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A CRITICAL FOCUS ON AKBAR'S RELIGIOUS POLICY



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ABSTRACT

Akbar was however the first among the Monarchs of medieval India who raised the policy of religious toleration to the pinnacle of Secularism. His state policy was not mere Sentiments and Platitudes.

KEYWORDS :critical, mere Sentiments and Platitudes, Socio-Political .

INTRODUCTION

In his role religion had played the role of a decisive force in the Indian society ever since the advent of Islam which most of its people had refused to embrace. Akbar fully understood the centrifugal tendencies of the complete Indian Socio-Political order and made a Serious attempt to eliminate there by Separating religion from Politics.

BASIC INSPIRATION FOR AKBAR'S RELIGIOUS POLICY:

Moreover to his own bitter experience, Akbar had found that mere religious affinity was no guarantee to win the love and loyalty of his camp-followers. He had suffered much at the hands of his own Secrupulous and jealous kingsmen; I nor could he depend exclusively on his self-seeking and turbulent Muslim nobles who frequently resorted to revolts and at times. Pored a danger even to his personal life. On the other hand Akbar's highly devoted, Intelligent and well-cultured Hindu wives won his love and their relatives earned his gratitude by their Selfish service to the throne. No wonder, the

Rajputs emerged as the Pillars of the Mughal throne whom Akbar could where as counter poise against Muslim Kith & Kin. All those considerations deeply influenced Akbar's religious views and moulded his state policies.

STAGES OF DEVELOPMENT OF AKBAR'S RELIGIOUS POLICY:

The exposition of Akbar's religious policy was not the sudden outburst of an idea nor a calculated political move. Moreover, its genesis was Spontaneous in keeping with the nature of Akbar, its growth and development was spread over distinct stages in the years process of evolution of his religious policy.

1ST STAGE – SPIRITUAL AWAKENING:

Objectionable of his subjects, he, therefore, abolished the pilgrims' tax throughout his dominions, close upon its heels, Akbar took the Most revolutionary step on March 15, 1564, in granting religious freedom to the Hindus; it was the abolition of jaziya. This was a poll tax, charged from the Hindus in their capacity as Zimni's, whereby they were denied the right of full-fledged citizenship of the state under their Muslim rules. The Hindu population was divided into three grades on the basis of their economic standing; the richest among them paid 48 dirhams, the second grade 24 dirhams, third 12 dirhams per annum. Akbar did not discriminate between his subjects on the basis of religion, instead, he was eager to establish his reputation as an impartial ruler of the people – Hindus as well as Muslims, Being a youth of courage & conviction, he wiped out the traditional religious disability from which the Hindu subjects of the Muslim rulers had been suffering since long. The abolition of jaziya caused a tremendous financial loss to the state exchequer & threw the revenue department of the Mughal government out of gear for a short while. Obviously, while taking this drastic step, Akbar was opposed by his Muslim Ministers & bitterly criticized by the orthodox for having violated the age-old tradition of the Islamic polity. Nevertheless, Akbar faced the opposition with patience & courage & attempted Akbar married the first Rajput princess from Amber in January 1562 & received the voluntary services of the Rajput warriors as his relatives. He witnessed for the first time, at the siege of Merta, a unique phenomenon it was that of the friendly Rajputs fighting with enthusiasm for the Mughal throne against their own people, led by the valiant Jai Mal, later the defender of Chittor. Akbar was so much impressed by the undaunted courage & valour of the Rajputs, including his friends as well as foes, that he forthwith stopped the practice of enslaving the prisoners of war & their forcible conversion to Islam. The decree issued to this effect, sometime after April 1562, made it clear that the women & children of the enemy camp must not be molested by the Mughal armies on any account. This was the first step of its kind taken purely on humanitarian considerations by a Muslim ruler of India. It was apparently against the traditional Islamic law & practice. Akbar won great applause from the people, particularly the non-Muslims, for this noble gesture.

Akbar was encamped at Mathura in 1563 when he came to know that, in accordance with the old practice of the Muslim rulers, his government had also imposed a tax on the Hindu pilgrims who wanted to have a dip in the 'holy' waters of the Jumna. Akbar's conscience did not allow the imposition of such curbs on the religious beliefs & practices, however superstitious & to cool the frayed tempers with arguments that the solidarity & stability of the Mughal state depended very much on the good will & cooperation of his Hindu subjects. Abul Fazl defends Akbar's action on the ground that when owing to the blessing of abundant goodwill & graciousness of Akbar. Those who belong to other religions (viz. the non-Muslims), have, like the Muslims, bound up their waist of devotion & service & exert themselves

for advancement of the dominion, why should they be classed with that old faction which cherished Mortal enmity & be the subjects of contempt & slaughter. It is very significant to note that Akbar had abolished jaziya & granted complete freedom to his Hindu subjects long before he came in contact with Sheikh Mubarak & his illustrious sons Faizi & Abul Fazl. Who later on, became the chief exponents of Akbar's concept of the nation state of India, based on the pillars of Secularism.

