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Akbar's religious policy

Dr. M Anusha Angel

Assistant Professor, Department of History, Jayaraj Annapackiam College for Women (Autonomous), Periyakulam, Tamil Nadu, India

Abstract

After Humayun's death his eldest son Akbar was barely thirteen years old. Nevertheless, he was a precocious and intrepid youth who, along with his Regent, Bairam Khan was encamped in Punjab, in pursuit of Sikandar Sur who adamantly continued to claim the imperial throne for himself. Consequently, Humayun's death had to be concealed till effective arrangements could be made to enthrone Akbar. On 14 February, 1556 A.D. Akbar was proclaimed ruler at Kalanaur in Gurdaspur district. The proclamation, however, barely secured Akbar's candidature within the family. The empire, as yet, seemed a remote possibility since Humayun, in his second tenure too, had proved more of an invader with few creditable conquests. Historically, the Sur successors possessed more legitimate claims to the throne. Besides, Muhammad Shah Adil and Sikandar Sur, Henu, Muhammad's capable warrior and adviser proved an equally ardent contestant.

Keywords: Humayun's, Akbar's, religious, throne

Introduction

Of all the Muslim rulers in India, Akbar proved the most liberal exponent of universal tolerance 'SulahKul'. Politically endowed with a rare shrewdness of mind, Akbar discerned early that a mere tolerance of the Hindus by itself was not enough. At best, it could only secure him their passive acceptance as in the case of Sher Shah, but deny him their trust and active cooperation which were essential for the consolidation of the empire. Additionally, as he was deeply interested in securing the welfare of his subjects, his policy was equally devoted to eradicating not only the religious but the prevalent social evils too.

Factors responsible for his liberalism

The Influence of His Heredity "endowed him with those qualities of head and heart that prepared him to receive the impress of his environments and reflect it in the best possible way". The Timurids besides their lust for blood and passion for warfare, proved equally voracious admirers of art and literature that rid them of the narrow religious orthodoxy. Babur and Humayun, while acquiescing to the tenets of Islam, were never orthodox. Moreover, Akbar's mother besides being a daughter of the Shia house was herself as Persian scholar. Akbar, therefore, born of a 'Sunni Shia Wedlock' early inculcated the necessity of tolerance, a quality that was equally impressed upon his mind by Abdul Latif, his tutor and the Sufi saints who had sought shelter at the Kabul Court. As a Sultan, his marriage with the Rajput princesses and his close association with Hindus and the Rajput noblemen (like Todarmal, Birbal and Raja Man Singh) and thinkers, further liberalised his thoughts and policies.

Akbar's religious tolerance was also an outcome of political necessity. In order to consolidate the state, he conciliated the Rajputs and attempted to abolish the glaring distinctions between the Hindus and Muslims by abolishing the

Pilgrimage tax and the Jeziya and encouraging the Hindus to growingly associate with the administration^[1].

Besides the temporal motives, Akbar's inquisitive mind harboured an eager craving to discern 'the truth of life and the universe'. As in other parts of the world, the 16th century was a period of religious and social revival in India. The ground had already been prepared in the preceding two centuries by the various religious and social reformers like Guru Nanak and Chaitanya who had reawakened in the country appreciation of the necessity of tolerance and reform. They had prepared the way for the integration and higher synthesis of all the dynamic and progressive forces. Akbar, "intelligent to an uncommon degree, with a mind alert and inquisitive, was best fitted by birth, upbringing and association to feel most keenly those hankering and that spiritual unrest which distinguished the century in which he lived. He was not only the child of his century; he was its best replica". Even as a youth, he was inclined towards mysticism. This is corroborated by his foremost critic Badauni who writes that "he would sit many a morning alone in prayer and melancholy, on a large flat stone of an old building near the palace in a lonely spot with his head bent over his chest, and meditate on the eternal mystery of life". His association with the liberal, Sheikh Mubarak, and his two sons, Faizi and AbulFazl, endowed him with a greater awareness of the hollowness of the ulemas' interpretations and encouraged him to discern the truth for himself.

Akbar's religious policy

The religious policy of Akbar can be analysed under three headings

1. His attitude towards the Hindu subjects;
2. His attitude towards the ulemas;
3. His personal religious beliefs.

Towards the Hindu

Since Akbar was genuinely interested in securing the welfare of his subjects, he attempted to mitigate the evil influence of the unwholesome religious and social usages that had existed in India, even before the beginning of the Muslim rule. In 1563 A.D., he abolished the *Jeziya* through out his dominions, which in the past, had brought crores of income. Akbar described the edict as momentous for it laid 'the foundation of the management of mankind and enforced it, in spite of the severe opposition of the orthodox Muslims. Similarly, he forbade infanticide, and condemned the practice of Sati. Instructions were issued to the *Kotwals* to see that the act was purely voluntary and not forced on anyone. Similarly, the imposition of the minimum age-bar, as 18 years for men and 14 years for women, was an attempt to discourage the child marriage and a fore-runner of the *Sharda Act*. He also encouraged the widow remarriage. The impact of this social reform may have been confined to a very select section of the society; nevertheless, a beginning had been made [2].

