



Akbar's Policy of Sulh-i-kul and Religious Harmony: Contemporary Relevance in Modern Secular India

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Abstract

This is a study of the socio-religious policies of the Mughal Emperor Akbar (reigned 1556–1605). The paper is based on the 'Akbar Nama', 'Ain-i-Akbari' and some other texts. The paper analyses the formulation and practical application of the principles of 'Zul-i-Kul' (universal peace) and 'Din-i-Ilahi' in the diverse Indian subcontinent. Beyond mere military rule, Akbar transformed his rule into a 'Social Contract' to protect the lives, property, honour and faith of his subjects. The paper elaborates on the prohibition of jizya and pilgrimage taxes, the administrative consolidation of the Rajput chieftains initiated by Raja Bharmal, the economic reforms under Raja Todar Mal, and the religious dialogues with different religious and cultural groups including Jesuit missionaries at Ibadat Khana. The paper also focuses on the translation initiatives of texts like the Rasm Nama (Mahabharata) to bridge cultural gaps.

Finally, the paper provides a comparative study between Akbar's sixteenth-century constitutional pluralism and the provisions of the modern Indian constitution (especially Articles 15, 16, 25, and 27). The study argues that Akbar's model of governance remains a fundamental historical model for maintaining democracy and secular unity in modern India.

Keywords: Akbar, Sul-i-Kul, Akbar Nama, Ain-i-Akbari, Jesuit Mission, Indian Constitution, Secularism, Pluralism.

1 Introduction

The Indian subcontinent has been a melting pot of diverse religious, linguistic and cultural identities for thousands of years. Managing this diversity is essential to the political survival of any state. In medieval Indian history, this political challenge was most evident during the rise of the Mughal Empire. When Emperor Akbar ascended to power in 1556, he was dealing with a deeply divided country that had been unified only through temporary military victories. While the vast majority of the population was Hindu, the top military-political power was in the hands of an Islamic minority. Akbar had long understood that an empire that relied solely on continuous warfare and the marginalization of the majority population could not achieve long-term stability.

In order to build a stable political structure, Akbar introduced fundamental changes in how the state should deal with different socio-religious groups. Instead of following the narrow thinking of religious scholars (ulama), he introduced a model of governance based on state neutrality, mutual respect, and cultural integration. This secular



model came to be known as 'Zul-i-Kul' or 'Universal Peace'. Instead of eliminating differences of opinion, Akbar balanced them within a unified political system.

In today's globalized social environment, it is of great academic value to review medieval governance strategies. Secularism in India is not a modern political idea imported from Western European countries; rather, it is rooted in the thought experiments of Emperors Ashoka and Akbar. By analyzing how a medieval king was able to successfully manage religious differences without the tools of modern democracy, we can learn valuable lessons for maintaining secular unity in today's society.

2. Historical Records and Administrative Theory

Our understanding of Akbar's view of governance depends largely on contemporary historical records. The most important of these is the 'Akbar Nama' written by Akbar's close friend, advisor and chief minister, Abul Fazl. Abul Fazl compiled this massive work after thirteen years of hard work, compiling official documents, royal decrees and his own memoirs. The work was completed in the forty-second year of Akbar's reign (1598). The third part of this work is 'Ain-i-Akbari'. This part contains invaluable information on the day-to-day administration of the empire, military systems, economic resources, geographical divisions and cultural patterns. The first two parts are historical narratives.

Ain-i-Akbari is a collection of five books (Daftars). In Ain-i-Akbari, Abul Fazl proposes a theory of government that is completely free from strict religious authority. He argues that a true ruler should be broad-minded and think beyond sectarian thinking. He argues that the purpose of royal power is not to impose a particular religious belief on others but to show equal justice to all people. He explains that a ruler is the light of God and is appointed by God to protect his subjects equally.

Akbar transformed the rule into a 'social contract' between the people and the ruler. It was the responsibility of the ruler to protect the lives, property, honour, and religion of the people. In return, the subjects had to pay political allegiance and taxes to the state. This was a revolutionary change for medieval India.

3. The Ibadat Khana Experiment and the Role of Jesuit Missionaries

In the early 1570s, Akbar consolidated military and economic control over North India. Thereafter, Akbar devoted his time to solving intellectual, cultural and religious problems. For this purpose, in 1575, he built a special building called 'Ibadat Khana' (House of Worship) at Fatehpur Sikri. Initially, it was open only to Islamic scholars. However, Akbar was frustrated by personal disputes and extreme religious fanaticism among the scholars.

Then in 1578, Akbar opened the Ibadat Khana to all religious groups. Scholars from Hindu, Jain, Buddhist, Zoroastrian and Christian sects gathered there. Scholars from these religious groups presented their ideas there. In 1580, Akbar gave a high position to the Jesuit missionary Mark, who arrived from Goa. From these discussions on various religions, Akbar learned a great truth. No religion has a monopoly on the ultimate truth. This led to a decrease in the influence of religious scholars in the government.

