan, Pakistan, North India and Bangladesh. The kingdom was situated on a complicated political chessboard of shifting allegiances and surrounded by rival rulers. The threats facing the teenage emperor came from both within and outside this empire. There were multiple challenges for the crown from close confidants and blood relatives. The empire itself was sharply divided by religion, most notably between Hindus and Muslims. These divisions, embedded in both law and culture, presented a persistent risk of sparking violent conflicts.

Despite all these threats, by the end of his first decade as emperor, Akbar had consolidated control of his 'precarious' kingdom and taken important steps to unify it by issuing edicts and abolishing religiously divisive taxes. This unity, in turn, helped strengthen and sustain Mughal expansion. By the end of his nearly 50-year reign, the Mughal empire had tripled in size to extend across most of the Indian subcontinent.

Plenty of monarchs have enlarged their kingdoms, yet few ruled them with the tolerance, fairness, and efficacy of Akbar.

Building a More Tolerant and Inclusive Society

For roughly 850 years before Akbar's reign, a *jizya* tax had been imposed on non-Muslim residents living under Muslim rule. Akbar, a Muslim, abolished that tax in 1564, the same year an attempt was made on his life. A year earlier he had abolished a tax that had been levied on Hindus whenever they made a pilgrimage to Mathura, a sacred site.

Taxation as a Tool for Unity

These would prove two of Akbar's most significant law-making achievements, and signalled Akbar understood he could rule a geographically vast, ethnically diverse empire – but not a divided one. He later abolished taxes which had disproportionately burdened the poor – including those on livestock, clothes, land, and fees paid to officials.

He even prohibited the enslavement of prisoners of war, ordering that they instead be treated as subjects who deserved protection. Such moves were not only principled, they were pragmatic, widening his base of support among those who had traditionally been overlooked or ignored.

Bridging Cultural Divides

Akbar turned his court into a hub of diverse cultures, welcoming scholars, poets, artists and philosophers. His personal library exceeded 24,000 volumes – he had books read to him regularly – and he encouraged extensive translations of works from European languages into Persian, the official court language, and also into Hindi, the language spoken by Hindus.

This passion for the arts and culture is remarkable given that by all accounts, Akbar was determinedly illiterate. As a youth, he refused tutelage, and today might have been considered dyslexic. He was barely able to sign his own name. 'The only sample we have of his handwriting is a signature on the margin of a manuscript book', writes Eraly, 'written laboriously, like a child'.

Though he personally had avoided formal education, Akbar sought to make it accessible for those who wanted it, regardless of their faith or status. He reformed education practices so that Hindu children could learn alongside Muslim children, and offered free schooling for those unable to pay. He also extended educational opportunities to women.

Education is a tool that could have encouraged separation but Akbar sought to use it to bring unity. 'Akbar showed his sympathies with Hindu culture by patronising the classical Indian arts, providing scope once more for painters, musicians, and dancers of the old tradition', writes S.M Ikram, 'Perhaps the most striking of his activities in this area is the creation of the post of *kavi rai*, or poet laureate, for Hindi poets'.

Akbar even left a visible legacy of cultural cohesion, in the form of the red sandstone Mughal capital he began to build – Fatehpur Sikri, near Delhi – which blends both Mughal and Hindu design and architecture.

Buland Darwaza gate is the entrance to Jama Masjid mosque in Fatehpur Sikri, Northern India.

Emperor Akbar in conversation with Jesuit missionaries.
Miniature from the Mughal School, India 16th Century.

Promoting Religious Tolerance

Akbar's stance on religion was tolerant and accepting. 'No man should be interfered with on account of his religion', Akbar is recorded saying, 'and anyone should be allowed to go over to any religion he pleased'. Such a belief was remarkable for a leader at that time and was in keeping with his principle of *sulh-i kull*, absolute peace for all.

In his court Akbar received Jesuits, Hindus, Muslim sects, Jains, Christians, and Zoroastrians. Although he never renounced Islam, he took such an active interest in religion that Jesuit missionaries once mistakenly believed Akbar was on the verge of converting.

Akbar had several wives, as was the custom at that time. One of them, Mariam-uz-Zamani, was a Hindu Rajput princess. He allowed Hindu women to practice their faith within the palace confines and he personally celebrated the Hindu festival of Diwali.

He even sought to dissolve the hardened divisions between religions by creating his own belief system: *Din-i Ilahi*, or Divine Faith. His goal, according to Eraly, 'was not to challenge or displace the existing creeds, but to establish a central point of convergence and concord in their midst, to which all could subscribe even while remaining true to their own faiths'. It was controversial – Akbar would be accused of apostasy – and *Din-i Ilahi* never gained the traction nor created the unity Akbar sought. But it revealed the lengths he was willing to go to try and bring people together, and his refusal to allow faith to divide his people.

Akbar, Jahangir and Shah Jahan with their Ministers.

Administrative Reform

Akbar personally oversaw the reformation of the central administration that would run his empire, and the financial system that would pay for it.

