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CONTENTS

S.NO.	TITLE	AUTHOR	PAGE NO.
1	CONTRIBUTION OF BRAJBHASHA POETS TO THE MUGHAL COURT	Dr. Sanskriti Ramzan	5
2	THE CONSTITUTIONAL MOVEMENT OF IRAN AND ITS IMPACT ON PERSIAN POETRY	Dr. Jitul Ali	15
3	THE RAMAYANA OF HAMIDA BANU BEGUM, QUEEN MOTHER OF MUGHAL INDIA	Dr. Anjali Gulia	20
4	WAS AKBAR LITERATE OR ILLITERATE: A CASE STUDY	Dr. Seema Jangir	23
5	A CONTEXTUAL APPRECIATION OF AVICENNA'S WORKS	Dr. Yaseen Kambay	31
6	HUMANISM AS DEPICTED BY MAULANA RUMI IN HIS MYSTIC POETRY	Dr. Bilqees Bashir	34
7	MULLA MOHSIN FANI AND HIS CONTRIBUTION TO PERSIAN LITERATURE	Dr. Shazia Bano	38
8	IQBAL'S CONCEPT OF SELF: A PHILOSOPHICAL ANALYSIS	Dr. Mohd Rashid	45
9	A STUDY ON ART AND ARCHITECTURE OF PALLAVAS IN MAHABALIPURAM WITH REFERENCE TO SHORE TEMPLE	Dr. S. Prabakaran	47
10	FROM ALIAH MADRASAH TO ALIAH UNIVERSITY: A JOURNEY	Afifur Rahman Mollah	53
11	FOLK ARTS IN THE PANCHAL REGION: A STUDY	Saroj Kumari	62
12	WHO WERE KARMATIANS?	Saurabh Misra	70
13	PROMINENT MUSLIM WOMEN OF COLONIAL INDIA: BEGUM SULTAN JAHAN (1858-1930)	Ishrat Mushtaq / Sartaj Hafiz	74
14	STATUS OF WOMEN IN EIGHTEEN CENTURY BENGAL UNDER THE NAWAB REIGN	Mehbuba Khatun	78
15	SHAH NAWAZ KHAN: A LOST SOILDIER OF A FORGOTTEN ARMY	Anuradha Pal	87
16	SUFI SAINTS MONARCHY: A STUDY OF THE POLITICAL ROLE OF "WARRIOR" AND	Tania Begum	93

	“INTELLECTUAL” SAINTS IN MEDIEVAL ASSAM		
117	DEVELOPMENT OF INDO- PERSIAN HISTORIOGRAPHY DURING THE SULTANATE ERA: AN IN-DEPTH STUDY	Shakir Laskar	100
18	PILLARS OF ASHOKA: DOCUMENTARY OF MAURYA DYNASTY	Totan Sheikh	115
19	FAWAID UL FUWAD: AN ANALYTICAL STUDY	Yasmin Firdosh	121
20	KARL MARX AND MICHEL FOUCAULT: THE DEBATE FOR HISTORIOGRAPHY BETWEEN MARXISM AND POST MODERNISM	Harjot Singh / Manpreet Kaur	125

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WAS AKBAR LITERATE OR ILLITERATE: A CASE STUDY**Abstract**

Some historians state that Akbar was illiterate but a few again assert that he was literate and well - versed in various arts as well as sciences. On the strong basis of much information and evidence, a few years ago, it has been proven that he was lettered and educated. It cannot be possible for Akbar with superhuman memory and an impressive mind that he did not even have knowledge of the alphabets and numbers. He himself was conscious of education and paid great attention to the sound education of his sons and grandsons. He was forever ready to encourage different arts and learned by imparting those rewards and stipends. A completely uneducated and illiterate person can never be in a position to feel joy and happiness in the company of scholars, appreciate the conversation on enlightening subjects and evaluate the merits and demerits of other's poetic compositions. The many dismissals of private tutors by Father Humayun and Guardian Bairam Khan both indicate fatherly solicitude for Akbar's training and learning. Many useful and necessary educational reforms, establishment of several *maktabs* and *madrasas*, huge library and its proper management, administrative, economic, social - cultural reforms, efforts for women 's education, deep devotion and love for scholars, Hindu - Muslim coordination and political integration of the country are absolutely impossible by a completely illiterate ignorant personality. The conclusion is that if literacy means reading and writing the alphabets and arithmetic numbers, then Akbar was literate. The meaning of education is to leave the narrowness of bookish knowledge and gain knowledge and intellectual advancement by coming out of the corridors of books, and then Akbar was undoubtedly highly educated and had a deep knowledge of the subject. He had a peculiar position in the Literary World of India of his times.