4. Sul-i-Kul: From Spiritual Vision to Governance

'Sul-i-Kul' is Akbar's philosophy of governance, which emerged from the debates of religious scholars at Ibadat Khana. The term translates to 'universal peace', 'perfect peace' or 'peace for all'. Under the guidance of Abul Fazl, Sul-i-Kul was transformed from a personal belief into the official constitution of the Mughal Empire. It ensured a firm rule that the state should maintain a neutral stance. This ensured that the different beliefs of the people were supported and that the power of the state was not used in favor of only one community.

Abul Fazl in his Akbar Nama states that the divine ruler should adopt the universal patterns of nature. He used this metaphor to describe the work of Zul H-i-Kul. The essence of this was that the state should maintain an equal distance from all religions and should not appease any group. Like the sunlight in nature, Abul Fazl wrote



in his Akbar Nama that all living beings should receive the protection and justice of a ruler equally. This principle laid the foundation of a secular state. A just ruler should provide equal administrative care, legal protection, physical security and financial security to all the people of his empire. Therefore, the state cannot discriminate against anyone who does not follow the Islamic faith. Every person in the country should be given the freedom to practice his traditional faith and worship and build his own holy places without state interference. It is important to note, however, that Sulh-i-Kul was not a policy of complete non-interference. It had a strict ideological system. While all people were free to follow their faith as they pleased, the use of their religion to attack other communities, spread hatred and disrupt the peace of the country was completely prohibited. If any community attacked or oppressed another community or disrupted the peace of the country, the state immediately intervened and took action. This approach is very much in line with the modern political ideology of positive secularism that is being practiced in India today. The state here maintains an equal distance and vigilance from all religions. It ensures that individual religious freedom never adversely affects the fundamental rights or security of the wider society.

5. Historical Analysis of Din-i-Ilahi

In 1582, Akbar initiated his social reforms by introducing an intellectual and moral system called 'Din-i-Ilahi' (Divine Faith) or Tawheed-i-Ilahi (Divine Monotheism). This concept has become a major source of confusion and debate among later historians. Many colonial historians have misinterpreted Din-i-Ilahi as a new religion created by Akbar. They have seen Din-i-Ilahi as a new religion created by a greedy ruler who wanted the people of his empire to worship him as a living god.

The eminent British historian Vincent Smith claimed that 'Din-i-Ilahi is not a monument to Akbar's wisdom, but rather to his folly'. Smith argued that Akbar was trying to create a personal form of worship to replace traditional Islam. Similarly, medieval realist writers such as Abdul Qadir Badauni severely criticized Akbar in their private writings. They claimed that the emperor had completely abandoned the path of true Islam and was actively trying to weaken the Islamic institutions of the empire. These critics pointed out that Din-i-Ilahi should be viewed with extreme suspicion because it deviated from traditional Islamic codes.

But modern and objective historical research has changed these old views. Contemporary historians have shown that Deen-i-Ilahi was not a new religion. Deen-i-Ilahi did not have any of the formal elements of a religion. It had no holy books, priests, temples, or obligatory rituals. It was not a set of moral principles or doctrines imposed on the common people. Rather, it was a voluntary moral code adopted by Akbar to foster unity among the high nobility of the court. It was a search for different moral paths. Its basic values were the respect for fire and light from the Parsi religious tradition, the values of non-violence and vegetarianism from the Jain tradition, and the complete devotion to God from Sufi mysticism. The original aim of the Din-i-Ilahi was to build strong cultural ties and unity among a very diverse group of nobles. Akbar's court included many generals and officials from Persian, Turkish, Central Asian and Rajput backgrounds. It was a system of this kind, with only Akbar's closest followers as members. Akbar never used the administrative system to recruit them to this idea. It was entirely voluntary. Only a very small group of people like Birbal and Abul Fazl were part of it. The Din-i-Ilahi was not a religious tradition but a social instrument designed to unify the leadership of a deeply divided state. It also helped to foster a sense of unity among the diverse nobles.

6. Experiments in Administrative Consolidation

Akbar introduced several administrative reforms to implement principles such as Zul-i-Kul. He understood that these would be completely useless if they were not implemented in the day-to-day administration. He understood that the common people would believe in their claims only if there was a direct improvement in the country's tax policies, government laws, and cultural and religious protection. To implement this, Akbar implemented several bold administrative reforms that forever changed the way the country functioned.



In 1564, the 'Jizya' tax was completely abolished in his empire. This was his first reform. 'Jizya' was a special tax levied on non-Muslims of the country under traditional rulers for centuries. Through this, Akbar was able to remove the inequality in taxation that existed for the majority Hindu population. He also abolished the special pilgrimage tax imposed on Hindus to pilgrimage sites such as Varanasi and Prayagraj. However, this reduced the revenue to the treasury. But it gave Akbar great influence over the Hindu population and the general public.