We have it on the testimony of Abul Fazl that Akbar was only twenty years old when he experienced an internal bitterness, for the lack of Spiritual provision for his cast journey & his soul was seized with exceeding sorrow. This spiritual awakening conditioned his father course of action as the ruler A.L.Srivastava makes significant comments on this inward change in Akbar as follows:

The feeling that twenty years of his life were practically wasted & that he had made little effort to work in a Manner as might lead to eternal bliss, produced in him a desire to work for the benefit of the people regardless of their race, religion, & way of life. It is clear that the belief that he firmly held in his mature years, that for a ruler there is no better way of pleasing God than the selfless service to his subjects of all classes & Creeds, began to dawn on him at this period of his life. Although there is no recorded evidence to show as to what factors were responsible for this revolutionary change, it is very likely that it was wrought by his association with Yogis, Sanyasis & other Saintly persons & his close contact with the Kachhwaha ruling family of Akbar, whose bravery, loyalty & unflinching devotion made a deep impression on his discerning impressionable, & receptive mind as against the wavering & questionable allegiance of his hereditary Mughal, Uzbek & other Muslim officers.

Sheikh Mubarak, liberal-Minded scholar of sufi dispositions, came in contact with Akbar in 1573. After the conquest of Gujarat. He became a personal friend, philosopher & guide of Akbar in his quest for truth. His illustrious son Faizl, the poet turned philosopher, who was younger than Akbar by about five years was introduced to the Emperor early in 1574 & immediately attached to the court. Faizl, in turn, presented his younger brother Abul Fazl to Akbar towards the close of 1574. All the three of them, individually as well as collectively, found favour with their royal patron because of their high Moral character, & the identity of their religious views with his own. They appreciated the liberal religious views & secular out look of Akbar & in turn, interpreted the royal gestures & elaborated his visions so as to transform them into a practicable state policy for public welfare. They made a contribution towards the fulfillment of Akbar's ideal to be the national Monarch of India. Under their influence, Akbar became all the more liberal & tolerant towards the people of diverse religions faiths. He removed all restrictions on the constructions & Maintenance of Hindu temples, churches & other places of worship. Bodbold tells us that under the influence of brahmanas & sramanas Akbar came to have faith in the doctrine of the transmiration of the soul. In order to please his Hindu subjects. Akbar adopted their social customs & practices, mixed freely with them & appreciated their cultural values. As a ruler, Akbar made it a point to administer even-handed justice to all, opened the gates of state services to his subjects on merit, & began to appoint capable Hindus to the highest offices of the state.

Akbar did not rest contented after the grant of complete religious freedom to his subjects. His next desire was to create a spirit of love & harmony among his people by eliminating all the racial, religious & cultural barriers between them under the ennobling influence of sheikla Mubarak & his sons. He was gradually drawn from the world of politics into the domain of spiritualism. As a first step towards it. She expressed eagerness to understand the fundamentals of his own religion, viz, Islam. In order to achieve this objective, he ordered, in January 1575, the construction of Ibadat Khana- 'The house of worship' at Fatehpur Sikri to adorn the spiritual kingdom: Here he initiated the practice of holding religious discourses with the learned & the saints of the age: the meetings were held on

Thursday nights & sometimes continued till the early morning hours of Fridays.

To begin with, Akbar used to invite only the Muslim theologians & Saints, including the Ulama, Sheikhs, Sayyads, the religious –Minded Mughal nobles, to take part in these deliberations. The Ibadat Khana had four aiwans (Verandahs) & there were, according to Abul Fazl, four noble sections in that spiritual & temporal assemblage. In the eastern chamber of worship (Ibadat Kada) were the great leaders & high officers who were conspicuous in the courts of society for enlightenment. In the southern compartment the keen-sighted investigators, both those who gathered the light of day (i.e. the illuminati) & those who chose the repose of the night-hales of contemplation sat in the school of instruction. In the western compartment, those of lofty Lineage practiced auspicious arts. In the northern compartment were the Sufis of clear heart who were absorbed in beautiful vision. The inaugural session of the august assembly at the Ibadat Khana was addressed by Akbar thus:

My sole object oh, wise Mullas ! is to ascertain the Truth to find out & disclose the Principle of genuine religion & to trace it to the Origin. Take care, therefore, that, through the influence of your human passions, you are not induced to conceal the Truth, and say nothing contrary to the Almighty decrees. If you do, you are responsible before God for the consequences of your impleity.

