

Evolution of Akbar's Religious Policy

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Abstract

Being the son of a Sunni father and Shia mother, Akbar got a liberal family environment right from the beginning. When he took hold of his kingdom at the age of thirteen, he wanted to establish a strong kingdom as a ruler. Keeping in his mind the historical background of his predecessors, a proper religious policy was required to follow. After going through different aspects of religion in the world, Akbar concluded with the fact that all religions preach the same idea. That is why, he wanted to establish a religion which favours people belonging to all religion. Because of his outlook and attitude towards religion, Akbar holds a distinctive place in the history of Mughal rulers.

Key-words: Akbar's Religious Policy, Din-I-Ilahi, Religion of Akbar, Socio- Religious Reform.

Akbar is generally hailed as one of the towering personalities not only in Indian rulers, but also among the great rulers of the world. His greatness lies not in his expansion of his kingdom, but he is often remembered for eliminating the age-old enmity between the Hindus and Muslims. He started a new era by demolishing the enmity between these two dominant religions as Dr. J.L Mehta also asserts in this direction that Akbar was the first ruler who adopted the policy of religious harmony and provide it highest place.

Now the question arises why Akbar adopted the new religious policy? Many factors were responsible behind the idea of this new religious policy that contributed a great deal to the development of this policy. Among the first and the foremost, we can include political factors. Akbar was a ruler with a vision and foresightedness. He was aware of this fact that a firm foundation of Mughal Empire was not possible until there is enmity between the Hindus and Muslims. He had the history of

320 years of Delhi sultanate before him. Before Akbar, the sultans of Delhi wanted to destroy Hindus and that is why, they put certain restrictions, checks and impediments. Akbar did not want to repeat the history and their acts. He wanted to rule by getting the co-operation of Hindus not with the help of sword, but with love and affection. So, he decided to follow the concept of 'Sulh-i-Kul' which means to keep peace with everyone. In this direction, we can quote the views of Edwards and Garratt that Akbar was from many points of views, the type of a modern ruler. He fully realized the important principle that to rule well and effectively, he must not make any distinction between people professing different religious views.

The second factor that contributed was Akbar's family heritage which proved beneficial in his religious policy. His father was neither a Sunni Muslim nor a staunch in that direction who advised his elder son, Humayun as 'o my son, people of diverse religions inhabit India; it therefore, behoves you that...you should not allow religious prejudices to influence your mind, and administers impartial justice, having regard

to religious susceptibilities and religious customs of all sections of the people you should in particular, refrain from the slaughter of cows...you should never destroy places of worships of any community...the propagation of Islam will be better carried on with the faith of love and obligation than with the sword of suppression.”

Moreover, the intimate relations between Rajputs and Akbar also contributed in carrying further his idea of religion. He married many Rajput queens and provided them religious freedom which they did not enjoy earlier and, no doubt, it was the beginning of a new era Besides, Akbar was a liberal ruler and he was totally against the staunch Muslims. That is why, to bridge up the gap between the Hindus and the Muslims, he started ‘Ibadatkhana’ to discuss the religious problems openly in 1575. During the meetings held here, he got familiar with the religious ideas of different people. he was totally frustrated to know their opinions and it also paved the way for him to start a new religious policy as A.L. Srivastava says ‘their irresponsible behaviour and quarrels, their inability to explain satisfactorily the fundamental doctrines of Islam and

their personal greed and unworthy conduct convinced Akbar that truth must be sought outside their bickering.” Akbar did not accept Islam as superior and true religion and other to be inferior. He experienced that we can get some things even in other religions, and by assimilating different positive aspects, Akbar wanted a new religion to be formed. That is why, he decided to adopt a new religious policy that will honour and respect all religions.

There were many factors that played a significant and important role in the evolution of Akbar’s religious policy. We can divide Akbar’s religious policy into three phases: the first from 1556 to 1575; the second from 1578 to 1581; and the third from 1582 to 1605.

The first stage from 1556 to 1575: Akbar took over his kingdom in 1556, and in the beginning, he totally relied on Bairam Khan. During this period, he ruled over his kingdom as a true Muslim and was used to obey the laws of Islam, respected the mullahs and Maulvis, but he was not a blind follower of Islam. After that, many changes took place in his ideology towards the formation of religious policy. In this direction, first

of all, he married the daughter of Biharimal, a Rajput ruler which reflects his great regard for Rajputs as he provided full religious freedom which played a very significant role in eradicating the enmity between the Muslims and Rajputs to a large extent. Dr. K.M. Aggarwal is right when he says in this connection that this marriage was a significant event in medieval Indian history. It led to a firm alliance between the Mughals and the Rajputs as it started an epoch of harmony and good will.

