

A Study on the Evolution of Educational Development During the Reign of the Great Mughal Emperor Akbar (1556–1605)

Dr. Shamsul Kabir

Professor Islamic History and Culture, Jagannath University, Dhaka, Bangladesh

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to fill a gap in the field of historiography by an in-depth study of Emperor Akbar (1556–1605)'s educational reforms, which his political and religious policies have often overshadowed. The issue that impelled this study is that prior to the Akbarian period, Indian education was also scattered, snobbish, and religion-based; madrasahs focused more on memorisation of theology rather than practical sciences, thus preventing any innovation in an increasingly diverse empire. Accordingly, this article has set out to overview of the reign of Akbar, then present the education before Akbar, then walk through *Sulh-i-Kul* philosophy and rational enquiry, systematic organization of institutions, education curricula in the madrasahs, language policy, translation movement, vocational training, scholars and teachers, and libraries, and then evaluate the overall impacts of these policies. The use of historical-analytical methodology, based on primary sources like the A'in-i-Akbari, Akbarnama, and contemporary court chronicles as well as secondary works, has yielded the following findings: Akbar revolutionized education through state-sponsored madrasahs with a balanced curriculum favouring logic, sciences, and humanities; the use of Persian as an administrative lingua franca supported by translations of Sanskrit epics; vocational workshops (*karkhanas*); the patronage of scholars like Abul Fazl; and the establishment of vast libraries, all of which advocated inclusivity under *Sulh-i-Kul*. In consequence, among elites and administrators, literacy levels rose dramatically, a powerful cultural fusion gave rise to a unique Indo-Persian scholarly tradition, and rationalism continued to flourish in successive reigns, though the attention of the rulers did not extend much to the countryside. The findings of this study point towards the fact that Akbar's model of education, which was based on tolerance, vocational unity, and empirical inquiry, is still very much relevant to present-day issues of societal polarization in different polities like modern times.

INTRODUCTION

The Mughal Empire was at its peak during the reign of Jalaluddin Muhammad Akbar (1556–1605). It was a period of high military and administrative achievement, but also marked a time of great intellectual and cultural development (1556-1605). Akbar's rule of almost five decades (from the time he ascended at the age of 13 to his death in 1605) was a time of tremendous expansion, consolidation, and innovation. Akbar emerged from the shadows of Humayun's turbulent reign and managed to unite the vast subcontinent of Afghanistan to the Deccan, creating a syncretic empire that was a mix of Persian sophistication and indigenous traditions. His court at Fatehpur Sikri was a lively center of diplomacy, art, and scholarship; the Mansabdari system of government proved to be a very effective system, and the elimination of the jizya tax facilitated religious harmony. In this overview of Akbar's reign, it is clear that his pragmatic intent emphasized merit rather than birth-line and integration over division, thus paving the way for educational reforms that would traverse centuries. However, before the advent of Akbar, education in the Indian subcontinent was not uniform, and it was influenced by various educational systems introduced by the regional dynasties and the Islamic world after the demise of the Delhi Sultanate (1206-1526). Sunni-oriented institutions, such as those of the Khiljis and Tughlaqs, the madrasahs taught by rote the Quranic text, fiqh (jurisprudence), and Persian literature, often excluding non-Muslims and sciences of practice (Khan et al., 2011). The localised pathshalas of Hindus focused on the study of the Vedas, arithmetic, and astrology, while the Buddhist viharas had been declining since the 12th century. It was an elitist, religious-prejudiced, and uncentralized landscape where literacy was at an abysmal level

(estimated at less than 10%), and the education was limited to the ulema (clerics) of urban areas and aristocratic society. Such restrictions were the main obstacle to innovation in that curricula were dogmatic and irrelevant to administration or society.

Rational inquiry (*zahir-o-batin*), integral with his *Sulh-i-Kul* (universal peace or tolerance) doctrine, was encouraged, as were his rejection of blind orthodoxy and his beliefs in Jainism, Sufism, Christianity, and Zoroastrianism (Tien, 2018). Despite his own illiteracy, Akbar was extremely curious, and so he organized Ibadat Khana debates at the Fatehpur Sikri with scholars like Abul Fazl and Badayuni, challenging the superstition and the concept of empirical reasoning. This approach challenged the monopoly of knowledge held by the ulema and saw education as a means to moral uplift, social cohesion, and loyal devotion to the imperial crown. Akbar also put a strong focus on adab (etiquette and humanism) along with intellect, so that he could produce enlightened subjects who could hold his multicultural empire.