Key Words: Akbar, literate, illiterate, education, tutors, *Ibadat Khana*, art, scholar.

We are approaching the reign of the emperor who is justly regarded as one of the greatest sovereigns India has ever seen. Mughal monarch Akbar- the Great is as much renowned for his statesmanship as for his encouragement of letters. Whether Akbar was literate or illiterate, this topic remains an unsolved mystery among historians. Many arguments have been presented by historians in favor and against this subject.

Akbar was illiterate or unlettered:-

However, he is described by some writers as utterly unlettered. For instance, Count Noer credits him with no literary education as he is unable to read or write on the authority of a Goanese Jesuit as the Jesuit tells us:" He (Akbar) can neither read nor write."¹

¹Noer, Frederick Augustus, *The Emperor Akbar, A Contribution Towards The History of India*, translated by A.S. Beveridge, Vol. II, Thacker, Spink & Co., Calcutta, 1890, p. 56, 243

Emperor Akbar's son Jahangir's autobiography entitled '*Tuzuk -i- Jahangiri*' makes the following statement on the subject cited above -

"My (Jahangir's) father always associated with the learned of every creed and religion, especially with pandits and the learned of India, and although he was illiterate, so much became clear to him through constant intercourse with the learned and wise, in his conversations with them, that no one knew him to be illiterate, and he was so acquainted with the niceties of verse and prose compositions that his deficiency was not thought of."¹

Here, the emperor is described as 'ummi', an Arabic word or illiterate and entirely uneducated by his son Jahangir. In '*Iqbalnama-I- Jahangiri*', Akbar is described as ummi i.e. unable to read or write.²

Catholic Missionary Father Monserrate was at the court of Akbar from 1580 to 1582 and he wrote that Akbar is entirely unable either to read or write.³ According to a Spanish Jesuit missionary named Father Jerome Xavier "The King (Akbar) is gifted with a wonderful memory, so that, although he can neither read nor write, he knows whatever he has heard learned men discoursing about, or whatever has been read to him."⁴

In this connection, V.A. Smith wrote "Akbar was a thoroughly idle boy from the school master point of view, and resisted all attempts to give him book - learning so successfully that he never mastered the alphabet, and to the end of his days was unable even to read or sign his own." Further, he added that "Although he would not learn to read books for himself, he enjoyed hearing them read by others."⁵ According to an eminent historian A.L. Shrivastav, although Akbar's ancestors were well educated, but he was not. From his childhood, he kept away himself from the field of study and never memorized his lessons seriously.⁶

On the basis of all the above mentioned arguments, historians and writers have described Akbar as illiterate or unlettered.

In modern times, differences have arisen about Akbar's illiteracy and in the last few years some historians have started to believe that Akbar was not illiterate. That is, he was literate and educated.

Akbar was literate or lettered -

² Jahangir, *Tuzuk- i - Jahangiri*, translated by A. Rogers and edited by Henry Beveridge, Vol. I, Royal Asiatic Society, London, 1909, p. 33

³ Khan, Mutmad Sharif Mohammad, *Tuzuk-i -Jahangiri*, English translation by W. H. Lowe, Bibliotheca Indica Series, work no. 126, Asiatic Society of Bengal, Calcutta, 1889, p. 26

⁴ Monserrate, *The Commentary of Father Monserrate,S.J. on his Journey to the Court of Akbar*, translated from the original Latin by J.S. Hoyland, and annotated by S.N. Banerjee, Humphrey Milford Oxford University Press, London, 1922, p. 201

⁵ Law, N.N.: *Promotion of Learning in India During Muhammadan Rule by Muhammadans*, Longmans, Green and Co., London, 1916, p.207

⁶ Smith, V. A. : *Akbar The Great Mogul 1542-1605* , Oxford Clarendon Press, London,1917, p.22

⁷ Shrivastav, Dr. A.L., *The Mughul Empire (1526- 1803 A.D)* , Shiva Lal Agarwala & Co. (Private) Ltd., Educational Publishers, Agra, Third Revised Edition, 1959, p. 137

However, the position that Akbar was illiterate and unlettered cannot be accepted on the basis of various reasons.

