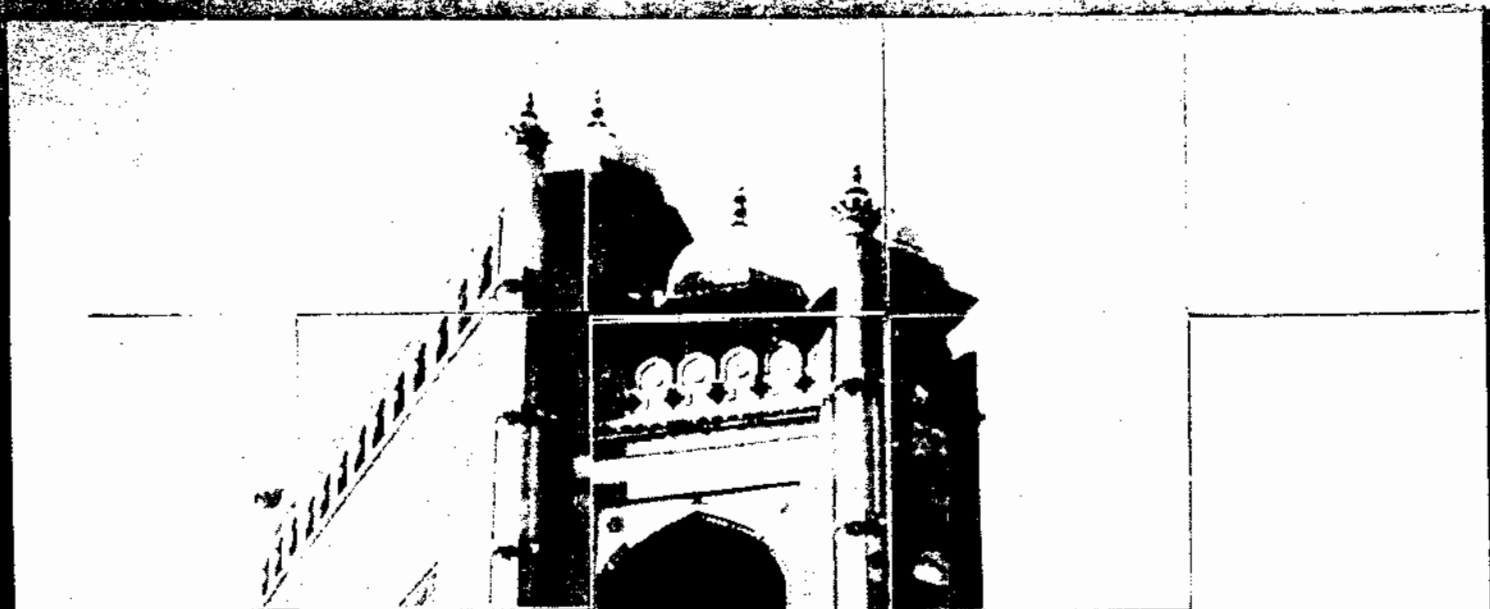


6

The City as an Intellectual Center

Bruce B. Lawrence



Fatehpur-Sikri was an imperial capital, and its intellectual life revolved around the person of its founder and patron, the Indo-Timurid dynast Jalal ad-Din Akbar. It flourished in the measure that Akbar bestowed on it the attention and resources of his vast but not limitless patronage. Others in this volume comment on the administrative, fiscal, and tax reforms that made possible the surplus capital that financed its building. Here I shall examine the ambiguous promise of my title, which implies, first, that Fatehpur-Sikri had an intellectual life, and, second, that it was central to the court's interests. A host of questions is raised by each of those claims.

If one grants that there was an intellectual aspect to Fatehpur-Sikri's life, how was it expressed? Was it limited to the person of Akbar himself, and did it therefore reflect only his own activist spirit—more architectural than literary, more musical than meditative? Or did Fatehpur-Sikri also exhibit other strains, even counter strains, to Akbar's own preferences, and, if so, in what ways have these been recorded and transmitted, given the encompassing and also constricting nature of imperial patronage? Further, does the life of the mind or intellect separate out as neatly and clearly from the life of the spirit, commonly called religion? If we intend to explore the imperial city from the viewpoint of its founder and his entourage, can we distinguish intellectual from religious elements except at the risk of imposing a classificatory template on Akbar's creation that did not exist either for him or for his courtiers?

