

Dīn-e-Elāhī: The Politics of Religion during Mughal Sultanate

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Abstract

This article focuses on Emperor Akbar's manipulation and elevation of a new religion "*Din-e-Elahi*" to handle the state of political matters during his reign and that was, according to the Muslim orthodox, against the basic canons of Islamic scriptural message. Akbar is the most urbane and triumphant Emperor (1556-1605) in Mughal Empire (1525-1858). The period of Akbar's rule has been regarded as one of the most significant and incomparable periods in Indian history in particular regarding Hindu Muslim interaction. Akbar's motivation and intention behind this new configuration, and the alteration in Islamic and the Quranic basics, was just political rather than religious. His new wave towards the transformation and so-called religious reformation, "*Ṣulḥ-i-kul*," (Absolute Peace) was just that he wanted to have stability in autocracy and strengthen his administrative grip. The objectives of this research are to know how Akbar's motivation in creating a policy of syncretic *Din-e-Elahi* and his thought contribution towards Indian people. This research uses literary or library research with historical approaches by incentivizing widely, critically, and deeply reading references relating to Akbar's thought, critical evaluation, and the best elements of all. The result of this research indicates that his policy of syncretic *Din-e-Elahi* purely promoted racial tolerance and religious freedom under the policy of "Universal Tolerance". He knew how a Muslim ruler could

govern over the Hindu majority country. To have a strong relationship with a predominant nation, he tried to attract them with new tact and propagated so-called brotherhood, interreligious harmony, and tolerance by mingling it with mysticism, philosophy, and nature-worship. His thought contributions then influence the daily life and culture of the Indians such as harmony in an interreligious community far better than before. He also constitutes a symbol of liberalism and secularism then reflected by modern India.

Keywords: Mughal philosophy of religion, liberalism and secularism in Mughal era, Islam for Emperor Akbar

Introduction:

Right from the beginning of human presence on earth, the never-ending struggle between humankind for supremacy on each other began. Able and Cain is one such example to be cited in this context that fought for a certain possession. This notion kept descending gradually among the succeeding generations of men till the era of more vigorous and tremendously powerful states, often shaping different forms and devices to take absolute control over people and their meager possessions.

Current research is based on the idea of the psychological state of the monarchs from the history of Mughals in the subcontinent over a span of several hundred years. The concept of monarchy and the reality of fright and shock are associated with my understanding of history. Human history resounds with such examples where the state deliberately created awe among the masses to rule smoothly over them. Assyrians¹ built passages in their palaces for the complainants to reach the king. The walls of those passages were lavishly covered with imposing and frightful animals, which did not exist in reality. The prime scheme of such depiction was to weaken spiritually and physically anyone who would approach the king through these appalling corridors to the effect that it would make them tremble to their bones. It was a success of the monarch and a serious dent in any possibility of a rebellious

attempt against the state. The sheer joy of seeing a stumbling person before the monarch enriched their morale to the highest level of glory, allowing them to rule and control the masses psychologically.

The Religious Syncretism of Sultan Akbar

The Mughals after being driven out of Central Asia tended their route towards India. In order to establish an empire that may last till their succeeding generations, they made several attempts to establish a strong rule on this new land of opportunity. This idea to regain their lost paradise in India was firmly embedded in Mughal's vision; therefore, they had to have all types of courage, devices, and commanding qualities which would help them to establish a glorious kingdom. Incidentally, when Babur got driven out of *Fergana* (a small state in central Asia) found conducive circumstances to conquer India. He managed to defeat the local ruling dynasty, and it was Akbar at a very early age to have such wisdom to comprehend the religious, political scenario of India to gain absolute control through the idea of religious and political tolerance. Apart from building up unshakable ties with the local rulers by marrying a number of Rajput princesses, he helped himself to establish a commendable empire.

