

# ***Translating the Solar Cosmology of Sacred Kingship***

***Audrey Truschke\****

Before the advent of Islam in South Asia, Indian kingship was already a multisourced phenomenon, and it frequently invoked cosmological and divine associations. But, when Islamic rulers began to enter the subcontinent, the political possibilities of Indian sacred sovereignty gained even more dramatic diversity. In the encounter between traditional Indian and Islamic idioms of rule, there were many instances of difference but also points of connection, overlap and convergence. Certain premodern sciences, above all cosmography and astrology, offered prime territory for cross-cultural exchanges because they relied on broadly similar assumptions about the nature of the world, the stars and interactions between the two.

The Mughals, who ruled much of northern and central India from 1526 until the early eighteenth century, vigorously utilised opportunities for dialogues across the boundaries of traditions. The Mughals were originally from Central Asia and moved into India, like many Muslim would-be rulers before them. Unlike most of their Indo-Islamic predecessors, however, the Mughals built a polity of truly imperial proportions, subsuming a majority of the subcontinent's population at their height and far outstripping the wealth and resources of contemporary European powers.

Through cross-cultural interactions, the Mughals paired the resources of their inherited Islamic and Turkish-Mongol traditions with those deeply embedded in their new Indian home. One compelling case study provides further insights into how the Mughals negotiated their various

\* Rutgers University, Newark and Stanford University, California.  
E-mail: [audrey.truschke@gmail.com](mailto:audrey.truschke@gmail.com)

---

*The Medieval History Journal*, 19,1 (2016): 136–141

SAGE Publications ♦ Los Angeles/London/New Delhi/Singapore/Washington DC  
DOI: 10.1177/0971945815626319

cultural worlds, namely, the royal practices of the third ruler, Akbar (r. 1556–1605), regarding the sun. Akbar's sun veneration and claims to enjoy a solar line of descent provide illuminating opportunities for parsing the translation of cosmography and idioms of rule in sacred kingship more broadly.

## Mughal Sun Veneration

Akbar fashioned sun veneration as a ritual whereby he communicated his prestige and authority to many communities across his empire. In part, sun veneration was appealing to the Mughal court because it offered a nearly unparalleled opportunity to speak truly cross-culturally and appeal to light imagery in numerous traditions. Nonetheless, specific groups were rarely, if ever, impressed by this cosmopolitan allure. Rather, individual communities interpreted Akbar's sun veneration in tradition-specific ways, and the Mughal elites grounded themselves in different traditions depending on the context.

Many Mughal court thinkers understood sun veneration as fully Islamic. For example, in the *Akbarnama*, the major imperially sponsored court history of his reign, Akbar is reputed to have said,

Something extraordinary from the glorious sun is bestowed on rulers. Accordingly, they praise the sun and count it as worship of God, which the short-sighted view with suspicion ... Out of ignorance, common people fall short in revering the fountain of light and unleash slander on those who praise it. If their understanding were not in error, how else could they forget the Quranic chapter beginning 'By the sun...' (*A'in-i Akbari*, 2:235).

In addition to a Quranic scriptural defense of the custom, the Mughals also invoked other Islamic precedents and justifications for sun veneration. Muslim thinkers had recited Arabic prayers to the sun as early as the ninth century CE, and these were included in the *Tarikh-i Alfi*, one of the other Persian-medium histories composed at Akbar's court. In addition, the Illuminationist (Ishraqi) philosophy of Suhrawardi (d. 1191) was in vogue in Mughal India. The Ishraqi term for the sun, Hazrat Nayyir-i 'Azam (His Holiness the Great Luminary/Light), which personified and sanctified this heavenly body, is used in Jahangir's memoirs and even appears in a bilingual Sanskrit and Persian lexicon authored at Akbar's

request by the Sanskrit writer Krishnadasa in the late sixteenth century (*Parasiprakasa*, verse 8).

But Akbar did not always elect to draw upon these deep Islamic precedents when crafting, practising and presenting his sun veneration. Sanskrit sources are more assertive than the somewhat apologetic Persian court texts on Akbar's solar reverence, and they attest that Akbar framed this royal practice as the adoption of an Indian, specifically a Brahmanical, custom. Jains, a religious minority in the Mughal Empire, were also key figures in helping Akbar situate his exaltation of the sun as an Indian practice.

One Jain thinker, Siddhicandra, narrates the story of Akbar reciting the Sanskrit names of the sun in his *Bhanucandraganicarita* (Acts of Bhanucandra), a Sanskrit history of Jain encounters with Mughal figures. Siddhicandra notes that Akbar sought out a Sanskrit text that contained the names of the sun from a Brahman (the uppermost class of Hindus). After procuring the *Suryasahasranama* (Thousand Names of the Sun), Akbar approached a Jain thinker to help him learn the sun's Sanskrit epithets. Siddhicandra then relays, 'The glorious shah diligently learned the *Thousand Names of the Sun*. He forgot any other taste and recited the names there' (*Bhanucandraganicarita* of Siddhicandra, 2.106). Siddhicandra does not explain further this 'other taste' (*anyarasa*) for which sun veneration eliminated any need on the part of the Mughal emperor. But it likely refers to Islam, especially given that in the next verse, Siddhicandra mentions that Akbar faced the correct direction and used his head and hands properly, which are both important concerns in Islamic prayer.