"Intellectual" raises a host of definitional questions when applied to Fatehpur-Sikri; "center" evokes a string of temporal and spatial qualifications. As Michael Brand remarks elsewhere in this volume, one cannot assume that even in the fourteen years (1571-85) during which Fatehpur-Sikri served as Akbar's capital, it was necessarily the only imperial artistic center in Mughal India. To speak of Fatehpur-Sikri as the center—whether artistic, intellectual, or religious—is to imply that something distinctive happened there that did not happen elsewhere, and also that the influence of Fatehpur-Sikri's distinctive style was projected beyond its boundaries to other urban centers of Mughal India.

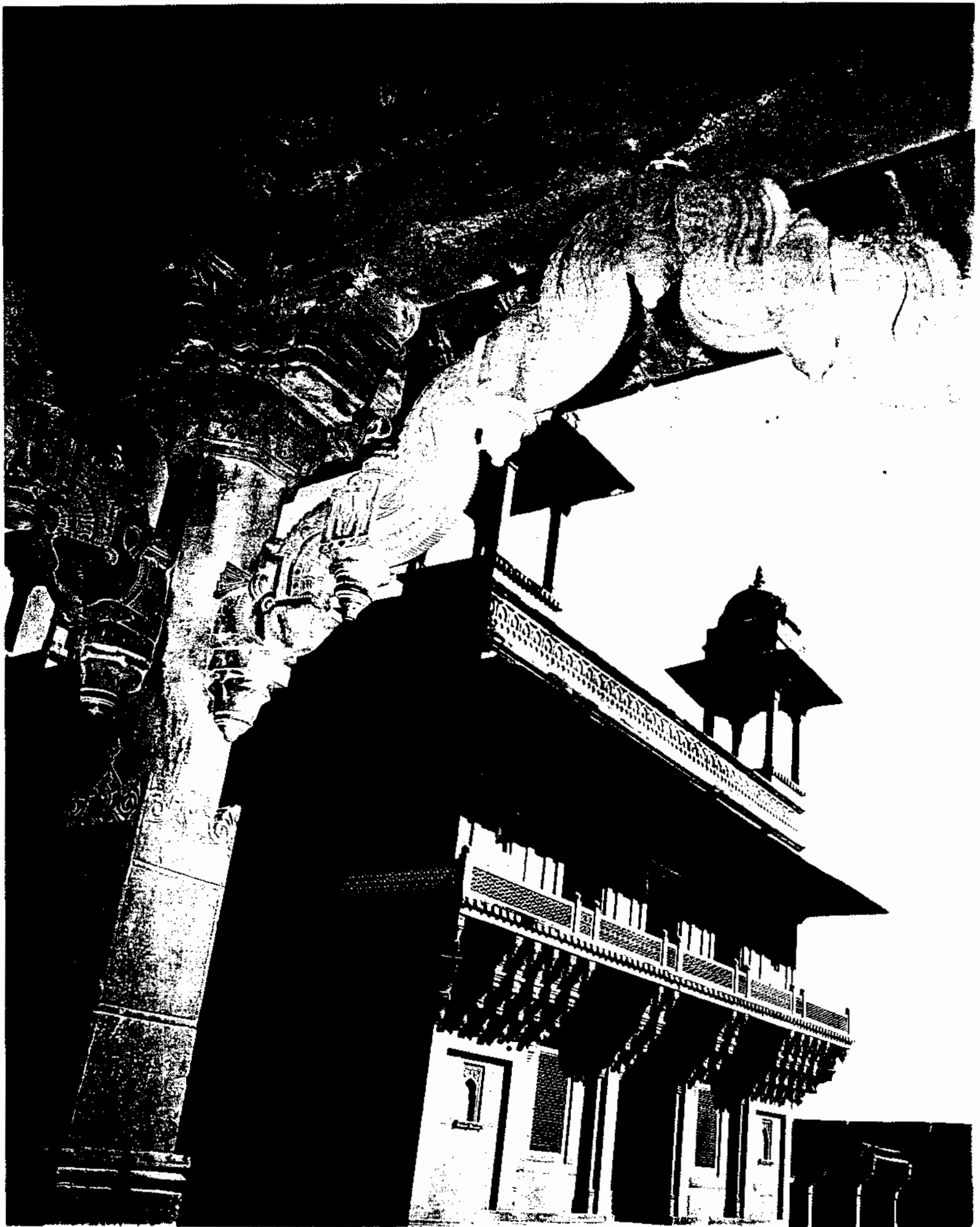
On both counts, we are compelled to reconsider this expansive assessment. Michael Brand notes that much of our information on the arts of the period is specific neither to a certain site nor to a precise date, and that "works produced during the 1560's, and even earlier, were still an important part of Akbar's collection at Fatehpur-Sikri, and some of the programs instigated there by Akbar, especially the production of historical manuscripts, were only brought to full fruition in the years after 1585."¹ Brand's apt remarks can be extended: we know that a great deal of activity—intellectual as well as artistic—did indeed take place in Mughal India before Fatehpur-Sikri was built, and that it continued after Fatehpur-Sikri was occupied and the imperial seat moved there from Agra. It also continued after Fatehpur-Sikri was abandoned and the imperial seat transferred, first to Lahore, and later back to Agra again.