In the educational sphere, Akbar systematically established educational institutions, and madrasahs were upgraded into a state-sponsored system. The ones that he used to exist he imperialized, the one of Mahmud Gawan in Bidar, and the ones which he started in Agra, Delhi, and Lahore, with salaried administrators (*sadr-us-sudur*) to manage both the curricula and the admissions. Accessibility was guaranteed via subsidisation from land grants (*madad-i-ma'ash*), which provided for Hindus through Sanskrit colleges and even maktabas at the village level. This institutional structure made learning democratic, and there was an increase in students as education was compulsory for the children of mansabdars under Akbar. Under Akbar, the syllabus of the madrasah was revolutionized, and it was no longer based solely on Islamic dogma but included a harmonious mix of the rational sciences (*ma'qulat*) and religious sciences (*manqulat*), namely logic, mathematics, astronomy, and medicine (Geaves, 2012). Akbar adopted Euclid's geometry, Indian arithmetic (*Lilavati*), and Aristotelian logic from Persian sources such as Nasiruddin Tusi; he encouraged critical thinking rather than exegesis. To this, Akbar's forward-thinking language policy and translation programme created the A'in-i-Akbari and translated Sanskrit epics such as the Ramayana (as Razmnama) and Mahabharata into Persian, as well as Greek texts like *Almagest* by Ptolemy. Persian served as a vehicle for administration and learning, connecting people of different faiths and cultures and saving indigenous knowledge.

The emphasis was given to both vocational (*karkhanas*) and technical (special) education, as in the Buland Darwaza and Panch Mahal, where artisans were trained in metallurgy, textiles, and architecture. Advanced irrigation and agronomy were introduced through agricultural schools, which were related to the economic self-sufficiency of students. At the heart of these reforms were the scholars and teachers, and the likes of Abul Fazl, Faizi, and Tansen, who were patronized by Akbar. Teachers (*ustads*) became respected and earned pensions, and people from all over Asia flocked to their schools to learn from them, and the culture of mentorship was established. Libraries and intellectual infrastructure thrived with the imperial library at Fatehpur Sikri having more than 24,000 volumes of books, illuminated manuscripts, and observatories for astronomical research (Farooqi, 2022). These repositories have made history and science accessible to all, leading to a resurgence of historiography and science. Akbar's education policies had far-reaching effects: literacy spread, thus creating a cadre of bureaucrats who were loyal to the emperor; Indo-Persian literature emerged; and rationalism was embraced by his successors, such as Jahangir. However, difficulties remained, such as the lack of rural penetration and rhetoric from the orthodox ulema. The paper explores these aspects to shed light on the ways in which Akbar's vision made education accessible to the masses and an instrument of the progress of the empire, and provides contemporary multicultural societies with some lessons.

METHODOLOGY

The method used in this study is a qualitative study with historical analysis to see the development of madrasah education in the reign of Emperor Jalal-ud-Din Muhammad Akbar (1556-1605). It is a non-experimental and interpretative study which reconstructs the educational policies and practices in the socio-political and religious framework of the Mughal Empire, focusing on Akbar's syncretising policies such as *Sulh-i-Kul* (Peace to All). A historical-analytical method is used to analyze primary and secondary sources to find out the structure, curriculum, and administration of the madrasah, and its interaction in the context of the imperial religious tolerance.

The sources of data collection are analysis of manuscripts from period-relevant books, textbooks from Mughal madrasahs; systematic review of peer-reviewed articles, book chapters, and journals related to Mughal education, Akbar's policies, and medieval Islamic pedagogy; and structured data collection protocols that are applied to archival examinations. The analysis is based on the thematic historical criticism and content analysis involving the source criticism to verify authenticity, provenance, and bias, and the triangulation between sources for consistency. There are ethical issues related to the responsible use of material, including using proper citations and not using anachronisms. There are drawbacks, such as the fact that the original curricula are not complete, that they are derived from translated Persian/Arabic texts, and that archaeological access is not granted to them, but it is a nuanced historical narrative.

