

AKBAR'S POLICY OF RELIGIOUS TOLERANCE

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Akbar has a very important and everlasting place in Indian history as empire-builder, the real founder of the Mughal Empire in India, upholder of religious tolerance and creator of innovative cultural tradition. He recognized India not only as his own home but also a country with variety of political and cultural personalities. He laid the foundation of a secular nation-state in India. He separated religion from politics, rejected the Islamic theory of state, and declared himself the national monarch of India.ⁱ Akbar was, however the first among the monarch of medieval India who raised the policy of Religious Toleration to the pinnacle of secularism. He included the Rajputs and other Hindus in the administration and used their power to expand the Mughal Empire and in his reign there was no place for racialism, regionalism, or any of religious prejudices. Akbar, just like emperor Asoka, made a sincere attempt to promote the spirit of love and harmony among his subjects. He created a political unity and it was also consolidated by the establishment of uniform system of administration and created a good environment for economic prosperity and socio-cultural harmony. That is why the Mughal period is the evidence of synthesis of Hindu-Muslim culture and shaping the composite Indian Culture. Akbar is mainly responsible for creating the environment of cultural harmony in India. The attempt here is to look into the various aspects of Akbar's policy of religious tolerance and the development in this regards.

Jawaharlal Nehru, the first Prime Minister of India and one of the versatile personalities in the modern India, in his world famous book, 'The Discovery of India', rightly judged Akbar and his abilities in the following words;

"Round himself Akbar collected a brilliant group of men, devoted to him and his ideals. Among these were the two famous brothers fyzee and Abul Fazl, Birbal, Raja Man Singh, and Abdul Rahim Khankhana. His court became a meeting place for men of all faiths all who had some new idea or new invention. His toleration of views and his encouragement of all kinds of beliefs and opinions went so far as to anger some of the more orthodox Moslems. He even tried to start a new synthetic faith to suit everybody. It was in his reign that the cultural amalgamation of Hindu and Moslem in north India took a long step forward. Akbar himself was certainly as popular with the Hindus as with the Moslems. The Mughal dynasty became firmly established as India's own."ⁱⁱ

The author rightly stated that because of Akbar's policy of religious toleration, the cultural harmony in Indian society came into exists and Hindus and Muslims both lived together with peace. Akbar was very liberal and broad minded in his outlook and never made craze of his religious practices and beliefs. Akbar abolished the tax *Jaziya* and gave complete religious freedom to the non-Muslims who constituted the majority of his subjects. He opened the administrative services to all without any discrimination and utilized the resources of the state to bring happiness to all his subjects. He was the first of any medieval kings to attempt sincerely to create spirit of love and harmony among the people by eliminating all the religious, racial and cultural barriers between them. I would like to throw light on articulation of his policy of religious toleration, impact if any on Akbar and how the things happened throughout his reign, which is the major concern of this paper.

Babar the grandfather of Akbar, though belong to an orthodox Sunni school of thoughts, was by nature very kind, generous and liberal in his religious outlook. He gave very important advice to his son Humayun about religious toleration and it was his advice which set the pace for the future religious policy of the Mughals in India. Akbar's mother Hamida Banu was daughter of a Persian *Shia maulavi*, Mir Baba Dost alias Ali Akbar Jami, a God-fearing man of liberal views.ⁱⁱⁱ Akbar himself was born in a Hindu house of Rana Virsal of Amarkot where Rana's chief queen treated Humayun as her brother. Akbar's tutors Abdul Latif and Mulla Pir Muhammad both were very liberal persons in their religious views. Bairam Khan, Akbar's guardian and regent of the state during the days of his minority was also had liberal views in religious matters. Thus collectively parental social heritage exercised a deep impact on Akbar's religious policy.

Akbar himself was liberal and had not any kind of religious fanatics. Though a mighty conqueror, he did not indulge in the cruelty. He usually maintained a perfect control. His manners were exceedingly charming and his address pleasant, for which he has been highly praised by all who came in contact with him. He was able to win love and reverence of his subjects, who considered the ruler of Delhi to be the Lord of the universe.^{iv} According to Badauni, he strictly observed Islamic precepts in his early youth. Many times he visited Sufi saints and had discussions with them. Thus he had an impact of liberal ideas of Sufism. Actually his religious policy was not the sudden outburst of an idea, nor a calculated political move. Its genesis, growth and development was spread over the years.

Akbar married the first Rajput Princess, Harkabai, (Jodhabai as mistaken) from Amber in January 1562 and incorporated Rajput princes in his service. At the the siege of Merta, he saw the Rajputs fighting vigorously with their own people for the sake of the Mughal thrown. Akbar was so impressed that he stopped the practice of enslaving the prisoners of war and their forcible conversion to Islam. He issued the decree in April 1562, making it clear that the women and children in the enemy camp must not be mistreated by the Mughal army on any account. This was a pure humanitarian step and it made Akbar a just ruler and he won great appreciation from the non-Muslims. In 1563, at Mathura, Akbar abolished the Pilgrim's tax throughout his state. Akbar took the most revolutionary step on March 15, 1564 in granting religious freedom to the Hindus; it was the abolition of *jaziya*.^v Thus Akbar did not discriminate between his subjects on the basis of religion and in fact he established his reputation as an impartial ruler of the Hindus as well as the Muslims. Akbar was bitterly criticized by the Muslim orthodoxy and even also by nobility because abolishing of *jaziya* proved to be a great loss to the Mughal treasury. But Abul Fazl defends Akbar on the ground that, *'when owing to the blessings of abundant goodwill and graciousness of Akbar, those who belong to other religion have like the Muslims bound up their waist of devotion and service and exert themselves for the advancement of the dominion, why should they be classed with that old fashion which cherished mortal enmity and be the subjects of contempt and slaughter.'*^{vi} Thus it was a great step taken by Akbar to create atmosphere of cultural harmony.