Improving Accountability and Oversight

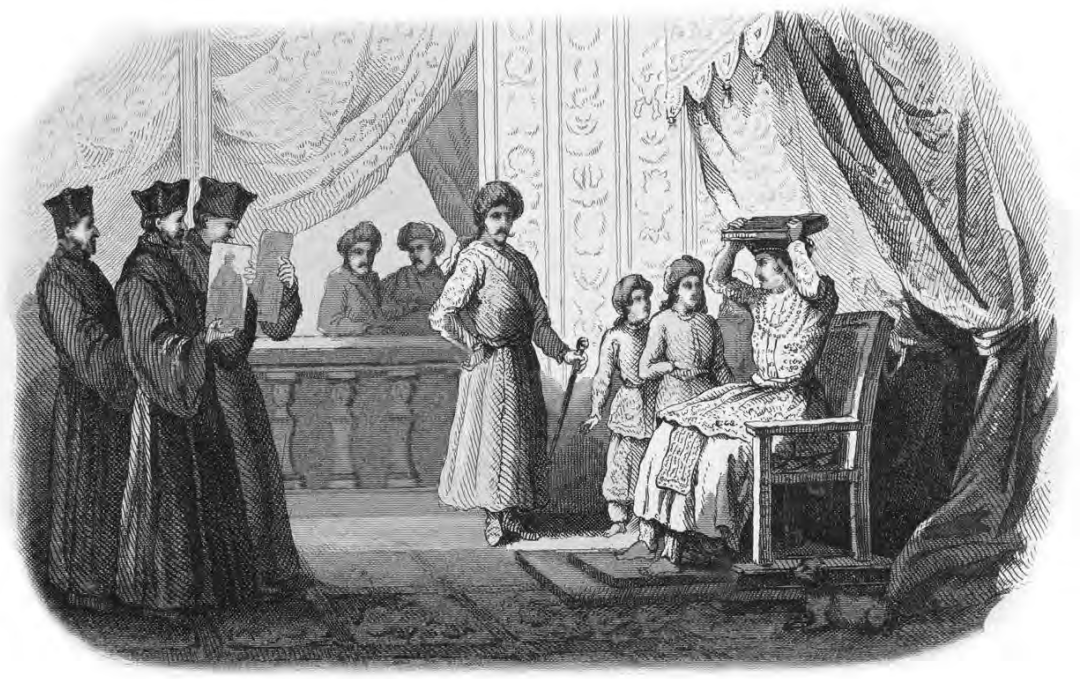
Akbar reorganised tax-collection processes and improved how land revenue was assessed, tracked, and recovered. This required structural changes: 'By the side of each provincial governor (*sūbadār*, later called nawab) was placed a civil administrator (*dīwān*, or divan) who supervised revenue collection, prepared accounts, and reported directly to the emperor. As a further safeguard against abuses, Akbar reorganised the existing network of newswriters, whose duty it was to send regular reports of important events to the emperor'.

Creating new positions within government – actually enlarging it – is seldom seen as a prescription for efficiency today. Yet Akbar's efforts created more accountability and transparency in areas where governors had previously ruled with near-unchecked power, and helped ensure that his edicts were actually implemented.

'The detailed measures which Akbar took to build up an efficient system of administration are … indicative of a great constructive genius', writes Ikram. They enabled him to extensively 'build up an efficient administrative machinery, centralise administration, and unify the country.'

Creating a More Inclusive Administration

Animating this drive for a more efficient administration was Akbar's secular approach to staffing it. Nativism and nepotism traditionally guided how rulers filled key posts and he would have been expected to appoint Muslim administrators. Akbar defied convention



Akbar the Great (1542-1605), third Mughal Emperor of India, receives a deputation of Jesuits. Date: 1576

by appointing a Hindu prince, Bhagwan Das, as his army commander. Two crucial posts – Revenue Minister and the Viceroy of Kabul and Bengal – were also held by Hindus. This was 'an indication not of his desire to show his tolerance but his freedom to choose able associates wherever they might be found'.

'One of the notable features of Akbar's government was the extent of Hindu, and particularly Rajput, participation,' Eraly writes. 'He treated the rajas as trusted comrades in arms and as esteemed members of the ruling elite … His government was as secular as any government could have been in that age'.

Importantly, this meritocracy also applied at less-senior levels. Hindus – and non-Muslims more generally – were appointed as tax collectors and financial officials. 'He insisted on maintaining a high level of administration, and for this purpose drew on talent from all available sources – the Mughals, the Uzbegs, the Rajputs, and other Hindus … the Turanis and the Persians' writes Ikram. 'By a judicious selection of personnel, their training in different fields, and by providing suitable opportunities to them, he was able to build up an efficient officers' cadre'.

A meritocratic administration was a more efficient one, which produced real benefits for the people whom it served – including the former chieftains, who had once opposed him, who now benefited from the devolved rewards of a growing Moghul imperial enterprise.

An Age of War and Peace

Not every aspect of Akbar's reign was worthy of emulation. He was on the warpath for the majority of his rule, as was the custom in an age of warrior kings. But if war was a necessity, slaughter was not; after one particularly hard-fought victory, Akbar ordered a massacre at Chitor estimated to have killed thousands who had taken refuge in the fort.

And Akbar's empire, despite its progress and his progressivism, was not fully at peace. One estimate counts at least 144 rebellions during his reign. Eraly places this in context: 'The rebellions … do not signify any weakness in Akbar, but are, paradoxically, an indication of the magnitude of his endeavour and the radical nature of much of what he did. The harder the bow is drawn, the more the wood complains'.

Centuries Have Passed; Similar Decisions Remain

The world in which Akbar led was so vastly different it can be tempting to conclude he has little to teach leaders today. Akbar had no legislative body through which he had to shepherd new laws or elections for which he had to campaign. But he did face choices that remain familiar to many in power today, like whether to inflame differences or to seek to heal them. Akbar's life and legacy reinforce a number of surprisingly relevant lessons, such as the power of aligning personal actions with public pronouncements, and the benefits of staffing an accountable administration with capable cadres.

Perhaps most fundamentally, his life reveals how core principles and values can inform everything from tax policy to personnel decisions, and that implementing those values often requires the courage to break with convention.

'Akbar's ambition was to gather the diverse peoples of the subcontinent under his benevolent wings, to enable them, through religious and cultural syncretism, to live in peace and amity. In this vision he was a thoroughly modern man, ahead of his time, and in some ways ahead even of our time.'

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