Through this research, I have tried to reveal the fore stated socio-political situation and the mindset of the ruler which initiated such circumstances in a particular era. It is not beside the point to mention that people, on the whole, were poor and living in marginal economic conditions. This has also been stated by Abraham Early "but the greater reality was of the desert and the barren life of the common people. Half naked and illiterate, barely scraping out a living, an average Indian during the Mughal times had advanced little from the conditions of life of his ancestors of a thousand or more years before his time."² The Mughals appear to be less vicious and barbaric as compared to the Assyrians; however, the mental attitude of Central Asian people persisted in their approach and handling the problems of their kingdom. Akbar though very young of age at the time of ascension, he knew all the characteristic attitudes of the people of the subcontinent; therefore, he effortlessly managed to strengthen the Mughal Empire. Apart from political

upheavals, he paid due respect to the artists and their work; it was a very clever move to appease all the communal sections at the same time.

The Mughals, in comparison to the Assyrians, constructed such buildings which were aesthetically more appealing and refined in the facade, which as a result made the appellant somewhat relaxed, but however, the splendor of the building overwhelmed the subject to the same effect as those of the Assyrian kings. This state of the grandeur of the sovereign created awe in the minds of the subjects, workers, and courtiers. As a result, every subject performed their best to get the appreciation of the monarch and at the same time expected to be lavishly rewarded. Owing to this entire psychological, political and social situation, the Mughal monarchs kept hold of their subjects and successfully attained obedience from the masses to their own needs and necessities. In the present era, the same approach of the ruling elite prevails.

Emperor Akbar (1556-1605) was the third ruler of the Mughal dynasty. India was in a most disarrayed shape at the time he gained the throne. The Hindu Rajput Maharajas ruled a large part of the land. Akbar was only 12. It was Behram Khan at the helm of affairs, but the young monarch himself had this ability to recognize what he needed to do for a sturdy consolidated rule in peace. He continued to follow the strategy of diplomacy and linkage with the Rajput states through marriages in order to mollify non-Muslim subjects of his state, which existed in the majority. In every era, very few rulers stood out among the multitude of Emperors and Kings whose reputation has lasted beyond their years of rule. Some of them were famous for their unmatched cruelty, some for their political prowess, and some for their diplomatic skills. In contrast, some are still known for their tolerance, openness, and intellectual curiosity. Akbar was known for his fascinating religious policies. He selected the most undisputed sections from the local religions such as Islam, Hinduism, Zoroastrianism, and Christianity and amalgamated them into a new state religion called *Din-e-Elah*. It pacified the conflicting factions and brought harmony to the country, and consequently became a favorable place for economic activities. However, the perspective of *Din-e-Elahi* remained beyond the tolerance of the Muslims.

Akbar's concept of *Din-e-Elahi*, which I have tried to explore and endeavor to trace its impact on the visage of Emperor Akbar himself. It may probably be a very clever device on the part of the Akbar and Mughal dynasty to synthesize the important and significant qualities of various religions into one uniformed inscription labeled as *Din-e-Elahi*; it was an unworthy approach a Muslim. It was close to the sacrilege of Islamic values.

