

The Politics of Inclusion: Akbar's Approach to Religious and Cultural Diversity in Governance

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Abstract

The article investigates Mughal Emperor Akbar's governance strategies for managing the vast religious and cultural diversity of his empire. Recognizing that a multi-ethnic, multi-religious populace was central to the Indian subcontinent's social fabric, Akbar employed policies that emphasized inclusion, religious tolerance, and political pragmatism to preserve harmony and stability in his empire. This inclusive policy allowed for the integration of non-Muslims into the highest levels of the Mughal administration and military, a marked departure from the orthodox practices of his predecessors. This paper explores Akbar's diplomatic and matrimonial alliances with the Rajputs, his reforms and innovation measures such as the prohibition of Sati, the philosophy of Sulh-i-Kul (universal peace), which sought to transcend religious and cultural divides, abolition of the jizya, creation of the Ibadat Khana as a platform for interfaith dialogue, his patronage of translations of sacred Hindu texts into Persian, and introduction of the Din-i-Ilahi, as part of his broader vision to create a pluralistic state. Through these actions, Akbar's politics of inclusion aimed not only at political consolidation but enabled him to rule a vast territory for a longer period and earn the title of 'Akbar the Great'. His political and administrative reforms, such as the Mansabdari system, incorporated officials from diverse religious backgrounds, creating a merit-based bureaucracy that helped maintain the Empire.

Akbar's reign remains a key period of study for understanding governance, pluralism, and political inclusion in pre-modern India.

Keywords: Akbar, Sulh-i-Kul, Ibadat Khana, Din-i-Ilahi, Mansabdari system, Rajputs, Mughal empire, pluralism, political inclusion, pilgrimage tax, Akbar's Theory of kingship.

Introduction

When Akbar acceded the throne in 1556 the Mughal Empire had yet not actually come into existence. Babur, the first Mughal Emperor, spent his political career eliminating the rival of the nascent Mughal Empire. His successor Humayun also made attempts to subdue rival powers but was expelled from rule by Afghans. Thus, consolidation became a chief priority of the Mughal Empire for its survival. Akbar made special efforts to strengthen the Mughal rule. He developed harmony and promoted cherished relations between different ethnic sections of society which brought the whole of India under one head. His political wisdom manifested by military conquests, efficient administration, and socio-religious reforms brought expansion and consolidation.

At Akbar's accession, the Mughal rule was confined to the territory of Punjab, Multan and its surroundings. Akbar embarked upon his political career with the second battle of Panipat and added Delhi and Agra to the empire. This victory started an unending episode of conquests and annexations. During his reign, Malwa (1562), Jaipur (1562), Gondwana (1564), Chitor (1568), Ranthambhore (1569), Kalandijar in Bundelkhand (1569), Gujrat (1573), Bengal and Bihar (1576) were added to his dominions. Kabul, Kashmir, Sindh, Baluchistan and Qandahar came under his dominion as a result of North West Frontier campaigns. Berar, Khandesh, and part of Ahmednagar were annexed between 1595 and 1601. Thus, at Akbar's demise, the Mughal Kingdom stretched from the Arabian Sea to the Bay of Bengal and from the Himalayas to the Narmada.

Akbar was not only a triumphant conqueror but also an adept administrator. The administration was divided at the central and provincial levels. It included the *Mansabdari* system, land revenue system and social reforms, introduced as a part of the administration. The administration was designed on the principle of centralization which effectively assembled all powers in the hands of

a sovereign of a state i.e. Emperor. The administrative reorganization enriched the Mughal treasury and raised the prestige of a ruler in the eyes of his subjects.

