



## **VISUAL ILLUSTRATIONS OF AKBAR NAMA – A CONTEXTUAL STUDY**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Akbar ordered illustration of Manuscripts in his imperial Atelier. Hamza Nama was the first to be illustrated and then followed the historical chronicles of his ancestry and then activities of his own court. Mughal style of painting was in formation in the workshop with the amalgamation of Safavid influences and indigenous conventions. Besides Artists of royal Atelier were expected to create realistic and faithful reproduction of the actual incidents. Thus creating the documentary or journalistic images. They shifted away from the decorative and two-dimensional representation of imaginative scenes. The artist also strived for showing depth and space by means of diagonals and suggested shadows.*

**Keywords** *Illustration of Mughal Manuscripts; Mughal Style of Painting; Miniature Painting; Ain-e- Akbari illustrations; Akbar Nama Illustrations.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

Illustrations of Akbar Nama penned by Abul Fazl have significant place among other manuscripts as it changed the course of painting from decorative to actual presentations. Thus creating a new genre of painting in Mughal Imperial Atelier. Although the complete work is lost but a significant part still survives and gives us the glimpse of the practice and development of the Mughal style. Few instances are also produced discussed in this paper for better understanding of the illustrations.

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### Visual Illustration of Akbar Nama

‘His Imperial Majesty Jalal al Din Akbar, the third Mughal Emperor of India, ordered Abul Fazl to write with the pen of sincerity the account of the glorious events of our dominion increasing victories’ (*Notes by Marg*).

Akbar after ascending the throne, commissioned the artists of imperial workshop to complete a series of paintings for narrative of Dastan –i – Amir Hamza. As the Emperor grew older and his Empire’s power became established the subject of his commissions changed from fanciful legends to realistic records of history. Being extremely conscious about their Timurid and Mongol heritage Akbar took especial effort to prepare illustrated manuscripts of his grandfather Babur’s exhaustive memoirs Waqiat-i-Baburi or Baburnama and the history of his Timurid and Mongol ancestors written in specially prepared manuscripts of the Jami-ut-Tawarikh, Tarikh-i Khandan-i Timuriya (*Ratnabali Chatterjee*).

After Hamza Nama Emperor commissioned the writing and illustration of a chronicle of his own reign. He did not write the account himself instead he entrusted the task to Abul Fazl who accompanied him everywhere to record his actions in accurate detail. As Akbar ordered it to be illustrated, artists of Imperial Atelier started working on illustrations even before the text was complete. Akbar Nama depicted the contemporary history with the episodes that were witnessed by artists themselves and that makes it truthful and realistic as they do not have to rely on their imagination, hence they can produce the very authentic textual and visual accounts (*Joan Cummins*).

Akbar Nama or the chronicle of Akbar’s rule is considered aptly as the comprehensive record that has ever been accomplished on the activities of any court. It comprises of three volumes- in turn, there are three parts of the first volume, of which the first contains the description of the birth and horoscope of Akbar, the genealogy of his ancestors of the house of Timur, and the history of the first two Mughal kings, Babar and Humayun. While its second part describes the story of imperial rule, from the ancestors of Akbar to the end of the seventeenth year. Volume two of the Akbar Nama is the continuation of events from the beginning of the eighteenth year of Akbar’s rule until the forty- sixth Year. Here the documentation breaks off due to the treacherous murder of the biographer. The third volume is in fact an independent work entitled Ain-i-Akbari that enumerates in meticulous detail the working of Akbar’s empire (*Notes by Marg*).

