

ANANTAM IAS · OPTIONAL NOTES

History Optional Akbar

Paper 1 · Unit 20

Conquests, Rajput policy, Todar Mal's revenue system, the Ibadat Khana and sulh-i-kul: 65 marks in four years, with a question in three of the four papers.

anantamias.com

UPSC SYLLABUS

Akbar: conquests and consolidation of the empire; establishment of jagir and mansab systems; Rajput policy; evolution of religious and social outlook, theory of sulh-i-kul and religious policy; court patronage of art and technology.

Consolidation of the empire

Political narrative is the least examined part of this unit, so compress it and keep the marks for policy.

- Accession at thirteen in 1556 was followed by the **Second Battle of Panipat** against Hemu, and by four years under **Bairam Khan** as regent until his dismissal in 1560.
- **Petticoat government** under Maham Anga and the Atka Khail lasted until 1562, and Akbar's assertion of personal rule from that year is the real beginning of the reign.
- Conquests proceeded from Malwa in 1561 through **Chittor and Ranthambhor in 1568 and 1569**, Gujarat in 1572, Bengal in 1576, Kabul in 1585, Kashmir in 1586, Sindh in 1591 and Kandahar in 1595.
- Sher Shah Suri's short reign supplied much of the administrative template Akbar inherited, in revenue survey, the rupee, the sarai and road system and military muster, so continuity from the Sur interregnum belongs in any answer on Mughal institutions.
- Deccan campaigns from 1591 brought **Ahmadnagar, Khandesh and Berar** under nominal control, and Chand Bibi's defence of Ahmadnagar in 1595 is the episode usually named.
- Territorial method combined conquest with **matrimonial alliance, mansab absorption and confirmation of local rulers in their lands**, which is what distinguished Akbar's empire from a purely military occupation.
- **Fatehpur Sikri** was founded in 1571 and abandoned around 1585, and the capital moved to Lahore and later back to Agra, largely for water supply and for proximity to the northwest frontier.
- By 1605 the empire ran from Kabul and Kandahar to Bengal and from Kashmir to the northern Deccan, organised into **fifteen subas** after the reorganisation of 1580.

The mansab and jagir systems

Both are named in the syllabus for this unit and both are the machinery whose later failure produces the eighteenth century crisis, so learn them precisely here.

- Introduced around 1573 and refined thereafter, the **mansab** fixed every officer's rank in two numbers, **zat** for personal status and pay and **sawar** for the cavalry contingent required.
- Ranks were graded from very small holdings up to seven thousand for the highest nobles, with figures above that reserved for princes of the blood.
- **Dagh**, the branding of horses, and **chehra**, the descriptive roll of each soldier, were the anti-fraud devices, and both were inherited from Sher Shah's practice rather than invented by Akbar.
- Payment came either in **cash from the treasury**, making the holder a naqdi, or by assignment of a **jagir** whose estimated revenue matched the salary.
- Crucially, a jagir transferred **revenue rights and not land ownership**, and transfers every three or four years prevented nobles from building local power bases.
- **Khalisa** land was retained for the imperial treasury, and the proportion of khalisa to jagir is a standing indicator of fiscal health across the whole Mughal period.

- **Jama** was the assessed revenue expressed in dams and **hasil** the amount actually realised, and the divergence between them is the technical seed of the later jagirdari crisis.
- **Du-aspa sih-aspa**, introduced later under Jahangir, allowed the sawar obligation to be doubled without disturbing the zat rank, and it shows the system being adjusted rather than replaced.
- Composition of the nobility was deliberately plural, drawing **Turani, Irani, Afghan, Indian Muslim and Rajput** groups, so that no single faction could dominate.

KEY TERMS

Naqdi — A mansabdar paid in cash from the treasury rather than by assignment of a jagir.

Dam — The copper coin in which revenue assessments were expressed; forty dams made one rupee.

Todar Mal and the revenue system

Asked in 2025 on the structural features of Todar Mal's system and its effectiveness in standardising assessment. Precision on the mechanism is what scores.

- **Raja Todar Mal**, who had served under Sher Shah before joining Akbar, settled the **zabt or dahsala system around 1580** after a decade of experiment.
- Assessment rested on three pillars: **measurement of the land, classification by productivity, and a schedule of cash rates** derived from average prices and yields over the previous ten years.
- Measurement used the **bigha standardised with the ilahi gaz**, and the rope jarib was replaced by a bamboo jarib with iron rings so that it could not stretch or shrink.
- Land was classified as **polaj** cultivated annually, **parauti** briefly fallow, **chachar** fallow three or four years and **banjar** uncultivated for five or more, each carrying graded rates.
- State demand was fixed at roughly **one third of average produce, assessed and collected in cash**, which forced monetisation on the countryside and integrated the peasant into the market.
- Provinces were divided into **dasturs**, revenue circles with their own price schedules, which is the feature that made a single system workable across regions with very different prices.
- Effectiveness was genuine but bounded, since zabt applied mainly to the **core provinces from Lahore to Allahabad and Gujarat and Malwa**, while **nasaq, kankut and ghalla bakhshi** persisted in Bengal, Sindh and elsewhere.
- That limitation is the answer to the 2025 question: the system standardised assessment where the state could measure and record, and outside that zone it was standardisation in name only.
- **Amil, qanungo and patwari** formed the collection chain below the province, with the qanungo holding the hereditary local records that made any measurement-based system possible at all.
- Relief provisions existed, with **taccavi loans** for seed and cattle and remissions in years of failure, so the system was not purely extractive in design even if implementation varied.