An overview of Emperor Akbar's Reign

Akbar, a leader of the greatest influence in India, was born Jalal-ud-Din Muhammad Akbar on Oct. 15, 1542, in the Rajput stronghold of Amarkot (now in Sindh) (Banerji, 1938). Mughal emperor Humayun's son Akbar, born to Hamida Banu Begum, lived in exile and turmoil after his father's defeats by Sher Shah Suri in 1539 and 1540. During Humayun's travels, Akbar grew up in Kabul, where he was taught to hunt, fight, and run by uncles like Kamran and Askari Mirza. Though he never learned to read or write, he acquired knowledge by reading at night. The ruler of Ghazni, he, upon becoming the ruler of the place at the age of 9, married his cousin Ruqaiya Sultan Begum, who, after the death of her father Hindal Mirza in 1551, inherited the money and army (Erskine, 1854). Humayun's victorious return to Delhi in 1555, supported by Persian assistance, was not to last long, and he died, handing over the throne to his 13-year-old son, Akbar. On February 14, 1556, Akbar was enthroned as "King of Kings" (*Shahanshah*) in Kalanaur, Punjab, under the able guidance of Bairam Khan in the course of war to recover the throne from the successors of Sher Shah, such as Sikandar Shah Suri. The military achievements of Bairam Khan paved the way for the expansion of Mughal rule in northern India under Akbar's reign of 49 years from 1556 to 1605 (Ramesh, 2024).

Akbar the Great was the ruler of the Mughals who, through conquest, diplomacy, and innovation, built up the Mughal Empire as a great unified state that stretched across much of the Indian subcontinent (Syed, 2011). He streamlined administration, consolidated his position through intermarriage with the Rajput rulers, and introduced a policy of religious tolerance, including the elimination of the jizya tax imposed on non-Muslims and the commissioning of Hindus to high civil and military offices (Prasad, 2021). These policies helped to establish peace in a diverse land, where Persian, Indian, and Islamic influences all merged to create a golden age of cultural and economic prosperity, making him one of India's greatest emperors.

The military campaigns of Akbar were significant in consolidating Mughal rule in the Indian subcontinent and turning a fragile kingdom into a vast empire through his relentless conquests, innovative strategies, and administrative vision (Kulke, 2004). Early in his reign, Akbar regained Delhi and Agra in 1556 by defeating the Hindu king Hemu at the Second Battle of Panipat, a battle which restored Mughal rule after Humayun's death and several years of instability (Jamsari et al., 2017). He then went on to conquer important regions, one by one: Malwa in 1561 (through the victory of his general Adham Khan over Baz Bahadur); Gujarat in 1572-1573, where Akbar personally led a lightning campaign to secure vital maritime trade routes; Bengal in 1574-1576, defeating the Afghan ruler Daud Khan Karrani; and large tracts of Rajput territory between 1562 and 1576, including the crucial Siege of Chittor in 1568 and through marriage with Rajput princess Harka Bai to Amber. Kashmir and Kabul were annexed in the 1580s for northern security, Sindh and Baluchistan in 1595, and the Deccan sultanates, such as Ahmadnagar, Khandesh, and Berar, between 1596 and 1601, with sieges often involving people like Chand Bibi. These campaigns strengthened the empire, extending its frontiers from Kabul to the Godavari River and illustrated Akbar's genius in the field by combining war elephants, matchlock guns bought from the Ottomans and Portuguese allies, better artillery, and strong fortifications to overpower a variety of enemies (Schimmel, 2004).

In addition to his triumphs on the battlefield, Akbar reorganized the military system with the introduction of the mansabdari system around 1571, which established a system of hierarchical ranks among nobles (mansabdars), based on their zat (personal status) and sawar (cavalry maintenance responsibilities), creating a loyal and expandable army directly answerable to the emperor (Forogh & Samimi, 2021). This was a merit-based system

that supplanted the tribal allegiance with the service of the emperor and was linked with jagirs (land revenue) and helped to build discipline in the civil and military forces. But Akbar's vizier Abul Fazl claimed that Indian artillery was matched only by that of Turkey: the Mughals became known as a "gunpowder empire" for using gunpowder technology alongside the traditional Indian weapons of elephants and elephant corps (Aggarwal, 2020). The development of artillery and fortifications, many of which were drawn from European Jesuit missionaries and Italian specialists, greatly increased the power of the Mughals, who were able to win sieges and battles against larger but less capable opponents. These changes were done by his regents and generals during campaigns, in order to form a regular army, which was able to triple the empire and establish its long-continued stability.

Akbar's reign also saw an economic and cultural revolution, with Akbar's conquests leading to commercial expansion, Gujarat's ports, and Bengal's riches tripling the wealth of the empire and patronising Indo-Persian arts. Poets, architects, and scholars were attracted to courts in Delhi, Agra, and Fatehpur Sikri, and Mughal painting, architecture (as in Buland Darwaza, Fatehpur Sikri), and literature were all a fusion of Timurid-Persian and Indian elements (Zia-ud-Din et al., 2015). In 1582, Akbar, who had become disillusioned with the divisiveness of orthodox Islam, introduced Din-i Ilahi, a new religion that had elements of Islam, Hinduism, Zoroastrianism, Christianity and Jainism, where principles of monotheism and ethical virtues such as piety and kindness were instilled, while the vices of slander or pride were shunned, and there were no priests or scriptures (Kutlutürk, 2016). It was propagated through the Ibadat Khana debates at Fatehpur Sikri and sought to bring together religious harmony in his pluralistic domain, but had only some 19 highborn adherents, and did not endure beyond his death. Akbar's policies included the abolition of the jizya tax, the appointment of non-Muslims to high posts, and the winning of Rajput alliances, which brought peace and unity. He was succeeded by his son, Prince Salim, who ruled as Jahangir, and who inherited a prosperous, tolerant empire at its zenith in 1605 (Prasad, 2021).