In the year 1596, Abul Fazl presented the completed first volume of the Akbar Nama for Emperor’s inspection. He soon issued formal orders for exclusive edition of this volume to be prepared for the imperial collection of books and manuscripts. Accordingly, the project was entrusted to the finest calligraphers and painters of the realm, and when completed, the illustrated copy of the Akbar Nama was placed in Emperor Akbar’s Library. It was the much-



treasured document and remained in the imperial collections. It was taken out only by Imperial command and for the perusal and declaration of the Mughal Monarchs. Nadir Shah, in 1739, tempted by the accumulated treasures of the Mughals, swooped down with his soldiers on the dust-laden plains of Delhi. In the senseless killing and looting that followed this raid, countless valuable Manuscripts, including the Akbar Nama were extricated from the imperial Library and either destroyed and scattered everywhere. While maximum parts of Akbar Nama were misplaced, but miraculously a fragment survived the various vicissitudes that befell it and, finally reached the distant shores, where it is treasured, and have an honored place in the collection of the Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

Various seals and endorsements that mark the first and last folios of the manuscript states that this fragment is indeed a part of the copy commissioned by Akbar. Amongst these, there is one of Jahangir's who has written in his own hand that it was deposited in his own library. In the year of his accession. Other endorsements made during the reign of Aurangabad reveal, that during his reign, he had the manuscript taken out on various occasions for purpose of the study. The last decipherable Imperial endorsement belongs to the Aurangabad period and is dated 1688 AD. A seal impressed upon the flyleaf is attestation of the fact, that in 1793 it came into the possession of Ahamad Ali Khan Bahadur. This shows, the manuscript wandered from hand to hand after it had left the Imperial Library. The inscription on the seal states that this book belongs to Ahmad Ali Khan Bahadur and, if someone else claims its ownership, he is a liar.

This also gives the fact that Ahmad Ali Khan was wealthy man and, as he expended Rs 7000/- for procuring the manuscript, as inscribed in an entry on the book by him he must had either a taste for manuscript or he was well aware of its royal worth. This also shows that the article was considered rather valuable in those days too. Its appeal then as now must have been tremendous (*Notes by Marg*). Unfortunately, Ahamad Ali khan did not produce any information as to where or from, he obtain the manuscript. In addition, there is no information about the fact that, when he bought the manuscript, whether or not his fragment was already detached from the rest of the volume. The whereabouts of these manuscripts remained unknown for another hundred years until it surfaced again when the widow of Major General Clark offered it for sale to the Victoria and Albert Museum. As Commissioner of Oudh, Major General Clark had spent some time in India and presumably acquired the manuscript during his stay there either through purchase or in the form of a gift.

From the surviving folios of this manuscript, it is evident that it was written in elegant Nastaliq script on fine paper, light brown in tone. The text is often arranged in geometrical designs. The present fragment consists of 217 folios and is interspersed by 117 full-paged miniatures. A few of these paintings spread over two pages facing one another. The beginning folio has a traditional floral geometric pattern in red azure, blue, and gold. These



splendid illustrations furnish a proper idea of the stage of refinement achieved by the painters of Emperor's Taswirkhana.

Many of these illustrations do not have any text and wherever there is some, it consists of merely one or two lines written in panels situated on the top or bottom of the painting. The text does not intrude upon the composition in any way. Although the manuscript follows the Persian upright book format, it gradually shifts from the Persian practice of the text being an integral part of an illustrated folio. The manuscript spans 17 years of Akbar's reign – from the fourth to the twenty-first regnal year. That is from AD 1560 to AD 1577. It features all the important events that occurred in those years and many of them are illustrated.

What is most striking about these paintings is the immediacy of their pictorial content. They are like journalistic recordings of day-to-day events that were taking place in Akbar's reign. The portrayal of these scenes required much ingenuity on the part of the artist. He had to constantly improvise and seek solutions in painting. For the formula that had come down to him through the ages became meaningless in the context of the Akbar Nama. The remarkable inventiveness of the artists becomes evident in the compositions where the elements are arranged along a steep diagonal line or a meandering S curve that leads the eye from the bottom to the top of the painting. Sometimes the figures are grouped around the central ascent in four quadrants. Occasionally the action, enlivened with realistic detail, would be laid in the foreground while in the far distance a toy-like city, appropriately blued and diminished in size, would be indistinctly visible in a smiling spacious landscape. The manuscript contains two superb works of recently arrived Qalmuck painter Farrukh Beg, which are remarkable for their freshness and variety. One of them is 'Akbar's Triumphant Entry into Surat' (fig.1) is a beautiful and realistic work (*Ratnabali Chatterjee*).

