

Jalal al-Din Muhammad Akbar:

THE THIRD MUGHAL, Jalal al-Din Muhammad Akbar, was undoubtedly one of the greatest emperors. He was a brilliant administrator and strategist, and a keen lover of the arts, especially painting and music. He took a serious interest in all religions and founded his own faith that was to transcend the rigour of Islam. He was a lover of books and his library had thousands of books and illustrated manuscripts. Yet, despite all this Akbar could not read or write.

Dr Asok Kumar Das, the pre-eminent Mughal scholar, argues that the great emperor perhaps had a neurological disorder that may have left him unable to read or write, though it is known that he had a prodigious aural and visual memory. There are only three instances where he wrote the word 'Farwardin', the name of the first month of the Ilahi era initiated by him at the time of the formulation of his revolutionary religious edict, the *Din-i-Ilahi*, in 1584. Evidently he tried his hand only after this date

Photos: Dr Asok Kumar Das

Jalal al-Din Muhammad Akbar, the third ruler of the Mughal dynasty, was not only one of the greatest of all Indian monarchs, but one of the few royal figures that truly approaches the stature of 'great'. By all accounts he was a man of boundless energy, a brilliant strategist, an able administrator, a connoisseur of literature, music, art and craft, with a serious interest in all religions. He built a huge empire covering most of the Indian subcontinent

and Afghanistan. He had a court that attracted scholars, lawgivers, artists, artisans, traders, envoys and travellers from all parts of the world. Interested in books from an early age, he had in his library thousands of books and manuscripts written in his sprawling scriptorium or collected from many different sources.

However, despite his brilliant achievements, love for books and admiration for authors and learned men, Akbar remained essentially illiterate – in the sense that he

could neither read nor write. This is testified by no less than his son and successor Nurul-Din Jahangir, as well as the Jesuit scholar Father Anthony Monserrate who lived in his court at Fatehpur Sikri from 1580 to 1583. Father Monserrate was a witness to all his activities and an important participant in the absorbing religious deliberations held in the Ibadatkhana.

How could this happen in a highly literate family, where strict Timurid convention for the proper upbringing of a prince called for



Was he dyslexic?

training in a variety of subjects including reading, writing and calligraphy? The founder of the Mughal dynasty, Zahir al-Din Babur, lost his father at the age of 14, and had to wander from place to place and fight constant battles before settling down in India. But he never neglected his books and was respected as an author.

His son and successor Humayun also received a good education in his childhood and showed great interest in a variety of subjects including astronomy. His father gifted important manuscripts to him and his brother Kamran Mirza after capturing the library of Ghazi Khan in Punjab in 1526, and there are many references to demonstrate his love for books and how he carried these in his travels, even to the battlefield. He wrote a commentary on his father's memoirs, the *Wakiat-i Baburi*. The copy of *Divan-i Hafiz* in the Khuda Bakhsh Oriental Public Library, Patna, bearing notes in his own handwriting on the margins of its pages shows his predilection for auguries taken from the works of Hafiz (a common Mughal practice



Akbarnama: Akbar in the evening assembly in the Ibadatkhana at Fatehpur Sikri. The Jesuit shown here is perhaps Father Monserrate. Artist: Narsingh. c. 1604. (Courtesy: Chester Beatty Library, Dublin)

at the time of indecision). Akbar's mother, Hamida Banu, also came from a respected and scholarly family and was interested in art and literature, as reflected from the 10 manuscripts on widely different subjects bearing her seal or other marks of ownership that have so far been traced.

