
Mughal Emperor's Religious Policy: A Study

Rakesh Kumar

M.Phil. Scholar, Dept of History,
MDU Rohtak

ABSTRACT

The Indian Subcontinent has experienced many religions over the centuries and is one of the oldest cradles of human civilization on earth. The river valleys of India are a petri dish of religion and cultural diversity in practices and beliefs. India has seen times of peace and hegemony, while also experiencing war and conflict with millions perishing in ethno-religious conflicts. Islam and Hinduism have been the two most prominent religions in India. Throughout its history the region has seen both times of cohesion and times of strife and conflict. The Mughal Empire was a time period of peaceful religious and cultural flourishing between the Hindus and Muslims of India, culminating in a golden age of Islamic-Hindu cross cultural pollination.

INTRODUCTION

The last Mughal Emperor's policy of intolerant towards the religious plurality

is what led to the fragmentation of this cohesive system, which continued to deteriorate for centuries. Central Asian tribes invaded India some time around 1500 B.C.E. The Central Asian invaders conquered India and created what is referred to as Classical Indian culture; putting an end to the Golden Age of the Mughal Empire. In a democracy, the Government has to respect the wishes of the people but that may or may not be true of monarchy. That explains the differences in the religious policy of the various kings of the Mughal Dynasty. Through the religious history of Mughal Period we know that all Rulers were not religiously blind.

It is definite that Islam was much spread and propagated in Mughal Period. But it may not be said that other religions were lost in background. There were kings who were generous and enlightened and they cared for the religious susceptibilities of their subjects. There were also those who in their vanity, pride and fanaticism tried to ride roughshod over the wishes and cherished

ideas and ideals of their subjects and did not bother about the consequences.¹

Babur:

Babur was the first Mughal King of Delhi. He had a strong faith in God and honestly believed that if prayers were made with earnestness, those were granted by God. He was careful about his prayers and fasts prescribed in Islam. However, he took wine, opium and Bhang. Many a time he took a vow that he would not drink but unfortunately could not keep up the promise.

He embraced the Shia faith and made his submission to a Shia Ruler. He did not attach much importance to the rituals of Islam and did not allow the principles of Islam to interfere with his ambition or personal pleasures. He married a Shia wife and gave her his affection and appointed her son Humayun as the heir to his throne. He loved the company of learned men and was himself a great writer. With such a mental outlook, Babur did not ordinarily persecute any sector creed.²

Humayun:

Babur was succeeded by Humayun. He resembled his father in many ways. He followed in the footsteps of his father and was fond of opium instead of wine. The mother of his successor was a Shia. Bairam Khan who was a Shia was his principal adviser. Shah Abul Maali was a special favourite of Humayun and he was also a Shia.

Humayun took interest in spiritual matters and at one stage he thought of renouncing the world and becoming a Darwesh. When he was a fugitive in Persia, he accepted Shiaism. This he did after great inner struggle and hard persuasion by his close friends and well-wishers. Such a ruler could not be expected to persecute any religion or its followers in India.

Akbar:

Akbar was born of the Shia daughter of a cultured Sufi family. His father was friendly to the Shias and their doctrines. Bairam Khan, his Ataliq, was a Shia. By personal conviction, Akbar was a Suuni. He did not inherit bigotry or fanaticism from his parents. His environments also inculcated in him a spirit of toleration and harmony. He was born under the roof of a Rajput. He grew under the care of teachers some of whom were Shias and one of them believed in the doctrine of Sulh--i-kul. His first contact with Indian life was in the Punjab where Guru Nanak had preached the lesson of concord between the Hindus and Muslims.³

Many Punjabi Muslims worshipped Bhawani, Durga and Sheetla. They even employed Brahman priests for some of their ceremonies. Akbar grew up in such an atmosphere. He possessed a sharp penetrating intelligence and genius for adapting the circumstances to his wishes. He had in him the ambitions of Timur and Babur and would like to establish an empire in India and follow a policy which would be conducive to his ambition. He was broad-

mindful and above all communal and sectarian considerations. His religious views underwent a great change with the passage of time. He was pre-eminently a religious man and he wanted to know the amount of truth contained in every religion.

Even as a Sunni Muslim, Akbar never behaves as an orthodox Muslim. He did not condemn any religion, by word or deed. He had a feeling that there was truth in every religion. He pondered over the problems of life and death. On the completion of his twentieth year, he was struck with great remorse which was caused by the difficulty of reconciling religion and politics.⁴

To quote Akbar, "On the completion of my twentieth, I experienced an internal bitterness and for lack of provision or my last journey, my soul was seized with exceeding sorrow; There was a great spiritual awakening in him, and that was the starting point of a new religious policy.