Akbar believed that a king should be just, and his vital obligation is to treat his subjects equally. Thus, he opened the doors of royal services for non-Muslims as well and employed many Hindus like Todar Mal, Bhagwan Das, Rai Singh as state employees. Many measures were taken to conciliate Hindus, Sikhs, Jains, Christians, Parisis, and Zoroastrians. He established *Ibadat Khana* at Fatehpur Sikri and promulgated *Din-i-Ilahi* to remove socio-cultural and religious barriers between different ethnic groups. He lifted all prohibitions on non-Muslims practising their faith in public. Conversion from one religion to another was allowed. Several Christian Church and Jain temples were built at Agra, Lahore and Ujjain (Sharma, 1988). The construction of churches and fire temples was also permitted. Various scriptures of other religions were translated to remove the cultural gulf. He ordered the *Atharva Veda*, the *Mahabharata*, the *Harivamsa* and the *Ramayana* to be translated into Persian (Sharma, 1988).

Akbar was a monarch fortunate with political wisdom and statesmanship. He aimed to rule all of India solely. Knowing the fact that he could not rule India effectively without winning the cooperation of non-Muslims since they constituted a large part of Indian society, incorporated them into Mughal state machinery. He introduced many administrative, social and religious reforms to seek his political ambitions which favoured non-Muslims, especially Hindus. His glorious rule was the product of his wise socio-political thoughts. He ruled united India almost for long fifty years and raised the Mughal Empire to the heights of its prosperity. He was, thus, termed as Akbar '*The Great*' and regarded as a real founder of the Mughal Empire.

Akbar's Approach to Religious and Cultural Diversity in Governance

Akbar's reign is considered a golden age in the history of India. It is marked by vast territorial expansion, administrative consolidation, and social and cultural prosperity. Socio-political thoughts of Akbar being motivated by his religious ideas supported the sovereign in pursuing his political objectives. The social stability gained by the accomplishment of these ideas ultimately gave strength to Akbar's regime and enabled him to rule effectively.

The political thoughts of Akbar are very significant since they were exclusive in their nature and function. The theory of kingship of Akbar as propounded by Abul al Fazl, a courtier, played a fundamental role in determining the structure of a state. His theory of kingship seems to be inspired by Balban's philosophy of authority, as documented by Barani but has unique features of its own. Abul al Fazl placed the institution of kingship at a very high place. He believed and placed royalty as a superior virtue in the divine's eye. Abul al Fazl goes on to deal with Holy aspects of sovereignty and holds that "Royalty is a light emanating from God, and a ray from the sun, the illuminator of the universe, the argument of the book of perfection, and the receptacle of all virtues." (Fazl, 1873) According to Abul al Fazl, a ruler who was endowed with *farr-i-izidi* (the divine light), has parental affection, and doesn't permit sectarian differences to "raise the dust of strife" (Chandra, 1992). It, thus, required a ruler to be just and treat his subjects equally.

Abul al Fazl visualized the king as infallible of all sins and he is responsible for the spiritual guidance of humanity. He even went to the extent that the king was superior to *Shariah*, the Islamic laws. At this point, these ideas reflected Barani's philosophy that *the king should have the authority to enact laws (zawabit), even if essential to supersede shari'at in dire circumstances* (Nizami, 1981). These ideas of Akbar had politico-cultural implications as he had been under *Shi'ia*

influence since his early days. His early regent Bairam Khan was a *Shi'ia*. Later Shaikh Mubarak and his sons Shaikh Faizi and Abul al Fazl, who exercised tremendous influence on Akbar during his lifetime, belonged to *Shi'ia* creed.

Akbar followed *Sulh-i-Kul* (“peace with all”, “absolute peace” or “Universal Conciliation”) to pursue his socio-political goals. His notion of *Sulh-i-Kul* evolved overtime and had socio-political and religious motivations. The philosophy suggests tolerance, consideration, and conciliation are required to preserve harmonious relations in communities (Shohibatussholihah & Barizi, 2022). His unique initiative sprang from his realization of India’s pluralistic communal nature and his willingness to acquire Hindu collaboration (Wolpert, 1977) to rule united India for a long period. His inquiring mind and political ambitions stimulated him to reason about the origin of differences among Indian people and feature the policy of *Sulh-i-Kul*. However, political ambitions also stimulated Akbar to feature this policy. Mulla Ahmad Tattavi in *Tarikh-i Alfi* draws a parallel between Akbar’s policy and with previous custom executed by the Mongol Khan Mongke (r. 1251–59) (Natif, 2018).