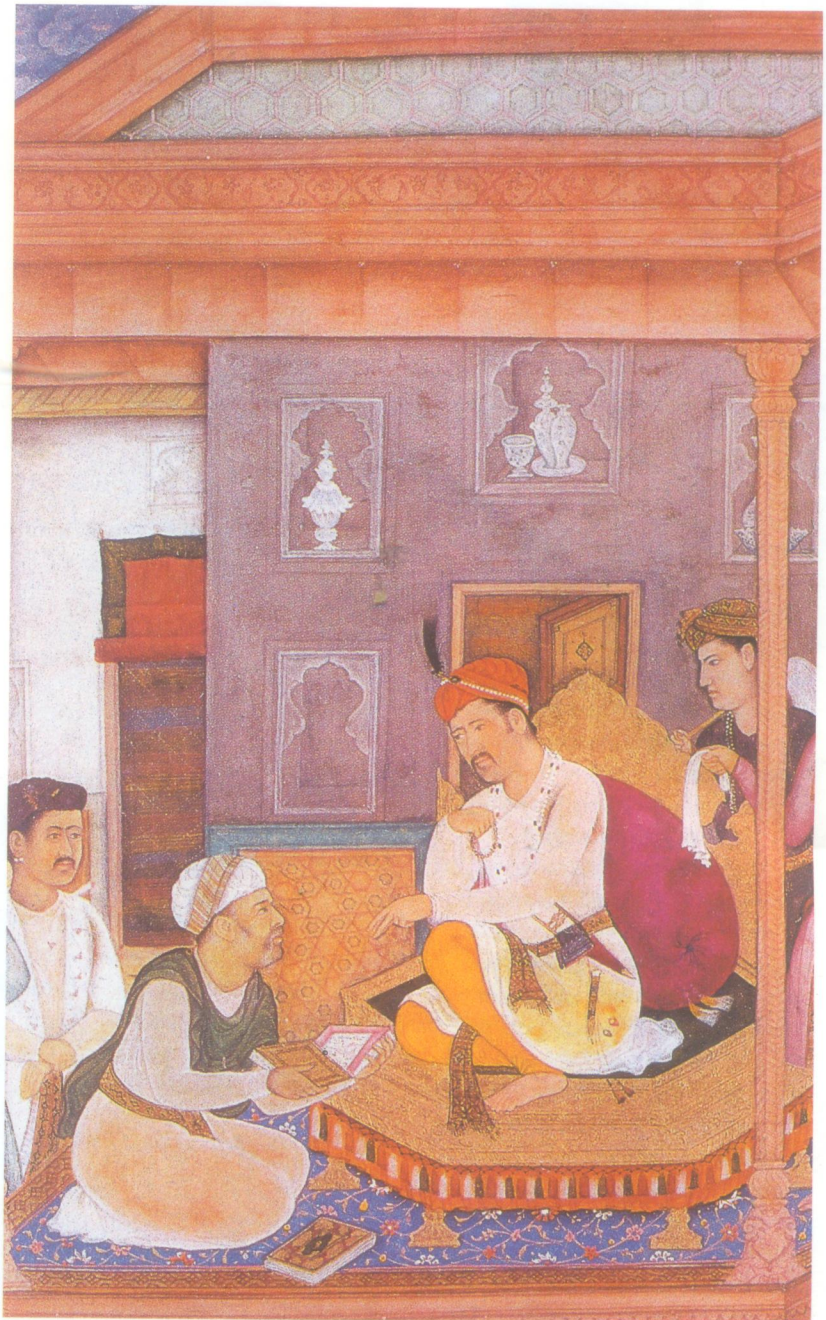
There are numerous references in the works of Abdul Qadir Badauni and Abu'l Fazl testifying to Akbar's interest in books and learning and his phenomenal memory. Abu'l Fazl recorded Akbar's opinion regarding education, which is most illuminating as to his basic approach:

'Every boy ought to read books on morals, arithmetic, the notation peculiar to arithmetic, agriculture, mensuration, geometry, astronomy, physiognomy, household matters, the rules of government, medicine, logic, the *tabi'i* (physical sciences), *riyazi* (mathematics, astronomy, music and mechanics), and *ilahi* (theology), sciences, and history; and all of which may be gradually acquired... No one should be allowed to neglect those things which the present time requires.'

The list is so exhaustive that it is baffling how such a dictum could have been formulated by a man who himself could not read and write. This apparent paradox has attracted considerable scholarly attention, but no one came out with a satisfactory solution until Ellen Smart published a paper, *Akbar, Illiterate Genius*, with a possible explanation.

Akbar had an undoubtedly difficult childhood. He was born at Amarkote in Sind in a humble house in the fort of a Rajput ruler, when his father Humayun was fleeing the country in great distress. When Akbar was barely one year old, his parents had to leave him in a camp with his foster mothers and attendants because his uncles, Kamran and Askari, were closing in to capture them. Humayun and Hamida were heading for Persia, and as the journey was too perilous and the future too uncertain there was great risk in taking the child with them. Akbar was captured by

Then came Maulana Abdul Qadir, selected from amongst three scholars after drawing lots. But years of trying did not bear any fruit as Akbar remained totally disinclined to learn the alphabet. He preferred to spend all his time with wild camels, Arabian horses and pigeons, and in coursing with dogs



Akbarnama: Abu'l Fazl presenting the Akbarnama book to Akbar. Artist unknown c. 1604. (Courtesy: Chester Beatty Library, Dublin)

Askari and taken to Kandahar and finally handed over to Kamran Mirza's wife, Sultan Begum.