Rajput policy

Asked in 2025 on whether Akbar's Rajput policy was shaped by factional politics at court. The question invites you to weigh a political reading against the conventional ideological one.

- Alliance began with the **marriage to the daughter of Raja Bharmal of Amber in 1562**, followed by the abolition of the pilgrimage tax in 1563 and of **jizya in 1564**.

- Rajput chiefs entered the **mansabdari** as nobles of the empire while retaining their ancestral **watan jagirs**, which meant they served the emperor without losing their homelands.
- **Raja Man Singh** rose to a mansab of seven thousand and governed Kabul, Bihar and Bengal, and **Raja Todar Mal** and **Raja Birbal** show that Rajput and Hindu service extended well beyond the military.
- Resistance was real and sustained, and **Rana Pratap of Mewar** refused submission, fought **Haldighati in 1576** and recovered much of Mewar before his death in 1597.
- Coercion accompanied conciliation, and the **siege of Chittor in 1568** with its reported massacre of some thirty thousand shows that the policy had a hard edge.
- For the 2025 question, the factional reading is strong: Akbar needed a counterweight to the **Turani and Uzbek nobility** whose revolts between 1564 and 1567 nearly ended his reign, and Rajput commanders supplied loyal military power with no independent claim on the throne.
- Ideological explanation is not thereby refuted, since the same policy is consistent with sulh-i-kul and with Akbar's documented personal curiosity, and the strongest answer holds that political necessity and ideological conviction reinforced each other.
- **Watan jagir** is the technical term that carries this policy, since it let a Rajput chief hold his ancestral territory as an assignment that could not be transferred, unlike an ordinary jagir.
- Consequences ran long: Rajput integration gave the empire military depth and administrative reach for a century, and **Aurangzeb's reversal** of the accommodation is conventionally treated as a major cause of Mughal decline.

Religious outlook and sulh-i-kul

Asked in 2024 through the Ibadat Khana. Ashoka's Dhamma and Akbar's sulh-i-kul make a natural comparison and examiners like candidates who see it.

- Established at Fatehpur Sikri in 1575, the **Ibadat Khana** began as a venue for debate among Muslim theologians and was opened in 1578 to Hindus, Jains, Zoroastrians and Jesuits.
- **Jesuit missions** from Goa arrived from 1580, with Rodolfo Acquaviva and Antonio Monserrate the best known, and their letters are an important external source on the court.
- The 2024 quotation, that the Ibadat Khana brought discredit rather than credit to Akbar, reflects **Badauni's** hostile account of unseemly quarrels among the ulama and of the emperor's drift from orthodoxy.
- Defending Akbar against that charge means arguing that the debates exposed sectarian rigidity, informed a policy of toleration in a plural empire, and produced the intellectual climate for the translation bureau.
- **Mahzar of 1579**, sometimes miscalled the Infallibility Decree, gave Akbar the authority to choose between conflicting juristic opinions on points where the mujtahids disagreed, which is narrower than infallibility.
- **Din-i-Ilahi**, proclaimed around 1582, is better described as **Tauhid-i-Ilahi**, a small circle of personal discipleship with perhaps a dozen or so adherents of whom Birbal was the only Hindu, and it was never a state religion or a mass movement.
- **Sulh-i-kul**, absolute peace or universal reconciliation, was the operative doctrine, and **Abul Fazl** elaborated it as the sovereign's duty to stand above sectarian attachment and to protect all subjects equally.

- Practical expression included the **abolition of jizya and pilgrimage tax**, the ending of forced conversion of prisoners, permission to rebuild temples, and the translation of the Mahabharata as the **Razmnama** and of the Ramayana, Atharva Veda and Rajatarangini into Persian.
- Social measures attempted included discouraging **sati** where it was not voluntary, raising the age of marriage and restricting child marriage, though enforcement was limited.
- **Badauni against Abul Fazl** is the standard source pairing here, and citing the disagreement is the quickest way to show source criticism in an Akbar answer.

KEY TERMS

Sulh-i-kul — Absolute peace: the doctrine that the sovereign stands above sectarian attachment and protects all communities equally.

Mahzar — The 1579 declaration allowing Akbar to choose among conflicting juristic opinions, not a claim to infallibility.

Court patronage of art, letters and technology

Named explicitly in the syllabus and overlapping with the Culture unit, so keep it to what is distinctively Akbari.