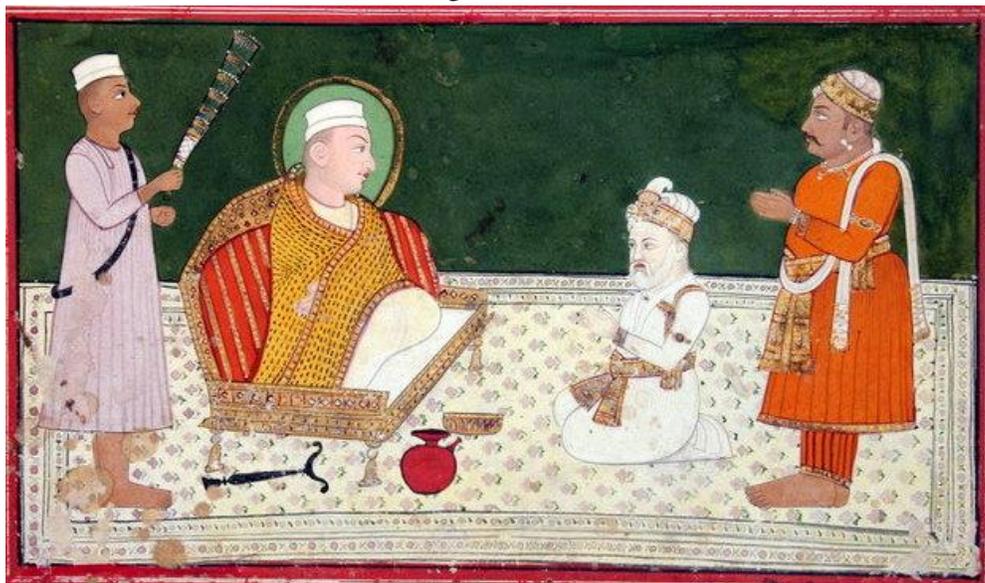


Figure I: *Mughal Emperor Akbar shows deference to Sufi saint Sheikh Salim Chishti Bikaner Ca, late 18th - early 19th century Opaque watercolour with gold on wasli 12.5 x 20.4 cm, miniature painting from Bikaner Rajput School, image curtsy to Wikimedia Commons*

While looking at the old manuscript where an image of Akbar is manifested in the seated position, he is handing over his dictum of a book to a well-known Sufi of his era. It is very interesting to note the countenance of Akbar reflects the deceitful character of the man who is hiding something back. The evil spirit is behind this book and is not letting out on King's face; in fact, it seems that he is enjoying the state of helplessness of the Sufi on happily receiving a book with contents heavily loaded against Sufi's notion of Islam. The contended and the sadist expressions, which are full of sarcasm, are noticeable on the face of Akbar. Many of the features of Emperor Akbar in the wake of his deceitful duality should have been painted by the artists of

that period. The image of Akbar represents a person in a rather grave concentration immersed in his own thoughts. There is no such sarcastic or sad appearance on his face. The look is of a very astute man who understands in a perfect manner the calamitous state of affairs threatening his country (Figure 1). It can be said that in order to be a triumphant head of state, probably the amalgamation of various religions was the imperative need of that time. This type of approach for the Muslim monarch appears to be unethical and against the basic canon of Islam. Through this divine slogan, Akbar helped him to build up the Mughal dynasty, but otherwise, he deserves to be penalized for irreverence to Islam. So it was during the reign of Akbar that the Mughal Empire decided to adopt a tolerance approach mainly influenced by Persian rulers who followed the Mongolian principles of tolerance because their main agenda was to sustain their peaceful rule in India. The main idea was to abolish the religious differences and extremists, but according to me, it triggered the Islamic orthodox and created strong hatred in the hearts of the true followers of Islam.

Akbar always took great interest in religious debates that he would converse with scholars from different religions and thus instigated a religious movement of his own. Firstly *Ibadat Khana*³ was created where experts' scholars, poets of different religions used to come together and talk on different religious issues (Figure 2). Akbar, although suffered from dyslexia⁴ but he was very keen to explore other religions to reach the ultimate truth of nature. Akbar would ultimately store up a library loaded with in excess of over 1000s of books and manuscripts in Arabic, Greek, Hindi, Kashmiri, and Latin. Jehangir⁵, the son of Akbar expressed that "Akbar was always keen of learning every doctrine and Canon of religions".

Akbar expressed his enthusiasm for knowledge of every religion in a letter to King Philip II of Spain⁶, where he mourns that individuals never question or ask for the issues inside their own religion, they would rather prefer to spend their whole lives in ignorance of other religions and convince themselves with the religion in which they were born and instructed.

According to him, the main noble goal of an individual is to ascertain the truth by questioning and exploring other religions. The discussion held at *Ibadat Khana* inspired him to create *Din-e-Elahi*.



Figure 2: Nar Singh, *Akbar the Great holds a Religious assembly in the Ibadat Khana (House of Worship) in Fatehpur Sikri*; the two men dressed in black are the Jesuit missionaries Rodolfo Acquaviva and Francisco Henriques. Ca. 1605, Illustration to the Akbarnama.