By defining the concept of *Sulh-i-Kul*, he devised a mechanism helpful in removing the religious, cultural and social disparity in his empire. He was inspired by increasing devotion to God and considered the spiritual guidance of humanity as a prime responsibility of a ruler. Ibn al Arabi’s theory of the Perfect Man also had a deep impact on Akbar which states that the ‘Perfect Man’ has extraordinary spiritual authority and wisdom and is comparable to a deep calm ocean (Izutus, 1999). For Abu’l Fazl, a sovereign like Akbar, being such personality demonstrates the Perfect Man (*insan al-kamil*), the Philosopher King (see, Rizvi, 1975, for details on Abu’l Fazl’s Platonic concepts). He, thus, throughout his life circulated *Sul-i-Kul*.

Sul-i-Kul's widespread acceptance and collaboration of court officials at various levels made it a huge accomplishment (Kinra, 2013). *Sulh-i-Kul* politically facilitated Akbar to govern the multiethnic society of India efficiently. According to Muzaffar Alam Akbar desired a “non-sectarian and open-ended cultural politics.” (Alam, 2004). Akbar’s policy of conciliation towards Rajputs, which proved a great success, was a product of *Sulh-i-Kul*. He had recognized Rajputs as a big military clout which could prove an obstacle to cherishing Akbar’s dream of ruling of united India. He opted for conciliation rather than force to subdue Rajput's power. The jealousy among the nobility also persuaded Akbar to bring an equally strong element into the court to curb them. His conciliatory policy towards Rajputs, though liberal in its nature, proved a great success. He established a matrimonial alliance with Rajputs by marrying Jaipur’s Raja Bihar Mal’s daughter, which led to the development of symbiotic relations between Akbar and Rajputs. Akbar opened the access of royal services to the Hindus. Raja Bhagwan Das, Todar Mal, Man Singh, Rai Singh were taken to the state services. Out of 137 *mansbdars* of 1000 and above, mentioned in the *Ain-i-Akbari*, 14 were Hindus (Sharma, 1988).

Akbar in return also extended his personal liking and favours to the Rajputs and gave them liberty in religious matters. Man Sing of Jaipur was given a *mansab* of 7,000, Bhagwan Das and Bihar Mal of Jaipur were given a *mansab* of 5,000 and Birbar of 2,000 (Sharma, 1988). Akbar’s employees included Chandrus (a Surgeon), Maha Dev (a physician), and Vishvanath (a painter). Raja Birbal, Miyan Tansen, Raja Man Singh, and Raja Todar Mal were among his Nauratans. Raja Rai Singh of Bikaner, Raja Jugan Nath, Raja Deep Nath, and Madhu Singh were his military commanders. The inclusion of Hindu nobility was also meant to curtail the authority and influence of Central Asian nobility (Amin, 2021).

Akbar abolished *Jizya* in 1563 and stopped the collection of pilgrimage tax from Hindus in 1564. Abul al Fazl in his work *Ain-i-Akbari* observed the collection of such wealth by Akbar as discriminatory and humiliating. Akbar expressed social toleration to the extent that he allowed his Hindu queen to practice her religion in the palace (Shirazi, 1987). Akbar on humanitarian grounds also introduced some social reforms. He allowed remarriage among Hindu widows (Badaoni, 1990) and also banned *satti* if the wedding had not been consummated (Badaoni, 1990). He initiated practising Hindu traditions like *Tilak*, *Jharoka Darshan*, *Diwali*, *Dussehra*, *Holi*, etc, and consented to construct new temples (see Choudhary, 1941, for more detail). Akbar also observed various Zoroastrian festivals. He implemented the Zoroastrian calendar and ordered that fire must never be extinguished (Akhtar et al., 2023).