Another painting, 'Birth of Salim' (fig.2) ascribed to Keshavdas and Dharamdas, illustrates the activities surrounding the Birth of His son Prince Salim. Joan Cummins writes, in a divided sequence of enclosed areas, three separate groups celebrate the birth of prince. In the innermost chamber on the top the Mother is painted in repose and the nurses tend to baby, while in central section, Musicians play and Courtiers celebrate throwing the coins to the gathering by the wall of the court.

In the painting, 'Akbar Watching the Dancing Girls'(fig.3), the delicate colouring and exquisitely tiled surfaces reveal the Persian antecedents in Mughal Art. At the same time, the artist finds pleasure in his newly acquired mastery of showing depth and space by means of diagonals. Likewise, in painting, 'Siege of Ranthambhor'(fig.4), the heaving bullocks, the taut ropes and the flailing arms of soldiers graphically convey the effort, which the cannons are being hauled up the steep incline of the hill. The composition in opposing diagonals is imbued with tension.

‘Akbar Hunting in a Fenced Ring’ (fig.5), shows one of the favourite modes of hunting among the Mughals in the qamargah or the enclosure. A large army of beaters would generally form a huge circle often of 50-60 miles in diameter and by gradually decreasing the circumference drive the game into the centre. After few days, the circle of beaters become smaller of about 4-6 miles in diameter a fence, created in the place of human chain. Then the Emperor enters the circle for hunting and later his nobles enter in turns.

In illustration of the scene, “Akbar Lost While Hunting’(fig.6), the artist has composed the painting in four Quadrants around the central ascent of tree sheltering Akbar. In the painting, ‘Akbar Inspecting a Large Elephant’(fig.7), Akbar is shown accompanied by his retinue inspecting a large elephant tied securely by a tree. The painting is composed in three horizontal segments with the main action in the middle section. In the foreground are two elephants while in the background is a fort. The tan and brown spectrum of colours lends a sober tone to the colour scheme (*notes by Marg*).

The Manuscript, as the other historical manuscripts prepared in Akbar’s reign have been painted in the typical workshop manner practiced in the Imperial atelier. Thus, more than one artist would be engaged in one painting – one would do the outline, another background, and a third the portraits. The intention was to extensively channelize the talent of each artist towards obtaining the best results. The studio supervisor recorded the names of the artists in the margin of the painting for Emperor to examine and reward in the course of his weekly inspections. From the names of the artists on the paintings of the Akbar Nama, it is evident that all fifty-six artists worked on it.

The sprawling taswirkhana employed numerous artists, illuminators, bookbinders and book artisans to cope with the increasing demand for images. Amongst them thirteen were mentioned by name by Abul Fazl in the Ain-i-Akbari that included the two Persian masters brought by Humayun, Mir Sayyid Ali and Khwaja Abdus Samad, followed by the most talented and versatile masters Daswant and Basawan, Keshav, Lal, Mukund, Miskin, Farrukh the Qamaq, Madhav, Jagan, Mahesh, Khemkaran, Tara, sanwals, Harbans and Ram. In some cases, the artists signed their names with the area from where they were recruited.

## CONCLUSION

Despite the workshop technique, the compositions do not appear to be artificial. They are unified and controlled. Their style integrated and their coloring was vivid as well as varied. However, even more than the accomplished workmanship the viewer becomes astonished by the excitement in the painting, the unparalleled feeling of observing action directly reported – a quality that makes the Akbar Nama Paintings truly significant works of art.