Akbar took part in these religious discoveries with great enthusiasm. The discussions were allowed to be carried on by the scholars long after Midnight even when the emperor retired to his sleeping chamber which was attached to the Ibadatkhana. Though these, discussions, according to Abul Fazl, 'wisdom & deeds would be tested, & the essence of Manhood would be exhibited. Those who were founded on truth entered the hall of acceptance, while those who were only venturing with good went hastily to the pit of base Metal. At the very outset the Muslim theologians came to be divided into two groups who did not see eye to eye with each other in the matter of interpretation of the Islamic Canon. Sheikh Makhdumul mulk & Sheikh Abdun Nabi were leaders of the orthodox sunni party while sheika Mubarak Faizi & Abul Fazl represented the group of free thinkers & liberal-minded Theologians. They failed to arrive at agreed opinions on many an Islamic belief & Practice, & in the midst of deliberations on very sober & thought-provoking aspects of divinity, displayed a spirit of intolerance towards each other. According to Badaoni, the mullas quarreled among themselves, drew the sword of the tongue, called their opponents names, & even attributed motives to one another. One night, Akbar's sleep was disturbed when the two rival groups of theologians actually drew their swords to settle the religious issues at stake. Akbar was shocked to witness the irresponsible behaviour of those self-conceited greedy & intolerant mullas; they were lost in his estimation particularly because of the fact that they had failed to give satisfactory answers to his yearnings for spiritual enlightenment. In disgust, he threw open the gates of the Ibadat khana to the priests & Scholars of other religious faiths, including Hinduism, Jainism, Zoroastrianism & Christianity. Thus in the pleasant company of the renowned sages of his age, Akbar explored the mysteries of nature & sought the truth about God & his creation in the spirit of a disciple. And in that spring-time of enlightenment; writes Abul Fazl a set of wisdom-having, judicious men were in readiness to propound questions & to record views. The difficulties of the various classes of men were fittingly resolved. The whole of that night was kept alive by discussions which approved themselves to one & all. The degree of reason & the stages of vision were tested, & all the heights & depths of intelligence were traversed & the lamp of perception was brightened. By the blessedness of the holy examination the real was separated from the fictitious & the un-currency of those who were only coated with wisdom was brought to light.

SECOND STAGE- THE ISSUE OF MAHZAR OR 'THE INFALLIBILITY DECREE:

As a result of the religious discourses held at the Ibadat Khana, Akbar's belief in the orthodox sunni Islam was shaken. And it were orthodox sunni Mullas who had been holding predominant position in the state politics ever since the assumption of powers by Akbar. Abdun Nabi their chief spokesman held the exalted office of the *sadr us sadur*- 'the minister for ecclesiastical affairs & religious endowments of the empire whom Akbar had loaded with favours. As leader of the Ulama or the *ahl i; saadat*, he wielded great influence at the imperial court, so much so that, according to Abul Fazl, nothing important could be accomplished without his opinion. He persecuted the shias & the heretics among the mussalmans, ill-treated the non-muslims & made misuse of his official position to advance the interests of his friends & favourites. He was not in favour of granting religious freedom to the Hindus & he put up a tough opposition to Akbar's liberal religious policy.

The orthodox sunni ulama who held important civil & judicial assignments throughout the Mughal dominions would not allow Akbar to rule as a liberal king. In the words of S.M Jaffar, 'the ulama were not only narrow-minded, but their influence in the state was wholly schismatic. The implicit obedience, which they exacted from the Boy-Badshah, intoxicated them & the unbounded reverence they received from the orthodox sect blinded them to the interest of the state. They could not tolerate the honest difference of opinion in religious matters. Power, Pride & prejudice alike governed their passions, under the charge of heresy a number of Mussalmans suffered death at their hands, many died in dungeons, & a good many more escaped with their lives & lived as exiles. Their hatred against the Zimmis, Particularly, against the Hindus knew no bounds. They could not tolerate any concession accorded to them by the Emperor; Akbar was thoroughly disgusted with their nefarious activities: & he made up his mind to curb their power once for all. As a first step towards it, he removed the *waiz*- 'The head Priest of the Jami Masjid at Fatehpur sikri, himself mounted the pulpit on June 22, 1579 & read the Khutba in his own name as the prophet Muhammad and his succeeding Khalifas used to do. The Khutba which was composed in verse by the poet laureate Faizi was later on repeated by the imams in all the prominent masjids throughout the dominions: it read as follows: In the name of him who gave us sovereignty, who give us a wise heart & a strong arm. Who guided us in equity & justice, who put away from our heart aught but equity; his praise is beyond the range of our thoughts. Exalted by his Majes Y Allah Akbar.