Following strict Timurid

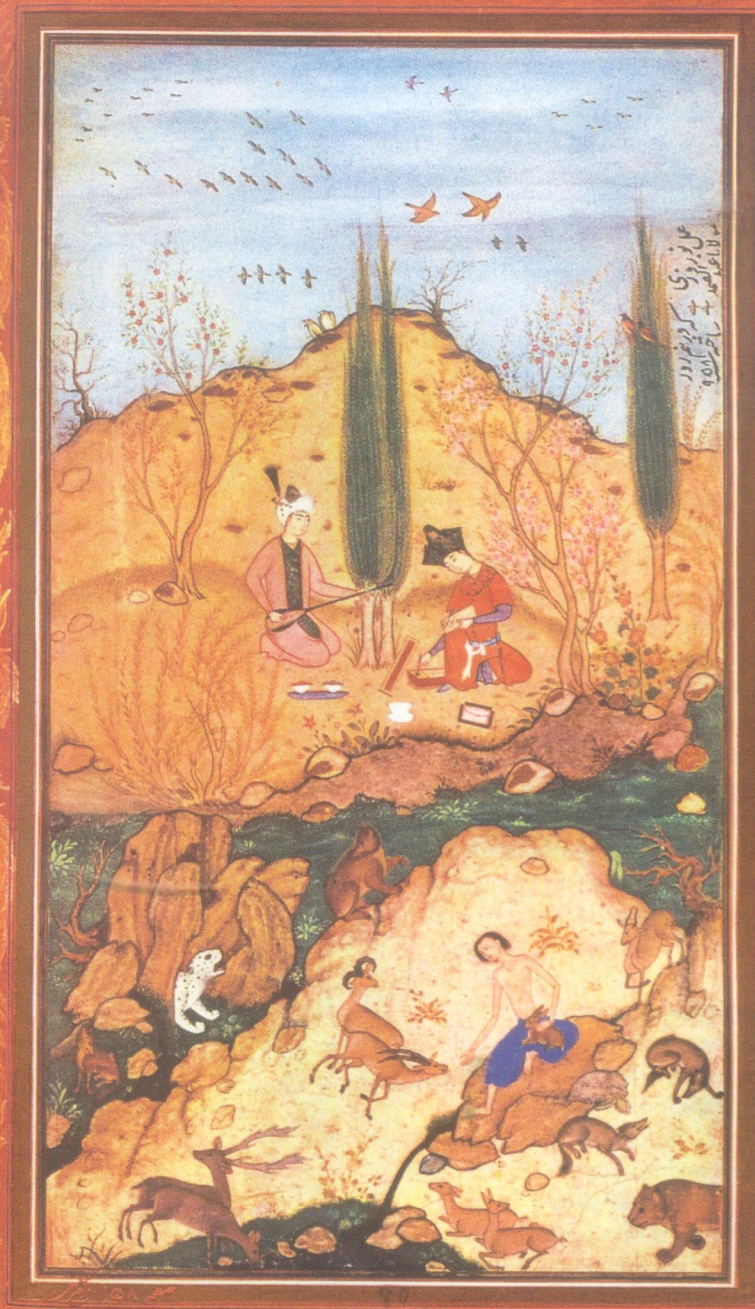
convention, Akbar was not harmed and he grew up with his cousins until he was reunited with his parents about two years later, on

their return from Persia.