Din-e-Elahi literal meaning the religion of God was founded by Mughal emperor Akbar, the great, in 1582 (*Figure 3*). The component was fundamentally drawn from Islam and Hinduism. The Sufi belief of *Din-e-Elahi* was advanced toward the start of the year 1582. As per the works of

Jesuit author Bartoli, a conventional chamber was set up for its advancement, and an old sheik, perhaps Sheik Mubarak, was sent to promote it. Vincent Smith⁷, a historic mentioned that the principles of *Din-e-Elahi* were not clearly and precisely defined as late as 1587 because it was not a new religion but was only a blend that acquired lessons from various religions.



Figure 3: Govardhan, *Akbar with Lion and Calf*, Ca. 1630, Illustration to the *Padishah Nama*, Metmuseum.

It was basically a moral framework, denying common sins such as lust, eroticism, defamation, and pride and ordering the ideals of devotion, reasonability, restraint, and kindness as it was a combination of all the religions, including Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, Zoroastrianism, Jainism, and Christianity. Its teachings, therefore, were also based on the amalgamation of all the above-mentioned religions. It urged to purify the souls by the *zikr* of God as taught by Sufism, restrained from slaughtering the animals as taught by Jainism, allowed chastity as allowed in Catholicism. It introduced the worshiping of the sun as in Zoroastrianism. The recitation of the 1000 Sanskrit names of the sun was borrowed from Hinduism. But while doing research on this topic, one can realize that *Akbar, around his own individual self, invented Din-e-Elahi*. In some places, it was even reported that he

wanted to be acknowledged as a prophet. The main underlying principles were:⁸

- a. God is extraordinary.
- b. Akbar is His missionary or delegate.
- c. Each disciple of this religion ought to sacrifice his property, life, religion, and honor to the head.
- d. Each entrant should make a vow to accomplish something useful to everyone.
- e. No entrant should be ignorant to have blind faith.

He even chose the members on his own based on their devotion and faithfulness. His availability tried screening the expecting contestants to *Din-e-Elahi* to forfeit property, life, religion, and honor. It was not all the time that every one of the contestants would be in a situation to forfeit those whole four things all at once. The position or phase of the contestant would be settled based on his sacrifice of those four valuables. They were expressed to have acquired one decree, two decrees, and so on accordingly. During his rule, there were very few formal adherents of *Din-e-Elahi*.

Akbar focused on establishing a dynasty as strong as he could but ignored how he was sabotaging the teachings of Islam. Akbar proposed that all religions are either equally true or equally illusory. We know that Akbar was illiterate, but his level of profundity and an inquiring mind completely overshadowed his shortcomings. This is evident from his practices where he normalized many sins that were considered haram in Islam but also, as every ruler, he couldn't afford to antagonize the Sufi nobles. So we see him trying to modify and root out some of the practices that were common among the post nomadic Mongols, this included the gathering of soldiers where excessive drinking of alcohol took place, it also included the general Mongol ways of warfare, which was according to most estimates quite brutal and unforgiving. Abd al-Qadir Badayuni writes which quote that "It was the code of Chingis Khan to slaughter or make captives of the relative multitude of occupants of the vanquished area, to annihilate completely numerous towns and towns and tidy everything up and clear to esteem God's creation as though it were nevertheless radishes, cucumbers and leeks"⁹. He whispered mantras, prayed to the sun, and worshiped fire, and safe himself from creating

Muslim rebels. He kept fasts and never called *Din-e-Elahi* a new religion. Therefore there was no priesthood in *Din-e-Elahi*, the scholar of the Persian language Heinrich Bloachman¹⁰ states that Akbar solely relied upon his influence and example. Thus he had established the priesthood and appointed no proper person to propagate his faith. This also aligns with the fact that Akbar never declared *Din-e-Elahi* as a new religion, so no priesthood or separate place of worship was required for the purpose. He was adequately astute to not turn people in general against himself and set the fundamentals of *Din-e-Elahi* on a large portion of the lessons of Islam.