Relations with the Ulemas

Akbar's political pragmatism and liberal views were bound to clash with the rigid orthodoxy of the ulemas who hitherto had enjoyed a powerful say in the political and religious affairs of the state. Under the Turko-Afghan Sultans, they were not merely the custodians of the King's conscience but had actively participated in making or marring the career of a Sultan. As *Sudur*, they virtually controlled the patronage of the learned, without which the scholars could be robbed of their livelihood. e.g. Sheikh Mubarak, in spite of his eminent intellect, was thoroughly disliked by the ulemas for his *Mehadavi* leanings. Consequently, not only was his request for a *Jagir* met with his removal from the court by *Sadr-i-Sundur* but even an attempt was made on his life. Similarly, they held a monopoly over the various educational institutions, which functioned under the various *qazis*. As *Qazi-ul-qazat*, they also controlled the judiciary of the empire. Their insufferable arrogance is testified by both *Badauni* and *AbulFazl*, who were exasperated with their assumed airs.

Against this background, it would be futile to consider Akbar's difference with the ulemas as purely religious; instead, they formed a part of his struggle against the nobility, who sought ulemas' help to thwart the Emperor's efforts to establish a broad-based state. This is clearly corroborated by the rebellion in the Eastern provinces, in 1581 A.D. where *Maulana Jaunpur* and many others, blessed a *Fatwah* of heresy against the Emperor, justified the revolt and invited *Mirza Hakim* to accept the crown.

Akbar's struggle with the ulemas can be further divided into three stages

- a. Upto the construction of the *IbadatKhana*, 1575 A.D
- b. Akbar's proclamation of *Din-i-Ilahi*.
- c. After the proclamation of *Din-i-Ilahi*.

Till 1575 A.D., Akbar was busy in securing the political conquest, of the country. Although he had already strained his relations with the ulemas by abolishing the *Pilgrim tax* and the '*Jeziya*, the strife between the two remained latent. Once, however, the Emperor had accomplished the political

conquest, "everything turned out well and no opponents were left in the whole world; His Majesty had thus the leisure of coming in nearer contact with the ecclesiastics and disciples of the *Muniya* sect and passed much of his time in reciting the *Quran* and *Hadiz-Sufism*, scientific discussions, enquiries into philosophy and law were the order of the day. His Majesty passed the whole nights in the thoughts of God". (*Badauni*) Consequently, Akbar ordered the building of the *IbadatKhana*, where the debates on religion were held. At first, the debates were confined to the various Muslim *Sheikhs*, *Sayyid*, *ulemas* and the *Amirs*, who met to explain 'the eternal truth' to the *ror* in disgust and disillusionment towards inviting the *pundits* of other faiths-*Brahmanism*, *Jainism*, *Parsis* and *Christians*. Akbar again implored them "to disclose the principle of genuine religion take care, therefore not to conceal the truth. "But just the opposite happened. The debate soon degenerated into a "vulgar rancour, morbid orthodoxy and personal attacks and they attacked the very basis of belief".

The divergent and conflicting faiths offended the Emperor's feeling and diverted his energies to the evolution of a new principle, which, he hoped, would prove a synthesis of the warring creeds and thereby unite the heterogeneous elements of his vast empire in one homogeneous whole [3].

Badauni has severely condemned *AbulFazl* for misguiding the Emperor away from the tenets of Islam, and examining everything 'on reason'. But *AbulFazl's* growing association with the Emperor only hastened the process of reforms which he had initiated early in the reign. "The main lines of his policy, directed to obliterating all differences in treatment between Muslims and Hindus, were fixed as political principles while he was still to all outward appearance an orthodox and zealous Muslim". As far as the ulemas were concerned therefore, their ruination began when they failed to satiate Akbar's quest for truth.

Undoubtedly, the ulemas' opponents the *Mehdavis* and others were quick to utilize the eclipse of the ulemas to their advantage. However, contrary to *Badauni's* interpretation, they did not motivate any change in Akbar's outlook. Their growing influence over the Sultan was an index of Akbar's already changed outlook. The period from 1572-1588 A.D. was one of bitter hostility of the ulemas with the Emperor.