The Educational Development Before Akbar's Reign

Before Emperor Akbar (pre-1556), education in the Indian subcontinent, including the early Islamic education under the Delhi Sultanate (1206–1526), was a decentralized, yet vibrant system of education influenced by ancient traditions and regional kingdoms (Momen & Hossain, 2022). The education system during the Sultanate period in the Indian subcontinent was largely established keeping in mind the goals and objectives of the Islamic education system (Momen, 2024). It is an ancient tradition dating back to the Vedic and Buddhist period, which emphasized oral teaching, memory work, and spiritual learning in the Pathshalas (Hindu schools under gurus) and Viharas (Buddhist monasteries), where Sanskrit texts such as the Vedas, Upanishads, grammar, astronomy, and mathematics were learnt by heart (Momen, 2023). Hindu education was centred in the four varna categories, Brahmins being taught scripture and Kshatriyas being taught warfare and ethics, and girls being taught at home in arts and home skills, but formal schooling was uncommon for girls. In the southern states, such as Vijayanagara (1336–1646), some temple-based mathas and agraharas supported advanced study in literature, logic (nyaya), and medicine (Ayurveda), and produced scholars like Sayana who commented on the Rigveda. Jain and Buddhist centres such as Nalanda (till its destruction in the 12th century) and Odantapuri provided education in several languages, intermingling philosophy, logic, and the sciences both for monks and lay people (Roy, 2018).

This topography was changed by the introduction of Islam through Turkic and Afghan rulers, but it did not completely replace indigenous systems. Under the Delhi Sultanate, the maktabas (primary schools connected to mosques) educated young Muslim boys in Quran recitations, Arabic and Persian grammar, basic arithmetic, and calligraphy, sometimes without taking any fee from the students with the help of the community. The madrasahs were patronised by the sultans such as Firoz Shah Tughlaq (r. 1351-1388). The theological centres that appeared in the period (1351–1388), namely in Delhi, Jaunpur, and Bidar, were based on the Nizamiyya system of Abbasid Baghdad, teaching theology (fiqh), Hadith, logic, and natural sciences. Firuz Shah constructed more than 30 madrasahs and Hospitals along with libraries, and the regional Deccan sultanates, such as the Bahmani (1347-1527), developed astronomy and medicine in Persian (Momen et al., 2024). Tol schools in Bengal and pathshalas in Rajasthan continued to be run by the Hindu and Jain communities for teaching regional languages, counting (*lilavati*), and other crafts such as accounting for traders. But education was still sectarian (with Muslim schools

hardly admitting non-Muslim students), still rural, and still kept at a low level, with literacy rates not exceeding 10-15%, even in the face of caste, gender, and the lack of peace caused by war.

This pre-Akbar period provided a disjointed foundation – an excellent tradition of holistic and practical knowledge in the Hindu system, lacking in state standardization, and a tradition of religious orthodoxy in the Sultanate madrasahs, where secular innovation was discouraged, and so access to them was limited. Thousands of such institutions flourished, with the support of the economic patronage of the temples, waqfs (endowments), and rulers, and by 1500, the number of madrasas was estimated to be 1,000, but the curricula were rigid, with little interest in the empirical sciences or even interfaith dialogue. Delhi's madrasahs were on a par with Cairo's, as travelers such as Ibn Battuta commented, but there was no print and no exams, which limited scalability. Babur's short reign (1526-1530) and Humayun's unsteadiness (1530-1556) meant that there were no systematic reforms; instead, the Persian courtly learning was provided, though resources were channeled to survival, and faced with Afghan rivals such as Sher Shah Suri (Ojha, 1950).

