INDIAN POLITICAL THOUGHT

Abul Fazl: Monarchy and Views on Administration

By **Brajabandhu Mahanta** • November 18, 2026 • 11 min read



Shaikh Abul Fazl Allami (1551–1602) was the chief ideologue, historian and minister of the Mughal emperor **Akbar** (r. 1556–1605). Through his monumental works, he gave Mughal kingship a **philosophical foundation** that was quite different from that of the Delhi Sultanate: kingship as a **divine light** above all sects, devoted to the welfare of all subjects and committed to **sulh-i-kul** (universal peace). His *Ain-i-Akbari* is also the most detailed record of **Mughal administration**. Where Barani (Topic 3) sought an Islamic state ruled by the well-born, Abul Fazl offered a vision of a **tolerant, rational and paternal monarchy** for a plural society.

Table of Contents

01 Life and Works 3

02 Theory of Monarchy 3

03 Views on Administration 6

04 Critical Assessment 9

05 Conclusion 10

06 Quick Revision 10

07 Exam Practice 11

08 Suggested Readings 12

POLIPREPHUB.IN

Life and Works

- Born at **Agra** in 1551, son of **Shaikh Mubarak Nagauri**, a liberal scholar persecuted by the orthodox ulema; his elder brother was the poet **Faizi** (Akbar's poet laureate).
- Educated in Islamic theology, philosophy and many other sciences; strongly influenced by rationalism and Sufi ideas of tolerance.
- He joined **Akbar's court in 1574** and soon became his closest adviser, one of the "**nine jewels**" (*navaratna*). He took part in the debates at the **Ibadat Khana** (house of worship, founded 1575) and helped draft the **Mahzar** (1579).
- He rose to high mansab and served as a general in the Deccan.
- He was **assassinated in 1602** by **Bir Singh Deo Bundela** at the instigation of Prince **Salim** (later Jahangir), who saw him as an enemy.

Works:

- ***Akbarnama*** ("Book of Akbar") — an official history of Akbar's reign and his ancestors, in **three volumes**.
- ***Ain-i-Akbari*** ("Institutes of Akbar") — the **third volume** of the Akbarnama, a detailed description of the empire's administration, army, revenue, provinces, statistics, and the religions, sciences and customs of India. It was translated by **H. Blochmann** and **H. S. Jarrett**.
- *Maktubat-i-Allami* (letters, also called *Insha-i-Abul Fazl*).

Theory of Monarchy

Kingship as divine light (farr-i-izidi)

Abul Fazl's central idea is that royalty is a **light emanating from God**: "**Royalty is a light emanating from God, and a ray from the sun, the illuminator of the universe**" (Preface to the *Ain-i-Akbari*). This divine light is called **farr-i-izidi** ("divine effulgence"), a concept from ancient Persian thought.

POLIPREPHUB.IN

- God communicates this light directly to kings, without the intermediary of any priest or religious class.
- It was transmitted through a line of chosen beings, from Adam through the Mongol ancestress **Alanqoa**, who conceived through divine light, down to Timur, Babur and finally Akbar. Thus Akbar's kingship is not only legitimate but **sacred and pre-ordained**.
- Because of this light, the true king possesses qualities no ordinary person has, and he is the **insan-i-kamil** (perfect man) of his age.

This theory has major political implications:

- The king's authority **does not depend on the ulema** or the Caliph. It comes **directly from God**.
- The king is not the leader of one religious community but the **guardian of all subjects**, whatever their faith.
- It provides a basis for the king's role as **spiritual guide** (*murshid*) of his disciples, seen in the **Tauhid-i-Ilahi** (Din-i-Ilahi) of 1582.

Meaning of padshah

Abul Fazl explains the word **padshah**: *pad* means stability and possession, and *shah* means origin, lord. A padshah is thus one who is **powerful in establishing and maintaining order**; without him, the world would fall into disorder, selfishness and strife.

True king and selfish ruler

Abul Fazl distinguishes between:

- the **true king** (*padshah-i-haqiqi*), who has divine light, rules for the welfare and security of all, protects the weak, upholds justice, and is free from selfishness; and
- the **selfish ruler**, who rules for his own pleasure and wealth; under such a ruler, there is insecurity, injustice and rebellion.

POLIPREPHUB.IN

Outward signs (treasury, army, servants) may be the same in both, but the true king uses them for the people's good, while the selfish one uses them for his own desires.