The Emperor's disillusionment with the ulemas compelled him to re-examine the *Jagirs* of the ulemas, where he found many discrepancies. Politically, as there was a shortage of *Jagirs*, a review of the religious grants, was not the offspring of *AbulFazl's* influence on the emperor, but the outcome of a political and economic necessity. *Badauni's* statement of the episode clearly reflects the frustration of the clerical class, just as his reference to the Hindus as "indispensable; to them belongs half the army and half the land," displays his jealousy against the sovereign's attempt to uplift the oppressed classes. The second measure, which earned Akbar the terrible wrath of the ulemas was the Emperor's assumption of 'the reading of the *Khutba*', in 1576 A.D. *Baduani* describes it as an attempt "to appear in the public as the *Mujtahid* of the age" V. Smith, on the other hand, wrongly calls bid to become the *Khalifa*". The strained relations between the Emperor and the ulemas culminated in the issue of an edict (*Mahzar*) signed by the principal ulemas, which settled the superiority of the '*Imam-i-Adil* over the *Mujtahid*'. According to the document which

was based on the verse of Quran.

1. "Obey God and obey the Prophet and those who have authority among you" i.e., the king.
2. The man who is dearest to God on the day of judgement is the Imam-i-Adil "whosoever obeys the Amir obeys me; and who so ever rebels against him, rebels against Me".
3. The rank of a Sultan-i-Adil (a just ruler) is higher in the eyes of God than the rank of Mujtahid.
4. Since Akbar has proved a most just, wise and god-fearing king.

V. Smith has described the edict as "a decree of infallibility a part of the fit of religious frenzy which assailed Akbar at the beginning of May, 1578." The charge of 'infallibility' are disproved by the limitations that were imposed upon the Emperor such as, "in case of difference of opinion amongst the learned, over the religion; the Emperor could choose any one of the conflicting opinions provided it was proven that it was for the benefit of the nation and was politically expedient. Akbar, instead of intervening in every religious issue, was to exercise his judgement on those conflicting issues which were related to the welfare of the people and politics.

The edict, undoubtedly, proved of far-reaching consequence

1. Hitherto, the ulemas had exercised their jurisdiction not only in matters of faith, but on all uses pertaining to the Holy Law. The edict, finally, quelled the issue by formally proclaiming the Emperor as the 'Supreme arbiter of all causes, civil or ecclesiastical'.
2. Since the principal ulemas had sanctioned the edict, and promised to devote themselves to the 'true implementation of the orders', it minimized the ulemas' strength vis-a-vis the state; never would they use it against Akbar
3. It gave tacit approval of the ulemas to all political measures of Akbar, including his policy towards the Hindus.

The fundamental aim of the edict, therefore, was political and not religious. The edict was successful in elevating the status of the Mughal kings to a level of exaltation unparalleled before'. It also secured the Emperor ulemas' help in liberalizing the common man's outlook. But it did not mark the end of the clash between the two. In 1580 A.D., the ulemas and Qazi of Jaunpur issued a decree that the rebellion against Akbar as an apostate, was lawful [4].

Din-i-Ilahi

Of all Akbar's measures, the Din-i-Ilahi in 1581 A.D., has proved the most controversial. It has equally exercised the minds of all major historians, contemporary and modern Indians and foreigners whose appraisal has either resulted in a severe condemnation of the act as the 'monument of Akbar's folly or unabashed praise as "the crowning expression of the Emperor's national idealism".

Analysis: The word 'Tauhid-i-Ilahi' is wrongly interpreted as 'Din-i-Ilahi'. The word 'Tauhid' signifies unity of God and its followers were akin to the 'Unitarians'. The word 'Din' on the other hand means 'faith'. The substitution of 'Tauhid' by 'Din' signifies not only a difference of words but it engenders

totally different implications. The exact date of its promulgation is a moot point.

Causes leading to its promulgation

V. Smith, following the Jesuit accounts, has described the promulgation of the Din-i-Ilahi as a "monstrous growth of unrestrained autocracy". AbulFazl, on the other hand, has clearly stated that "whenever from lucky circumstances the time arrives that a nation learns to understand how to worship truth, the people 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.... A king will therefore sometimes observe the element of harmony in a multitude of things, or sometimes, reversely, a multitude of things in that which is apparently one. Now this is the case with the Monarch of the present age (Akbar)." "He now is the spiritual guide of the nation and sees in the performance of this duty a means of pleasing God".

Akbar, therefore, as the divine representative of God on earth aimed at the political and spiritual unification of the country. ('Sulh-i-Kul'). He tried to achieve this ideal by changing the thinking of the leading men, ulemas and the nobility. The need for a new synthesis of the warring creeds was urgent as the Shias, Sunnis, Mehadvis and Sufis and their mutual bloody conflicts in Kashmnir and Ahmadnagar had caused irreparable damage to the life and property of the subjects [5].