Akbar's Marriage with a Rajput Princess

In 1562, Akbar married the daughter of Raja Bihari Mai of Ambar. That marriage is considered to be the starting point of his new religious policy. Dr. Ishwari Prasad writes, "Such intercaste marriages between the Hindus and Muslims were already in prevalence in the North and the South but they were characterised by absence of any true affection between the two communities; resulting in the widening of gulf of relations between the two. Contrary to it, thus marriage created no bitterness in the minds of the Rajputs.

Akbar treated this Rajput princess by hearty love and good treatment. Raja Bihar Mai and his grandson Raja Man Singh were admitted to royal service. They were treated with as much honour as any other high dignitary of the state. It was these Rajputs who were entrusted by Akbar with difficult and dangerous military expeditions. Thus, Akbar's Policy of marriages with Rajput Princesses which began in 1562 ended the long-standing friction between the Rajputs and the Muslims. It was really a master-stroke of his religious policy."

Abolition of Pilgrim Tax (1563):

In 1563, Akbar visited Mathura. He was informed that all the Hindus who had assembled there for pilgrimage had been charged the pilgrim tax. He was also informed that the pilgrim tax was being charged from the Hindus at all the places of their pilgrimage. Akbar did not approve of it and abolished the pilgrim tax. He was informed that involved a great financial loss but in spite of that, he abolished the tax.⁵

This generosity on the part of Akbar had a political motive also. Akbar knew that the Sultans of Delhi failed because they persecuted the Hindus. He realised that a vendetta against the Hindus could neither lead to their extermination nor the strengthening of the Mughal Empire in India. His conclusion was that it was more expedient to conciliate and befriend the Hindus than to alienate them. Political expediency recommended a policy of religious toleration.

Abolition of Jizya (1564)

In 1564, Akbar abolished Jizya. It was a poll tax which was levied from all non-Muslims. That had been done by the Sultans of Delhi and even his father and grandfather had realised it as a part of their religious duty. The tax charged from the Hindus was a heavy one. The Hindus were also required to pay that tax personally which was very much resented by them. Akbar did not find any justification for realising it.

If tradition was to be the guide, it could be imposed only on the Jews and Christians. If it was a sort of sausage in return for exemption from military service, it could no longer be imposed on the Hindus as they had already been enrolled in the Mughal Army.

If it was expected that the imposition of Jizya would induce the Hindus to become Muslims on account of economic pressure, the history of the last 350 years belied that hope completely. If it was a penalty for disbelief in Islam, it was contrary to law because the Quran itself prescribed that faith could not be induced by compulsion. If it was intended to humiliate the Hindus, it was both senseless and harmful because the Hindus did not lose their faith in their religion in spite of the imposition of Jizya for centuries.⁶

Akbar knew that any attempt to rule a country by alienating permanently more than two-thirds of its population, was bound to fail. It was under these circumstances that Akbar abolished Jizya in 1564. In 1579, it was brought to the notice of Akbar that Jizya

was being levied in a part of the Empire. The result was that Akbar issued fresh orders abolishing it throughout the length and breadth of his empire. Prof. S. R. Sharma writes, "With its abolition, Akbar created a common citizenship for all his subjects, "Hindus and Muslims alike.

Liberty of Worship

Akbar was in favour of granting perfect liberty of conscience to his non-Muslim subjects. With that object in view, he removed all restrictions imposed upon the construction of their places of worship by the non-Muslims. The result of this action was that the Rajput Sardars began to erect temples in the names of their Gods and Goddesses.

Raja Man Singh got erected two great temples, one at Banaras and the other at Brindaban. The Christians also built their churches, one at Lahore and the other at Agra. It is said that Akbar visited Amritsar and made an offering to Guru Ram Das, the Fourth Sikh Guru. He also put up a gold canopy over the Goddess at Jwalamukhi in Kangra.

Removing of Cultural Differences

Akbar also removed the long-standing cultural differences between the Hindus and Muslims. Prof. S. R. Sharma writes, "He established a Translation Department. Apart from other duties, the duty of this Department was also to translate the Hindu books of religion into Persian and thus this Department was responsible for translating the Hindu religious books like the

Atharvaveda, the Mahabharata, Harivamsa and the Ramayana into Persian. It was therefore in this way that the old Hindu Religious Literature was patronized during the Reign of Akbar and long standing cultural differences were removed to a great extent."