- Painting under **Abdus Samad** produced the enormous **Hamzanama** on cloth, then the illustrated histories, and the workshop's collaborative method of designer, colourist and portraitist was established here.
- Named Hindu artists including **Daswanth, Basawan and Kesu Das** are listed in the Ain-i-Akbari, and their prominence is the evidence that the atelier was genuinely composite.
- Architecture at **Fatehpur Sikri** used red sandstone and a trabeate vocabulary of brackets, chhajjas and chhatris drawn from Gujarati and Rajasthani practice, with the **Buland Darwaza of 1576** commemorating the Gujarat conquest.
- **Music** flourished with **Tansen** among the nine gems, and the Ain lists dozens of court musicians of several traditions.
- **Maktab khana**, the translation bureau, rendered Sanskrit works into Persian, and the choice of the Mahabharata and Ramayana was a policy of cultural incorporation rather than antiquarian interest.
- Literature in Persian centred on **Abul Fazl's Akbarnama and Ain-i-Akbari** and Faizi's poetry, while **Rahim** wrote Hindi dohas and patronised vernacular poets.
- Technology drew on **karkhanas** for arms, textiles and shipbuilding, and Akbar took a documented personal interest in gun founding and in mechanical devices.
- Akbar himself was **illiterate**, according to Abul Fazl and Badauni alike, and had books read aloud to him, which makes the scale of his intellectual patronage more striking rather than less.
- Printing, known through the Jesuits, was **not adopted**, and the standard explanations are the prestige of calligraphy and the economics of an established manuscript industry.

Assessment and how the questions come

Four questions in four years, all from different angles. Read them together and the pattern is that Akbar is examined as a policy maker, not as a conqueror.

- Questions have covered the **nature of the Mughal state** in 2023, the **Ibadat Khana** in 2024, **Todar Mal's revenue system** and **Rajput policy** in 2025, so the conquests have not been asked at all.
- For the nature of the state, the two positions to weigh are **Athar Ali's** centralised bureaucratic empire and **J. F. Richards' and Stephen Blake's** patrimonial-bureaucratic model in which the household remains the organising idea.
- **Sanjay Subrahmanyam and Muzaffar Alam** have added the argument that Mughal sovereignty worked through negotiation with regional elites rather than through uniform command, which suits the evidence on Rajputs and zamindars.
- Where a question offers a hostile quotation, as the 2024 one does, state the source of the hostility, in that case Badauni, before you agree or disagree with it.
- Every strong Akbar answer ties **policy to political necessity**: jizya abolition and Rajput alliance answered the problem of ruling a Hindu-majority empire with a fractious Turani nobility.
- Avoid the two lazy extremes, the nationalist Akbar as secular hero and the communal Akbar as calculating dissembler, and argue instead from what the policies actually did.

Last-mile revision

- 1556 accession and Panipat II; Bairam Khan to 1560; petticoat government to 1562; Chittor and Ranthambhor 1568-69; Gujarat 1572; Bengal 1576; fifteen subas after 1580.
- Mansab: zat and sawar, dagh and chehra from Sher Shah; jagir is revenue not land, transferred every three or four years; khalisa retained; jama versus hasil.
- Zabt about 1580 under Todar Mal: measurement with ilahi gaz and bamboo jarib, four land classes, ten year price schedule, dasturs, about one third in cash; nasaq elsewhere.
- Rajput: Amber marriage 1562, pilgrimage tax 1563, jizya 1564, watan jagirs, Man Singh at 7,000; Haldighati 1576; Chittor 1568.
- Ibadat Khana 1575 and opened 1578; Jesuits from 1580; Mahzar 1579; Tauhid-i-Ilahi about 1582 with about a dozen followers; Razmnama.
- Art: Hamzanama, Daswanth, Basawan, Kesu Das; Fatehpur Sikri and Buland Darwaza 1576; maktab khana; Tansen.
- State models: Athar Ali centralised, Richards and Blake patrimonial-bureaucratic, Alam and Subrahmanyam on negotiated sovereignty.

Common errors to avoid

- Calling Din-i-Ilahi a new religion with mass following. It had roughly a dozen adherents and is better called Tauhid-i-Ilahi.
- Describing the Mahzar as an Infallibility Decree. It let Akbar choose between conflicting juristic opinions, which is much narrower.
- Crediting Akbar with inventing dagh and chehra. Both come from Sher Shah's practice.
- Saying zabt covered the whole empire. It applied to the core provinces; nasaq, kankut and ghalla bakhshi persisted elsewhere.
- Presenting Rajput policy as purely conciliatory. Chittor in 1568 and Mewar's long resistance are part of the same policy.

- Taking Badauni or Abul Fazl at face value. Each is written against the other and the pairing is the point.

Mains Practice

“Instead of bringing credit, the Ibadat Khana brought growing discredit to Akbar.”

Comment.

20 marks · 250 words · 2024

Discuss the structural features of Todar Mal's revenue system and evaluate its effectiveness in standardized land revenue assessment.

15 marks · 200 words · 2025

Akbar's Rajput policy was shaped by considerations of factional politics in the Mughal court. Discuss.

15 marks · 200 words · 2025

Discuss the nature of the Mughal State under Akbar.

15 marks · 200 words · 2023