

Final Report on American Institute of Pakistan Studies Grant

A. Azfar Moin

Grant Period: Sep 2008-Dec 2008

Site of Research: London, U.K.

Purpose: Archival Research

The pre-doctoral fellowship from AIPS allowed Azfar Moin to conduct three months of research in London for his project on the religio-political significance of the Islamic millennium in Mughal South Asia. His work reevaluates the religious controversy surrounding the emperor Akbar (1556-1605), and reexamines the relationship between Islam and politics in the Mughal period. While Akbar's religious cult – the *Din-i ilahi* (Divine Religion) – is well known, few realize that it was timed to coincide with the end of the first Islamic millennium. It was widely held that religion and dynasties underwent a great convulsion at the end of a thousand year era, marked by the rise of a great messiah or world conqueror. Azfar's thesis is that millenarianism was not merely an eccentric interest of the emperor Akbar but an important idiom of social communication and political debate in which claims of power were made and unmade.

Azfar spent a majority of his time in London at the British Library which houses both the British Museum and the India Office collection of manuscripts from the Mughal, Safavid and Timurid periods. Here, he was not only able to examine the variant copies of the well-known, illustrated chronicles and memoirs from the Mughal period such as the *Baburnama*, *Akbarnama*, *Jahangirnama* and the *Humayunnama* but also a whole range of manuscripts that often get neglected in traditional studies of Mughal religion or politics. These include, for example, the *Karnama-i Sahib Qiran-i Thani*, a work of astronomical tables with a long introduction on the practices and benefits of astrology, produced for Shah Jahan who, the work underlines, was born in the year 1000 AH; and the *Hidayat al-Raml*, a manual on magic and geomancy produced for Akbar on the eve of the Islamic millennium. Such works, which often get mis-categorized either as science or superstition, provide a window into the intellectual culture and social institutions that sustained rituals of kingship and theories of time and history.

When one traces the use of millenarian forms of knowledge in the early Timurid period in fifteenth century Iran, the importance of these institutions for becomes even more evident. Here one of the richest historical source is the “pocket library” of Mirza Iskandar b. Umar Shaykh (d. 1414), a grandson of Timur who ruled the province of Fars. One of the rarest manuscripts in the British Library, the prince's miniature library is a *majmua'* or collection of works copied out in a minute but lucid hand, illustrated, and bound in one portable volume. It contains not only the classics of Persian literature such as extracts from the *Shahnama*, and standard works on Islamic jurisprudence (both Shi'i and Sunni) but most interestingly, almost half the volume is filled with works on mathematics, astronomy, astrology, and alchemy. One can recover the cosmology and practice of Timurid-Mughal kingship from such a collection of texts and to decode the signs of that cultural system. One the finest visual record of this cultural world is preserved in paintings and illustrations from the Mughal period which Azfar was able to examine at length at the British Library, Victoria and Albert Museum and the Royal Collection at the Windsor Castle.