When Akbar reached the age of four years, four months and four days, Humayun appointed Mullazada Mulla Asamuddin Ibrahim as his son's first tutor. But Akbar seemed to be an unwilling student. Humayun had consulted court astrologers and made all sorts of calculations before fixing the time to commence Akbar's education, but Akbar disappeared at the propitious hour. On receiving complaints about his inattentiveness, Humayun sent him an admonishing letter quoting Nizami, the great Persian author: 'Sit not idle, 'tis not the time for play / 'Tis the time for arts and for work.' As it was reported to Humayun that Asamuddin was devoted to pigeons more than teaching, he was discharged and Maulana Bayazid was appointed – but he too didn't last long. Then came Maulana Abdul Qadir, selected from amongst three scholars after drawing lots. But years of trying did not bear any fruit as Akbar remained totally disinclined to learn the alphabet. He preferred to spend all his time with wild camels, Arabian horses and pigeons, and in coursing with dogs. This made Abu'l Fazl write in his usual adulatory language:

'For him who is God's pupil what occasion is there for teaching by creatures, or for application to lessons? Accordingly his holy heart and his sacred soul never turned towards external teaching. And his possession of the excellent sciences together with his disinclination for learning of letters were a method of showing to mankind, at the time of manifestation of the lights of hidden abundancies, that the lofty comprehension of this Lord of the Age was not learnt or acquired, but was the gift of God in which human effort had no part.'

We also hear of a number of other scholars who acted as tutors to Akbar including Pir Muhammad Khan, Hajji Muhammad Khan, Mulla Alauddin, Muqim Khan and Mir Abdul Latif. Bayram Khan, Akbar's regent, selected the last named one when Akbar was nearly 15 years old and had already



Gulshan Album: Young Akbar painting in a landscape.
Artist: Khwaja 'Abdus Samad c. 1551. (Courtesy: Gulistan Palace Library, Tehran)

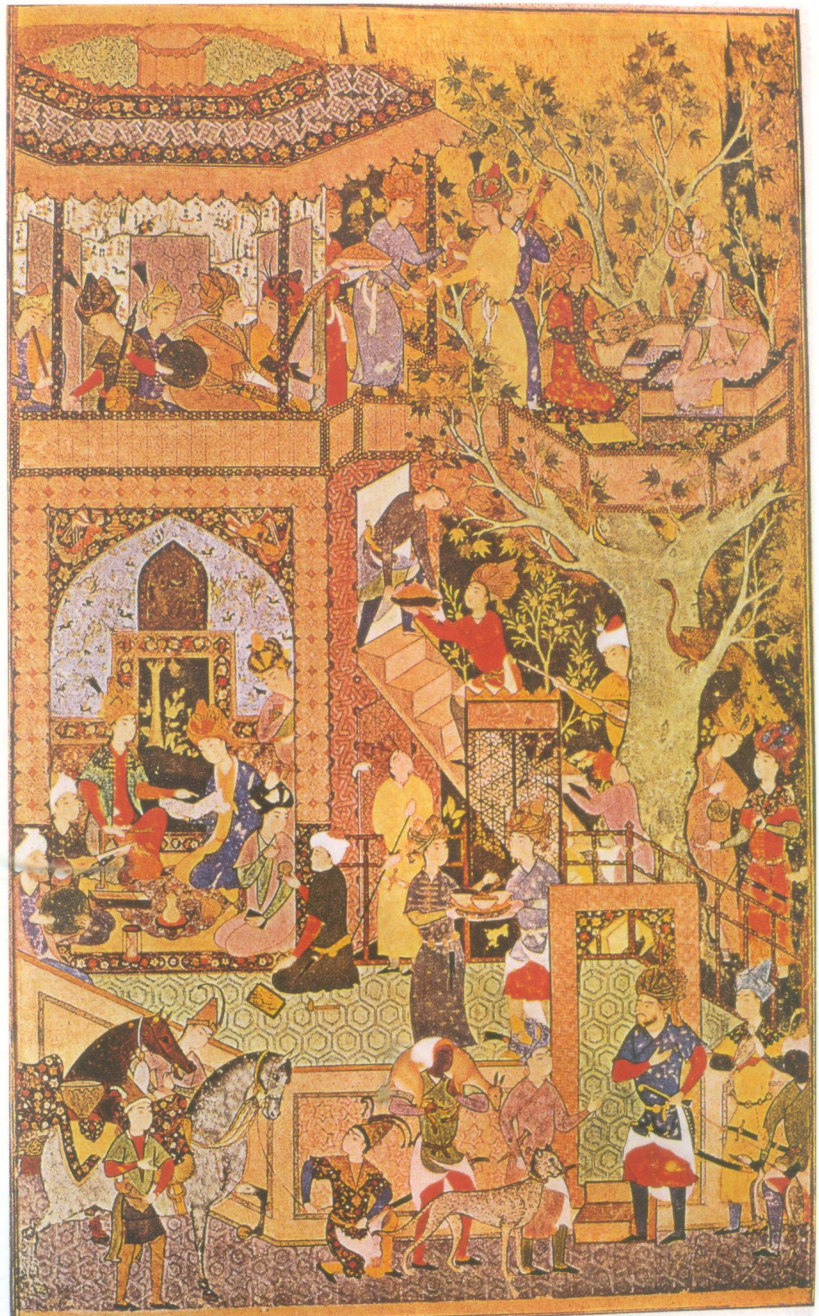
Akbar's interest in painting is revealed by the size of his taswirkhana, the number of painters recruited from different parts of the subcontinent and from Persia, Transoxiana and Central Asia, the unusually wide range of manuscripts selected for illustration and the large number of illustrations in most of them. He selected their subjects, regularly inspected the work of his painters, and provided hefty cash incentives to the skilful ones