It was a patchwork of which Akbar was the inheritor: his predecessors did not succeed in uniting it, nor in extending it in any appreciable way. Pre-Mughal education flourished in small pockets and was exceptionally fractured and divided by the feudal system and religion—Vijayanagara had 2000 plus schools to train administrators and Gujarat had mathas for commercial maths (Farooq & Hussain, 2017). This paved the way for Akbar's innovations, such as secular madrasahs with rational sciences, geometry, medicine, inclusive policies towards Indians and state-funded colleges, which meant a move away from just memorizing theology. In all, pre-Akbar education manifested India's pluralism, but it also highlighted the need for centralization to tap its potential to a diverse India (Momen & Hossain, 2022).

Akbar's Educational Philosophy: *Sulh-i-Kul* and Rational Inquiry

Akbar's educational philosophy is inextricably bound with his political and religious philosophy, in particular the policy of *Sulh-i-Kul* (universal peace or reconciliation) (Shohibatussholihah & Barizi, 2022). This would form a part of his guiding principle in governance, where he was a proponent of tolerance, dialogue, and respect among all religious groups. Akbar treated all his subjects equally and established educational institutions for Muslims as well as Hindus in his empire.

The experiences of Akbar in the 'Ibadat Khana (House of Worship), which he built at Fatehpur Sikri in 1575, very much influenced this philosophical attitude (Ali, 2012). The 'Ibadat Khana was a place where Muslim jurists and theologians could debate theology; it soon became apparent how far the Muslim orthodoxy was split. During the debates, Akbar observed that among the Muslim scholars, there were differences not only in matters of law but even in matters of faith. There, he was disillusioned with these sectarian differences and took a bold step — he invited Hindu, Christian, Parsi, Jain, and even atheist scholars to join the deliberations (Howard, 2021). The discussions went on for several years, and left a deep impact on Akbar's views on knowledge, truth, and education, particularly, which culminated in the conclusion that no single tradition could have a monopoly on wisdom.

Systematic Organization of Educational Institutions

Expansion and Patronage

Akbar's most tangible contribution to education was the systematic organization of education on a scale unparalleled before. The Ain-i-Akbari, written by his renowned court historian Abu'l-Fazl, records Akbar's creation of many schools and colleges in his vast empire (Anweiler et al., 2026). These schools were not restricted to imperial capitals, but were founded in provincial centres and thus education became more accessible than ever before. Under Akbar, Agra was a special hub of Islamic culture and learning. A madrasah had been established there since the days of Sikandar Lodhi, but madrasahs, culture, and fine arts were the main focus of Akbar's plans in this city. In the same way, his short-lived yet magnificent capital of Fatehpur Sikri was home to several residential madrasahs in which students of diverse backgrounds studied in the royal patronage (Davar, 1978).

Funding and Administration

Akbar's funding for madrasah education was from various sources. The state made significant grants of money and land, especially in the form of royal grants (*madad-i-ma'ash*) and jagirs, which were allotted to institutions as well as individual scholars. The contribution of the rich and the religious was also made by means of endowments, as it is the tradition of Islam to support education by giving charity (Shrivant & Ganpatrao, 2013). This form of multi-layered funding also provided relative stability for educational institutions and provided significant local autonomy. Importantly, Akbar created an administrative department for the administration of state-run educational institutions, which was unprecedented at that time (Smith, 1917). This kind of bureaucratic system contributed to the proper distribution of funds and also helped to ensure the institutions had a certain standard.

The Development of the Curriculum of the Madrasah

Secular and Rational Sciences are introduced

Previously, all the educational activities in the madrasahs were concerned with religious education, and the educational system that had been established since the time of the Prophet Muhammad (SAWS) was largely followed (Momen et al., 2025), but Akbar made a radical and comprehensive change in the madrasah curriculum to introduce the *'ulum al-aqliyya* (rational or secular sciences) (Momen, 2023). This growth was motivated by his belief that education should meet needs and potentialities, rather than indoctrination.