Akbar's action struck a blow at the prestige of the mullas who considered themselves to be the moral & spiritual guardians of the state. They did not like the emperor to establish direct rapport with his subjects, who according to the traditional practice, was expected to communicate with mass only through the agency of the imams. They started a whispering campaign against Akbar on the ground that latter was striving to assume the role of the Khalifas as the spiritual and temporal head of the state. Nevertheless, Akbar did not pay any attention to their voice of protest & went ahead with his plans to reduce the power & influence of the Mullas in the state politics. It led to the issue of a Proclamation, called the mahzar in September 1579. prepared by Sheikh Mubarak, & signed by almost all the prominent Muslim theologians & divines of the Mughal empire, it recognized Akbar, in his capacity as the just monarch & *amir ul momnin*, to be the Imam I Adil, viz. the Supreme interpreter or arbiter of the Islamic Law in all the controversial issues Pertaining to ecclesiastical or civil matters. Previously, the mullas used to act as the arbiters of all such disputed questions in their capacity as *mujtahids*- 'the interpreters of Islamic law'. The Mahzar declared Akbar to be higher in rank than the *Mujtahids* as the Supreme arbiter of these issues. It is clear from the Mahzar that it did not deprive the Mullas of their basic right to act as the *mujtahids* nevertheless, Akbar placed himself at their head as the chief judge,

thus assuming the powers which Previously had belonged, by delegation, to Sadar us Sadur or qazi ul qazat-the chief justice of the Mughal empire. The English translation of the document is reproduced below for the persual of the readers: A most God-fearing King; should, therefore, in future a religious question come up, regarding which the opinions of the Mujtahids are at variance, & His Majesty, in his Penetrating understanding & clear wisdom be inclined to adopt, for the benefit of the nation and as a political expedient, any of the conflicting opinions which exists on that point & should issue a decree to that effect.

We do hereby agree that such a decree shall be binding on us & on the whole nation. Further, we declare that should his Majesty think fit to issue a new order, we and the nation shall likewise be bound by it; provided always, that such order be not only in accordance with some verse of the Koran, but also of real benefit to the nation & further, that any opposition on the part of his subjects to such an order passed by his Majesty shall involve damnation in the world to come & loss of property & religious privileges in this. This document has been written with honest intentions, for the glory of God & the propagation of the islam and is signed by us, the principal ulama & lawyers in the month of Rajab in the year nine hundred & eighty seven (August – September. 1579 AD)

The Muslims constituted a religion-dominated society; the Islamic canon was deemed to regulate their social and Political order. The issue of the Mahzar confirmed & approved of the predominance of religious influence over the Indian Muslims. It authorised Akbar to interpret & implement the Muslim law whenever there occurred a difference of opinion between the various sects of the Mullas on religious & civil matters, governed by their religious law. He could exercise this power only when the muslim divines failed to arrive at an agreement. The Mahazar did not give any original or overriding powers to Akbar either to make a religious law or violate, go against, or obstruct the operation of such law, As a matter of fact, up till that time, Muslim populace of India regarded the Mughal empire to be an Islamic state & expected the emperor to act as the amir-ul-Momnin-' Leader of the Faithful', & the amir I adil-' The Just Ruler'. It was in this capacity that Akbar was entrusted with the responsibility of implementing the Muslim law over his subjects in letter as well as Spirit, what was given by the Mazhar to him was the power of interpretation of this law as the chief Imam or judge with a view to resolving the religious or civil disputes arising out of the difference of opinion among the ulama. As stated earlier, this power was enjoyed by the mullas-' the muslim divines in their capacity as the mujtahids-' the interpreters of the Canon law'. They made use of this power by issuing what were called the fat was 'the religious decrees'. The right to appeal against their fat was lay with the court of the Sadr at the provincial level & the sadar (Sadar of the Sadrs) or the chief sadr of the empire constituted the highest appellate authority in this regard. These officers were all the nominees of the Mughal emperor, who held their office at the Pleasure of the latter. According to the Mahzar, Akbar reserved to himself the function of interpretation of the Muslim law which was previously delegated to the chief Sadr of the empire. The Muslim divines were not deprived of their right to interpret the Islamic law albic Akbar asserted his authority over their heads as the chief Imam. According to the Islamic theory of Kingship of Emperor in his capacity as the amir I adil was already expected to be 'the fountain of justice'; through the issue of the Mahzar, Akbar asserted this right. As a matter of fact, ' the Muslim state' was a theocracy in which the religious priests – the ulama or the mullas wielded great influence in the state politics; whenever, a Muslim ruler happened to be orthodox in his religious views, or exhibited signs of weakness, the mullas usurped the high offices of the state & asserted their authority over the king in their capacity as the guardians of the Muslim law which regulated the affairs of their society including the state. To the misfortune of the muslim the predominance of the mullas in the state politics