ascended the throne after Humayun's death. Shahnawaz Khan in his *Ma'athir-ul Umara* states that Akbar began reading the *Divan-i Hafiz* with the Mir. Abu'l Fazl also writes that Akbar could recite the Mathnavi of Jalal-ud-din Rumi and the diwans of the mystic poet Hafiz, and had a good command of Hindi.

This fact that Akbar was interested in everything excepting studies, despite Abu'l Fazl's mystic explanations, prompted Ellen Smart to find out if there was anything fundamentally wrong with him that made him behave so unusually. After consulting the seminal works of Dr M Critchley she came to the conclusion that Akbar was probably suffering from some neurological disorder that made him so disinclined to learn the alphabet. He was not a dull student, but he was unable to master this as he probably had dyslexia, 'a specific syndrome involving... difficulty... in learning the conventional meaning of verbal symbols and inability to associate the sound with symbols in appropriate fashion'. 'The dyslexic is unable to transform writing into words, and vice versa. This syndrome of developmental dyslexia is of a constitutional and not of environmental origin, and it is often – perhaps even always – genetically determined. It is unlikely to be the product of damage to the brain at birth, even of a minor degree. It is independent of the factor of intelligence. Other symbol systems, e.g., mathematical and musical notation, may or may not be involved as well. The syndrome is found more often in boys. The difficulty in learning to read is not due to peripheral visual anomalies, but represents a higher level defect.'

CM Critchley, *Developmental Dyslexia, and The Dyslectic Child*, London, 1964 and 1970)

Smart also found out from Critchley that dyslexia does not interfere with the ability to read pictures. And this is especially important in Akbar's case as while all traditional teachers failed in their attempts to teach him,



Gulshan Album: Young Akbar presenting his work to his father Humayun, sitting in a tree house. Artist: Khwaja 'Abdus Samad c. 1551. (Courtesy: Gulistan Palace Library, Tehran)

Khwaja 'Abdus-Samad, who imparted lessons in painting, succeeded in making him paint. There are two signed paintings by this master showing young Akbar engaged in painting activity: one depicting young Akbar painting in a landscape drawn by 'Abdus-Samad in half a day on the nauruz of 1551 at Kabul, and the other an elaborate and well-finished one showing young Akbar presenting a miniature to his father seated on a throne placed on the branches of a huge chanar tree.

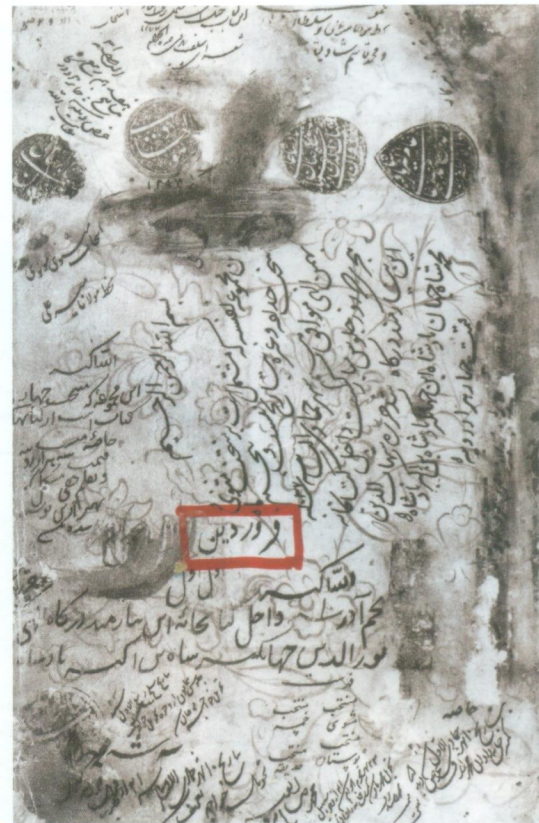
We know from the writings of Abu'l Fazl as well as from a reference in the *Tarikh-i Khandan-i*