Akbar was not confined only to abolition of *jaziya*, rather than he wanted to create a spirit of love and harmony among his people by eliminating all the cultural, racial and religious barriers between them. He tried to understand the Islam and other religions deeply to find out the truth and for this purpose he built a separate building, known as *'Ibadat Khana'* at his new capital Fatehpur Sikri in 1575. He held discussions with Muslim scholars Sunni and Shi'a, Sufis and rational scholars (hakims), the Hindus, Jains, Parsis and Christians. These discussions convinced Akbar that no single interpretation of Islam was correct or forthcoming, and further that no single religion could be true, but that all drew, but only in part, upon the same Truth. It was for him as a chosen man of God, to assist in the realization of consciousness of Absolute Peace (Sulh-i-Kul) in order to prevent idle strife between the votaries of different religions and factions. This

being so, all religions to be tolerated but did not need to be followed.^{vii} Akbar's policy of equal treatment to all religions gave a full freedom of religious expression, conversion and construction of places of worship to all. It was consistent with his views to be formulated by the early 1580's. It was perhaps a policy for which it was not easy to find a parallel in the contemporary world- a fact underlined with great pride by his son.^{viii}

Such a policy of religious toleration not only displeased the Muslims theologians but also the good Jesuit father Antony Monserrate. He remarked bitterly that Akbar "cared little that in allowing everyone to follow his own religion he was really violating all religions".^{ix} Akbar was also criticized by the orthodox ulemas and high post holders like Abdun Nabi, chief sadr of the empire and so he wanted to curb their religious power. It led to the issue of a proclamation, called the 'Mahzar' in September, 1579. It was a statement signed by leading Muslim theologians at the court, declaring that Akbar, in his position as a Just Sultan, was entitled to exercise limited powers of interpretation and elaboration of Muslim Law, which was to be binding on all Muslims.^x It was prepared by Shaikh Mubarak and signed by almost all the prominent Muslim theologians and the divines of the Mughal Empire. It recognized Akbar, in his capacity as the Just Monarch and 'amir-ul-momin', to be the 'Imam-i-Adil', viz; the supreme interpreter or arbiter of the Islamic law in all the controversial issues pertaining to ecclesiastical or civil matters.^{xi}

Akbar occupied a unique position in the history of India. Akbar was really a man of farsightedness, a genius statesman, a valiant soldier, a benevolent and wise ruler, a man of enlightened ideas, a sound judge of character and utilized all his powers to create a cultural harmony among his subjects. His manners were exceedingly charming and his address pleasant, for which he has been highly praised by all who came in contact with him.^{xii} Akbar was a patron of art and architecture and in that field also he promoted men irrespective of their religious backgrounds. He was in the real sense in born just ruler. Akbar tried to introduce human social reforms. His attempted to stick to the truth forever and so never discriminated among his subjects on any basis. Akbar, remarks Smith, "was a born king of men, with a rightful claim to be one of the mightiest sovereigns known to history. That claim rests securely on the basis of his extraordinary natural gifts, his original ideas and his magnificent achievements". In fact he chalked out a rational path for anyone who would aspire to the position of a national ruler of India^{xiii} Due to his liberal and just polices and his overall behavior, Akbar was able to win the love and respect of his subjects.

ⁱ J. L. Mehta, 'Advanced Study in the History of Medieval India', Vol. III *Medieval Indian Society and Culture*, Sterling Publishers Pvt. Ltd. New Delhi, 1996, p. 241.

ⁱⁱ Jawaharlal Nehru, 'The Discovery of India', Jawaharlal Nehru Memorial Fund and Oxford University Press, 19th impression, New Delhi, 1999, p. 260.

ⁱⁱⁱ J. L. Mehta *ibid.* p. 243.

^{iv} R C Mujumdar, H C Raychaudhari & Kalikinkar Datta, 'An Advanced History of India', Macmillan, London, 1946, p. 454.

^v J L Mehta *ibid.* p. 246.

^{vi} Abul Fazl, 'Akbarname', II, p. 203, 204. Cited in J L Mehta's *ibid.* p. 246

^{vii} Irfan Habib, 'Medieval India, the of a civilization', National Book Trust, New Delhi, 2008, p. 184-185.

^{viii} Jahangir, 'Tuzuk-i-Jahangiri', ed. Sayyid Ahmed, Aligarh, 1863-64, p. 28, cited in Irfan Habib, *ibid.* p. 186.

^{ix} 'The Commentary of Father Monserrate', translated and ed S. N. Banerjee and John S. Hoyland, reprint, Jalandhar, 1993, p. 142.

^x The text of this document is translated and commented upon by Osamu Kondo, 'Akbar and the Theologians' Declaration', in 'Religion in Indian History' ed. Irfan Habib, New Delhi, 2007, pp. 158-166.

^{xi} J.L. Mehta *ibid.* p. 249.

^{xii} R C Mujumdar, H C Raychaudhari & Kalikinkar Datta, *ibid.* p. 454.

^{xiii} R C Mujumdar, H C Raychaudhari & Kalikinkar Datta, *ibid.* p. 455.