The case of Agra highlights the predicament of talk about Fatehpur-Sikri as a center. It was Agra, not Fatehpur-Sikri, that became the new administrative seat of the dual and military bureaucracies created by Akbar to govern province (or *subah*) of the region in which both cities were located. As a result, Agra continued to grow as a cosmopolitan center throughout Akbar's reign. It was to Agra that Akbar recruited some of the outstanding intellectuals of his reign, such as the Persian scientist Mir Fathullah Shirazi, who came to Agra from Bijapur in 1582—that is, while Fatehpur-Sikri was still the imperial capital. The stature of Agra was undiminished, and some would even say unaffected, by the transfer of the imperial court.² Precisely because Fatehpur-Sikri was the creation of a single emperor and its days of glory limited to a small part (fourteen of the forty-nine years) of his reign, it is difficult to argue that it was the intellectual center at any particular point in those years, even though it served as the new imperial capital.

If we restrict artistic to architectural output and try to compare the architectural to the intellectual legacy of Fatehpur-Sikri, we are faced with an instructive contrast. This publication and the conference that preceded it came about under the patronage of the Aga Khan Program for Islamic Architecture precisely because Fatehpur-Sikri did succeed in being an architectural showcase for Akbar's hegemonic vision. Compared with that its intellectual role at once appears imprecise, less palpable, and less durable than its red sandstone structures. It becomes a minor link to other Mughal metropolitan centers—Agra, Delhi, and Lahore—all of which preceded it and superseded it in their intellectual allure and achievement. Fatehpur-Sikri could boast no major educational institution, no permanent library, not even a Sufi lineage comparable in appeal to the Chishti paragons of Ajmer, Delhi, Nagaur, and Gwalior. As an intellectual site, it revealed the limits, rather than the marvels, of imperial might and patronage.

Having given a minimalist appreciation of Fatehpur-Sikri as an intellectual and religious forum, it is now time to present the opposite view, namely, that its very nonconformity to the canon of expectation for an intellectual center is exactly what makes it representative of its founder and patron. Akbar projected his own personality, at once activist and pragmatic, probing and calculating, on all that he did. In 1571 he ordered the building of Fatehpur-Sikri for imperial purposes; he stated reason—allegiance to a particular Sufi order, the Chishtiyya, and gratitude to a specific Sufi, Shaikh Salim—but masked another, larger purpose: to separate his own rule from what preceded, but also from what would follow. Four years later Akbar left it for other imperial purposes, partly related to the immediate tactical objective of subduing the unruly Afghans in the north. His further major goal was to separate himself from the artifacts of his own creation, to focus attention exclusively on the authority of his person, and not to be trapped by either the splendor or the immutability of his self-made environment.

Such an interpretation flies in the face of traditional historiography. Most students of Mughal India try to see





together the random references in Badauni's *Muntakhab-i-Tawarikh* and Abu'l Fazl's *Akbarnama* to make sense both of the building and of the abandonment of the city. This approach, however, leaves only the mystery of deserted buildings and the regret of a desperately poor surrounding village. The intellectual and religious voices that once filled its paces remain mute; their influence is assigned to some nonspatial category of reference, such as "Akbar's contribution to Indo-Muslim civilization." A more promising approach to examining the intellectual quality of Fatehpur-Sikri is to discover from the highlights of those fourteen years when it was the imperial capital what objectives of Akbar's court were pursued there and how they persisted and developed or were thwarted and abandoned afterward.