Qualities and duties of the king

The ideal king, according to Abul Fazl, has:

- **Paternal love towards his subjects**: he treats all people like his children, without distinction of religion or sect;
- **A large heart**: he is not disturbed by the faults of others and is forgiving;
- **Increasing trust in God** and devotion to prayer;
- **Justice**: he maintains order and punishes evil-doers impartially;
- **Wisdom and reason** (*aql*): he prefers rational inquiry over blind imitation (*taqlid*);
- **Self-control** and moderation;
- **Accessibility**: Akbar's practice of **jharokha darshan** (daily public appearance) symbolised the king's closeness to the people.

Social theory: the four classes

Abul Fazl compares society to the **four elements** and says the king must maintain balance among them, as a physician balances the body's humours:

- **Warriors** (like **fire**) — protect society;
- **Artisans and merchants** (like **air**) — provide comforts and wealth;
- **The learned** (philosophers, physicians, scholars, like **water**) — provide knowledge;
- **Husbandmen and labourers** (like **earth**) — provide sustenance.

The king must keep each class in its place and prevent any from dominating the others, so that harmony is preserved. Unlike Barani, the classification is **functional**, not based on birth or religion.

POLIPREPHUB.IN

Sulh-i-kul: universal peace

Sulh-i-kul (“peace with all”) is the core of Abul Fazl’s political ethics:

- The king must be **impartial** towards all religions and sects and must not persecute anyone for their beliefs.
- All religions contain truth; disputes between them arise from ignorance and blind imitation.
- Akbar’s policies — **abolition of the pilgrim tax (1563) and jizya (1564)**, the **Ibadat Khana debates**, marriage alliances and the inclusion of **Rajputs** in the nobility, patronage of Sanskrit translations (Mahabharata as *Razmnama*), and the Din-i-Ilahi — were justified in terms of sulh-i-kul.
- The **Mahzar** (“infallibility decree”, 1579) declared Akbar the **Imam-i-Adil** (just ruler) and gave him authority to decide among conflicting opinions of the ulema, so long as his decision accorded with the Quran and was for the good of the people. This strengthened the king’s authority over the orthodox clergy.

Views on Administration

The *Ain-i-Akbari* describes the administration that Abul Fazl regarded as the practical expression of just kingship. Its main features:

The emperor and the central government

The emperor is the source of all authority, assisted by high officers:

- **Vakil** (vakil-us-sultanat) — the chief minister, a post whose powers Akbar reduced;
- **Diwan** (wazir) — in charge of revenue and finance;
- **Mir Bakhshi** — in charge of the military establishment, the mansabdars and intelligence;
- **Sadr-us-Sudur** — in charge of religious affairs, charity and grants (*madad-i-maash*);
- **Qazi-ul-Quzat** — chief judge;
- **Mir Saman** — in charge of the royal household and karkhanas (workshops).

POLITREPHUB.IN

Abul Fazl emphasises **division of powers among ministers** so that no one becomes too powerful, and **checks and balances** among officials.

The mansabdari system

Introduced in **1573–74**, the **mansabdari system** was the backbone of Mughal administration:

- Every officer (military and civil) held a **mansab** (rank), expressed in two numbers: **zat** (personal rank and salary) and **sawar** (number of cavalrymen to be maintained), the dual rank being formalised later in Akbar's reign.
- Mansabs ranged from 10 to 5,000 for nobles (higher ranks for princes).
- Mansabdars were paid in cash or by assignment of **jagirs** (revenue assignments), which were **transferable** and not hereditary, preventing local power bases.
- The **dagh** (branding of horses) and **chehra** (descriptive roll of soldiers) prevented fraud.
- The nobility was **composite**: Turanis, Iranis, Afghans, Indian Muslims and **Rajputs**, reflecting sulh-i-kul.

Provincial and local administration

- The empire was divided into **subas** (provinces; 12 under Akbar initially, later 15), each under a **subedar** (or *sipahsalar*), with a provincial **diwan**, **bakhshi**, **sadr**, **qazi** and **waqia-navis** (news-writer).
- Subas were divided into **sarkars** (under a **faujdar** for law and order and an **amalguzar** for revenue) and **parganas** (under a **shiqdar**, **amil** and **qanungo**).
- In towns, the **kotwal** maintained law and order, regulated markets and prices, and supervised morals.
- The village had its **muqaddam** (headman) and **patwari** (record-keeper).