No Force to Convert

Akbar issued another royal order by which he discouraged the use of force for converting people from one religion to another. As a result of this order, the religion even of prisoners of war could not be changed by force. Although this order did not completely stop conversions, it had a wholesome effect on the minds of the Hindus and their loyalty and devotion to Akbar.

Jobs Given to Hindus

Akbar opened the gates of Government Service to the people of all religions, castes and creeds and colour. Previously, all the posts in the Government were the monopoly of the Muslims. Akbar appointed Hindus to some important posts in the State. Todar Mai was appointed the Revenue Minister. In the provinces, eight out of 12 Divans were Hindus. Todar Mai appointed those Hindus in the Revenue Department who learnt the Persian Language. The result was that most of the Hindus learnt Persian and that brought the Hindus and Muslims close to each other. Raja Man Singh was given a Mansab of 7,000.

His Attitude towards Islam

Akbar was anxious to have an authentic knowledge of the principles of Islam. With that object in view, he availed himself of guidance from Shaikh Abdunnabi and Makhdum-ul-Mulk Abdullah Sultanpuri from 1565 onwards. Up to 1574, he was under their influence and on the whole, he ruled according to the Sunni Principles. The Sadr was incharge of the Ecclesiastical and

Religious Policy of the Mughals

Judicial Departments and he administered public charities. Haj Pilgrims received subsidies from the Government. Akbar appointed a separate officer called Mir Haj to look after the amenities of the Haj Pilgrims. He had a feeling that if an authoritative commentary on the Quran could be prepared giving a rational and well-documented interpretation of all important matters, internal dissensions among the Muslims might be ended and reliable information about the true principles of Islam could be secured.⁷

Ibadatkhana at Fatehpur Sikri

With that object in view was built at Fatehpur Sikri in 1575 the Ibadatkhana with capacity to seat 500 persons. There an assembly was held every Thursday evening and discussions were held on religious questions. To begin with, Akbar invited only Sunnis to those meetings. The names of the important persons who participated in those meetings were Makhdum-ul-Mulk, Abd-un-Nabi, Qazi Yaqub, Mulla Badaoni, Haji Ibrahim, Shaikh Mubarak and Abul Fazal.

Akbar hoped to get true knowledge of the principles of Islam by associating with the above mentioned learned men. However, they started quarreling at the very beginning about the precedence in their seats. Akbar intervened and decided that the Sayyids, Shaikhs, theologians and nobles should occupy the western, northern, southern and eastern sides of the hall of the Ibadatkhana respectively.

Debates

When the debates started, there were demonstrations of vulgarity, vanity and narrow-mindedness among the learned persons assembled there. In disgust, Akbar asked Badaoni to give him the names of all those who indulged in abuse or came to blows with one another. He also gave a stern warning that those who violated his instructions in future would be excluded from the debates. The warning had no salutary effect and the participants cast dirty aspersions against one another.

There were three prominent ideological groups and those were the supporters of Makhdum-ul-Mulk, the followers of Abd-un-Nabi and penons like Haji Ibrahim, and Abul Fazal who represented the views of Akbar. Akbar had deputed them to put questions on his behalf and the other two groups were expected to remove their doubts. During the debates, some people exposed the vices of Makhdum-ul-Mulk.

Many stories compromising his integrity were related. Khan-i-Jahan told the members of the assembly that in order to help himself

to get the money payable to the Haj Pilgrims, Makhdum-ul-Mulk had given the Fatwa that pilgrimage to Mecca did not promote piety but sin because none of the two routes to Mecca was safe for Sunni Muslims. He also told the members of the assembly that Makhdum-ul-Mulk transferred all his property to his wife towards the end of every year and thereby evaded the payment of Zakat on the ground that no property was in his possession for the whole year.

It was also pointed out that Makhdum-ul-Mulk made illicit gains out of the grants payable to the poor, the indigent, saints and scholars. Many of those charges were found to be correct and Makhdum-ul-Mulk suffered a lot in public esteem. He retaliated by writing a book charging Abd-un-Nabi with murder and disrespect to his father. He also stated that Abd-un-Nabi was suffering from piles and it was not proper for him to lead the public prayers. The result was that by 1578-1579 Akbar lost all respect for Makhdum-ul-Mulk and Abd-un-Nabi.