At any cost, this reference is duly supported and made by a renowned historian named Abul Fazl who makes a few positive and notifying remarks about Akbar's education. Abul Fazl mentions alone that to learn the combinations of letters and to acquire general knowledge, His Majesty the Shahinshah (Akbar) was taken to school on 7th Shawwal, 954 H. (20th November, 1547) when he was four years, four months and four days old and after the ceremony of his circumcision. Auspicious time for the Maktab ceremony was determined by the Emperor Humayun himself with the knowledge of his astrology. The weighty officer was charged with the responsible task to teach or educate him to a meritorious teacher named Mullazada Mulla Asamuddin Ibrahim. Further, he says " The inspired nature of his Majesty is strongly drawn to the composing of Hindi and Persian poetry and is critical and hair - splitting in the niceties of poetic diction." According to Abul Fazl, Akbar recites off - hand the Jalalu-d-din Rumi's Masnavi and the Diwan of Hafiz (The mystic tongue) and takes delight in their beauties and varieties.

A weighty verse is a product of Akbar's meditations.

Verse

"This is not the chain of insanity on the neck of the afflicted Majnun;
Love hath laid a loving hand on his neck."

In Hindi, he has also strung splendid thoughts which may be considered masterpieces in this kind.

Abul Fazl told that Mulla Asamuddin, the first preceptor of Akbar was dismissed for his addiction to pigeon - flying and Maulana Bayazid was appointed in his place after some time.¹ We are informed that later on Munim Khan was appointed to prepare or train Akbar in the military art or in the use of arms and in riding.² It is mention worthy that in this connection the remarks of Mr. H. Beveridge and A.S. Beveridge are very important as they are directly connected with the solution of this perplexing question.

Humayun was very keen in the matter of giving a sound education to his son Akbar. Humayun has selected and appointed an honored scholar named Mir Abdul Latif of Kazwin as a tutor to the young sovereign Akbar. Although his pupil could not read or write but soon took delight in studying the mystic ghazals with his erudite preacher and in repeating the odes of 'Hafiz' from memory.³ This fact proves the fatherly solicitude of Humayun for his son's education. Bairam Khan, the guardian of Akbar loved to surround himself with scholarly and cultivated men; it is not possible that he should have left the education in a precarious state for the future emperor.⁴

It seems, Bairam Khan selected Abdul Latif as a tutor of Akbar later on. Moreover, there is a distinct record that Peer Khan Muhammad and Haji Khan Mohammad

⁸ Fazal, Abul: *The Akbarnama*, translated from the Persian by H. Beveridge, Vol. I, The Asiatic Society, Calcutta, 1907, Reprint in March 2000, chapter XLIV, p. 518 - 520

⁹ Augustus, Frederick, Count of Noer: *The Emperor Akbar*, translated by A.S. Beveridge, Vol. I, Thacker, Spink & Co., Calcutta, 1890, p. 125

¹⁰ Ibid: p.126-127

¹¹ Ibid: p.126

were also Akbar's private tutors.¹ It can be clearly stated that so many tutors including Mulla Asamuddin, Maulana Bayazid, Munim Khan, Mir Abdul Latif, Peer Khan Muhammad, Hazi Khan Mohammad, Shaikh Abun - Nabi and Abdullah Makhdum -ul-Mulk had appointed by Humayun to teach Akbar.² Thus, the appointment of a good number of teachers one after another asserts that Humayun was keen excited or eager to give the best kind of education to Akbar. F.E. Keay says that generally it is supposed that he was unable to read or write but indeed, one can't call him an unlettered or uneducated person, and he was keenly interested in spreading education and learning.³

Besides, an "entirely illiterate" and "entirely uneducated" man is not in a situation to appreciate the beauties and elegances of literary works and compositions, to take part in discussions with intellectual bodies and learned personalities, to praise conversations on learned topics and enjoy abstruse controversies.