Akbar extended the folds of *Sulh-i-Kul* to religious and cultural dimensions of society. He showed consent at the building of places of worship. Man, Singh built a temple at Brindaban at a cost of half a million rupees and another at Banaras (Sharma, 1988). Akbar also permitted reconverting to the Hindu faith (Badaoni, 1990). Akbar expressed interest in learning other religious sacred texts. He ordered the translation of various religious texts to develop tolerance among people. During his reign, several scriptures of Hinduism including the *Athrava Veda*, the *Mahabharata*, the *Harivamsa* and the *Ramayana* were translated into Persian (Sharma, 1988). The art and architecture patronized by Akbar was characterised by a harmonious fusion of Islamic and Hindu traditions (Nijjar, 1979). Classical literature of Indic, Islamicate, Persianate, Central Asian, and Greco-Roman traditions were gathered, translated, and studied at the court. Akbar developed diplomatic, cultural, economic and military linkages with the Europeans, leading to the preservation of Renaissance resources at the Mughal libraries and workshops (Natif, 2018).

India under Akbar was notable for openness to the multiple ethnicities and religions within the empire: the Turkic, Persian, and Indian populations included Hindus, Muslims, Jains, Buddhists, Zoroastrians, Christians, and Jews. For reasons of both religious belief and expediency, Akbar's policy of *Sul-i-Kul* made coexistence within India feasible while opening possibilities for cultural exchanges with Europe. His policy of tolerance led to interactions with visiting Europeans and those living in the Portuguese colony of Goa. This *Sulh-i-Kul* along with political objectives also led to beauty in the culture, art and architecture of India (Natif, 2018). Its goal was to create stability and a balance of power among the different religious, social, and ethnic groups in the empire, thus enabling the Mughal emperors to broaden their base of support, making the empire a place of refuge for Muslims and non-Muslims alike. The policy contributed and coincided with Akbar's openness to and curiosity about other cultures and played an important role in the creation of a pluralistic artistic language (Natif, 2018).

The establishment of *Ibadat Khana*, a platform for religious and philosophical debates in 1575 at Fatehpur Sikri, provided Akbar and his subjects an opportunity to come into religious and cultural contact with the people of other religions. The debates of Sunni Muslims soon expanded to include prominent court figures (jurists, mullahs, scholars) and leaders of other Islamic sects (including Shi'i and various *Sufis*), as well as Hindus, Jains, Christians, Jews, and Zoroastrians (Natif, 2018). The discussions at *Ibadat Khana* were not only confined to religious matters but discussions on Sufism, science, philosophy, and law were also raised (Early, 2004). The assembly, usually on Thursday nights, was summoned on the order of the emperor to discuss important spiritual topics and relevant books were distributed among the participants.

Initially, Akbar expressed his deep interest in these discussions but later the extreme difference of opinions among religious scholars exhausted Akbar and he left to visit *Ibadat Khana*. The

antagonism and divergence on religious matters among *ulemas* compelled Akbar to promulgate the 'Infallibility Decree' in 1579, which was partly urged by the practical necessity of providing an authoritative interpretation of the law, and partly led by his ambition to brook no rival authority in the state (Sharma, 1988). It enhanced the superiority of Akbar since he gathered into his own hands the power and functions which had been so far exercised by his subordinate functionary, the *Sadr*. The issue of the famous *mahzar* (edict) in 1579, granted Akbar judicial authority (*sultan-i 'adil*) that exceeded any of his Muslim jurists (Khan, 1999). He was accorded supreme legal-religious oversight of all the different communities in the empire. Knowing this, he took further steps toward equality and harmony among the religious communities in his empire (see Buckler, 1924, for more details).