Akbar's far-reaching educational revolution saw the traditional madrasah curriculum, which hitherto focused exclusively on religious orthodoxy (Quran recitation, Islamic jurisprudence, *fiqh*, hadith studies, and Persian grammar), replaced by a broader secular one that trained students for the practical realities of governing a large empire of diverse peoples. Before Akbar, under the Delhi Sultanate, the madrasahs taught their students to memorize a large number of religious texts, and other subjects such as Arabic grammar and logic were used mainly to produce ulema (religious scholars) loyal to the Sunni orthodoxy, and who often neglected the empirical sciences or other knowledge systems. Around the 1570s-1580s, Akbar, disaffirming the previous rigid pattern, was influenced by rationalist Persian thinkers and by the works of Jesuit missionaries and Hindu scholars at his House of Worship (Ibadat Khana) in Fatehpur Sikri; to this end he issued a revolutionary syllabus that included mathematics (including arithmetic for everyday use, Euclidean geometry for land measurement and architecture, and algebra drawn from Al-Khwarizmi's works), astronomy (based on the Ptolemaic system, which had been refined by Islamic thinkers such as Al-Biruni and Nasir al-Din al-Tusi, and essential for a precise calendar and for navigation), and medicine (mixed with Galenic humoral theory from Greco-Arabic medical works such as Avicenna's *Canon* and indigenous ayurvedic use of herbal remedies and surgery as described by court physician Hakim Ali Gilani) (Momen & Hossain, 2022). This was also a diversification in geography, where the administrators were taught how to map the trade routes, the boundaries of the provinces, etc., with the help of instruments such as the astrolabe; in history, the chronicles of preceding rulers, such as the Baburnama, were taught to impart lessons in governance and statecraft; in agriculture, a subject which focused on crop rotation, irrigation techniques and soil classification, to strengthen the empire's backbone in agrarian revenue, and in accountancy, which was based on the text *Lilavati*. Akbar's integration of these subjects into the imperial madrasahs at Agra, Delhi, and Fatehpur Sikri led to the creation of polymath bureaucrats like Abul Fazl, the author of *Akbarnama*, and to the creation of an intellectual environment in which knowledge was used to unite rather than divide (Farooqi, 2022).

What is distinctive of Akbar's educational philosophy was the unprecedented student-centeredness of his curriculum, which was entirely different from the medieval curricula that were set by religious endowment (*waqf*) and clerical gatekeepers (*muftis*) and were prescriptive in nature. In earlier times, under such rulers as Firoz Shah Tughlaq, who had constructed dozens of madrasahs but had enforced orthodox *fiqh*, there was little freedom for learners: the movement was unidirectional, from *maktab* to the highest level of the theological knowledge, and deviation from it meant social ostracism and loss of patronage (Jahan & Obaydullah, 2019). Akbar's model was based on his own experience of being illiterate but listening to debates with avidity, and

allowed young nobles (often sons of mansabdars) and commoner talents to specialise – perhaps for astronomical purposes in calibrating artillery for campaigns, for accountancy in the management of jagirs, or for medicine for the royal service – while core ethics, as part of Din-i Ilahi, taught tolerance and inquiry (Sadiq, 2025). It was a student-centric model, as described by Abul Fazl's *Ain-i-Akbari* and as practised, for instance, in designing fortifications such as Allahabad Fort, in agricultural studies that boosted the empire's GDP by three times by increasing agricultural yields, and in studying history, to sustain the multicultural narratives, including the Rajput epics. This kind of reform opened up opportunities to a caste- and faith-divided society, drawing in Hindu scholars who were knowledgeable in Sanskrit Jyotisha (astronomy) and Jain mathematicians, and paved the way for the golden age of learning of Mughal India, which in turn impacted the ateliers of Jahangir's successor. In the end, Akbar's madrasahs channeled administrators who were above religion, who practiced his *Sulh-i-Kul* (universal peace) and guaranteed administrative strength despite the conquests from Gujarat to Bengal.

Mir Fathullah Shirazi: The Curriculum Change Maker

Mir Fathullah Shirazi was a brilliant Persian scholar, scientist, and engineer who was a key figure in Akbar's educational reforms. The revision of the madrasah syllabus under Akbar's reign was one of the most important works done by Shirazi, which is important to highlight (Tariq et al., 2024). Shirazi was a scholar of vast interests, and he was familiar with philosophy, medicine, mathematics, astronomy, and mechanics. He is known to have brought a more systematic and rational system to the education of madrasahs, where he introduced the rational sciences more extensively in the religious curriculum (Anjum, 2018). The influence of Shirazi is a case in point of Akbar's readiness to draw wisdom from all sources and his desire for intellectual excellence. In Shirazi's hands, the madrasah education was made more intense, more complete, and more in tune with the needs of imperial administration (Khan, 2015).

Language Policy and Translation Movement

The introduction of Persian as a court language by Akbar had far-reaching consequences for education. Persian was no longer only a language for administration, but also a language for intellectual interaction, and was learnt by Muslims and Hindus aspiring to employment in the imperial bureaucracy. This linguistic policy helped to create a common cultural and intellectual space among different religious groups (Szyliowicz et al., 2026). But more important was the ambitious translation movement of Akbar. He commissioned the translation of many Hindu classics and philosophical works from Sanskrit to Persian. The books that were translated were the Mahabharata (popularly known as the *Rāmāyana* or book of war), Ramayana, Atharva Veda, and Yoga Vasishta. Also, Greek and Arabic scientific and philosophical texts were translated into Persian (Szyliowicz et al., 2026). The works of translation were done at the imperial cost, and the scholars, both Muslim and Hindu, worked together. This process of translation was put into action for several reasons. It made Indian philosophical and literary traditions accessible to Persian-speaking Muslims, promoting understanding between the two. It also expanded Islamic intellectual traditions by adding non-Islamic sources of wisdom. Important, Akbar allowed Hindu students seeking education at madrasahs to learn Sanskrit and the Upanishads as well, thus avoiding forced assimilation (Khan, 1983).