On the other side, we find that some historians have described him as well capable to repeat several odes of Hafiz.⁴ According to Ferishta "Although Akbar was by no means an accomplished scholar, he sometimes wrote poetry, and was well read in History. He also delighted in Indian fables. He caused the fables of Meer Hamza, consisting of three hundred and sixty stories, to be written in a beautiful hand and appropriate pictures were affixed to each story."⁵

Akbar kept up his studies and learning throughout his life. Abul Fazl informs us that every day some experienced and competent people read books before His Majesty, who hears each book from beginning to the end. Akbar did not feel fatigue and bored of hearing a book again and again, but listened to them always with more delightness and interest as well as great avidity. Abul Fazl says "At whatever page the readers daily stop, His Majesty makes with his own pen a sign, according to the number of the pages, and rewards the readers with presents of cash, either in gold or silver, according to the number of leaves read out by them." This continuous progress in study and learning made him acquainted with many compositions on various subjects like History, Science, Philosophy etc.. The following renowned works were continually read out for him -

Akhlaq-i-Nasiri, Kimiya-i-Saadat, Qabusnamah, Works of Sharaf of Munair, Gulistan, Hadiqah of Hakim Sanai, Masnavi of Manawi, Jam-i-Jam, Bustan, Shahnamah, Masnavis of Shaikh Nizami, Works of Khusrau and Maulana Jami, Diwans of Khaqani Anwari and several works on History.⁶ A famous book '*Hayat-ul-Haiwan*' was often used to read

¹² Law, N.N. : *Promotion of Learning in India During Muhammadan Rule*, op. cit., p. 141 and Mohammad Kasim Ferishta: *Tarikh-i- Farishta*, the original Persian by John Briggs as *History of the Rise of the Mahomedan Power in India*, Vol. II, Low Price Publications, Delhi, first published 1829, Reprinted 1990,1997, p. 118

¹³ Ray, Krishna Lal: *Education in Medieval India*, B.R. Publishing Corporation, Delhi, 1984, p.98

¹⁴ Keay, F.E: *Ancient Indian Education*, Oxford University Press, London, 1918, p. 121

¹⁵ Elliot and Dowson: *The History of India, As Told By It's Own Historians*, Vol. I, Turbner and Co., London, 1872, p. 294

¹⁶ Ferishta: Mohammad Kasim: *Tarikh-i-Ferishta*, op. cit., p. 173

¹⁷ Fazl, Abul: *Ain I Akbari* , translated from the original Persian by H. Blochman, Vol. I, Asiatic Society of Bengal, Calcutta, 1873, p. 103-104 and N.N. Law: *Education in India During Muhammadan Rule*, op. cit., p. 209-210

before the Monarch by Naqib Khan.¹ Above passage testifies to Akbar's capability to read and write at least the numerical numbers.

It is significant that it was his deep love for knowledge and curiosity to discover the truth which encouraged him to get the famous *Ibadat Khana* - his special innovation, constructed at Fatehpur Sikri. He had laid the strong foundation of an ideal seat for intellectual meetings and the spiritual world. According to Abul Fazl, His Majesty's main aim was " His sole and sublime idea was that, as in the external administration of the dominion, which is conjoined with eternity, the merits of the knower of the things of this world had by profundity of vision, and observance of justice, been made conspicuous, and there had ceased to be a brisk market for pretense and favoritism, so might the masters of science and ethics, and the devotees of piety and contemplation, be tested, the principles of faiths and creeds be examined, religions be investigated, the proofs and evidences for each be considered and the pure gold and the alloy be separated from evil commixture. The temple of Divine Knowledge was on Thursday nights illuminated by the light of the holy mind.² On Friday nights, along with on pious nights, "Sufis, doctors, preachers, lawyers, Sunnis, Shias, Brahmans, Jains, Buddhists, Charbaks, Christians, Jews, Zoroastrians and learned men of every belief, were gathered together in the royal assembly, and were filled with delight. Each one fearlessly brought forward his assertions and arguments, and the disputations and contentions were long and heated.³