The fundamentals of *Din-e-Elahi* were stated by Mohsin Fani, who has described a part of it in his famous *Dabistan-i-Mazahib*¹¹. The virtues of *Din-e-Elahi*, according to Mohsin Fani, included the following:

- a. Liberality and beneficence
- b. Forgiveness of the evildoer and repulsion of anger with mildness
- c. Abstinence from worldly desires.
- d. Care of freedom from the bonds of worldly existence and accumulating good for future and perpetual world.
- e. Wisdom and devotion in the frequent meditation on the consequences of actions.
- f. Strengths of dexterous prudence in the desire for marvelous actions.
- g. Soft voice, gentle words, and pleasing speech for everybody
- h. Good treatment with brethren
- i. A perfect alienation from the creatures and a perfect attachment to the Supreme Being.
- j. Dedication of soul in the love of God and union with God the preserver of all.

In spite of the efforts of King Akbar, it is still observable that the main agenda behind *Din-e-Elahi* was not religious but rather political. These alterations in teachings of Islam and a so-called blend of religions create *Sulh-i-ku*¹² was merely to strengthen his dynasty and to have stability in his totalitarianism. All this was just to have a solid relationship with a multicultural and religious country. He attempted to draw in them with affability and spread brotherhood and fellowship by creating interreligious harmony. In my opinion, his tactics were intolerable and in other worlds

beyond the pale to Muslims, particularly Sufis. Sheikh Ahmed Sirhindi, at that time, was completely unhappy and condemned his ways of running the administration.

This period is thought of as disputable by Muslim orthodox and Sufis because of Akbar's fascinating ways of dealing with religious instability. Rizvi S.A.A quotes Professor Fazl-ur- Rahman who writes that "The first Islamic controversy aroused during the rule of King Akbar, who somewhat through political intentions however to a great extent based on his own strict perspectives and encounters and equally aided by the two siblings Abul Fadl and Faydi planned and initiated a new diverse religion, the *Din-e-Elahi*. The new religion died before even spreading as it was rejected by both Hindus and Muslims." Akbar was of the expectations to acquire ascendancy over the state and wanted to win the hearts of devotees of all religions by transforming the doctrine to please everyone regardless of the number of modifications that he did to Islamic principles. It's clear he just wanted to be an extraordinary ruler. Sheik Ahmed Sirhindi around then was totally troubled and denounced his methods of running the organization. He even called the scholars who upheld Akbar as world searchers and lackeys of the lord. These scholars included Sheik Tajuddin, who straightforwardly upheld the possibility of *Wahdatul Wujud*. He upheld his position by saying that kneeling before Akbar was the same as bowing down before Allah. This likewise lines up with the principles of *Din-e-Elahi* as Akbar was of the view that through any type of religious worship, Allah is worshipped regardless of how they are performed and who performs them. These are simply various methods of cherishing God, therefore, driving us to a similar objective which is to kneel before Allah. As per the above discussion, such a disposition of scholars gave Akbar certainty and further helped him to proceed with his concept of *Din-e-Elahi*. Sheik Ahmed Sirindi likewise thinks about a portion of the *Ulmah* and scholars of that time liable for making him astray from *Sirat-e-Mustaqeem* (a straight path). A portion of these scholars even realized the fact that *Din-e-Elahi* went against the authoritative Islamic opinions, yet at the same time to turn into King's favorite; they upheld him. Sirhindi also went against Akbar's approach to eliminate the *Jizyah*¹³, an exceptional survey charge on Hindus. He said that eliminating *Jizyah* was not exclusively to stifle them yet additionally to

embarrass them. As indicated by his learning, ought the state to be administered by Islamic laws and guidelines, and these laws to ought not to change with modernization. He, therefore, started to assume the responsibility for the assignment of purifying the Muslim society from the lessons that were amalgamated with Hindu Pantheism. He was really worried for the upcoming generations and condemned the idea of *Wahdat-ul Wujud*⁴ and proposed his philosophy of *Wahdat-ush-Shuhud*⁵.

Din-e-Elahi was just a modern-day religion, and its entrants were people who were unable to follow the extremists of their religion. Still, advancement in Islam is against the lessons of Islam. Sheikh Ahmed Sirindi has completely gone against the division of development into *al-Hasana* (good) and *al-Siyyah* (bad), unlike other scholars of that time. Because of this division of development in religion, disarray has been made in the idea of *Bid'at*. He considered it highly unsafe to submit to such a ruler who was capable of bringing innovations in the religion. Therefore guided Muslims to spread and advance Islam by spreading the word of *Sunnah*.