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### Pictures for References

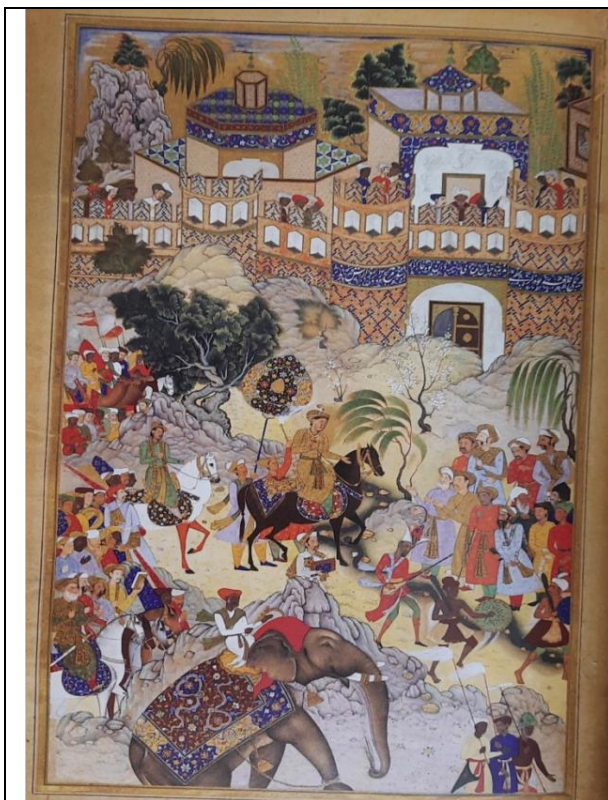


Fig.1 Akbar's Triumphant Entry into Surat'

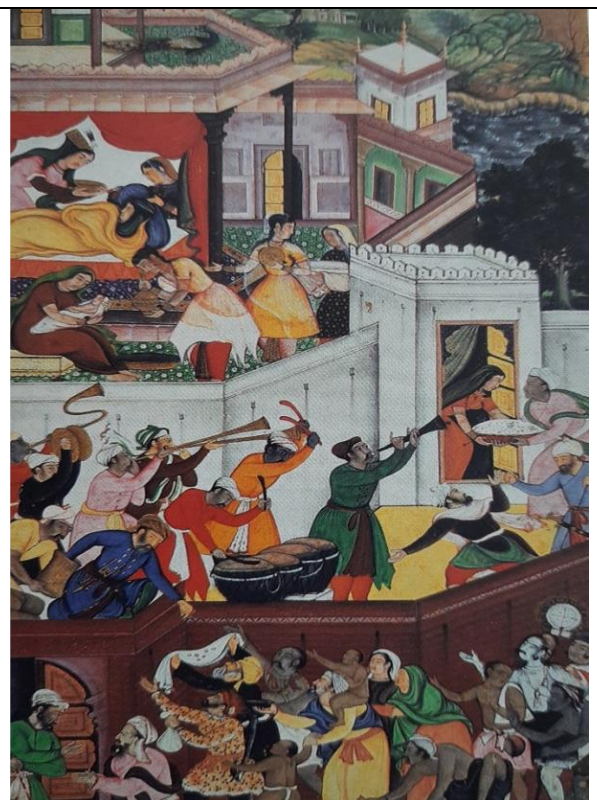


fig.2 ' Birth of Prince Salim'



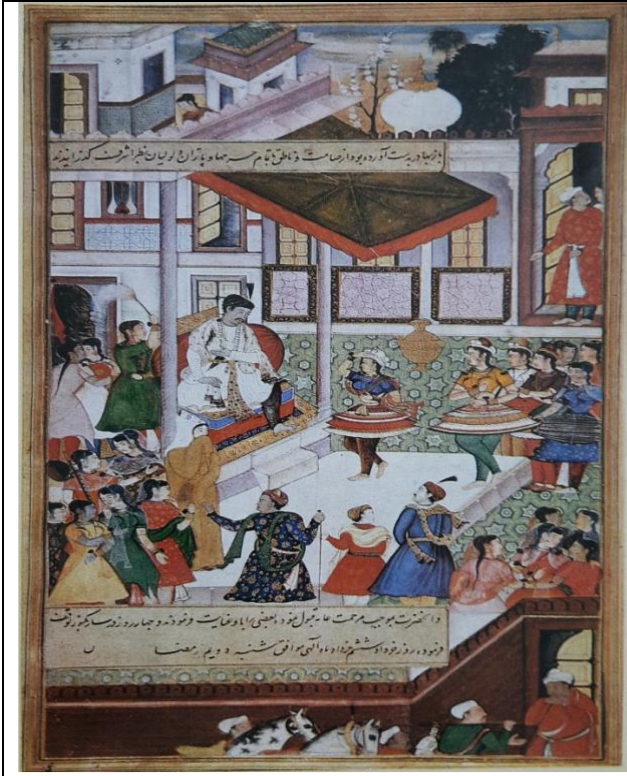


Fig.4 'Akbar watching the Dancing Girls'