Timuriyah manuscript in the Khuda Bakhsh Oriental Public Library, Patna, that both Humayun and Akbar took painting lessons from the Khwaja. Abu'l Fazl informs us that after Humayun's victory over Sikander Lodi and return to Delhi, Akbar continued to learn painting from the Khwaja and Mir Sayyid 'Ali. He also narrates one incident when Akbar was told to kill Hemu with his own hand in order to be a ghazi, the honorific title conferred for killing an infidel, but he refused with the remark that he had already done this years back while practicing drawing with Khwaja 'Abdus Samad, when he

The third example of Akbar's handwriting is found on the opening page of an anthology in the Freer Gallery of Art, Washington DC (no 44.48). This is well known as the *Bihzad Album* as it contains an extraordinary roundel attributed to Bihzad. Akbar, in almost exactly the same place of the folio and in a similar fashion, writes the word 'Farwardin'. Though Jahangir or Shah Jahan have not endorsed it, the letters are unmistakably in Akbar's unsteady hand



Opening page of the *Zafarnama* manuscript detailing the history of ownership. Akbar's autograph is below the central medallion. c. 1467-8. (Courtesy: John Work Garrett Library, Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore)



Opening page of the '*Bihzad Album*' detailing the history of ownership. Akbar's autograph is in the middle. (Courtesy: Freer Gallery of Art, Smithsonian Institute, Washington DC)

1468 and apparently for the same patron. In this case the endorsement, 'the blessed signature of His Majesty Shah Baba Akbar Padshah', is in Shah Jahan's well-formed hand. The book has a chequered history as Akbar gifted it to his former tutor Munim Beg who was later promoted as his Commander-in-Chief (Khan-i Khanan). Munim recorded on the same page: '...this noble book was given by His Majesty, the Emperor of Mankind, protector of the Realm of Islam, Inheritor of the

throne of the Sultanate by birth and right – and may God prolong his rule – to this miserable one. Munim b Miram in Kara on the date 975 AH (AD 1567-68). Number of folios 107, number of lines 3123, and five illustrations.' It was returned to Akbar's library after Munim's death as per contemporary practice. It passed on to Jahangir who signed it on the day of his accession. Shah Jahan, while signing on the same page on the day of his accession, wrote: '...This Gulistan, which is a verdant

garden without equal, whose calligraphy is from the rarity of the age, Mulla Sultan Ali.' Eight years later he presented this elegant volume to his favourite daughter Jahan Ara Begam and wrote in another part of the same page: 'I gave this special book, which is my own property on Monday, the eleventh of Tir, year 8 of the reign (2 July 1635) in the capital Akbarabad to my dear felicitous child, precious as my soul, Jahan Ara Begam, written by Sahib Qiran-i Sani (Second Lord of

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drew the picture of Hemu with his head severed.

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painters to make their work more meaningful and pulsating with life. He himself sat for lifelike portraits and had similar ones made for his nobles and courtiers and mounted in grand albums for his own use.

Despite the definite remarks made by Father Monserate and Emperor Jahangir that Akbar could neither read nor write, as many as three specimens of his handwriting have been found, two of them authenticated by his son and grandson. Rather strangely, all three of them have the same word, 'Farwardin', the name of the first month of the *Ilahi* era initiated by him at the time of the formulation of his revolutionary religious edict, the *Din-i-Ilahi*, in 1584. Evidently he tried his hand only after this date.