This is corroborated by AbulFazl, "For an empire ruled by one head, it was a bad thing to have the members divided among themselves-We ought, therefore, to bring them all into one, but in such a fashion that they should be one and all with the great advantage of not losing what is good in any one religion while gaining whatever is better in another. In that way, honour would be rendered to God; peace would be given to the peoples and security to the empire".

Din-i-Ilahi therefore was a logical culmination of the process of evolution which had begun with Akbar's series of dialogues and discussions with the various jurists. The Emperor refused to identify himself with any creed but the truth i.e., the enlightened and universal toleration. With this aim, he established Din-i-Ilahi which was not a religion, but a new way of life.

He took equal interest in Brahmanism, Jainism, Zorstrianism, Christianity and Sikhism, listened to their doctrines and even adopted certain of their practices. His giving up of meat and the prohibition of injury to animal life could be traced to the influence of the Jain teachers like HiravijayaSuri, Vijayasena Suri, and Bhanuchandra Upadhayay. From the Parsis, he learned of the sacred fire and ordered Abul Fazl to make arrangements that the 'eternal flame' should be kept burning at the court at all hours of the day; from the Persians, he inculcated the worship of Sun, and referred to the Granth Sahib as a 'volume worthy of reverence'. Compounded out of the various good elements of all religious, "Its basis was rational; it upheld no dogmas and recognised no gods and prophets; the Emperor was its chief exponent". It was an association of free-thinkers and was confined to the select enlightened intellectuals who, like Akbar, had broken the shackles of sect, creed and rituals and were united in their pursuit of the 'universal truth'.

Its very conception therefore, was devoid of any missionary

zeal to spread a new faith or religion. Akbar never applied the traditional methods of force or persuasion, to obtain recruits and secure a large following, although nothing would have been easier for him. Badauni himself has mentioned that the 'Emperor' was very strict in selecting members.

The *Ain-i-Akbari* mentions only 18 ministers of the association of which only Birbal was a Hindu. The Emperor, with his organizational ability and the resources at his command, could have easily evolved 'a machinery that would ensure the continuation of his order; that he did not deliberately do so, itself proves that his object was not proselytization but to achieve the ideal of universal tolerance and eternal truth'.

Actual practices

On meeting each other, the members uttered the words *Allah-o-Akbar* and *Jalla Jallalhu*.

A dinner during life time was to take the place of the dinner usually given after a person's death. The members were to abstain from meat, although they were to allow others to eat it; during the month of their birth, they were not his innumerable Hindu subjects, Akbar stands as a unique figure in the pageant of history.

Art and Literature

A long, peaceful and prosperous reign was bound to result in an unprecedented growth in the sphere of art and literature which received the impress of the Emperor's magnanimity and liberalism. The splendour of his court and the extensive patronage of the intellectuals, musicians, and artist revived the memories of the legendary *Vikramaditya*. At the head of the intellectuals stood *AbulFazl* and his brother *Fazl*. After seven years of intensive labour, *AbulFazl* brought forth the voluminous and precious *Ain-Akbari*—an indispensable historical reference to Akbar's reign. Similarly *Faizi's Akbarnama* has proved equally priceless for its reference value.

Badauni's work, in spite of its obvious prejudice against the Emperor, is an important source of information. Of the poets, *Faizi's* verses in Persian were considered the most outstanding.

In the sphere of painting, Akbar was the first Sultan, who encouraged the Hindu painters to imbibe the Persian style. Thus, he founded the Indo-Persian school of painting that reached its zenith under *Shahjehan*.⁶

The architecture of his reign too, projected his liberalism and tolerance. It was a fine blending of the Indo-Islamic styles. This is corroborated by *AbulFazl*, when he says "His Majesty plans splendid edifices and dresses the work of his mind and heart in the garment of stone and clay".

Conclusion

As a Nation Builder, Emperors had won large kingdoms earlier too. But hardly anyone had attempted to rejuvenate the vanquished by imparting to them equality with the victorious and increasingly associating them with the administration. Even *Sher Shah* had never allowed religion to over-ride politics but the ideal of imparting equality to all men did not manifest itself during his reign. Akbar's empire, on the other hand, founded on the principles of equality, universal

tolerance, and the welfare of both Muslims and Hindus, proved truly national; it not only helped Akbar to build a mighty empire but also to sustain it under his successors. He had inherited a kingdom which was feeble and fragmented but he reinvigorated it by bequeathing the same breadth of vision and greatness that he was endowed with. Akbar never consolidated his despotism by trampling or curtailing the wishes and the rights and liberties of his people; instead, his government was unique, for it upheld throughout the twin ideal of welfarian and humanitarian kingship.

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