

Sulh-E-Kul; Emperor Akbar's Religious Policy

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ABSTRACT

Akbar laid the foundation of an empire based on equal rights to all citizens, irrespective of their religious beliefs. After marrying Jodha Bai of Amer, he abolished jizya and also the pilgrim tax. The liberal principles of the empire were strengthened by bringing able Hindus into the nobility. For instance, Raja Todar Mal rose to the post of Diwan and Birbal who was a constant companion of Akbar.

Abu'l-Fath Jalal-ud-din Muhammad Akbar was one of the greatest monarchs of the Mughal dynasty. He was the son of Humayun and Hamida Banu Begum, born at Amarkot in c. 1542 C.E. Akbar was crowned at Kalanaur in c. 1556 C.E. at the young age of 13 years and 4 months. Akbar was deeply interested in religion and philosophy. At first, Akbar was an orthodox Muslim. He held in high esteem the leading qazi of the state, Abdun Nabi Khan, who was *sadr-us-sadur*. Gradually he moved away from the path of narrow orthodoxy.

In c.1575 C.E., Akbar built a hall called Ibadat Khana or the Hall of Prayer at his new capital, Fatehpur Sikri wherein he invited learned scholars from all religions like Hinduism, Jainism, Christianity and Zoroastrianism and used to conduct religious discussions with them. Some of the scholars were:-

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1. Dastur Maharji Rana - Parsi [of Navsari]
2. Hira Vijaya Suri - Jain saint of Kathiawar
3. Purushottam Das - Hindu
4. Aquaviva and Monserrate - Christian [sent by the Portuguese on Akbar's request]

In c.1582 C.E. Akbar discontinued the debates in the Ibadat Khana as it led to bitterness, the representatives of each religion denounced the other and tried to prove that his religion is the best. In c.1579 C.E., Akbar also issued a declaration or **mazhar**, which was called '**Decree of Infallibility**' by which he asserted his religious powers. He was entitled to choose any of the interpretations of the holy book, Quran, if there were a difference of opinion among the ulemas. In c.1582 C.E., he set up a new religion called **Din-i-Ilahi / Tawhid-i-Ilahi [Divine Monotheism]** which believes in **one God and Sulh-i-Kul i.e. equal toleration and respect to all religious sects.**

It contained the good points of various religions. The **Tawhid - i Ilahi** was an order of the sufistic type. It however, virtually died with the death of Akbar. At the height of this religion, Din-i-Ilahi had only **18 followers** of which only one Hindu followers of which only one Hindu follower named **Mahesh Das**. Mahesh Das had titles as Raja Birbal and Kaviraj. Worship of Fire God and Sun God, No non-vegetarian food, No celebration of birthdays, No marriage to elder or minor, Greetings 'Allahu Akbar' [Allah is great], etc. These are the main principles of Din-Ilahi.

AKBAR'S RELIGIOUS POLICY

Akbar is one of the remarkable personalities in Indian history. Although illiterate, he was endowed with those great qualities of head and heart that make a man great. 'Abul Fazl', and even hostile critic Badayuni, asserts that he possessed a dominant personality and looked every inch a king. 'Jahangir' maintains in the 'Tuzuk-i-Jahangiri' that his

father 'in his actions and movements was not like the people of the world, and the glory of God manifested itself in him [Walia,117].

Akbar was a 'Timurid'. The Timurids were Sunnis by faith but they were not fanatics [Prasad,345].

Akbar's long-cherished project of establishing throughout his empire one universal religion, formulated and controlled by himself, was avowed publicly for the first time in 1582. He was so well acquainted with history that it is possible that he may have been influenced by the example of Sultan Alau-din Khilji, who at the beginning of the fourteenth century had allowed his vanity to be flattered by a similar mad scheme. Although the Sultan contemplated the enforcement of conformity by the power of the sword, while Akbar trusted the influence of persuasion aided by bribery, the parallel between the two cases is sufficiently close to warrant quotation of the historian's account of Alau-din's proposal [Smith,209].

DEVELOPMENT OF AKBAR'S RELIGIOUS POLICY AND VIEW

In 1562 he married the princess of Amber, Raja Bharmal's daughter, and her entry into the palace had a great influence on the emperor. Contact with Hindus made the emperor more liberal minded. He abolished the Pilgrim Tax and then the Jeziya in 1563 [Prasad,347].