These episodes paved the way for formulating a national religion which contained the conciliatory teachings of different religions. The inquiring mind and constant shift in Akbar's religious views incorporated by his desire to hold on to socio-political and religious spheres led to the promulgation of *Din-i-Illahi* (Divine Faith) in 1581. It was an effort to bring people of different religions with similar interests and develop social tolerance among them. However, this effort proved less successful as it was unable to gain popular support from Indian society. It had a very less following and remained a state religion which declined with the death of Akbar. Akbar neither propagated *Din-i-Illahi* nor used force to convert people to this new faith. Raja Bhagwan Das and Man Singh refused to join, and Akbar did not force them. (Sharma, 1988). The four grades of its followers contributed to the dignity and prestige of the emperor in the eyes of his followers.

Akbar followed *Sulh-i-Kul* as a covert means of control over the state and society. He used conciliation as well as forces to unify India under a single umbrella. He pursued Northwestern Frontier, Deccan and Rajput policies for the expansion and consolidation of his rule. His

Northwestern Frontier campaigns crushed the turbulent forces of Yusufzai's, a turbulent Afghan tribe, and Raushaniyyahs, who had planned an invasion of India. It also added Kabul, Kashmir, Sindh, Baluchistan and Qandahar to the Mughal territory. Akbar's march towards Deccan also brought territorial expansion. Berar, Khandesh, and part of Ahmednagar were annexed between 1595 and 1601.

The administrative reorganization by Akbar established a strong and centralised state. The administrative structure of Akbar later became the foundation of the British administration with slight modifications (Ikram, 1998). He reorganised the administrative structure of his state as devised by Afghan king Sher Shah Suri, his immediate predecessor, and Delhi Sultans. He opened the doors of services for non-Muslims and employed Hindus in Mughal services. Various capable Rajputs served in the Mughal imperial administration and extended the Mughal rule to its farthest limit. *Sulh-i-Kul* helped Akbar in taking Hindus to royal services however, merit was highly considered during employment.

Akbar believed in the centralization of authority to rule efficiently. All powers and authority were vested in the hands of an Emperor as he was the head of state. The Infallibility Decree made the emperor more commanding as it gave him the authority to decide the Islamic laws in cases of dispute. The administration of a state was divided at the central and provincial levels. The chief officials included *wazir* or *diwan*, *mir bakhshi*, *sadr al-sudur* and *mir saman*. Akbar introduced the *Mansabdari* system for controlling his political elite. It was a civil and military organization which was divided into 33 grades and had a rank ranging from 10 to 10,000 of *zat* and *sawar*. Akbar with the functioning of this system concentrated all powers in his hands. The *mansabdars* were appointed by the emperor and were answerable to him for their performance. It also provided

the military strength to the state. However, this system proved unsuccessful. It placed a financial burden on the royal treasury since this system was expensive in its nature.

The military under Akbar, also known as the Akbarian force was composed of a diverse populace. His policy of inclusion enabled Muslims of various races and ethnic groups to constitute Akbar's military strength including Mongols, Turks, Iranis, Kashghari, Badakhshi, Kablis, Kolabi, Tabrezi, Medani, Birlas, Saldoz, Taklu, Shamlu, Turkman, Tolak, Arju, Insari, Deccani, Afghans, Hindus, Baloch, Gakhar, Murl, Mirzas, Khans, Sayyads, Khawaja, Shaiks, Lodhis, Niazis and Hindus of Patvars, Kaiths, Khatries, Kakras, Kaidhorias, Kachhwahas, Rathors, Chohans, and Sisodias. The trust of these diverse religio-ethnic groups helped him in his military conquests and annexations, acquiring large territories.