In order to test their learning, Akbar asked the theologians what was the maximum number of legal marriages at a time. In order to please Akbar, Abd-un-Nabi stated that one of the Mujahids had permitted 18 Nikahs while another had himself married 9 wives. When Akbar brought the matter before the assembly, their view was that only four full marriages were legal although by Muta sanctioned by Imam Malik, any number of marriages could be legally contracted.⁸

When the matter was again referred to Abd-un-Nabi, he stated that he had referred only to the divergence of views among scholars and had no intention of legalising illegal marriages. Akbar was very much offended by that reply. Finally, scholars approved the proposal of Badaoni and all marriages of Akbar were declared legal.

The proposal of Badaoni was that as the decision of a Qazi was binding on all, the question of the marriages of Akbar on a Muta basis for life should be referred to a Qazi of the Maliki School who would pronounce them legal and valid. Akbar acted upon that advice and even those wives of Akbar who were not legally married, were recognised as legally married.

When discussions took place on the tenets of Islam, there were so many differences of views that the theologians called one another Kafirs. As soon as arguments started, they lost their temper and abused one another. All that did not create a good impression on the mind of Akbar.

Religious policy of Shah Jahan:

1. According to Khafi Khan, Shah Jahan, issued an order prohibiting employment of Hindus in services.
2. He established a separate department for securing conversion to Islam.
3. Temples in Banaras, Allahabad, Gujarat and Kashmir were broken during his reign.

4. He ordered that those Hindus who embraced Islam would get their share from the property of their father immediately.
5. The war captives were converted to Islam.
6. Culprits who accepted Islam were left free. Christians were persecuted after the capture of Hughly.

According to S.R. Sharma, “He embarked on a campaign of complete destruction of the new temples of the Hindus.”⁹

Religious policy of Aurangzeb:

Aurangzeb completely reversed the religious policy of Akbar. He followed a policy of persecuting people of all faiths other than Sunnis.

1. He established a separate department for the destruction of temples. All important temples of north India including the Vishwanath Temple of Banaras, Keshav Dev Temple at Mathura etc. were destroyed during his period.
2. Mosques were raised the sites of temples.

3. Images of Hindu gods and goddesses were broken and used for the construction of mosques.

4. Several taxes including 'Jazia' were imposed on the Hindus.

5. Hindus in large number were turned out of services and especially of the revenue department.

6. Various kinds of temptations were offered to Hindus to embrace Islam.

7. Restrictions were imposed on the celebration of Hindu festivals and fairs.

8. The execution of the 9th Sikh Guru Teg Bahadur on his refusal to embrace Islam is the most glaring example of the bigotry of Aurangzeb.

9. During his reign, two sons of the 10th Sikh Guru Gobind Singh were buried alive.

Consequences of the religious policy of Aurangzeb:

In the words of Pringle Kennedy, "What Akbar had gained...he (Aurangzeb) lost."

Dr. Surjit ManSingh in Historical Dictionary of India' (1998) has observed, "Some modern historians ascribe to Aurangzeb the intention of ruling India as an Islamic country and depict the Maratha rebellion by Shivaji as an early stage of Hindu nationalism. Some go further in tracing the seeds of partition in 1947 to him. Far fetched though such judgements may be, it is certain that Aurangzeb died in his own words, "forlorn and destitute" and soon after that his empire disintegrated."¹⁰

REFERENCE

- [1] [Smith, Vincent Arthur \(1917\). Akbar the Great Mogul, 1542-1605. Oxford at The Clarendon Press. pp. 12-19](#)
- [2] [Marc Jason Gilbert \(2017\). South Asia in World History. Oxford University Press. p. 79](#)
- [3] [Irfan Habib \(2011\), Economic History of Medieval India, 1200-1500, page 54, Pearson Education](#)

-
- [4] Begum, Gulbadan (1902). *The History of Humayun (Humayun-Nama)*. Royal Asiatic Society. pp. 237–9. *of Economic History*. Cambridge University Press. **29** (1): 32–78.
- [5] Bose, Sugata Bose; Ayesha Jalal (2004). *Modern South Asia: History, Culture, Political Economy*. Routledge. p. 41.
- [6] N. G. Rathod, *The Great Maratha Mahadaji Scindia*, (Sarup & Sons, 1994)
- [7] Richards, J. F. (1981). "Mughal State Finance and the Premodern World Economy". *Comparative Studies in Society and History*. **23**(2): 285–308.
- [8] Irfan Habib (2011), *Economic History of Medieval India, 1200-1500*, page 54, Pearson Education
- [9] Zahir ud-Din Mohammad (10 September 2002). Thackston, Wheeler M., ed. *The Baburnama: Memoirs of Babur, Prince and Emperor*.
- [10] Habib, Irfan (March 1969). "Potentialities of Capitalistic Development in the Economy of Mughal India". *Journal*