

Reason was basis of Akbar's

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“Emperor Akbar's radical departures in religious tolerance, his line of thinking that religion must not be denied (in order) to have a secular state and that tradition must be based on reason...one can imagine how revolutionary these ideas were in the 1590s.” Amartya Sen (acceptance speech on conferment of D. Litt by Jamia Millia Islamia)
The Mogul Emperor Akbar was fortunate in having excellent court chroniclers.

Principal sources are those of Abul Fazl and Abdul Qadir Badaoni. While Abul Fazl, Akbar's favorite, wrote Akbarnama and Ain-i-Akbari, a hostile Badaoni kept a diary and notes criticizing the Emperor. The visiting Jesuits and English Protestants kept records. Based on these sources, the noted Indologist, Heinrich von Stietencron, summarized the main trajectory of Akbar's religious quest and education.

When Akbar assumed the throne in 1556 at the age of 13, the situation was hopeless. His father had re-conquered the kingdom only partially, which promptly began falling apart on his death. Akbar established his military might, consolidated his kingdom and reformed the land tax by fixing it on a 10-year basis rather than the oppressive year-by-year assessment.

He linked the military-bureaucratic mansabdari system to merit and performance of the individual regardless of his religious background. This broke the back of the closed elite dominating the army and politics.

In 1562, he married the Princess of Amber securing Rajput support for his dynasty. Next year, he abolished the pilgrimage tax and, in 1564, the Jizya tax and domestic custom duties. The pilgrimage and Jizya taxes applied solely to Hindus and the domestic duties had hampered trade.

The ban on Hindus building temples and carrying out their religious customs in public places was lifted. While all this drew support from the oppressed Hindu majority, it earned the wrath of Muslim fundamentalists.

From 1575 onwards, Akbar attempted to understand Islam. He invited the contending Muslim sects to discuss doctrine, law and practical behavior. During these debates, the vehement quarrels among Sunni, Shia and Sufi scholars and high clerics revealed to him contradictions in their arguments, their inability to refute arguments of their opponents and many character weaknesses.

Above all, they gave the illiterate Akbar a unique and intense opportunity to understand Islamic theology and law, their various interpretations and argumentative justifications. As his confidence in his own judgment grew, he sought to mediate and strived for rationalization.

In 1579, he ensured that the principal Ulema issue a fatwa (which he promulgated). It quoted the Koran (Sur IV, 62), "Obey God and obey the Prophet and those who have authority over you", and the Hadith, "Surely the man who is dearest to God on the Day of Judgment is the Imam-i-Adil (just leader); whosoever obeys the Amir obeys me, and whosoever rebels against him, rebels against me".

The Ulema declared Akbar as Imam-i-Adil, and Shadow of God on Earth, etc. and stated that he was the final word in any religious dispute and his verdict was binding on all of them and the whole nation. In March 1579, he read the khutba at Friday prayer and assumed the title of the Caliph of Islam.

Even earlier, he developed an understanding of Hinduism, Christianity, Zoroastrianism and Jainism. Scholars from all these religions were invited to the Imperial presence and confronted with Islamic theologians. Since the Ulema were ignorant of the Bible and the Hindu scriptures, Akbar ordered translations, of the Ramayana by Badaoni and the Bible by Abul Fazl.

He rejected both Hindu idol worship and the Judeo-Christian-Islamic idea of the Resurrection and the Last Judgment. From the Hindu tradition, he accepted the doctrine of reincarnation, the role of the king as representative of the Supreme Being requiring him to be the protector of all his subjects and accepted the king's duty to preserve moral order.

He adhered to the belief in one God and took the sun as His symbol. He had a fire altar erected on his palace terrace and had a fire burning there all day and night. From 1580 onwards, he publicly worshipped the sun and fire, incorporating a part of Zoroastrianism. He also adopted the Sanskrit prayer (reciting the thousand names of the sun) and the three prayers of the Hindus (morning, midday and evening) instead of the five prayers of Islam.

From the Jains, he adopted ahimsa and, in 1583, banned killing of animals all over the Empire. But compliance was low everywhere, as indicated by numerous later decrees repeating the law and demanding obedience. These decrees and laws were difficult to implement: the Muslim provincial governors had a high degree of independence and were averse to the new liberalism – and "Delhi was far".

Badaoni, who thought Akbar had ceased to be a Muslim, wrote: "there grew .. The conviction in his heart that there were sensible men in all religions and abstemious thinkers and men endowed with miraculous powers among all nations. If some true knowledge was thus everywhere to be found, why should truth be confined to one

religion, or to a creed like Islam, which was comparatively new, and scarcely a thousand years old?"

It had been foretold that Islam would last only a thousand years after the Hirja and, as that year approached, there was great religious unrest throughout the Islamic world. It was expected that the hidden Imam or Mahdi would reveal himself and a new empire of the just would be ushered in. Akbar believed in this though he did not see himself as the Mahdi. However, he had devised a new religion appropriate for the new millennium.

After 1591-2 (1000 Hijra) and the non-appearance of the messianic event, he stopped observing fasts, shaved himself, permitted dogs, and even pigs, to be kept in the palace and no longer went to public prayer. His trust in reliability of doctrine had collapsed utterly. From then on, he recognized reason alone as the basis for religion.

He became Grand Master of an order of free thinkers –the Din-il- Illahi - committed to ten virtues culled from all the available religions. Yet, Akbar did not impose this belief on his Muslim or Hindu courtiers and officials, let alone on his subjects. This absence of dogmatism, in one who considered himself all-powerful and semi-divine, was an attribute of his true statesmanship.

By the time he died in 1605, he had forged and stabilized, in his 50-year reign, a great empire whose glory outshone that of Persia and inaugurated in India a flowering of peace. His greatest failure lay in not training and educating his successors to carry on his monumental task. Had he succeeded in this, India may have achieved a religious syncretism, saving this ancient land from the ill effects of the clash of religions. Yet the impact he made on the Empire was so great that even his unworthy successors took a hundred years to wind it down.

More importantly, as Heinrich von Stietencron says: "no ruler in 16th century Europe tried as consistently to implement the rule of reason in the framework of an absolutist order as did Emperor Akbar in India."