He was influenced by his contact with **Sheikh Mubarak** and his two sons **Faizi and Abul Fazal**. Shaikh Mubarak was a learned man and his son Faizi was a wonderful poet. Abul Fazl, his younger son, was a man of extraordinary intellectual powers and he had no equal in that age. They were all Sufis and persuaded the Emperor to announce the policy of Sulah-i-Kul, 'universal peace' and toleration and convinced him that behind all forms of worship and externals there was the fundamental unity which all religions were endeavouring to reach. He saw the dissensions of the divines and was deeply annoyed at the misconduct and evil practices of **Makhdum-ul-mulk and Shaikh Abdunnabi**.

Besides, the Hindus whom the Sunnis heartily disliked, were within the fold of Islam itself divergent opinions on the point of doctrines. The Sufis propounded their own philosophies and rejected the canonical interpretation of the Quran. The Mehdavis, another sect very powerful at that time, believed in the doctrine of millennium. They held that the thousandth year of Islam would be closed by the appearance of a 'Mahdi' or a 'Messiah' of the age and after that it would come to an end [Prasad,348].

He met Sheikh Salim Chisti who lived at Sikri - a well known saint of great piety and spiritual powers, through whose blessings the Amber Princess gave birth to a son Salim. Akbar resolved to build a city on the spot where the Shaikh's cell stood to show his thankfulness to the Shaikh, and a House of Worship whither he wished to invite learned divines, Mullas, Maulvis to come and take part in religious discussions [Prasad,349].

Ibadat Khana or Hall Of Worship

In February-March 1573 Akbar ordered the construction of a 'Hall of Worship' called Ibadat Khana to hold discussions about the doctrines of the faith. In this chamber the seating arrangements were made by the command of the Emperor. There were four sections in the Assembly Hall;

1. In the eastern sat the great leaders who were conspicuous for their enlightenment.
2. In the southern the keen-sighted investigators gathered the light of the day [the illuminate] and those who chose the repose of the night halls of contemplation.
3. In the northern compartment were seated the Sufis of clear heart who were absorbed in beatific visions. The Emperor presided and sat in the middle [Prasad,351].

Ibadat Khana was divided into four sections, occupied by four classes of members: the nobles of the court, Shaikhs or ascetics, sayyids or descendants of the Prophet, and the Ulama or jurists [Majumdar,134].

Influence of Other Faiths

As the Emperor's object was to find out the Truth, he invited men of other faiths to take part in the debates. The **Brahman Pandit** came and he had intimate conversation with them. He acquired a knowledge of the principles of their

religion. The **Jains, Buddhists, Parsis** taught him the tenets of their faiths. The **Christian missionaries** also came to his court and took part in the debates of the Ibadat Khana [Prasad,359].

In October, 1578, discussions in the Ibadat-Khana were revived the renewed vigour and the House of Worship had become a Parliament of religions where the Sufi, Philosopher, Orator, Jurist, Sunni, Shiah, Brahman, Atheist, Jain, Buddhist, Christian, Jew, Sabeian, Zoroastrian and others met and debated under the presidency of the Mughal Caesar [Majumdar,135].

The Muslim theologians quarrelled over the questions they were asked to answer. When they were asked to explain how many free born women a Muslim could marry, and the reply was returned that a man could marry more than four, the number prescribed in the Quran, and Abdunnabi who held the office of Sadr had on an early enquiry stated that the Sunni jurists permitted only four wives but according to some others a man could marry 18 women. He cited the case of a **Mujtahid** who had nine wives. Now during the debate when he was asked to explain the law he changed his opinion and upheld the number prescribed in the Quran. Akbar now had serious doubts about the ability of Abdunnabi to carry on properly the duties of the Sadr. He was in charge of an office which received liberal grants from the State. These were misused [Prasad,353].

INFALLIBILITY DECREE

The Emperor read the **Khutba** in the grand mosque at **Fatehpur on 26th June,1579**. The lines of verse included in the Khutba were composed by Faizi.

“ In the name of Him who gave us Sovereignty, who gave us a wise heart and a strong arm, who guided us in equality and justice, who put away from our heart aught but equity : His praise is beyond the range of our thoughts, Exalted be His Majesty - Allahu-i-Akbar ! [Mahajan,515].

The leading men who signed the document were **Abdulla Sultanpuri** who had the title of Makhdum-ul-mulk, **Shaikh Abdunnabi** the Sadr and also the **Shaikh-ul-Islam, Ghazi Khan Bada Kahani, Hakim-ul-mulk, Qazi Jalal-ud-din Multani, Qazi-ul-Quzat, Sadr Jehan Mufti** of the Empire and other prominent divines [Prasad,361].