Vocational and Technical Education

Akbar's educational policy was not limited to the formal system of madrasah education but also included vocational and technical education. He realised that education should be for productivity in society, not only for religious and administrative purposes (Al Hasani, 2022). Karkhanahs (manufacturing centres/workshops) provided education through apprenticeship for young people to acquire craft and trade skills. The luxurious textiles, metalwork, jewelry, and other products, for which the Mughal Empire was renowned, were produced in these workshops (Momen & Hossain, 2022). At the same time, they were learning centres for the passing on of skills from the master to the apprentice. If the administrative career was opted, training in specific skills was provided along with madrasah education: assessment of revenue, record-keeping, diplomatic correspondence, and organization of military. Akbar's focus on practical education was a reflection of his knowledge that he needed competent administrators and skilled artisans to run his empire, and not just theologians (Sabir, 2025).

Primary Education: The Maktab System

The maktab system was also taken up by Akbar's educational reforms as a part of primary education, while madrasahs were the institution of higher education. The maktab was an elementary school, usually located in a mosque, where basic education was first started (Majid, 2023). Usually, people are entered at the age of about four, with a formal ceremony of induction. The maktab curriculum was made up of the basic skills: reading, recitation, writing, and basic arithmetic. Calligraphy was a very appreciated skill in Persianate culture, and students spent a lot of time developing this art (Siddiqui & Khan, 2018). Usually, the age of Quranic study was seven years, so it was implemented as a basic study.

The special feature of Akbar's primary education was that it was relatively accessible. In the past, Muslim education had laid great stress on the provision of knowledge to all Muslims irrespective of their status; but Akbar's policies went a step further to ensure that the poor too could be educated (Lawson et al., 2026). The major source of finance for maktab was mosque collections, zakat (obligatory alms), and other contributions, which can be called a system of charitable primary education. Akbar's policy on education was one of the most outstanding regarding the Hindu students. Traditionally, Hindu children learned in *pathshalas* (Hindu elementary schools) and *tols* (centers of Sanskrit learning); however, Akbar's madrasahs were open to Hindu students who wanted to learn (Imamuddin, 1982). Such openness was for both ideological and practical reasons. In terms of ideology, it was an expression of Akbar's principle of *Sulh-i-Kul* and his conviction that education was the key to bringing his subjects together. On the practical side, the fact that Persian was a condition of securing administrative posts brought the Hindu pupils of the madrasahs into the imperial service. The outcome was an intercultural system of education where Hindu and Muslim students' education was conducted together. Such contact led to an understanding of each other's cultures and an intellectual class of administrators who had become comfortable with more than one cultural and intellectual tradition. It also helped in the growth of a new language, Urdu, a mixed language with elements of both Hindi, Persian, and Arabic, that came from this melting pot of language and culture (Momen & Hossain, 2022).

The Role of scholars and teachers

Akbar knew that the quality of educational institutions is dependent upon the scholars who work in them. So, he gave generous grants to bring famous scholars to instruct in imperial madrasahs. Teachers and scholars were well respected and paid well (Rehman et al., 2025).

The imperial court itself served as a place of intellectual training, and Akbar gathered a stunning array of intellectuals around him, known as the '*navaratna*' – the nine jewels. This group comprised artists, administrators, but also scholars like the historian and political philosopher Abu'l-Fazl, poet and translator Faizi, and financial expert Raja Todar Mal. Not only did these court intellectuals write their own works, but they also oversaw translation projects and had an impact on educational policy (Ahmad et al., 2024). In most cases, the teacher and the student had a cordial and personal relationship, similar to the traditional relationship between the teacher and the student in Indian education, as the guru-shishya relationship (Kumar, 2021). Education did not take an impersonal, bureaucratic form, but rather close mentorship. Post-madrasah training may be done through the services of a learned teacher who could offer training in a specialized area.

