

CHAPTER
18

Section 3

PRIMARY SOURCE **Akbar**
by Father Monserrate

Akbar, who ruled the Mughal Empire for nearly 50 years, was remarkable for his attempts to promote religious tolerance. By demonstrating acceptance of many religions, he hoped to establish peace between his Muslim and Hindu subjects. Father Antonio Monserrate, a Catholic missionary from Portugal, visited Akbar's court for a few years. Think about Father Monserrate's impressions of Akbar as you read his firsthand account.

This Prince [Akbar] is of a stature and of a type of countenance well-fitted to his royal dignity, so that one could easily recognise, even at the first glance, that he is the King. He has broad shoulders, somewhat bandy legs well-suited for horsemanship, and a light-brown complexion. He carries his head bent towards the right shoulder. His forehead is broad and open, his eyes so bright and flashing that they seem like a sea shimmering in the sunlight. . . . Contrary to the custom of his race he does not cut his hair; nor does he wear a hat, but a turban, into which he gathers up his hair. He does this, they say, as a concession to Indian usages, and to please his Indian subjects. He limps in his left leg, though indeed he has never received any injury there. His body is exceedingly well-built and is neither too thin nor too stout. He is sturdy, hearty and robust. When he laughs, his face becomes almost distorted. His expression is tranquil, serene and open, full also of dignity, and when he is angry, of awful majesty. . . . It is hard to exaggerate how accessible he makes himself to all who wish audience of him. For he creates an opportunity almost every day for any of the common people or of the nobles to see him and converse with him; and he endeavours to show himself pleasant-spoken and affable rather than severe toward all who come to speak with him. It is very remarkable how great an effect this courtesy and affability has in attaching to him the minds of his subjects. For in spite of his very heterodox [against accepted beliefs of a particular religion] attitude towards the religion of Muhammad, and in spite also of the fact that Musalmans [muslims] regard such an attitude as an unforgivable offence, . . . Akbar . . . has not yet been assassinated. He has an acute insight, and shows much wise foresight both in avoiding dangers and in seizing

favourable opportunities for carrying out his designs. Yet all these fine qualities both of body and mind lose the greater part of their splendour because the lustre of the True Faith is lacking. . . .

He is a great patron of learning, and always keeps around him erudite men, who are directed to discuss before him philosophy, theology, and religion, and to recount to him the history of great kings and glorious deeds of the past. He has an excellent judgment and a good memory, and has attained to a considerable knowledge of many subjects by means of constant and patient listening to such discussions. Thus he . . . makes up for his ignorance of letters (for he is entirely unable either to read or write). . . . He can give his opinion on any question so shrewdly and keenly, that no one who did not know that he is illiterate would suppose him to be anything but very learned and erudite. . . .

from Father Monserrate, S.J., *Commentary on his Journey to the Court of Akbar from 1580 to 1583*, edited by S.N. Banerjee, translated by J.S. Hoyland (London: Oxford University Press, 1922), 196–202, 207, 213–14, 219. Reprinted in Peter N. Stearns, ed., *Documents in World History*, Vol. II (New York: Harper Collins, 1988), 64–65.



Akbar the Great

Directions: Answer the following questions based on the primary source.

1. What does the introductory paragraph tell you about Akbar? What does it tell you about Father Monserrate?
2. According to Father Monserrate, what did Akbar look like?
3. Why did he grow his hair and wear a turban in the style that he did?
4. How did Akbar treat his subjects when they came to his court?
5. When Father Monserrate mentions the "True Faith," what religion does he mean? How do you know?
6. Do you feel that Father Monserrate wrote about Akbar in an objective, unbiased manner? Give examples from the passage to support your answer.

DICTIONARY

Stature = Height

Countenance = Appearance

Bandy = Wide at the knees

Usages = Customs, Traditions

Tranquil, Serene = Calm,

Peaceful

Affable = Friendly

Courtesy = Politeness

Heterodox = In conflict with
Orthodox teachings

Luster = Shine

Patron = Financial supporter

Erudite = Highly educated,
intellectual

Shrewd = Smart, Sharp, Clever

