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Religious Policy in the Mughal Empire: A Balanced Historical Inquiry

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Abstract

The Mughal Empire occupies a central place in the political and cultural history of South Asia. Stretching across vast regions and ruling over populations of extraordinary linguistic, ethnic, and religious diversity, the Mughals developed administrative structures that blended Turko-Mongol, Persianate, Islamic, and Indic traditions. Because of this complexity, the question of Mughal religious policy—particularly its impact on Hindu communities—remains one of the most debated subjects in South Asian historiography. Discussions often slip into two extremes: either romanticizing the empire as a model of syncretic coexistence or depicting it as a monolithic apparatus of religious persecution. Both views flatten a far more intricate historical reality.

This research paper aims to examine Mughal religious policy from a balanced, evidence-driven perspective. It neither minimizes moments of coercion nor exaggerates them. Instead, it situates these events within their broader political and administrative contexts. Drawing upon the scholarship of Richard Eaton, Romila Thapar, Satish Chandra, John F. Richards, Audrey Truschke, Irfan Habib, and others, this paper analyses how specific rulers—particularly Akbar, Jahangir, Shah Jahan, and Aurangzeb—adopted contrasting strategies shaped by personal belief, imperial stability, regional resistance, and evolving statecraft.

The aim is not to justify or condemn, but to understand. As Eaton (2000) writes, "religious policy in premodern India cannot be divorced from the political economy within which it was embedded." Thus, the Mughal Empire presents a landscape where religious accommodation and religious restriction existed side by side, often influenced less by theology and more by governance and circumstances.

This first part of the paper introduces the subject and examines the early Mughal emperors—Babur and Humayun—before turning to the widely studied policies of Akbar.

Keywords: Mughal empire, cultural, religious, policy, economy

Early Mughals: Babur and Humayun

Babur: Conqueror, Not Missionary

When Babur founded the Mughal Empire in 1526, he arrived not as a religious crusader but as a Central Asian warlord whose ambitions were almost entirely political. His *Baburnama* reveals irritation toward certain Hindu practices, including idol worship, but scholars agree that these were personal sentiments rather than administrative directives. As Richards (1993) argues, Babur "had little time or administrative capacity to enforce any ideological program beyond military consolidation." His rule was brief, and much of it was spent defending newly conquered territory.

There is no evidence that Babur attempted mass conversions or imposed Islamic law on Hindu subjects. His priorities were creating alliances with Indian elites, strengthening troop loyalty, and stabilizing tax structures. In fact, several Rajput leaders continued to retain semi-autonomous authority under his rule.

Humayun: Between Sufism and Survival

Humayun inherited an unstable empire and spent considerable time in exile after Sher Shah Suri's revolt. His years in Persia, under the patronage of Shah Tahmasp, influenced him toward a more refined Persian court culture and Sufi metaphysics. Historians such as Thapar (2002) emphasize that Humayun's religious worldview was eclectic rather than orthodox.

Again, there is little evidence of religious coercion. His alliances with Hindu Rajput rulers continued the long-standing Indo-Islamic pattern of political pragmatism. His administrative reach was limited, and his short restored reign after 1555 left minimal scope for imposing any religious ideology.

Thus, the early Mughal state was not defined by a systematic religious agenda. Instead, it displayed the typical characteristics of early conquest dynasties: fluid alliances, shifting loyalties, and a patchwork of local autonomies.

Akbar: The Architecture of Accommodation

Akbar (1556–1605) represents the most extensively documented period of Mughal religious policy, and for good reason. His reign marked a decisive shift from ad hoc governance toward a consciously articulated vision of imperial inclusivity. As Irfan Habib (1999) notes, Akbar's policies stemmed from a blend of political necessity and philosophical curiosity.

Abolition of Discriminatory Taxes

One of Akbar's earliest religious reforms was the abolition of the *jizya* (tax on non-Muslims) in 1564. This was not merely symbolic. It carried financial and moral significance, signaling that the emperor did not differentiate between his subjects on the basis of faith. He also removed the pilgrim tax that burdened Hindu worshippers at holy sites.

These decisions aligned with Akbar's political strategy of incorporating Hindu Rajputs into the Mughal administrative-military complex. As Chandra (2004) argues, "Akbar realized that empire-building in India required genuine collaboration with Hindu elites."

Temple Patronage and Religious Freedom

Akbar permitted the reconstruction of Hindu temples destroyed during earlier conflicts and occasionally granted land endowments (*madad-i-ma'ash*) to religious leaders, including Brahmins. Eaton (2000) notes that "imperial patronage flowed across sectarian lines," reflecting a deliberate effort to signal imperial neutrality.