POLITREPHUB.IN

Land revenue

- Abul Fazl describes the **zabt** or **dahsala** system introduced by **Raja Todar Mal** (1580): land was measured, classified by fertility (**polaj, parauti, chachar, banjar**), and revenue was fixed on the basis of the **average produce and prices of the previous ten years**, typically **one-third** of the produce, payable in cash.
- Other systems: **batai/ghalla bakhshi** (crop sharing) and **kankut** (estimation).
- The revenue collector should be **a friend of the cultivator**, grant loans (*taqavi*) in times of distress, and remit revenue in case of calamity.

Justice and welfare

- The emperor was the **highest court of appeal**; qazis administered justice according to Islamic law for Muslims, while Hindus could settle disputes according to their customs and panchayats.
- Abul Fazl stresses **justice, protection of the weak**, and care for agriculture, trade and the poor; he lists the many public works, charities and price regulations of Akbar.
- He also records restrictions on **sati** (it was not to be forced), **child marriage** and other social reforms Akbar attempted.

Principles of good administration

From the Ain-i-Akbari, the following principles emerge:

- Administration exists for the **welfare of subjects**, not the enrichment of rulers.
- **Merit** and loyalty, rather than birth or religion, should be the basis of appointments.
- **Records and statistics** (land, revenue, prices, population) are the basis of good government — the *Ain* itself is a monumental statistical survey.
- **Checks** on officials through news-writers, inspections and transfers.
- **Tolerance** and impartiality among communities.

POLIPREPHUB.IN

Critical Assessment

Contributions:

- Developed an Indian theory of **secular-tolerant monarchy** (sulh-i-kul) that freed kingship from clerical control.
- Gave **legitimacy** to a composite Mughal state uniting diverse communities.
- The *Ain-i-Akbari* is an unparalleled record of **administration, economy and society**, an early example of statistical governance.
- Emphasised **reason (aql)**, inquiry and dialogue among religions.

Criticisms:

- He was the emperor's **court historian and propagandist**; his writing is full of **flattery** and presents Akbar as almost superhuman. Orthodox historian **Abdul Qadir Badauni** (*Muntakhab-ut-Tawarikh*) gives a very different and hostile picture.
- His theory justifies **absolute monarchy**: there are no institutional limits on the king, only moral ones.
- The divine light theory could make the king's will unquestionable.
- The ideal of sulh-i-kul depended on the personality of the ruler and was partly reversed under later emperors.

Abul Fazl and Barani

Point	Barani	Abul Fazl
Source of kingship	God's vicegerent, defender of Islam	Divine light (farr-i-izidi) direct from God
Relation to ulema	Ulema important; shariat supreme	King above ulema (Mahzar, 1579)
Religion	Orthodoxy; discrimination against Hindus	Sulh-i-kul; equal treatment of all

POLITREPHUB.IN

Social basis	High-born Muslims (ashraf)	Functional four classes; composite nobility
Law	Shariat + zawabit	Royal regulations (ain) for welfare
Model ruler	Mahmud of Ghazni	Akbar

Conclusion

Abul Fazl transformed the idea of kingship in India. In his view, the king receives a divine light directly from God, stands above sects and the clergy, loves his subjects like a father, and rules for universal peace and welfare. The *Ain-i-Akbari* shows how this ideal was translated into an elaborate administrative system — the mansabdari, the zabt revenue system, provincial and local administration — that became the backbone of the Mughal empire. Though his writings are court panegyric and justify absolute power, his ideal of a tolerant, rational and welfare-oriented state remains one of the most attractive visions in medieval Indian political thought.

Quick Revision

Concept	Key point
Dates	1551–1602; joined Akbar 1574; killed 1602 (Bir Singh Bundela)
Works	Akbarnama (3 vols); Ain-i-Akbari (3rd vol.)
Kingship	Farr-i-izidi — light emanating from God
Padshah	Pad = stability; Shah = lord
Ideal king	Paternal love, large heart, trust in God, justice, reason
Society	Four classes like four elements
Sulh-i-kul	Universal peace, toleration
Mahzar	1579; Akbar as Imam-i-Adil
Mansabdari	Zat and sawar; transferable jagirs
Revenue	Todar Mal’s zabt/dahsala (1580)

POLIPREPHUB.IN

Memory aid: Abul Fazl's king = **"Light, Love, Law, Liberty of faith"** — divine light, paternal love, just administration, sulh-i-kul.