John Richards called attention to the discrepancy between pretext and intent, not only in Akbar's earlier decision to build the city, but also in his later impulse to desert it, first for Lahore and then for nearby Agra. If the move to Lahore in 1585 seemed precipitate, it was at least tactically plausible. But Akbar's subsequent preference for Agra as his capital raises questions about his change in attitude toward Fatehpur-Sikri that must be explored, however slim the evidence upon which to reconstruct a suitable answer. To Richards's credit he asks the right questions and provides a plausible hypothesis for shaping their answers:

To summarize, first Akbar designed and built Fatehpur-Sikri as a completely new capital devoid of any of the political associations of Delhi, Lahore, or any of the other long-occupied Muslim cities. His own creation, Fatehpur-Sikri, was thus completely identified with Akbar's policies and personal authority. Later, concerns for defense and perhaps . . . rejection of possible ceremonial immobilization, led to the abandonment of Fatehpur-Sikri. Thereafter, the imperial camp, rather than a specific city, became Akbar's capital, titled the seat of the *khilafa*. For the Indo-Muslim rulers of Hindustan prior to Akbar, including his father and grandfather, possession and political domination of Delhi were of supreme importance. Similarly in the earlier central Asian tradition of the Timurids, possession of Samarkand, coronation, and political support from the populace were matters of continuing concern. Akbar reversed this fixed concern, fusing instead all authority within himself and ultimately within the dynasty which succeeded him.³

Elsewhere in this volume he writes:

During his fifty-year-long reign Akbar never established a permanent capital. He shifted the court when he felt it necessary. He delegated tasks, but not the supervision of his territorial expansion, and often led

the imperial armies into battle himself. For that reason there was always a direct correlation between the location of the capital and the empire's strategic interests. Where Akbar was, there too was the capital of the empire.⁴

If Richards's remarks are correct, then Fatehpur-Sikri has to be reinterpreted, not only as an imperial capital, but also as an intellectual center. To the extent that Akbar succeeded as a patron of the arts and learning, it could not be measured by standards that applied to other royal cities; it was, as Richards says, his own creation and thus completely identified with Akbar's policies and personal authority. The converse of this statement is also true: once Fatehpur-Sikri ceased to be the imperial seat, whatever special quality it had generated as an intellectual forum also ceased. Even if Fatehpur-Sikri in some reduced measure continued to function as a city after Akbar's departure in 1585, its character had irrevocably changed. Old patterns that had been reshaped or new directions that had been launched there before 1585 became linked after 1585 to Akbar or to his reign, and not to the city where they had first become manifest.

In retrospect, Richards's point seems obvious. One should not have expected that a monarch who prided himself on his own charismatic appeal would have allowed the creation of a space that would compete with it, if only because, thus left unattached, his charisma could more easily be transmitted to another generation. If one studies Akbar's relationship with his legitimate male heirs, whether Prince Murad, Prince Daniyal, or Prince Salim, the future Jahangir, one quickly realizes that the greatest Mughal did not concern himself with grooming the second greatest, nor was he apparently preoccupied with securing his niche in history, as has sometimes been suggested by certain nostalgic interpreters of Fatehpur-Sikri. Akbar's quixotic character may have dictated the foundation of a city which in its architectural symmetry and splendor would be unrivaled in South Asia, but this same quixotic character determined that any city, even one created by him, could not be any more than a way station, a caravanserai, en route to the achievement of deeply held but largely inchoate imperial aspirations.

One of the reasons why so little firm evidence can be found for assessing Akbar's intentions is the paucity of historical data. Although Mughal historiography has been praised (one writer even going so far as to claim that it was "the art that flourished most during the Mughal period"⁵), all that is known or knowable about Akbar from literary sources is secondhand. The emperor, unlike his grandfather, never wrote his own memoirs. He is said never to have written or read any document: all his correspondence was dictated to official scribes, the foremost of whom was Abu'l Fazl.⁶ All correspondence from others, as well as poetry, literary or religious texts, including presumably the Koran, were "read out to him at set times of the day by professional reciters."⁷ The argument for the historical accuracy of this image is built largely on the testimony of two documents, both written by

courtiers totally dependent on him for patronage. Their respective assessments are suggestively opposite, the one from a favored confidant commissioned to do the official chronicle, the other clandestinely prepared by a biographer, a "failed"⁸ contestant in the courtyard of royal patronage.