In September, 1579, Shaikh Mubarak pronounced a document in his own handwriting which was drafted in such a way as the **Imam-i-Adil or the final interpreter of Muslim Law**. ‘**Dr. Smith calls it the ‘Infallibility Decree’. It was called the ‘Mazhar’**’. The following is the translation of the document which is preserved in the text of Badauni and Nizam-ud-Din: -

1. “Whereas Hindustan has now become the centre of security and peace, and the land of justice and beneficence, a large number of people, especially learned men and lawyers, have immigrated and chose this country for their home.”
2. “Now we, the principal Ulama, who are not only well-versed in the several departments of the law and in the principles of jurisprudence, and well acquainted with the edicts which rest on reason or testimony, but are also known for our piety and honest intentions, have duly considered the deep meaning, first, of the verse of the Koran :
3. “Obey God, and obey the Prophet, and those who have authority among you, and secondly, of the genuine tradition.”
4. “And thirdly, so several other proofs based on reasoning or testimony; and we have agreed that the rank of Sultan-i-Adil is higher in the eyes of God than the rank of a Mujtahid.”
5. “Further, we declare that the king of the Islam, Amir of the Faithful, Shadow of God in the world, Abul-Fath Jalal-ud-Din Muhammad Akbar, Padshah Ghazi [whose kingdom God perpetuate], is a most jurist, a most wise, and a most God-fearing king.”
6. “Should, therefore, in future a religious question come up, regarding which the opinions of the Mujtahid are at variance, and His Majesty, in his penetrating understanding and clear wisdom be inclined to adopt, for the benefit of the nation and as a political expedient, any of the conflicting opinions which exist on that point and should issue a decree to that effect.”
7. “We do hereby agree that such a decree shall be binding on us and the whole nation. Further, we declare that should His Majesty think fit to issue a new order, we and the nation shall likewise be bound by it; provided always, that such order, be not only in accordance with some verse of the Koran, but also of real benefit to the nation; and

further, that any opposition on the part of his subjects to such an order passed by His Majesty shall involve damnation in the world to come and loss of property and religious privileges in this [Mahajan, 515-16].

8. According to Dr. V.A. Smith, "The document assured to Akbar, so far as any written instrument could have such effect, the utmost power that any man could claim to exercise within the limits of Islam." [Smith,180].
9. According to Lane-Poole, 'He found the rigid Muslims of the court were always casting in his teeth some absolute authority, a book, a tradition, a decision of canonical divine and like Henry the VIII, he resolved to cut the ground from under them; he would himself be the head of church and there should be no Pope in India under Akbar [Poole,42].

MAHZAR

The Mahzar was evidently the result of a compromise. It is a document capable of various interpretations. It was declared that a just Sultan was higher in rank than a Mujtahid, that Akbar was the Sultan-ul-Islam [Khalif-al-assam] and the refuge of mankind and a just prince was entitled to this kind of authorisation, He might issue orders and they would be obeyed provided they were not contrary to the Quran and were for the good of the nation [Prasad,363].

According to Wolesley Haig, Islam is not wholly opposed to the notion of infallible human guidance. The Imam Ali, the Prophet's cousin and son-in-law, and his eleven successors are referred to as "infallible" by the Shia sect, while each of the four Sunni schools of law essentially attributes the infallibility of its founder. In Shia communities, the highest ranking divine and jurist is considered infallible when it comes to matters of faith and morality since the disappearance of the twelfth Imam, the Mujtahid. However, a passage from the Quran and a saying attributed to Muhammad elevate the authority of the legitimate and righteous ruler above that of gods and jurists. As a result, the court's top ecclesiastics were so discredited by their disagreements and their fruitless arguments in debates organized by Shaikh Mubarak and his two sons in the "Hall of Worship" that their claim to leadership could be easily contested.

The Mahzar was a victory for the Emperor. The Ulama had themselves made a petition to the Emperor and had elected him as the Imam-i-Adil who was given the power to decide disputes. A close analysis of the document leads to the following conclusions.