Libraries and Intellectual Infrastructure

Akbar's policy of patronage of education included the establishment of libraries, which became very important intellectual resources for education in madrasahs. These libraries had manuscripts in several languages (Persian, Arabic, Sanskrit, and Turkish), which were accessible to scholars and advanced students (Dasgupta, 1975). The imperial library was said to be very large, comprising thousands of manuscripts. It is believed that Akbar himself was a collector of books and producer of manuscripts (Sakhani, 2022). The libraries set up at the big madrasahs gave students opportunities to do their own research, which went beyond the prescribed curriculum and established a culture of learning beyond mere rote memorization.

The Limits of Reform: Tensions with Orthodoxy

Though Akbar's educational reforms were a success, they were not accepted by everyone. The new secular subjects and the involvement of non-Muslims in educational debates were attacked by traditionalist Muslim theologians such as the court historian, 'Abd al-Qadir Bada'uni, whose views on Akbar's policies were highly negative (Khan, 1967). The *mahzar* (declaration) of 1579, by which the eminent Muslim theologians acknowledged Akbar as Imam-i-'Adil (Just Leader) and granted him the authority to interpret Islamic law in the public interest, was controversial (Buckler, 1924). The increased curriculum of the madrasahs was seen by some orthodox Muslims as a dilution of Islamic education. Some saw Hindu philosophical literature and the promotion of interfaith dialogue as threatening to Islamic identity. But these tensions were never completely deadened during Akbar's reign, although usually his rule and the functioning of his administration proved to be more important (Bowen et al., 2026). It should also be noted that Akbar's policies on the education of the Hindus were very tolerant, but not all his successors were as tolerant. In fact, Akbar's educational revolution was contingent upon the fact that, while Akbar was open towards learning, Aurangzeb later on destroyed the Hindu schools.

The Impact of Akbar's Policy of Education

The educational system that Akbar built did not come to an end after Akbar's demise in 1605. Most of his successors, especially Jahangir and Shah Jahan, kept his policies, the general course of study, and the attitude of inclusion. The idea of "Madrasah" that emerged in the reign of Akbar, the synthesis of religious studies with rational ones, the inclusion of various intellectual systems, and the linkage with state service, persisted in India for centuries (Ipfling et al., 2026). But it also had some flaws, which increased over time. Education was not a planned-out central activity but rather a growth that was voluntary and dependent on charitable endowment and haphazard state assistance, and in this way, it could easily be left to fall by the wayside during unfavorable political attitudes (Ipfling et al., 2026). By the eighteenth century, the Mughal Empire had declined, and many of the madrasahs were no longer supported, and the curriculum had become very unchanging. Furthermore, it has been suggested by some later critics that even in Akbar's lifetime, the stress upon service to the state might have precluded true intellectual freedom. As one historian said, the bees that swarmed to the cultural centres might in some instances have been "drones" looking for patrons, not scholars for wisdom (Sanzid, 2025). However, Akbar's contribution to education is outstanding. He established an educational system that in some ways was quite modern—both wide-ranging and fairly open in admissions, linked to practical skills and open to intellectual conversations between religion and culture.

CONCLUSION

Jalal-ud-Din Muhammad Akbar's reign is a pinnacle in the history of Islamic education in South Asia in terms of the development of madrasah education. Akbar converted the Madrasah into a broad-based institution of learning for both Muslim and Hindu students through systematic state patronage, curriculum reform, translation projects, and inclusive policies. There are many reasons why Akbar was successful. In his policy of *Sulh-i-Kul* lies the ideological basis of educational inclusivity. He was convinced from his experiences in the 'Ibadat Khana about the importance of interfaith dialogue and rational enquiry. He was willing to support scholars such as Mir Fathullah Shirazi and introduce expertise in curricular reform. His pragmatic approach guaranteed that education was useful to people and to the state.

However, perhaps Akbar's most significant contribution to the education system was his proof that religious and secular knowledge did not have to be at odds; that Muslims and Hindus could learn together without losing their identity to one another; and that learning could be both useful and elevating, traditional and innovative. The lessons of these are as relevant today as they were then, and as South Asian teachers and others contemplate the issue of curriculum, inclusivity, and the role of education in pluralistic societies. The system of Madrasahs created under Akbar did not remain intact in modern times. Colonialism, political turmoil, and lack of internal development all had their effects. Yet, the ideal that inspired Akbar's educational reform, that education is a connecting force between communities, a means to a practical end, and a way to wisdom, is a lasting contribution to the philosophy of education. After the Sultanate and the Mughal education system in the Indian subcontinent, under British imperialism, Muslims developed independent education systems such as the Qawmi Madrasah

education system, and the Alia madrasah education system under British colonial rule (Momen et al., 2023; Momen, 2025; Momen & Islam, 2025; Momen et al., 2025), which are still important in the Islamic education of Muslims in the Indian subcontinent.

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