

VIVEKANANDA COLLEGE THAKURPUKUR KOLKATA-700063

NAAC ACCREDITED 'A' GRADE



Topic: Discuss the various influences that shaped Akbar's religious views. How far is it correct to hold that "Din-i-Ilahi" was a monument of Akbar's folly?

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5) Discuss the various influences that shaped Akbar's religious views. How far is it correct to hold that 'Din-i-Ilahi' was a monument of Akbar's folly?

No aspect of the history of Akbar's reign has been the subject of so much interest and controversy as his religious views. Akbar's religious views underwent a process of evolution and culminated in the promulgation of the "Din-i-Ilahi". Heredity, environment and the various religious communities at the court of Akbar — the Sunnis, the Shias, the Hindus, the Jains and the Christians — contributed their respective shares to the promulgation of the "Din-i-Ilahi".

Akbar was born and brought up in an atmosphere surcharged with conflicting religious influences. His father was a central Asian Sunni, his mother a Persian Shia. In his early years he came in contact with Sufism at Kabul. Bairam Khan, his guardian, was a Persian Shia. His tutor Abdul Latif, was a liberal and taught him the principle of "Sulh-i-kul". Through his Rajput wives and Hindu courtiers he came in contact with Hinduism. The Bhakti Movement, which had taken deep roots in Northern India at that time made a deep impression on

Akbar's liberal and imaginative mind. Thus, "intelligent to an uncommon degree, with a mind alert and inquisitive, he was best fitted by birth, upbringing and association to feel most keenly those hankerings and that spiritual unrest which distinguished the century in which he lived. He was not only the child of his century, he was its best replica.

Considerable influence on the development of Akbar's religious views was exercised by Faizi, his father Shaikh Mubarak and his brother Abul Fazi. They came to the imperial court in 1567, 1573 and 1574, respectively. In them Akbar found congenial spiritual companions. Under their influences his views grew more and more catholic and he became eclectic in religion. Akbar's inquisitiveness also came to his help. He desired not only to profess and practice the faith of his forefathers, but to understand it as well. With this end in view, he established the "Ibadat-khana" at Fatehpur Sikri, and started religious discussions there. He first summoned there the learned divines of Islam, but their discussions soon took the shape of "vulgar rancour, morbid orthodoxy and personal attacks." In fact, their wranglings of which Badayuni gives a graphic picture, failed to satisfy his inquisitive soul and led him to seek truth elsewhere. He therefore called to the "Ibadat-khana"

the wise men of different religions and sects, such as the Hindus, the Jains, the Zoroastrians and the Christians. He patiently listened to the arguments of the exponents of each faith and "went so far in relation to each religion that different people had reasonable grounds for affirming him to be a Zoroastrian, a Hindu, a Jain or a Christian." But he was not converted to any of these faiths.

In addition to formal discussion in the "Ibadat-Khana" Akbar had private meetings with scholars and holy men of different faiths. He carried on long conversations with Shias, Sufis, Hindu ascetics, Jain divines, Zoroastrian priests and Christian missionaries. The influence of Akbar's Hindu wives and Hindu courtiers was strengthened by Brahmin philosophers like Devi and Purushottama. His acceptance of the Hindu doctrines of "Karma" and transmigration of soul was the result of these influences. He was influenced by the ~~He was influenced~~ Jain doctrines of "ahimsa" and the Zoroastrian system of fire worship. He appreciated the Sikh Guru's message and devotion to God. In response to Akbar's invitation three Jesuit Christian missions from Goa visited his court at different dates and stayed with him long enough to explain to him the principle and practices of their

faith. His conduct and attention made the Jesuit missionaries think that Akbar was well on the way of becoming Christian. But there is no reason to exaggerate the influence of Christianity over him.

All these things played their part in shaping Akbar's religious views culminating in the promulgation of the "Din-i-Ilahi". But it was his spirit of inquiry, a rationalistic urge to seek the truth, and his political foresightedness that gave definite shape to the policy of tolerance to the several religions in his kingdom.

The result of his lifelong inquiry was the conclusion that truth was not confined in "one religion or creed", and there were sensible men in all religions. Dissatisfied with tradition and authority and in his anxiety to do away with religious discord in the empire he made an attempt to bring about a synthesis of all the various religions known to him. ~~(This attempt to bring about a synthesis of all the various religions known to him)~~ This attempt culminated in the promulgation of the "Din-i-Ilahi". According to Badauni and Bartali, Akbar after his return from the Kabul campaign, convened in 1582 a council of his principal courtiers and officers and formally promulgated the "Din-i-Ilahi" for the purpose of "not losing what is good in any one religion, while gaining whatever is better in another." Its official name was "Tauhid-i-Ilahi" (Divine Monotheism).¹ The underlying

* The word "Din" was never used by Akbar. It was ^{first} used after 70 years of his death.

principle was "Sulh-i-kul" (universal toleration). There was a belief in the unity of God, with mingling some Sufi, Hindu, Jain and Persian doctrines.

Scholarly opinion differs as to real character of the "Din-i-Islahi". From the meagre information that is available in the 'Ain', Badauni and the "Dabistan-i-Mazahib" about its beliefs and practices, it would be a gross exaggeration to raise it to the rank of a religion. But historian Vincent Smith treated it as a new religion and went to the length of saying that, "the Divine faith was a monument of Akbar's folly, not of his wisdom." What is the basis of Smith's conclusion quoted above? Smith appears to be too much dependent on the evidence of Badauni and on the writings of the Jesuits. But we should keep in mind that Badauni was a fanatic and an uncompromising critic of Akbar's policy of "Sulh-i-kul"; the Jesuit missionaries who entertained the sore hope of converting Akbar to Christianity but had failed to do so must have been dissatisfied with the tolerant Emperor. Relying on the prejudiced views of Badauni and the Jesuits, Smith condemned Akbar for promulgating the "Din-i-Islahi" a religion of his own. Smith's view that Akbar expressed contempt and dislike for the Muslim religion and renounced Islam is based on Badauni's prejudiced account. Moreover, in discussing Akbar's

religion, Smith began with some pre-conceived notions. The theory of Smith regarding Akbar's religious views starts on the assumption that from the very beginning Akbar had a mind to combine "the role of the caesar and Pope into one". But we know that Akbar himself used to say, "Why should I claim to guide men, before I myself am guided?". Thus, it appears that the "Din-i-Ilahi" was never regarded by Akbar as a new religion, and therefore it had no book, no priests, no ceremonies, and practically no religious beliefs. According to professor Sri Ram Sharma, "It was an order rather than a religion and more akin to freemasonry than any religious movement".

Moreover, modern researchers, notably the Aligarh school of historians, have shown that Akbar, in promulgating the "Din-i-Ilahi" deviated from dogmatism and practised the principle of "Sulh-i-kul" or universal toleration both in state policy and in his personal attitude towards religion. Seen in this context, Smith's comment appears to be erroneous. Disagreeing with Smith Professor Sri Ram Sharma has rightly opined, "Din-i-Ilahi" was neither a monument of his folly nor of great wisdom. It was an attempt at getting together a band of enthusiastically devoted followers, some of whom like English murderers of Bachet, were prepared to give their all in royal service.