There was a complete ban on making prisoners of war as slaves which was decided in 1562. But, Akbar ordered not to tease and humiliate the prisoners. They were also not compelled to change their religion to Muslim from Hindu and this idea was also a part and parcel of Akbar's new religious policy. The edict not only put an end to inhuman practices, but also saved Hinduism from mass conversion of adherents to an alien faith.

Abolition of the pilgrimage tax in 1563 was also an additional step in bringing harmony between the Hindus and the Muslims. It was the result

of Akbar's consistent efforts that this effort came to end. Besides it, the abolition of Jaziya tax contributed a great deal in establishing harmonious relationships between the Hindus and the Muslims. To end Jaziya tax is considered as a landmark achievement in the direction of bringing harmony between the two religions. It was really a turning point in the history of Muslim rule in India for it ended the discrimination against the non-Muslims. By abolishing Jaziya, Akbar removed the galling distinction between his Muslim and non-Muslims subjects and declared that a Muslim king could equally be the Padshah of the Hindus and the Muslims.

Akbar also provided religious independence to non-Muslims because he wanted to eradicate the contradictions between the Muslims and non-Muslims. Now there was no religious restriction on both the religions which was the beginning of a new era in Indian history. Akbar also made strict rules for prohibiting the forcible conversion which was the main reason of enmity between the people of two religions. In his new religious policy, Akbar followed the policy of giving higher posts on the

basis of merits irrespective of religion and ideology. By establishing Ibadatkhanas, Akbar tried to remove the cultural differences among the Hindus and the Muslims.

The Second Stage From 1578 to 1581: During the second stage of his religious policy, Akbar gave much more importance to Hindu religion in comparison to other religions. His interest in Jainism, Christianity and Zoroastrianism reflects how eager he was in expanding his religious policy to every nook and corner. He also took a very keen interest in reading of Khutba and the infallibility decree. Apart from emphasizing the concept of justice which was an integral part of the policy of Sulh-i-Kul, Akbar also reminded the Ulema through the document the state machinery was meant for the welfare of the people.

The Third Stage From 1582 to 1605: After having discussion with a number of religious people at Ibadatkhana, Akbar finally concluded the fact that all religions are basically one. He tried to bring about reconciliation between different religions he came across. Keeping in mind all this, he assembled all the religions and constituted a new

religion which is known as Din-i-Ilahi which is also termed as the best religion. It is also called Tohid-e-Ilahi or Sulah-e-Kul as some critics also says that indeed the Din-e-Ilahi set an example that in spite off social, political and religious differences, people could meet on a common platform and unite for god and king. In fact, Din-e-Ilahi must have strengthened the hands of Akbar by casting a spiritual aura around his throne. Akbar also laid down certain principles in this religion where god is considered to be the highest power. It also preaches the welfare of common masses. Apart from it, Akbar also asked to follow the intimation into Din-e-Ilahi. So, Din-e-Ilahi sets the model before the people in the light of which they could generate the forces of national integration by overcoming their respective religious prides and prejudices and other separatist or diverse tendencies. Akbar provided not only the political but also moral and spiritual leadership to Indians of his day; he deserves a place of honour and pride in the annals of Indian history for all times to come.

In this way, after making an in depth and incisive study of different religious concerns propounded by Akbar during his life as a ruler, we can safely and rightly aver the fact that he believed in the goodness of all religions. At the same time, he also did not like the false practices followed by the people in the name of religion. His religious policy can be appreciated in the sense that it helped him a lot to gain the support of Hindus and Rajputs, but it would not be right to say that his religious policy was completely inspired by his imperialistic thinking. Although he was an ardent follower of Din-I-Ilahi and other religious ideologies but never did he compel others to follow the same. It can be said that as an emperor he was very liberal I the concept of religion and the main aim was that he wanted to please the followers of all religions to a great degree. In that case he can be compared to Mahatma Buddh and Emperor Ashoka as far as the discussion of religious harmony and faith is concerned.

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