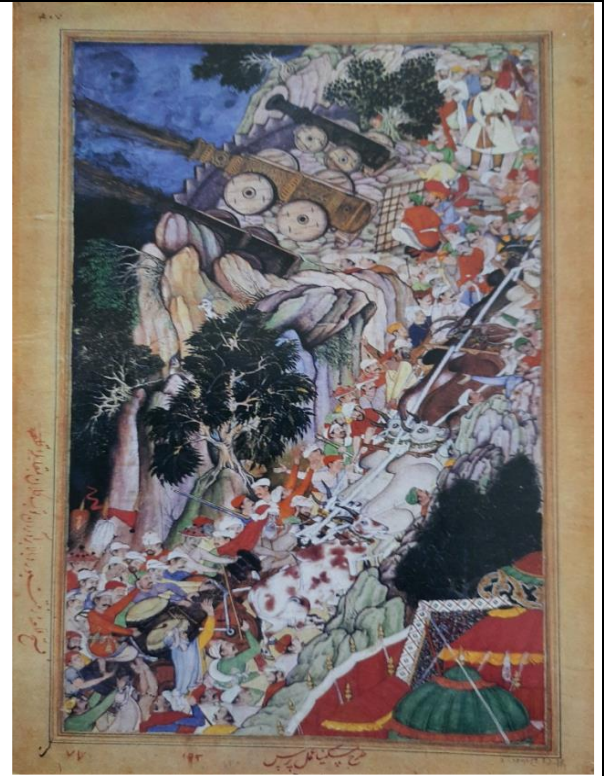


Fig.4 'Siege of Ranthambhor'

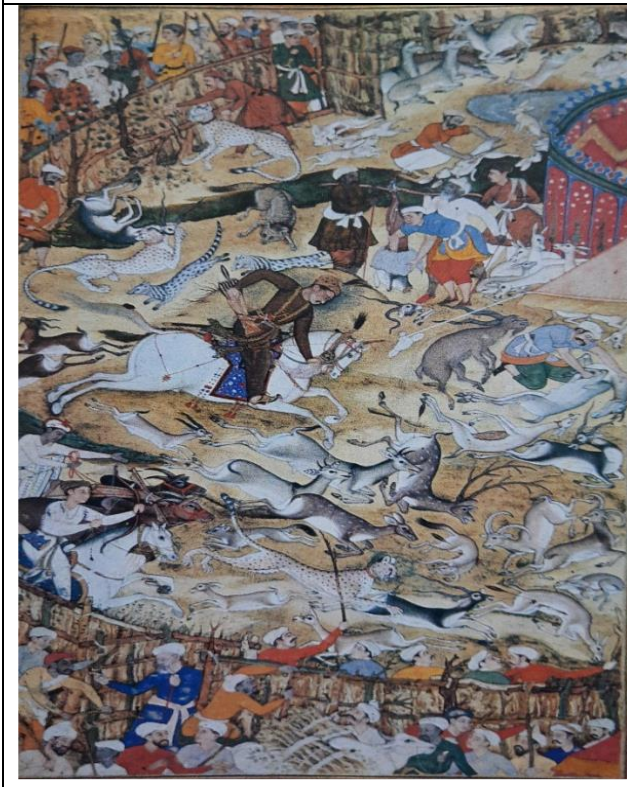


Fig. 5 'Akbar hunting in a Fenced Ring'



Fig. 6. 'Akbar Lost while Hunting'





Fig. 7 'Akbar Inspecting a Large Elephant'