Akbar's political wisdom and ambitious nature facilitated him in accomplishing his dream of ruling India. He had recognised that government designed on the lines of persecution leads to disunion thus, designed the intellectual socio-political frame which incorporated different ethnic sections of society and led to the union of interest. He adopted reconciliation and social toleration to assure his subjects that he was a ruler of Indian people not just Muslims which led to the submission of his non-Muslim subjects towards the emperor and developed an atmosphere where people of different castes and creeds could enjoy socio-cultural and religious liberty. The outcome was upward social, political and fiscal mobility (Shohibatussholihah & Barizi, 2022).

The policy of *Sulh-i-Kul* favoured Akbar a lot in the accomplishment of his socio-political aims. It helped Akbar in gaining the territorial expansion and administrative consolidation of the state. Akbar being a man of great genius and political wisdom manipulated the religious sentiments of Indian people to pursue his socio-political achievements. It brought prosperity to the Mughal

Empire which proved to be temporary as India experienced a great shift from Akbar's liberalism to Jahangir's fundamentalism. It shook the foundations of the Mughal Empire which started its journey to a gradual decay.

Conclusion

When Akbar acceded the throne, the Mughal Empire had just been established. It sought strength for its survival. Akbar's rule not only provided stability to the Empire, but he raised it to the heights of prosperity that it took a long time for its decline. Akbar being creative and innovative in his nature designed the Empire on its own unique features. His kinship theory gave him unquestionable authority. He, with the help of covert measures like *Sulh-i-Kul*, was successful in exercising this unquestionable authority. He appeased different multiethnic groups by extending his favours, and took non-Muslims in Mughal state machinery which on one hand increased the efficiency of the empire and on the other hand curbed the power of orthodox Muslims. Akbar by employing Hindus curbed the powers of Muslim state officials as he had recognised them as power seekers and could prove a hurdle in cherishing Akbar's political ambitions.

Akbar's Rajput policy was a manifestation of his political wisdom and statesmanship. He had recognized Rajput as a big military power which could prove a hurdle to cherishing his dream of ruling united India therefore, opted for conciliation rather than force to subdue Rajputs. The jealousy among the nobility also persuaded Akbar to bring equally strong elements into the court to curb them. He effectively used Rajput for various administrative and imperial purposes, even using Rajput power against Rajputs in a military expedition to Chitor by extending his generosity in winning Hindu support. He through conciliation made Rajputs from a formidable foe to a subservient ally which demonstrated the political intelligence of Akbar.

Akbar also used overt means of state control as the Northwest Frontier and Deccan campaigns of Akbar extended the Mughal territory from the Northwest to the South. These military expeditions established defence lines and brought territorial expansion with the crushing of turbulent forces. Akbar established an effective administration to rule this huge empire effectively. He developed a sound administrative structure which concentrated all powers in his hands. His *Mansabdari* System and land revenue system proved complimentary to the administrative structure devised by Akbar. The administration provided a base for Mughal polity and brought potency and prosperity to the state. However, the administrative structure especially the *Mansabdari* system had its flaws as well as it proved to be highly expensive and put a burden on the royal treasury.

To sum up, Akbar was an illiterate genius. His reign is considered a golden era in the political sense of Indian history as it is marked by the extension and consolidation of Mughal rule. Therefore, Akbar is considered a real founder of the Mughal Empire who brought diversified India under one sceptre. He governed India evenly without any major internal or external threat. He effectively exercised his political authority and manipulated the religious sentiments of the Indian people to accomplish his socio-political ambitions. Akbar was motivated by reconciliation and social toleration which he exhibited generously during his rule. However, the accomplishment of the socio-political motives of Akbar was liberal in its nature. It proved fruitful during Akbar's reign but lost its popularity with the sharp shift from Akbar's liberalism to Jahangir's fundamentalism. The liberal policies followed by Akbar hurt the religious sentiments of Indian Muslims and damaged the sanctity of religions in India, especially Islam. It also provided a setback to the Muslim Empire in India and compelled Jahangir, the successor of Akbar, to pursue Islamic fundamentalism to secure the Muslim rule in India.

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