



# An Analytical Study of Jalaluddin Akbar's Policy of Pluralism

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**ABSTRACT:** Although many people associate pluralism with the western thinkers of the enlightenment, the very roots of this concept go back to Islam. This paper aims to counter the stereotype that Islam is an intrinsically intolerant and extremist religion which in turn may provide the much-needed stimulus for this kind of intellectual debate. It also analyses in detail the pluralistic policies of the Mughal emperor Jalaluddin Akbar, who reigned from 1556 to 1605, and the far-reaching impact of his doctrines of Sulh-i-Kul (absolute peace), Rah-i-Aql (the path of reason), and Rawa-i-Rozi (maintenance of livelihood) had on the socio-political environment of India.

**KEYWORDS:** Akbar, Pluralism, Mughal Empire, India, Democracy

## I. INTRODUCTION

Pluralism, as defined by the Cambridge dictionary, is the existence of people of different races, religious beliefs, and cultures within the same society, or the belief that this is a good thing [1].

Contrary to the popular belief, the holy Quran contains many verses pertaining to pluralism. For example,

لَا إِكْرَاهَ فِي الدِّينِ

*“There is no compulsion in religion”*

*(Quran 2:256)*

In this verse, Allah Almighty has clearly specified that there is no compulsion in Islam, i.e., Islam neither forces anyone to embrace it nor does it compel anyone if someone wishes not to follow it.

Similarly, Quran also states that everyone has free will. It is the personal choice of a person whether he believes or disbelieves. Allah Almighty says,

فَمَنْ شَاءَ فَلْيُؤْمِنْ وَمَنْ شَاءَ فَلْيُكْفُرْ

*“Then whosoever will, let him believe, and whosoever will, let him disbelieve”*

*(Quran 18:29)*

Moreover, everyone has the choice to choose and practice their religion.

لَكُمْ دِينُكُمْ وَلِيَ دِينِ

*“To you your religion and for me mine”*

*(Quran 109:6)*

Even the Prophet of Islam Muhammad (Peace Be Upon Him) prohibited his companions from compelling people to accept Islam. For example, two Jewish tribes were expelled from Madinah while they had the charge of children of Ansar. When their biological parents sought permission from the Prophet to take their children back, the Prophet refused and cited the verse that says, “there is no compulsion in religion”. Moreover, another Muslim whose two children, under the influence of Christian merchants, converted to Christianity and



left for Syria wanted the Prophet's permission to pursue them but he was also denied [2].

## II. Pluralism in India –Akbar's Policy of State-Governance

In the Indian context, it was the Mughal emperor Akbar who implemented his pluralistic policy of state-governance at an unprecedented level. He was an inclusive leader who firmly rejected any type of religious intolerance and also disapproved of inhuman practices like slavery, *sati*, and polygamy. Influenced by his parents and teachers, he was inclined towards pluralism. Many of his teachers were free from any kind of sectarian prejudices. Moreover, the cultural ethos of Timurids allowed him to respect all religions alike.

In his early age, he was very intolerant towards Hinduism. However, with age and his marriage with the daughters of various Hindu Rajput chieftains, his attitude towards Hinduism changed. He became much interested in understanding the principles of all religions of his time. He invited various scholars of different religions and philosophical systems such as Sufi, Sunni, and Shia as well as Brahman, Jain, Jews, etc. in his *Ibadat Khana*, i.e., house of worship. He was particularly attracted to Jainism because of his strong belief in non-killing and compassion towards all and his belief in the transmigration of souls. He was very keen on learning Hindu epics, romances, religion, and philosophy. He brought Hindus and Muslims together. As there was no religious persecution, everyone was allowed to follow the religion of their choice. He felt no shame in celebrating Hindu festivals like *Dussehra* and *Diwali* and on his birthday gave huge charity to the needy, both Hindus and Muslims alike, according to the Hindu ceremony of *Tuladan* in which he weighed himself against gold, silver, scents, silk, etc.

The following titles were assumed by him to announce his pluralistic nature [3]:

- Sun of Benevolence and Bounty
- Enlightened Seer of the Truth
- Achiever of Universal Peace
- Fountain of those who Thirst for the Waters of Knowledge
- Beacon of Benevolent Society
- Riveter of the Chain of Universal Justice
- Ocean of Generosity

- Equitable Equinox of Justice
- Source of Smiling Donations
- Source of Powerful Benevolence

## III. Key Elements of Akbar's Policy of Pluralism

The official biographical account of Akbar's life and governance, *Akbarnama* (literally, Book of Akbar), written by Abul Fazl (b.1551- d.1602), gives a detailed account of Akbar's administration and governance. It provides various accounts which show that Akbar considered himself the ruler of all his subjects, both Hindus and Muslims alike. The following three doctrines of his policy well-demonstrate the pluralistic nature of his administration:

### Sulh-i-Kul (Absolute Peace)

Akbar promoted pluralism by encouraging inter-religious dialogue and tolerance. The abolishment of the pilgrimage tax levied upon Hindus for visiting Hindu holy shrines and sites in 1563 as well as the abolishment of *jizya*, a tax levied upon non-Muslims, in 1564 were the two bold steps he took that eliminated the inferiority status of Hindus and put them at par with Muslims. Consequently, this led to the amalgamation of the two great communities of India along with their social and cultural spheres. He allowed his non-Muslims subjects to build new places of worship and the public celebration of their festivals. His inclination towards the Sufi mystic tradition of Islam and his great love for the great Muslim mystic Maulana Rumi led him to the development of his concept of *Sulh-i-Kul* i.e., promotion of harmony among various culturally diverse groups for a pluralistic society. This can be seen explicitly in his behaviour. Along with sending money to Ajmer for the shrine of Moinuddin Chishti and Makkah, he also spent time indulging in Jain spirituals. He was also interested in Christian rituals.

### Rah-i-Aql (The Path of Reason)

Akbar had two main passions:

1. Collection of translations of the holy books of all religions and religious discussion and debate with the leaders of all religious groups. For this purpose, he constructed a special place in Fatehpur Sikri in Agra, *Ibadat Khana*.



2. His court became a place of meeting for the learned men and leaders of all creeds without any discrimination.

He believed in the notion of *Rah-i-Aql*, i.e. the pursuit of knowledge, rather than a blind following of tradition. For example, on the issue of property divisions among children, he opposed the Muslim law in which daughters are provided with a smaller share of the inheritance. He argued that owing to her weakness, she must be given a larger share. His diversion from orthodox Islam enraged orthodox Muslims but he went even further and adopted the title of *Farr-i-Izdi* (Divine Light of God) and in 1579 by a proclamation, he was certified an *Imam-i-Adil* (Just Ruler) inferring upon him an infallible authority. Finally, he was able to restrict the influence of the orthodox Muslim ulama.

Furthermore, he promulgated a new religion, *Din-i-Ilahi* (also known as *Tawhid-i-Ilahi*) which was pure theism and was based on the common elements of all religions, without any ceremonies, priests, or books. However, it did not survive the death of its creator and soon died after the emperor.

#### **Rawa-i-Rozi (Maintenance of Livelihood)**

This principle was like a social contract between the Ruler and the ruled. It referred to the responsibility of the state to provide an unobstructed livelihood to its citizens. The most unique aspect of this notion is that the emperor is a representative of God and God does not withhold the sun and the rain from anybody, even the disbelievers. So, it is not appropriate for the emperor to discriminate against someone on the basis of their religion and withhold any of his bounties from them. With his inclinations towards pluralism, Akbar created common citizenship due to which the only distinction made was on the basis of merit, loyalty, and devotion. Earlier, only Muslims held administrative offices. Now, these ranks were opened for all [4].

#### **IV. Din-i-Ilahi**

Apart from pleasing his Hindu subjects, he also invited scholars of other religions in his court. For example, Dastur Mahyarji Rana, a theologian of Zoroastrianism arrived at his court in 1578. He influenced Akbar very much. His influence along with the influence of Birbal, the only Hindu advisor in his court who accepted his secular religion *Din-i-Ilahi*, and various Hindu ladies of his harem, he

established a sacred fire in the palace and prostrated himself publicly before the fire and the sun. Furthermore, Persian festivals were revived and the solar *Ilahi* era, with Persian names for months and days was also adopted in 1584.

Likewise, a Jesuit mission invited by Akbar arrived at Fatehpur Sikri in 1580 and was met with the utmost respect. Then again in 1582, he welcomed a Jain delegation which with their doctrine of non-violence made a deep impression upon him and influenced his personal life. So much that he abstained from flesh for almost nine months of a year and slaughter of animals was prohibited firstly to certain days and then ultimately in 1587 for about half a year. Also, he was very impressed by Sikhism, and in its holy book, *Granth Sahib*, he could only find love and compassion. These experiences made him believe that not only Islam but all religions have good and truth in them. As a result, in early 1582, he promulgated his own religion *Din-i-Ilahi* [5].