(The First Jesuit Mission Arguing before Akbar, by Narsingh)

(Source- The Jesuits and the Great Mogul, by Edward Maclagan, Burnsotates and Washbourne Ltd., London,1932, frontispiece)

The Prime Listener - Emperor was very generous in his ideas and kept his mind open and free forever to get any new light which any person, irrespective of his caste or creed or colour or nationality, might bring.⁴ With his abnormal thirst for knowledge, the

¹⁸ Al-Badaoni, Abd-ul-Qadir Bin Maluk Shah: *Muntakhab-ut-Tawarikh*, translated from the original Persian by W. H. Lowe, Vol. II, Asiatic Society of Bengal, Calcutta, 1884, p. 207

¹⁹ Fazl, Abul: *The Akbarnama*, translated from the original Persian by H. Beveridge, Vol. III, The Asiatic Society, Calcutta, first published in 1939, Reprinted in February 2000, p. 364-365

²⁰ Elliot and Dowson: *The History of India As Told By It's Own Historians* , Vol.VI, Trubner and Co. , London,1875, p. 59-60

²¹ Law, N.N: *Promotion of Learning in India During Muhammadan Rule*, op.cit., p. 146

Monarch had every time tolerance to devote some time out of his hectic schedule to interact with Sufis, Historians and Philosophers. He always felt entertained and took much pleasure in the society of scholars, and organized meetings repeatedly for listening their wise discourses "on all matters of worldly interest."¹

The kind of eloquence he used to show in these meetings, no one could have guessed by listening to him that this person would be illiterate. In the words of N. N. Law " Great as was the Emperor's zeal for extending the bounds of his knowledge by participating in such learned discourses, no less was his earnestness to foster literature which feeds such knowledge and becomes a valuable asset to the country at large." On the orders of the King, many translations works were made of books in Sanskrit and other languages into Persian or Hindi.²

His memory power was supernatural and his thinking was crystalline. There was a constant flow in his expression. Akbar, who had a wonderful memory, could remember the contents of the books completely and accurately just by listening to them. His superhuman memory enabled him to recall accurately " the details of departmental deeds and even the names of hundreds of special horses, elephants and birds. He learned drawing also in his childhood and the architecture of his rule "unmistakably bears the impression of his personal good taste." In this connection, Dr. Smith has correctly observed that a person so differently accomplished can't be considered illiterate in actuality. "He simply preferred to learn the contents of books through the ear rather than the eye, and was able to trust his prodigious memory, which was never enfeebled by the use of written memoranda. Anybody who heard him arguing with acuteness and lucidity on a subject of debate would have credited him with wide literary knowledge and profound erudition, and never would have suspected him to illiteracy."³

From the account of Akbar's son Jahangir, *Tuzuk-i -Jahangiri* , we find that Akbar was able to understand and appreciate the elegences of poetry as well as prose, even improving upon the verses of other authors.⁴ On the other hand, the '*Waqiat -i- Jahangiri*', which also professes itself to be an autobiography of the same Royal personage (Jahangir) merely says that though Emperor Akbar was not **profoundly** learned, yet his conversation with the learned might lead one to believe that he was profoundly learned in every branch of Science. It doesn't say that he was **utterly unlettered**. The description is as follows -

"My father (Akbar) used to hold discourse with learned men of all persuasions, particularly with the Pandits and the intelligent persons of Hindustan. Though he was illiterate, yet from constantly conversing with learned and clever persons, his language was so polished, that no one could discover from his conversation that he was entirely uneducated. He understood even the elegancies of poetry and prose so well, that it is impossible to conceive any one more proficient."⁵

²² Ibid: p. 144

²³ Ibid, p. 147- 151

²⁴ Ray, Krishna Lal: *Education in Medieval India*, op. cit., p. 98-99 & V. A. Smith: *Akbar The Great Mogul 1542 - 1605*, op. cit., p. 337-338

²⁵ Jahangir: *Tuzuk-i-Jahangiri*, Vol. I, op.cit., p. 33

²⁶ Jahangir: *Waqiat-i-Jahangiri*, English translation by H.M. Elliot, Sheikh Mubarak Ali, Lahore, 1975, p.15



Akbar as a boy, about 1557 A.D (Tashbih Khurdsal Akbar Padshah, Johnson Collection, India Office, album xviii, fol. 4, artist not known, The earliest Indo- Persian painting.)