1. The Mahzar was a petition presented by the Ulama who signed it and accepted its contents.
2. It conferred upon the Emperor a limited authority to decide disputes.
3. The Emperor was declared the Imam-i-Adil [a just leader] and when a conflict arose about a law or a religious matter he had to accept the unanimous decision of the jurists. But if there was a controversy and the jurists were divided in their opinion he could accept any one of the interpretations. His choice was final and his decision had to be accepted.
4. But it was clearly laid down that the order passed or decision given by the Emperor must be in accordance with the Quran otherwise it will not be binding upon the public or the jurists.

This was the limited authority given to the Emperor who was elected as Imam-i-Adil. He was not made a Mujtahid nor was he given absolute authority in deciding religious or secular disputes. He was not declared a mujtahid having the authority to give a decision independently on a controversial question [Prasad,366].

DIN-I-ILAHI

The next stage in development of the religious views of Akbar came in 1581 when he promulgated the Din-i-Ilahi, or Tauhid-i-Ilahi. The object of the Din-i-Ilahi was to establish a national religion which would be acceptable to the Muslims and the Hindus. According to Abul Fazl, Akbar became the spiritual guide of the nation and saw in the performance of that duty, a means of pleasing God. He tried to satisfy the thirst of the people for truth. A ceremony for initiation into the new faith was prescribed. That ceremony is described by Abul Fazl in these words: 'When a novice bears on his forehead the sign of earnestness of purpose, and he is daily inquiring more and more. His majesty accepts him, and admits him on a Sunday when the world illuminating sun is in its highest splendour. Notwithstanding every strictness and reluctance shown by His Majesty in admitting novices, there are many thousand men of all classes, who have cast over their shoulders the mantle of belief, and look upon their conversion to the New Faith as the means of obtaining every blessing [Mahajan,518]

The official account of the Divine Faith is given by Abul Fazl in Ain No.77 of the Ain-i-Akbari, which begins with a preamble in a Sufic strain to the effect that all religions have much in common, and that God and man are one in a mystic sense. The author then, proceeds to expound the doctrine that a people seeking guidance to truth 'will naturally look to their king, on account of the high position which he occupies, and expect him to be their spiritual leader as well; for a king possesses, independent of men, the ray of divine wisdom, which banishes from his heart everything that is conflicting. A king will therefore sometimes observe the harmony in a multitude of things, or sometimes, reversely, a multitude of things in that which is apparently one; for he sits on the throne of distinction, and is thus equally removed from joy or sorrow'. In Akbar the peoples of India had been given a king of the ideal king. 'He now is the spiritual guide of the nation, and sees in the performance of this duty a means of pleasing God. He has now opened the gate that leads to the right path, and satisfies the thirst of all that wander about panting for truth. But, whether he checks men in their desire for becoming disciples, or admits them at other times, he guides them in each case to the realm of bliss. Many sincere inquiries, from the mere light of his wisdom, or his holy breath, obtain a degree of awakening which other spiritual doctors could not produce by repeated fasting and prayers for forty days[Smith,216-17].

ORDINANCES OF DIN-I-ILAHI

Abul Fazl concludes his notice of the Divine Faith by the following description of certain ordinances observed by members of the order, which may be transcribed verbatim.

1. The members of the Divine Faith, on seeing each other, observe the following custom. One says, 'Allahu Akbar', and the other responds, 'Jalla Jalaluhu'. The motive of His Majesty in laying down this mode of salutation is to remind men to think of the origin of their existence, and to keep the Deity in fresh, lively, and grateful remembrance.
2. It is also ordered by His majesty, that instead of the dinner usually given in remembrance of a man after his death, each member should prepare a dinner during his lifetime, and thus gather provisions for his last journey.
3. Each member is to give a party on the anniversary of his birthday, and arrange a sumptuous feat. He is to bestow alms, and thus prepare provisions for the long journey.
4. His majesty has also ordered that members should endeavour to abstain from eating flesh. They may allow other to eat flesh, without touching it themselves; but during the month of their birth they are not even to approach meat. Nor shall members go near anything that they have themselves slain, nor eat of it. Neither shall they make use of the same vessels with butchers, fishers, and bird-catchers.
5. Members should not cohabit with pregnant, old, and barren women; nor with girls under the age of puberty.

A later passage gives a special rule about funerals, as follows:

1. If any of the darsaniyyah disciples died, whether man or woman, they should hang some uncooked grains and a burnt brick round the neck of the corpse, and throw it into the river, and then they should take out the corpse, and burn it at a place where no water was.
2. People should be buried with their heads towards the east, and their feet towards the west. His majesty even commenced to sleep in this position.
3. The last-quoted rule appears to have been prescribed for general compliance. It had the double purpose of honouring the rising sun and offering an insult to Muhammadans who turn towards Mecca, which lies westwards from India.