Ironically it was Akbar's intent to have only one—and the official—record of his reign. It was not until almost a century later that we learn of the textual odyssey of Badauni's work. Written under the nose of the emperor and without approval by a scholar in his employ, it was so carping in its tone that Badauni had to keep it concealed during his lifetime. That he managed this feat is an untold story that must be at least as interesting as the numerous details of Akbar's court, which Badauni records largely to vilify others while at the same time drawing attention to his own virtue. It is not even clear when Badauni died, but according to the only Mughal writer who alludes to the book's textual transmission, it was in 1599, 1597 or 1615. Sometime after Badauni's death, Jahangir came to know of the book's existence. Although Badauni's sons denied responsibility for it, or even knowledge of it, they were imprisoned and their property confiscated; booksellers were forbidden to sell or purchase the book, though it continued to circulate clandestinely.⁹ We may presume that the book became a runaway bestseller during the reign of Aurangzeb, leading to the subsequent biographical turbulence about Akbar and his reign.

Was Akbar the heretical villain depicted by Badauni or the semi-divine hero of Abu'l Fazl's eulogistic narrative? Although most students of Mughal India are aware of their contrasting positions in Akbar's court and their opposing opinions about the ruler whom they both served, those contrasts have been underscored when speaking of the intellectual tendencies of Fatehpur-Sikri as it is portrayed by each of them. It is in reading beyond what either courtier chooses to say, whether in wanting to praise (Abu'l Fazl) or in hoping to criticize (Badauni), that we can reconstruct the variables that determined the boundaries of discourse there. The intellectual games that were played were rather narrow in both their range and intended audience. One does not have to read many pages of either account to note the preoccupation with religious matters that often cloaked sectarian differences under the guise of a disinterested pursuit of the truth. Akbar rose above this bigotry, seeking a reconciliation of differences, or did he superimpose his own ideology on his contenders without taking into account what they contained? However one answers that question, it is essential to stress the distinction between Akbar's patronage of literature—especially translations—which was considerable, and his own intellectual pursuits, which are unknown except through interpolation from Abu'l Fazl's encomia.

In the entire three volumes of the *Akbarnama*, there is only one reference to the contents of the imperial library. Abu'l Fazl reports (probably about Fatehpur-Sikri, though the place is not specified):

Among books of renown there are few that are not

in his Majesty's assembly hall; and there are no historical facts of the past ages, or curiosities of science, or interesting points of philosophy, with which his Majesty, a leader of impartial sages, is unacquainted.¹⁰

Yet the only books mentioned specifically by title concern neither history nor science nor even philosophy; they are rather poems or collections of poems, a few books on religious ethics, and some Sufi treatises. Only two titles suggest works by Indian authors, the poems of Amir Khusrau, the Delhi Sultanate courtier, and the letters of Shaikh Sharaf ad-Din ibn Yahya Munairi, a fourteenth-century Bihari saint from the minor Firdawsi order.

If the intellectual exchange at Fatehpur-Sikri was restricted to religious discourse, that was due to the preference of the emperor. It was he, too, who determined its scope. Despite the availability of printing, known at least as early as 1556 through the Portuguese at Goa, Akbar made no effort to gain a wider audience than "the relatively small official class that could be reached through hand-copied manuscripts."¹¹ If there was a debate, it was conducted among elites, and its chief consumer was the elite of elites, the emperor himself.

To be a courtier one had to be equipped with numerous skills, and willing to undertake a wide range of tasks. Almost all courtiers had to be administrators—both civil and military—as well as battlefield tacticians. Few escaped going on campaigns, and Abu'l Fazl stands out as the chief exception to the rule. He was exempted from military service for twenty years and, once pressed into it, he became vulnerable to intrigues beyond the imperial court which eventually cost him his life. Badauni had to report to the imperial camp more than once when Akbar was waging his wars; his unexcused absence from military service may have cost him dearly in terms of the patronage he so eagerly sought. Yet Akbar's insistence on combat readiness as a requirement for his courtiers proved beneficial to his imperial designs, as can be seen in the case of Raja Birbal, a Brahman who became perhaps his closest confidant and performed with distinction on the battlefield numerous times before succumbing to intrigues on the dangerous northwest frontier.¹²

Not surprisingly, a battle-ready mentality suffuses Fatehpur-Sikri, whether one studies the cluster of its buildings as a tent city in stone or the level of discourse at the 'Ibadatkhana and elsewhere. Conversation, like art, had to have a visible, practical effect. To look at a structure like the Divan-i Khass—presuming, for the moment that it is the elusive site of the 'Ibadatkhana—and see it as a place of tranquil speculation is to misread Akbar's fundamental character, insofar as we have any means of gaining insight into it. While the pillared crosswalk of the Divan-i Khass [63] may have served as a retreat from the battlefields beyond Fatehpur-Sikri, it was not a substitute for them. To be effective, religious discussions had to relate to the only goal worth pursuing. That goal was the integration of the diverse groups included within an expanding hierarchical bureaucracy which admitted of only one ultimate authority—the emperor.