(Source: V.A. Smith: Akbar The Great Mogul, The Frontispiece)

The Monarch took more pleasure in the collection of books in his bibliotheca and he made many provisions for the better management of his Royal Library. He had a library in his Harem also and a few interesting and important books were kept there. He had extreme love and reverence for men of letters. His interest in the fine arts i.e. painting, music, calligraphy etc. was no less than his love of knowledge and learning. The educational system in his empire was also reformed and he made many healthy educational changes and multiplied the numbers of educational institutions.¹

Emperor Akbar himself was conscious of education and he paid a lot of attention to the sound education of his sons and grandsons. He appointed prestigious preachers to superintend their studies. During the reign of Akbar, Hindu and Christian teachers were also appointed independently to provide education to the princes.² The Emperor was forever ready to encourage art and learned by imparting rewards and stipends. The '*Tabkat-i-Akbari*', provided a list of 95 names altogether of scholars and poets who received encouragement from the King.³

Conclusion:-

²⁷ Law, N.N: *Promotion of Learning in India During Muhammadan Rule* , op.cit., p. 151-163 & S.M. Jaffar: *Education in Muslim India*, Idarah-I Adabiyat-I Delhi, Delhi-6, First Edition 1936, reprint 1972, p. 83-89

²⁸ S.J., Pierre Du Jarric: *Akbar And The Jesuits*, translated by C.H. Payne, Harper & Brothers, New York & London, first published in 1926 , p. 36

²⁹ Law, N.N: *Promotion of Learning in India During Muhammadan Rule* , op.cit., p. 168

³⁰ An early modern Arabic dictionary written by the Lebanese polymath Butrus al-Bustani

In the light of the various evidences adduced above, it cannot be accepted easily that Akbar alived and died in the ignorance of alphabets. It should be noted that all the facts and observations available in the accounts written by Christian or foreign Missionaries cannot be guaranteed as they are and completely near to truth. The precise value of the aforesaid type of evidences has to be carefully examined. 'Muhit-ul-Muhit'¹ carries among the meanings of the word 'ummi' that of 'al-qalil-ul-kalam' or 'taciturn' and this meaning will be apt and appropriate with the connection of the aforesaid passage in the '*Tuzuk-i-Jahangiri*'. How can it be possible for a boy (Akbar) with superhuman memory and an impressive mind, and a lad (Akbar) who was very interested in various sports and military activities in early life, that he did not even have knowledge of the alphabets and numbers. Undoubtedly, it can be said that Akbar could read and write, although his art of writing was not very beautiful. A completely uneducated and illiterate person can never be in a position to feel joy and happiness in the company of scholars, appreciate the conversation on enlightening subjects and evaluate the merits and demerits of other's poetic compositions.

The many dismissals of private tutors by Father Humayun and Guardian Bairam Khan both indicate fatherly solicitude for Akbar's training and learning. Many useful and necessary educational reforms, establishment of several *maktabs* and *madrasas*, huge library and its proper management, administrative, economic, social - cultural reforms, efforts for women 's education, deep devotion and love for scholars, Hindu - Muslim coordination and political integration of the country are absolutely impossible by a completely illiterate ignorant personality.

The conclusion is that if literary means reading and writing the alphabets and arithmetic numbers, then Akbar was literate. The meaning of education is to leave the narrowness of bookish knowledge and gain knowledge and intellectual advancement by coming out of the corridors of books, and then Akbar was undoubtedly highly educated and had a deep knowledge of the subject. He had a peculiar position in the Literary World of India of his times.