Other Rules:-

1. No child was to be given the name of Muhammad, and if he had already received it the name must be changed.
2. New mosques were not to be built, nor were old ones to be repaired or restored. Later in the reign mosques were levelled to the ground.
3. The slaughter of cows was forbidden, and made a capital offence, as in a purely Hindu state. In 1583 abstinence from meat on more than a hundred days in the year was commanded. This order and punishment was inflicted on everyone who acted against the command. Many families suffered ruin and confiscation of property. Those measures amounted to a grave persecution of the large flesh-eating Muslim population.
4. Beards were to be shaved. Garlic and onions, as well as beef, were prohibited, in accordance with Hindu prejudices.
5. The Sijdah, or prostration, hitherto considered lawful only in divine worship, was declared to be the due of the emperor.

6. Gold and silk dresses, forbidden by Muhammadan rule, were declared to be obligatory at the public prayers. Even the prayers themselves, the fast of Ramzan, and the pilgrimage to Mecca were prohibited.
7. The study of Arabic, of Muhammadan law, and of koranic exegesis was discountenanced, the specially Arabic letters of the Alphabet were banned. [Smith, 218-220].

Decline of Din-i-Ilahi

In the year 1581-2 a large number of Shaikhs and Fakirs, apparently those who resisted innovation, were exiled, mostly to Kandahar and exchanged for horses, presumably being enslaved.

A sect of Shaikhs, who had the impudence to call themselves Disciples, like the followers of His Majesty, and were generally known as Ilahis, were sent to Sindh and Kandhar, and given to merchants in exchange for Turkish colts.

No later contemporary account of the Din-i-Ilahi has been found. The Divine Faith was a monument of Akbar's folly, not of his wisdom. His actions throughout his reign exhibited many illustrations of both qualities [Smith,221].

Akbar, with his principles of universal toleration, was far in advance of his age. As the historian Freeman says: 'In his age he stood alone, not only in Islam, but in the whole world; Catholic and Protestant Christendom might both have gone and sat at his feet.' No wonder that the Din-i-Ilahi could obtain hardly twenty-five converts of note and died with its author.

The 'ethical rationalism' of Akbar, which was to have united all, pleased none; it was many centuries too soon. It appealed neither to the Hindus nor to the Muslims. Hinduism moved on in the old track while reactionary Islam, championed by Shaikh Ahmad, became triumphant with Shah Jahan. It would, however, be rash to describe the Din-i-ilahi as a 'monument of Akbar's folly', because it was not a 'monument of his wisdom'. It was a failure; none-the-less it was sublime [Majumdar,139].

CONCLUSION

The religious policy of Akbar the Great was based on a Sufi doctrine known as Sulh-i-Kul, a policy of universal brotherhood and non-discrimination. In 1562, he banned forcible conversions, and the Pilgrimage tax was abolished by Akbar. During his reign cow slaughter was banned in India and many temples and churches were constructed. Akbar married many Rajput princesses and gave complete religious freedom to them. In 1575, Ibadat Khana at Fatehpur Sikri was built by Akbar. It was a hall of worship where on every Thursday, a religious debate was being organized. By 1578, he became the most knowledgeable person in Islam. Then he came to know that Islam is not conservative. Most of the Ulemas were asked to go to Mecca. From 1578, the doors of Ibadat Khana of Fatehpur Sikri were opened to other religions also.

In Ibadat Khana, Hinduism was represented by Devi and Purushottam, Jainism was represented by Hira Vijaya Suri, Zoroastrian religion was represented by Dastur Meherji Rana and Christianity was represented by Portuguese missionaries named Antonio Monserrate and Rudolf Acquaviva. Ibadat Khana was active upto 1582. By 1582, he had tremendous knowledge of all religions. In 1582, he developed a new religion having principles of all religions. It is known as Tauhid-i-Ilahi and later it was renamed as Din-i-Ilahi. Sunday was a holiday in this religion. At the height of this religion, Din-i-Ilahi had only 18 followers of which only one Hindu follower named Mahesh Das. Mahesh Das had titles as Raja Birbal and Kaviraj. Worship of Fire God and Sun God, No no vegetarian food, No celebration of birthdays, No marriage to elder or minor, Greeting 'Allahu Akbar' etc. are the main principles of Din-i-Ilahi

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