Although its promulgation started as early as 1582, the principles of this religion were not properly defined till 1587 as it was not a new religion but a mixture of the old ones. There was no written treatise on the principles of this religion until Mohsin Fani described in some parts the fundamentals of Akbar's *Din-i-Ilahi* in his famous *Dabistan-i-Mazahib*. The ten virtues of *Din-i-Ilahi* were [6]:

1. Liberality and beneficence
2. Forgiveness of the evil-doer and repulsion of anger with mildness.
3. Abstinance from worldly desires
4. Care of freedom from the bonds of worldly existence and violence as well as accumulating precious stores for the future real and perpetual world
5. Wisdom and devotion in the frequent meditation on the consequences of actions
6. Strength of dexterous prudence in the desire of marvellous actions
7. Soft voice, gentle words, pleasing speeches for everybody
8. Good treatment with brethren, so that their will may have precedence to our own
9. A perfect alienation from creatures and a perfect attachment to the Supreme Being; and
10. Dedication of soul in the love of God and union with God, the preserver of all.



## V. Akbar's Steps towards a Pluralistic Society

### Architecture

Besides his efforts for a pluralistic society through the synthesis of different religions and cultures, he also built many buildings which became to be known as astonishing examples of Arabo-Persian architecture and Hinduism style calligraphy.

### Music

There were 36 musicians in the court of Akbar and among them Mian Tansen of Gwalior, a prominent figure of Hindustani classical music, was a legend. He appointed many musicians from different origins including Hindus, Irani, Turanis, and Kashmiris.

### Festivals

Festivals of many religions were celebrated with full zeal in Akbar's reign. These celebrations were regarded important as these were crucial in cementing his policies of pluralism. Akbar celebrated *Nauroz* (the Persian New Year) by converting it into *Khushroz* (Joyful Day). He also followed some customs of Parsees and made *Holi*, an ancient Hindu festival, an official celebration. He also celebrated *Rakhi*, *Diwali*, *Dusshera*, and *Vasant* as a symbol of his pluralistic nature [7].

### Marriage Alliances

His marriages with the Rajput princess were the turning point in his policy towards Hinduism. The first marriage was with the daughter of the Raja of Amber (now known as Jaipur) in 1562. She became the mother of the next emperor Jahangir. Akbar then married more Rajput princesses to strengthen his relations with the Rajputs of India. Although many earlier Muslim rulers had married Hindu women, it was only Akbar who allowed them to practice their Hindu rites within the walls of the royal harem [8].

### Abul Fazl and the *Akbarnama*

Sheikh Abul Fazl, Akbar's friend, was also his grand vizier, a position he held from his appointment in 1579 till his death. One of the *Navratnas* (Nine Jewels) of Akbar's court, he authored the official history of Akbar's reign, namely *Akbarnama* in three volumes, the third

being called the *Ain-i-Akbari*, and a Persian translation of the Bible.

Abul Fazl played a pivotal role in positioning Akbar as a universal leader rather than a leader of Muslims. He, in the state commissioned history of Akbar's reign, proves the legitimacy of Akbar's policies on religious lines.

It also helped Akbar's introduction of reforms in religious practices aimed at pluralism. Thus, Akbar developed a unique model of pluralism which addressed the diversity of his subjects[9].

## VI. Criticism of Akbar's Policies

Enraged by his policies, a fraction of the society who considered Akbar's policies as un-Islamic and unorthodox revolted many times against him, and on one occasion his eldest son, Prince Salim also joined them but later reconciled with Akbar. But he did not deviate from his policies rather he insisted on the need for open dialogue and free choice. Upon his death in 1605, the Islamist theologian Abdul Haq stated that despite his 'innovations', Akbar had remained a good Muslim [10].

## VII. Akbar's Influence on Indian Democracy

After the independence of India, the founding fathers of the Indian constitution made efforts to unify different cultures and societies into the one republic of India. They were strongly inspired by the principles practised by Akbar in his time. Akbar became a symbol of harmony for the Indian people. Even the first Prime minister of independent India, Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru referred to Akbar as "*the father of harmonious people or the father of Indian Nationalism*".

Akbar led his government with toleration and without discriminating against any religious group. Likewise, taking example from his policy the founding fathers formulated our Constitution whose preamble secure to all its citizens: justice, social, economic, and political; liberty of thought, expression, belief, faith and worship; equality of status and opportunity, and to promote among them all fraternity assuring the dignity of the individual and unity of the nation and mutual respect one to another [11].



### VIII. Conclusion

Indian democracy is a sum total of all that has come before it. Its seed was implanted on fertile soil. Although there are many problems in its functioning, like criminalization of politics and corruption at high levels, democracy, and its institutions are well-established in India.

As India has had a long and diverse history, it has a long history of pluralism also which, in turn, had fostered Indian democracy. This shows that democratic institutions in India stand on a very firm foundation. The pluralistic society shaped by the Mughal emperor Jalaluddin Akbar proved conducive to managing the cultural diversity of India.

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