was no guarantee for Peace & harmony amongst them. They were usually divided into mutually hostile sects which did not see eye to eye with one another. The Sunnis, Shias & Mahdavis Persecuted their opponents, frequently entered into bloody conflicts with one another & Created law and order problems for the state. As stated elsewhere Akbar had a very bitter experience at the hands of the orthodox sunni ulama who held office of profit , under the leadership of his chief Sady Aldum Nadi, and exercised great influence over the state affairs for over a decade. What to say of granting religious freedom to the non-muslims, the orthodox sunnis did not allow Akbar even to act as the impartial ruler of the musalmans themselves. Because they discriminated against the Shias and publicly dubbed the Mahdavis as the heretics. They stood in the way of Akbar in the achievement of his ideal to transform the theocratic Mughal state into a Secular nation state of India. Through the mahzar, Akbar struck a serious blow to the Power and influence of the mullas in the state politics brought them under his subordination as the chief imam or guardian of the muslim law, and rendered them politically important therein lies the significance of the mahzar; it was apparently a religious document which carried the most significant the political implecations. R.P. Tripathi makes a significant reference to the international tension which them prevailed between various muslim countries owing to the mutual conflict of rival sects, particularly, the Sunnis and the Shias, he writes;

The international situation of the muslim world also called forth a clarification of the policy of the Mughal empire the Shia Kingdom of Persia and the Sunni States were at war more for religious than political reasons. The shah of Persia claimed to be the leader of the shias while the ottoman sultan of Turkey claimed Khilafat over the muslim states, particularly of the Sunnies. These warring states were egregious of know what policy mughal empire proposed to follow, the declaration of Akbar signed by some of the leading divines announced his policy in unambiguous terms to all concerned, both in India and outside. The mughal emperor refused to identify himself with any creed and declared his determination to follow an independent policy of enlightened toleration within the ambit of the Quran, Hadis and common agreements between the accredited divines.

It is simply amazing to note the worldly character of the mahzar which stands unique in the history of Islam Interpreted by S.M.Jaffar as the Act of supremacy the document reveals most unmistakably the statesmanship of Akbar who caught the ferocious lions(The ulama) in their own dens Like King John's magna carta it was a petition to the King from the most influential ulama but unlike it, it increased rather than diminished the royal prerogative. The mahzar came as a bolt from the blue to the orthodox Sunni circles who raised a hue and cry against Akbar's interference in the religious affairs; nevertheless, it marks the liberation of the state-politics from the baneful influence of the orthodox ulama. The latter did not take it kindly. They fretted and fumed and started a vigorous campaign of hatred and character assassination against Akbar among the muslim masses, they accused Akbar of having assumed the role of the prophet badaoni, a bigoted mussalman, pours out the venom of his wrath Akbar and his confidential advisers who set the world on flames Abul Fazl refuters the charge that Akbar had denounced the prophet or let down the true. Islamic religion Akbar was an absolute monarch who did not broke the infringement of his sovereign powers at the hands of the ulama albeit his belief in the ' theory of divine Rights of Kingship should not be Confounded with the charge that he wanted to play the prophet Abul Fazl asserts that the bigoted mullas gave no need to the fact that the not honour and respect which this appreciative throne occupant used to show to the family of the prophet had been rarely exhibited by other monarchs, many good sayyids had been raised to dignities and high offices by the favour of his majesty and from time to time, they were still further promoted and the garden of their wishes kept watered and verdant.

CONCLUSION:

On viewing all the Assertions of the historians and critical views on the Akbar's religious policy it is better to conclude that Akbar was one of the emperors who originally separated politics from the religion. And the first king in the mughal emperors who clearly separated the religion, from the politics. The religious based administrative policies had made him very popular and generous-specially in Non-Muslims. His religious policy was nor fully accepted at well as bitterly criticized by orthodox Muslim like mullas. Akbar's religious policy and views moulded his state policy. He had played the role of decisive from in the Indian society ever since the advent of Islam which most of his people had refused to embrace. Indian social-political order had been completely known to him and he fully understood the centrifugal tendencies of India this made to eliminate there by seperating religion from politics.

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