Another important policy of his was the alliance with the Rajputs. The Rajputs were the powerful kings of Rajasthan. The previous rulers had seen them as mere military targets. But Akbar adopted a different policy based on mutual respect and political numbers. Raja Barmal of Amber was the first Rajput king to form an official alliance with the Mughal Empire. As part of this, he married his daughter Jodha Bai to Akbar. He also entered into marriages with other prominent Rajput families. However, Akbar never forced his Rajput wives to convert to Islam. He built beautiful temples for them in his palaces at Agra and Fatehpur Sikri. He also gave them complete freedom to practice their traditional customs.

Akbar based his administration's high positions in the civil service and the army on personal merit. Thus, non-Muslims were also appointed to high positions in the administration. He introduced a new military administrative system called "Mansabdari". Appointments and promotions were determined based on merit in Mansabdari, regardless of religion, race, caste, or noble birth. Raja Todar Mal was appointed as the finance minister of the empire. Similarly, he gave such high positions to good people. He implemented revolutionary tax reforms. Raja Mansingh was appointed as the top military commander of the Mughal army. This was a monopoly of the Turkish nobles. But that monopoly was broken by this.

Apart from political reforms, Akbar also brought about social reforms. He made officials responsible for abolishing 'Sati' (the practice of widows throwing themselves on their husbands' pyres). He issued clear orders to protect women who chose to end their lives without practicing Sati. He brought laws to abolish child marriage. He made widow remarriage a legal right. He abolished the practice of enslaving prisoners of war. He established 'Maktab Khana' (translation department) to reduce social distance between different communities. Here, important Sanskrit epics like the Mahabharata were beautifully translated into the Rasm Nama (Book of War). The Ramayana was translated into Persian. This helped the Mughal officials understand the heritage of their Hindu people. This helped to reduce social misunderstandings considerably.

7. Modern Indian Constitution and Akbar's Governance

The governance reforms implemented by Akbar in the 16th century show a deep connection with the ideas of secularism and democracy in the modern Indian Constitution almost four hundred years later. When drafting the Constitution for India after independence, leaders like Dr. B R Ambedkar, Jawaharlal Nehru, and Dr. Rajendra Prasad faced a similar political challenge to that faced by Akbar. We can see from Akbar's rule how a society with centuries of religious, linguistic, and caste differences could be built into a stable and progressive state. This helped them to build a democratic secular republic that directly reflected the idea of Sulhi-e-Kul.

We can find historical connections by comparing the fundamental rights in the Indian Constitution, which was framed after 1947. There is a striking similarity between Articles 15, 16, 25, and 27 and Akbar's governance.

- Article 15: Absolute equality before the law: According to this, no citizen of the country should be discriminated against on the basis of religion, caste, sex, place of birth, etc. This is the modern form of equal justice implemented by Akbar in his government.
- Article 16: Equal opportunity in employment: According to this, all citizens are ensured equal opportunities to get appointment in the government service in the country. Akbar appointed talented people like Raja Todar Mal and Raja Mansingh to high positions considering their merit. This can be read in conjunction with Akbar's Mansabdari system.



- Article 25: Freedom of religion: This guarantees the right of every citizen to adopt, practice and propagate the religion of his choice. This right is a reflection of the broad protection given by Sul-hi-Kul. Akbar had given freedom to all his subjects to practice their religion.
- Article 27: No taxes for religious purposes: This prohibits the use of public funds for the protection or promotion of a particular religion. It also prohibits the collection of taxes from individuals for the promotion of a religion. This is consistent with Akbar's abolition of the Jizya tax and the withdrawal of the pilgrimage tax in 1564.

In our current political climate, where communal differences challenge our democratic processes, Sul-hi-Kul offers a very practical example. Indian secularism faces criticism for ignoring religious values. However, in real India, secularism is deeply rooted. Akbar's secularism, while criticized, was based on the ancient principle of 'Sarva Dharma Samabhav' (equal respect for all paths), as his historical works demonstrate.

8. Conclusion

Emperor Akbar's socio-religious policies were not mere personal whims; rather, they were very visionary and well-planned political plans designed to unite a diverse empire. He realized that a secular state was better for survival than military conquests. He successfully shifted the basis of his rule from a narrow religious ideology to a universal one. He built a unified national state through practical measures such as avoiding discriminatory taxes, establishing close ties with local leaders, and promoting open cultural dialogue. During his reign, his views and policies faced fierce opposition from conservative religious groups. His ideas changed the course of Indian history forever. They left behind a rich legacy of tolerance and structural pluralism that helped define the unique identity of the Indian subcontinent. Amid the challenges to pluralism that modern India faces today, Akbar's vision of 'Zul-i-Kul' is a great guideline for peaceful coexistence. Akbar's model of governance reminds us that national unity is not achieved through a single voice, but through mutual respect and the impartiality of the state.

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