Badauni, a notorious Muslim critic of Akbar's reign, provides further confirmation of this perceived conflict between Islamic practices and Akbar's sun veneration. In his Persian-medium history of the period, Badauni records that Akbar's recitation of the sun's Sanskrit names sometimes conflicted with times for Islamic prayers. He further attests that Birbal, a Brahman advisor to the emperor, tried to persuade Akbar to worship the sun as it rose in the east, which would mean turning away from Mecca (which lies to the west of India). In the eyes of Sanskrit and some Persianate intellectuals, Akbar worshipped the sun at the expense of comparable Islamic activities, and thereby signalled imperial investment in an Indic religio-cultural realm.

Curiously, however, precedents for sun worship among non-Muslim Indian kings are scant and present a significant temporal gap vis-à-vis Akbar. In the sixth through eighth centuries CE, some kings were members of what Alexis Sanderson has termed ‘the cult of the Sun’; although, this was never an especially populous group. In Kashmir, sun worship arguably became subsumed within traditions focused on Shiva and survived in that form. Other centres of sun worship on the subcontinent before the appearance of Islam, such as Multan, had ties with Zoroastrian priests who arrived from Persia.

Thus, while Akbar was seen by many to have adopted an explicitly non-Muslim Indian tradition of sun veneration, he did not draw upon a living practice of solar veneration among Hindu kings. Contemporary Hindu kings, by contrast, sponsored temples dedicated to other deities. However, the lack of a robust subcontinental tradition of royal sun exaltation apparently did not bother Akbar. This suggests that the easy translatability of the sacred—perhaps even of the divine—enabled by a focus on a heavenly body such as the sun, rather than any actual depth in traditional Indian society, drew the Mughals to this particular practice.

### Akbar as the Sun’s Son

A part of the solution to the mystery of Mughal sun veneration may lie in the fact that this dynasty positioned itself as descended from the sun, thereby establishing what can be called a cosmological lineage. Like Akbar’s sun veneration, this idea has roots in multiple traditions. The Mughals inherited a story about one of their Mongol ancestors, Alan Qo’ā (Alan the Fair), conceiving triplet sons via a ray of divine light. According to Abu al-Fazl, the most influential historian in Akbar’s court, this divine light was passed down in a latent form through the generations until it manifested itself brilliantly in Akbar.

In his links with the Sanskrit cultural world, however, Akbar explored another avenue for proclaiming solar ancestry. Akbar sponsored the translation of the *Mahabharata*, one of the two great Sanskrit epics, into Persian. One of the tale’s great warriors, Karna, is the son of Surya, the sun god. Karna was conceived when his mother used a secret mantra to call down Surya to impregnate her. The Persian rendition of the epic tells this story with a few modifications that allow the tale to reflect that of Akbar’s ancestor, Alan Qo’ā (*Razmnama*, 1: 117–18). The main adjustment

is that whereas in Sanskrit, Kunti conceived the old-fashioned way, in Persian, she is impregnated via a ray of divine light. The Mughals do not maintain a consistent parallel between Akbar and Karna throughout the *Mahabharata*, but they frequently dwell on Karna's story at some length, even at times elaborating it beyond the Sanskrit text.

Being able to claim a place within the *suryavamsa*, the lineage of the sun, was a standard tactic of Indian rulers. Here, Akbar found himself with a much more vibrant non-Islamic Indian tradition than with his sun veneration. Yet, he did not claim to be the sun's offspring independent of his Mongol ancestor's story. Akbar at times claimed to be affiliated with other Hindu deities quite aside from any association with Mongol or Islamic ideas. For instance, both Sanskrit and Persian texts attest that Akbar was identified as an incarnation of the Hindu god Vishnu. But, when it came to being the sun's descendent, Akbar maintained a foot in the Mongol world.

### Recovering Eurasian Sacred Kingship

Akbar's solar connections render a few useful insights for the investigation of Eurasian sacred kingship and its recourse to astral symbols and cosmology more broadly. First, connections with the sun spoke powerfully to Emperor Akbar because of their multivalence and their traction in local traditions. He advanced these dual interests by delineating the meaning of sun veneration and his alleged solar descent according to different traditions for specific audiences. In this regard, the built-in flexibility of cosmology and related forms of knowledge was a key component in their political appeal.

Second, individual communities within the Mughal Empire interpreted Akbar's sun veneration in particular within their own cultural frameworks. Occasionally, Islamic and Jain thinkers noted cross-cultural aspects of this royal activity, but they were generally troubled by this multivalence and sought to resolve, rather than celebrate it. For interpretative communities, the local depth of royal practices associated with sacred kingship, rather than their cross-cultural potential, rendered them effective.

Last, the many specific interpretations of Akbar's sun veneration and solar descent can only be reclaimed by using linguistically diverse sources, some of which (such as Sanskrit texts) are not typically considered pertinent for Mughal historiography. Few scholars would disagree with

the need to use more diverse archives, but the purchase of my claim is far stronger. Few Mughal historians can access Sanskrit texts, and yet a multilingual archive is indispensable for understanding the operation of Eurasian sacred kingship in the Mughal polity.

## References

- H. Blochmann (ed.). 1867–1877. *A'in-i Akbari* of Abu al-Fazl ibn Mubarak (2 vols). Calcutta: Asiatic Society of Bengal.
- Mohanlal Dalichand Desai (ed.). 1941. *Bhanucandraganicarita* of Siddhicandra. Ahmedabad-Calcutta: Sanchalaka Singhi Jain Granthamala.
- Sayyid Muhammad Reza Jalali Naini and Dr. N. S. Shukla (eds). 1979–1981. [*Razmnamah*] *Mahabharata: The Oldest and Longest Sanskrit Epic (4 vols.)*. Translated by Mir Ghayasuddin Ali Qazvini Known as Naqib Khan (D. 1023 AH). Tehran: Kitabkhanah-i Tahuri.