Exam Practice

Long-answer questions

- Explain Abul Fazl's theory of kingship. How did it differ from the Sultanate theory of kingship?
- Discuss the concept of sulh-i-kul and its role in Akbar's policies.
- Describe the administrative system as presented in the Ain-i-Akbari.
- "Abul Fazl's theory of monarchy was a justification of absolutism." Discuss.
- Compare Barani and Abul Fazl on the relationship between religion and state.

Short-answer questions

- What is farr-i-izidi?
- What is the Ain-i-Akbari?
- What did Abul Fazl mean by the word padshah?
- What are the four classes of society according to Abul Fazl?
- What was the Mahzar of 1579?
- Explain zat and sawar.
- What was the dahsala system?
- Who was responsible for Abul Fazl's death?
- What was the role of the kotwal?
- Distinguish between a true king and a selfish ruler according to Abul Fazl.

POLIPREPHUB.IN

Multiple-choice questions

- **The Ain-i-Akbari is part of:** (a) Tarikh-i-Firuz Shahi (b) Akbarnama (c) Muntakhab-ut-Tawarikh (d) Tuzuk-i-Jahangiri. *Answer: (b)*
- **“Royalty is a light emanating from God” refers to:** (a) Zill-allah (b) Farr-i-izidi (c) Sulh-i-kul (d) Zawabit. *Answer: (b)*
- **Abul Fazl was killed at the instigation of:** (a) Akbar (b) Prince Salim (c) Badauni (d) Todar Mal. *Answer: (b)*
- **The Mahzar was issued in:** (a) 1575 (b) 1579 (c) 1582 (d) 1602. *Answer: (b)*
- **The dahsala system was devised by:** (a) Birbal (b) Todar Mal (c) Man Singh (d) Bairam Khan. *Answer: (b)*
- **Match the following:** (A) Warriors – (B) Merchants and artisans – (C) Learned – (D) Husbandmen. (1) Earth (2) Fire (3) Water (4) Air. Correct code: (a) A-2, B-4, C-3, D-1 (b) A-4, B-2, C-3, D-1 (c) A-2, B-3, C-4, D-1 (d) A-1, B-4, C-3, D-2. *Answer: (a)*
- **Assertion (A):** Abul Fazl’s king was independent of the ulema. **Reason (R):** He held that royal authority comes directly from God as divine light. (a) Both true, R explains A (b) Both true, R does not explain A (c) A true, R false (d) A false, R true. *Answer: (a)*
- **Which historian gave a critical, orthodox account of Akbar’s reign?** (a) Nizamuddin Ahmad (b) Abdul Qadir Badauni (c) Faizi (d) Firishta. *Answer: (b)*
- **In the mansabdari system, “sawar” indicated:** (a) Personal salary (b) Number of cavalrymen (c) Jagir size (d) Revenue share. *Answer: (b)*
- **Sulh-i-kul means:** (a) Universal peace (b) Divine light (c) Infallibility (d) Holy war. *Answer: (a)*

Suggested Readings

- Abul Fazl, *Ain-i-Akbari*, trans. H. Blochmann and H. S. Jarrett (Asiatic Society, 1873–1894).
- Abul Fazl, *Akbarnama*, trans. H. Beveridge (1897–1921).
- Irfan Habib (ed.), *Akbar and His India* (OUP, 1997).

POLIPREPHUB.IN

- Muzaffar Alam, *The Languages of Political Islam: India 1200–1800* (Permanent Black, 2004).
- John F. Richards, *The Mughal Empire* (Cambridge, 1993).
- Satish Chandra, *Medieval India: From Sultanat to the Mughals*, Part II (Har-Anand).
- Harbans Mukhia, *The Mughals of India* (Blackwell, 2004).
- Himanshu Roy and M. P. Singh (eds.), *Indian Political Thought: Themes and Thinkers* (Pearson, 2017).

Category: Indian Political Thought

Tag: Abul Fazl

Source: https://poliprephub.in/indian-political-thought/abul-fazl-monarchy-and-views-on-administration/

© PoliPrepHub · Generated on November 18, 2026

POLIPREPHUB.IN