There are sections of the Quran where it's clearly stated that innovations in religious teachings are forbidden at all. Some of these verses are stated below:

- "Quran (5:3)." n.d. "today I have perfected your the religion for you and have completed by favor upon you." Meaning that the religion has been completely revealed, and there will be neither further revelations nor changes in the Quranic verses.
- Muslim (3:1343). n.d. "He who designs something bogus which has no connection with the religion of Islam is dismissed."
- Muslim (2:592). n.d. "The best words are the words of Allah and the most ideal way is the method of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) and the most awful things are the variations and each variation in the religion is deceiving."
- Abu. Abu Dawood (7/16-17). n.d. "I encourage you to fear Allah and should hear your ruler and submit to him however he is a Negro slave. So it is a commitment upon you to follow my Sunnah and my caliphs and hold it unequivocally and keep away from the developments in light of the fact that each new thing is advancement in the religion and each development is misdirecting."

Akbar was also seen deciphering “Allah o Akbar” as God is Akbar (himself) instead of God is great. It’s evident from the fact that *Din-e-Elahi* is best seen as a state religion with the head himself at its middle. He was the single expert and had the power over all religious matters. He completely misused this authority by making his own variations in the code of Islam, which were best for the peace according to his intellect. This was again blasphemy and irreverence to Islamic teachings, which offended Muslims of the Subcontinent. This triggered the firm believers, and they started to play their duty of clearing the minds of Muslims. These efforts really discouraged the spread of *Din-e-Elahi*, and it disappeared with time. Indeed, even before Akbar's death, it was no more. The few chances it had to survive were also brushed off by Aurangzeb, an extremist Sunni Islam believer. It was rejected not only by Muslims but also Hindus. It is reported that Akbar asked his nephew Man Singh to accept this faith, but he rejected it by saying that “he would have even converted to Islam for his sake but he cannot accept a religion that was so out of his understandings.” The very first Hindu adherent reported was Mahesh Das, who was a very close friend of Akbar so that he might have accepted the faith due to his love for the king; so many such other examples are seen among the entrants, which is why with the arrival of Aurangzeb this new faith vanished¹⁶

The thought featured through this research is how the great Akbar supported his rule by forfeiting on his *din*. Many individuals regard him and defend the cause for framing *Din-e-Elahi*, yet truly he did all of this to accomplish political objectives. His insight directed him to accomplish the worldly desires, which one can say were effectively accomplished; however, he was sufficiently imbecilic to compromise it for the life hereafter.

Conclusion:

There is no history of an era or state in the globe that has not yet encountered any sort of unrest, occasion, or mishap. All things considered, numerous people, through various channels and stages, were either renowned or infamous for their words, activities, considerations, and motivations, are as yet being alluded to in the socio-religious history for quite a while. There is a huge number of people in the history of mankind who distinguish themselves from others through advanced thinking. Among such people was Akbar, the

extraordinary head of the subcontinent who marked himself in the history through his successful rule and concept of *Din-e-Elahi*. Thus we see where his throne was considered the best of all; the Mughal Empire has dark religious crises behind the curtains. Also, success is always remembered with the tactics through which it was achieved; therefore, Akbar's rule for Islamic norms and Muslims will always be a disappointment instead of pride.

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- ¹¹ *Dabistan-i-Mazahib*: meaning school of religions, a Persian language work that examines and compares South Asian religions and sects of the mid-17th century
- ¹² Sulh I Kul: literal meaning "peace for everyone" was a term given to the harmonization of religions and peace created by this union.
- ¹³ Jizya is tax paid by the non-Muslims of a Muslim state to their Muslim ruler.
- ¹⁴ Wahdat-ul-wajud is the doctrine that says Allah is present in everything and therefore you can worship all beings.
- ¹⁵ Wahdat-ush-Shuhud is a doctrine that says things are reflection of Allah and you can only bow down in front of Allah.
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