The first example is found on the opening folio of a copy of Sharaf al-Din 'Ali Yazdi's *Zafarnama*, written by one of the foremost calligraphers of the Islamic world, Sultan 'Ali of Mashhad, for his patron Sultan Husayn Byqara in 872 AH (1467-68) at Heart. It also contains six double-page illustrations by the greatest Persian master, Kamal al-Din Bihzad, and his circle of painters. The word 'Farwardin' written in a shaky clumsy hand would not have been recognized as that of Akbar had there not been an endorsement by Jahangir below it stating: 'This word is in the blessed handwriting of Hazarat 'Arsh Ashyani (Akbar) now in heaven, and Mir Jamal al-Din Husayn Inju presented this copy to his Majesty in the capital of the Caliphate, Dar-ul Khilafat Agra.'

The book was obviously a treasured family possession as it was inscribed by Jahangir on the day of his accession in 1605, and again by Shah Jahan on the day of his accession in 1628, with numerous other seals and endorsements of librarians. Shah Jahan declares in his note: 'Because of its preciousness it shall always remain in my presence and shall frequently be read'.

The second work containing Akbar's handwriting is a *Gulistan-i Sa'di* manuscript written in exquisite letters by the same calligrapher just a year later in



Akbarnama: Bayram Khan watching young Akbar learning to shoot.
Artist: Govardhan c. 1604. (Courtesy: British Library, London)



Two pages of the same manuscript with quality border illuminations attributed to the Persian master Aga Mirak. (Courtesy: Art and History Trust, Houston)

The rigid and well-laid Timurid tradition and the appointment of capable tutors did not have much effect on his mind. Yet he had a prodigious memory, a lively interest in written texts and a profound wish to be educated through words read to him. He learned to paint and displayed a lifelong and unusual interest in painting...

the Conjunction, as Shah Jahan styled himself.)'

On receiving this valuable gift Jahan Ara wrote on the same folio, 'His Majesty Sahibjiu ordered this volume of the Gulistan given on the date of the sixteenth of Muharram to this father-loving child, Jahan Ara.'

At some point it was also owned or examined by Prince Dara Shukoh whose signature is also to be found on the folio. The famous Safavid master Aqa Mirak very tastefully decorated the margins of the first sixteen folios of the book in the first quarter of the sixteenth century.

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books. Value three thousand rupees. It is in pointed minuscule script better than which has not been written. This was the property of Muhammad Akbar (rubbed). Allahu Akbar. On the fifth of Azar year 1 (this book) entered in the library of the Supplicant at the Divine Court. Written by Nur al-Din Jahangir Shah, son of Akbar Padshah.'

Apart from these three undisputed examples of Akbar's handwriting there is another one-line inscription that has been speculated as coming from Akbar's pen. This is a sort of label on the top right hand corner of the first illustration in the *Tarikh-i Khandani Timuriyah* manuscript composed by the legendary artist Daswant and finished by Jagjiwan in the Khuda Bakhsh Oriental Public Library, Patna. It reads, 'Amir Timur Shah Sahib Qiran'. (To me, the line appears to be from Jahangir's hand.)

Mahfuz-ul Haq provides another piece of evidence of Akbar's handwriting from a reference in Abdul Baqi Nahawandi's *Ma'athir-i Rahimi*, the biography of Akbar's favourite courtier Abdur-Rahim Khan-i Khanan, composed in 1025 AH (1616). In a farman sent by Akbar to the Khan-i Khanan in 991 AH (1582) on the occasion of his march to Gujarat, he wrote in his hand the words, 'farzand' (the son)

'Abdur-Rahim bedanad,' above the Tughra. The original farman has not survived, but there is no reason to suspect Nahawandi's testimony as he, like everybody else, was definitely familiar with Akbar's infirmity and therefore highlighted this fact for its extreme rarity.

In conclusion it may be stated that Akbar must have suffered from some neurological disorder like dyslexia that restricted his power of mastering the faculty of reading and writing like a normal child. The rigid and well-laid Timurid tradition and the appointment of capable tutors did not have much effect on his mind. Yet he had a prodigious memory, a lively interest in written texts and a profound wish to be educated through words read to him. He learned to paint and displayed a lifelong and unusual interest in painting for which more than a hundred painters worked in his taswirkhana to produce thousands of paintings to illustrate dozens of manuscripts for his personal use. However, although at a later age he did take the pen and write Farwardin on the opening folios of as many as three of his most prized manuscripts from his personal library, this may not be sufficient to remove the stigma of being 'illiterate' attached to his name!