It is to Akbar's credit that he wrapped absolutism in the

cloak of ecumenicity: he may have encouraged discussion, but he did not permit dissent. The repeated efforts to read an orthodox-heterodox controversy into the religious issues that surfaced during Akbar's reign, especially at Fatehpur-Sikri, are digressive. There was no standard of orthodoxy apart from loyalty to the emperor. The same fusion of religious-political identity can be discerned in the imperial ideologies of other Muslim empires contemporary with the Mughal dynasty, whether one looks to Isfahan or Istanbul, or even to Meknes in the distant Maghrib. Badauni understood this far better than his subsequent interpreters: while he may have scribbled treason in private, he did not confront Akbar in public.

A Muslim scholar who did attempt to confront the emperor was Shaikh Abd an-Nabi. He had been Akbar's early choice as *sadr al-sudur*, or chief religious official of the Muslim constituency of the empire, and held office from 1564 to 1579. But disgracing himself, he was sent on a pilgrimage to Mecca as a punishment, only to return to India without permission. Even then he might have retained a modicum of political power, or at least personal liberty, had he not used such abusive language in addressing Akbar at a public audience that the emperor struck him. He was then accused of embezzlement, tried, found guilty, and thrown into prison; there he remained until either he died or was killed.¹³

To answer one of the questions posed at the beginning of this essay, then, Akbar did not brook any countermanning authority. The fate of Abd an-Nabi would have been shared by Badauni, had his slanderous and hence treasonous chronicles, now so widely quoted, been discovered during his lifetime. Because the abilities, the preferences, and, above all, the judgment of the emperor determined the outcome of every situation, we cannot assess the intellectual scope of Fatehpur-Sikri without squarely facing the two traits that set Akbar apart from predecessors and successors in South Asia as well as from contemporaries elsewhere in Dar al-Islam. On the one hand, he claimed to be illiterate, and on the other, he engaged in a wide range of activities, not only military and diplomatic, bureaucratic and fiscal, but also musical, poetic, and artistic. Each informed and augmented the other. His putative illiteracy allowed him to engage in many activities and never to be bound by another's text. At the same time, some of those pursuits were given priority over others. He was inclined to music, architecture, and painting, but, despite the testimony of Abu'l Fazl, not to calligraphy.

The narrowness of the intellectual discourse, the controlled activity of courtiers, and the unchallengeable authority of the emperor taken together allow us to evaluate the two most durable intellectual legacies of Akbar's years at Fatehpur-Sikri: the translations from Sanskrit to Persian begun in 1574 by the spiteful but talented Badauni, and the discussions of the 'Ibadatkhana, begun about the same time. To answer another of the questions posed at the beginning, both achievements inextricably combine the intellectual and religious. For instance, the translations may be classifiable as intellectual pursuits, but

the most significant were the translations from the Hindu religious classics. Both the great epics, the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*, as well as the *Atharva Veda*, were made available to Muslim officials interested in understanding something of the culture of the empire's most numerous subjects, but the major result was to win the enthusiastic participation of the Hindu clerical class (*kayasth*) who made up a large part of the civil bureaucracy.¹⁴

Translations were made in places other than at Fatehpur-Sikri, and they continued to be after Fatehpur-Sikri was no longer the imperial capital, but the distinct atmosphere of Fatehpur-Sikri inspired by Akbar contributed not only to their launching but also to their long-term influence.

The same can be said of the religious discussions. Though we do not even know for certain where the *Ibadatkhana* was located, we do know that the discussions began as exchanges among Muslim legal specialists, chiefly the ill-fated Abd an-Nabi and his rivals, and were then progressively broadened to include articulate religious professionals from other communities. Shi'i savants, Sufi shaikhs, and in time also Hindus, Jains, Parsis, and Catholics were invited to participate. Viewed only as religious events, the weekly discussions can be interpreted as an aspect of Akbar's belief in doctrinal tolerance, but in fact they were much more than that. They indicated his belief in the necessity of finding and applying an ideological *modus vivendi* for the diverse groups under his hegemony. Beyond doctrinal tolerance was the imposition of social pluralism and intellectual discourse among otherwise incompatible groups. Akbar was the enforcer and though he may have used a religious forum and religious actors, his own ultimate purpose lay not in promoting religious harmony or understanding, but in broadening the base of participation by the elite in his system to cement their corporate solidarity as his subjects, and, above all, to increase their dependence on him as unifying and controlling agent of their destinies.

