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FIQWS

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During the sixteenth century, the Mughal court under Emperor Akbar (1556–1605) emerged as one of the most influential cultural centers in South Asia, especially in the development of music. Unlike many earlier rulers who viewed music mainly as courtly entertainment, Akbar elevated music into a respected and institutionalized art form. He encouraged musical experimentation, sponsored musicians across cultural backgrounds, and created a shared space for artistic exchange. Through this broad patronage, Akbar's court helped shape the foundations of what would later become Hindustani classical music.

Akbar's court became a hub for musicians from different cultural, linguistic, and religious traditions. He gathered performers not only from North India, but from Persia and Central Asia, blending these influences inside the Mughal palace. As Huma Aizaj explains, "At the court of Akbar, a larger part of foreign musicians and singers came from Persia and Central Asia. Abul Fazl mentioned the list of foreign musicians like Sultan Hashim Usta Dost and Mir Saiyed Ali which belonged to Maashhad from Persia. Tash Beg Qipchaq and Qasim Khobar were from Central Asia" (Aizaj 857). This large presence of international musicians transformed the Mughal court into a multicultural musical environment. While Akbar personally admired Persian music, the broader musical culture of North India gravitated toward Hindustani classical music, which combined local Indian musical traditions with Turko Persian melodic concepts. Akbar's willingness to bring together such a diverse group of performers created new opportunities for cultural blending.

Akbar's court historian Abu'l Fazl described the emperor's deep engagement with the arts. In the *Ain i Akbari* he wrote, "His Majesty pays much much attention to music, and is the patron of all who practise this enchanting art. There are numerous musicians at court, Hindus, Iranis, Turanis, Kashmiris, both men and women" (Sahapedia). This description emphasizes that Akbar used music as a bridge across cultural and religious divisions. Music in his court became a shared language that connected people, ideas, and artistic styles. Rather than separating Persian traditions from Indian traditions, he encouraged

collaboration. This openness created an environment where creativity, innovation, and experimentation flourished. These qualities later became the core of the Hindustani classical music tradition.

One of the most significant figures in Akbar's musical world was Miyan Tansen. A legendary vocalist trained in the devotional dhrupad tradition, Tansen is often regarded as the father of Hindustani classical music. His mastery of raga based improvisation, his innovations in performance, and his ability to blend Indian and Persian influences shaped the court's musical direction. Akbar's patronage allowed Tansen to expand the scope of dhrupad and present it within a cosmopolitan setting. As Sahapedia notes, "Tansen is one of the greatest musicians of India whose compositions and style continue to define the dhrupad tradition" (Sahapedia). A well known painting of Tansen from around 1590, titled "Portrait of Miyan Kalawant Tansen, one of the Nine Jewels of Akbar's Court," now held at the National Museum in New Delhi, visually reflects the prominence he held in the imperial household ("Portrait of Miyan Kalawant Tansen"). This image, widely reproduced through platforms such as Pinterest, helps illustrate how Tansen was represented in Mughal artistic tradition and how deeply the Mughal court valued him.

Music in Akbar's court was organized around ragas, the melodic frameworks that guide the mood, structure, and improvisation of a piece. The *Ain i Akbari* provides one of the earliest records of musical organization in the Mughal court. Abu'l Fazl explained that "music is the means of exciting emotions in the mind, and is therefore held in great esteem" (*Ain i Akbari*, Vol. 1). This description shows that Akbar viewed music not only as entertainment, but as a sophisticated intellectual and emotional art. His court embodied this belief by formalizing musical theory, classifying instruments, and recording musical practices in imperial texts.

A key part of Akbar's musical legacy lies in the fusion of Indian and Persian theoretical systems. According to Aizaj, "the theory of Indian performed dhrupad music, as given in Sanskrit text, was well understood. During the reign of Akbar the establishment of connections between model forms of Indian and Persian music established the relation between rag and parda" (Aizaj 859). Rag refers to Indian melodic frameworks, while parda refers to Persian modal structures. The blending of these two systems created a unique musical language that became the basis for Hindustani classical music. This synthesis

was possible because Akbar encouraged dialogue between traditions rather than keeping them separate.

Other scholars highlight how Akbar institutionalized music more formally than earlier rulers. According to an analysis in *Ethnomusicology*, the Mughal court under Akbar functioned as a structured artistic institution where musicians were ranked, classified, and given defined roles (JSTOR). This organization provided stability for musicians and helped formalize musical training. Sources such as the Revolver Club note that the Mughal court employed specialists in vocal music, instrumental music, composition, and even music theory, creating a complete artistic ecosystem. This helped Hindustani classical music take shape as a sustained and structured musical tradition rather than a scattered set of practices.

Akbar's musical patronage also impacted the broader social and cultural environment of the empire. By embracing musical diversity, he fostered a culture of tolerance and artistic exchange. The Berhampore Girls' College study on Mughal music notes that Akbar built a tradition where "music acted as a cultural medium that unified various communities of India" (Berhampore Girls College). These cultural connections strengthened court identity and showcased the empire as a place where artistic excellence thrived.

Overall, Akbar's reign marked a turning point in the development of Indian music. Through his support of musicians from diverse regions, his encouragement of collaboration between Indian and Persian traditions, and his institutionalization of music within the Mughal court, he laid the foundations for Hindustani classical music. Akbar's musical patronage was not only a reflection of his personal interest. It was a transformative cultural force that shaped the structure, theory, and performance style of North Indian classical music. The legacy of this period continues today in the ragas, compositions, and stylistic techniques that define Hindustani music. The court of Akbar stands as a crucial moment when artistic diversity and innovation came together to create one of the world's most enduring musical traditions.

Works Cited

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"Portrait of Miyan Kalawant Tansen, one of the Nine Jewels of Akbar's Court, c. 1590 CE." National Museum, New Delhi. Reproduced on Pinterest, <https://in.pinterest.com/pin/219128338110542865/> .