The isolation of Fatehpur-Sikri from the distractions—and also the competing factions—of other imperial cities proved an invaluable asset to Akbar in achieving the ideological reform which lay at the heart of his religious discussions. It took five years (1574-79) for him to build the aura of his personal probity and dynastic invincibility. It was a period of comparative peace. Having secured Gujarat from Afghan meddling in October 1573, he turned his hand to the relatively easier campaigns against other Afghan notables in Bihar and Bengal. In 1579 at Fatehpur-Sikri he took two bold steps to forge an independent Muslim ideology and to cement his personal authority as emperor. First in June he himself recited the *khutba* in his name at the Friday prayer and arrogated to himself the title of caliph. It was an extraordinary step, but not unprecedented—ambitious Indian rulers from as early as Mubarak Shah Khalji and also many of the Timurid rulers had claimed to be caliph.¹⁵ Then in September Akbar compelled the leading Muslim scholars in his court to sign a document (*mahzar*) acknowledging his superiority to them in interpreting Islamic law.¹⁶ The later proclamation of peace for all (*sulh-i*

kulh) as the latitudinarian slogan of his empire was mere extension to all his subjects of what Akbar had promised Muslims in the *mahzar*: peace, i.e., the resolution of conflict and assurance of justice, was guaranteed to everybody. The one unstated, but clearly understood, proviso that Akbar's authority as the guarantor was beyond question. Some would call this peace with an iron fist, but in view of the circumstances in which he lived and ruled, it was arguably the best policy he could have chosen to pursue.

What finally needs to be stressed about the intellectual significance of Fatehpur-Sikri is its special, if transient, role as the site for reshaping Akbar's image and his subject's perception of him as an absolute ruler. While the translation projects might have been undertaken and might have succeeded elsewhere, the policy of enforced tolerance required both for its genesis and for its rapid implementation the geographic isolation and scenic awe that Fatehpur-Sikri provided in double measure. Though he shifted the imperial seat to other cities, his bold attempt at imposing communal harmony through royal fiat and obedience to the emperor may be the most enduring and certainly is the most controversial element of Akbar's intellectual legacy from the Fatehpur-Sikri years.

NOTES

1. See Michael Brand, "The City as an Artistic Center," elsewhere in this volume.
2. Gavin Hambly, "Agra," in the *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, ed. E. Yarshater (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1984), vol. 1, fasc. 1, pp. 611-12.
3. John F. Richards, "The Formation of Imperial Authority under Akbar and Jahangir," in *Kingship and Authority in South Asia*, ed. J. F. Richards, University of Wisconsin South Asian Studies 3 (Madison, 1978), pp. 252-85.
4. Idem, "The Imperial Capital," elsewhere in this volume.
5. Muhammad Mujeeb, *The Indian Muslims* (Montreal: McGill University Press, 1967), p. 332.
6. S. A. A. Rizvi, *Religious and Intellectual History of the Muslim Akbar's Reign* (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1975), pp. 30-31.
7. Michael Brand and Glenn D. Lowry, *Fatehpur-Sikri: A Sourcebook* (Cambridge, Mass.: Aga Khan Program, 1985), p. 14.
8. Rizvi, *Religious and Intellectual History*, p. 279.
9. Ibid., p. 295, citing Khafi Khan, *Muntakhab al-Lubab* 1:197-98.
10. Brand and Lowry, *Sourcebook*, p. 140.
11. Fritz Lehmann, "Akbar," *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, vol. 1, fasc. 1, pp. 707-711.
12. P. P. Sinha, *Raja Birbal* (Patna: Janaki Prakashan, 1980), pp. 10-11.
13. Khaliq A. Nizami, "Abd-al-Nabi," *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, vol. 1, fasc. 2, p. 130.
14. Lehmann, "Akbar," p. 710.
15. Ibid., p. 709.
16. See Mujeeb, *Indian Muslims*, pp. 242-43, for a concise and interpretation of this *mahzar*.