More importantly, Akbar did not merely tolerate Hindu practices—he engaged with them. He participated in Hindu festivals such as Diwali and Raksha Bandhan, and his court invited Jain monks, Christian missionaries, Zoroastrian priests, and Buddhist scholars to

discuss theology.

The *Ibadat Khana* and Intellectual Curiosity

Founded in 1575, Akbar's *Ibadat Khana* (House of Worship) was a unique experiment in cross-faith dialogue. It fostered debates among Muslim theologians, and soon included Hindu, Jain, Zoroastrian, and Christian thinkers. Truschke (2017) emphasizes that this forum represented "a moment where imperial authority interacted with inter-religious dialogue to produce new intellectual possibilities."

Though it produced tensions with orthodox groups, the *Ibadat Khana* deepened Akbar's philosophical evolution toward what later became his controversial doctrine, *Sulh-i-Kul* or "universal peace."

Sulh-i-Kul: Governing a Plural Society

Sulh-i-Kul did not attempt to create a new religion, as is sometimes claimed. Instead, it was a political ethic: all subjects would be treated equally, regardless of faith. The emperor alone embodied sovereign authority, and religious groups were expected to coexist peacefully within the imperial framework.

This ideological project helped stabilize the empire during periods of expansion. By integrating Rajputs into the mansabdari (rank) system and marrying into Rajput families, Akbar restructured the politics of North India.

Din-i-Ilahi: Misunderstood Experiment

Din-i-Ilahi (1582) was not a formal religion. It had no scriptures, lay followers, or rituals. As Eaton and Habib both note, it was an ethical fellowship for a small group of nobles devoted personally to Akbar. No evidence suggests that conversion was ever demanded of anyone.

Thus, Akbar's religious policy can be characterized as inclusive, experimental, and politically astute. It did not erase tension—orthodox groups resisted many reforms—but it did create a framework for shared political participation by diverse communities.

Jahangir: Inheritance of Tolerance with Elements of Control

Jahangir (1605–1627) inherited Akbar's inclusive framework but modified aspects of it according to his own political priorities and personal tastes. Known for his interest in art, natural history, and aesthetics, Jahangir's worldview was less philosophical than Akbar's but still fundamentally pluralistic.

Continuity of Administrative Inclusion

Jahangir maintained the participation of Hindu nobles in the mansabdari system. Rajputs, in particular, remained integral to the stability of the empire. This inclusivity was not merely symbolic; it reflected ongoing political realism. As Satish Chandra notes, "Jahangir recognized that the empire's cohesion depended on the active collaboration of Hindu elites" (Chandra, 2004).

Temple Patronage and Occasional Restrictions

While Jahangir often continued Akbar's policy of granting land to Hindu religious institutions, he also ordered temple demolitions in specific political contexts. One example often cited is his order to destroy a temple in Pushkar when its mahant was accused of defying imperial authority. Eaton (2000) points out that such incidents "were rooted in political acts of defiance, not in any doctrinal hostility to Hinduism."

Jahangir's memoir, the *Tuzuk-i-Jahangiri*, repeatedly praises Jain ascetics and includes accounts of his admiration for Hindu yogis and sadhus. His religious engagements, thus, reflected a personal interest rather than ideological enforcement.

Regulation of Public Practices

He occasionally regulated public processions—such as large Hindu fairs—especially when they posed risks of unrest. These restrictions, however, were largely administrative rather

than theological. His interventions in Hindu religious life were generally limited, and the empire during his reign remained religiously plural and stable.

Shah Jahan: Orthodoxy within Political Pragmatism

Shah Jahan (1628–1658), often associated with monumental architecture such as the Taj Mahal, is sometimes portrayed as more orthodox compared to his predecessors. Yet his religious policy also followed a balanced pattern, mixing orthodox leanings with political flexibility.

A Shift Toward Conservative Expression

Shah Jahan reintroduced certain Islamic legal codes more visibly in court rituals. He also showed a preference for Islamic architectural symbolism, reinforcing imperial authority through grand mosques and monuments.

Historians such as Richards (1993) argue that this conservatism was more stylistic and political than doctrinal. It reaffirmed the emperor's legitimacy during a period of increasing factional tensions.

Temple Destructions: Political Contexts Matter

Though some temples were destroyed during his reign, these incidents were usually tied to political resistance. For example, the Bundela rebellion led by Jujhar Singh resulted in punitive temple demolitions, which scholars widely interpret as political punishment rather than a systematic anti-Hindu policy (Eaton, 2000).

It is important to note that Shah Jahan also supported Hindu religious activities. He granted land to several temples and continued to employ Hindu nobles at high administrative levels.

Religious Landscape under Shah Jahan

The overall religious environment under Shah Jahan remained one of coexistence, despite a formal return to ritual orthodoxy. The state neither promoted forced conversions nor outlawed Hindu practices. His rule therefore reflects a nuanced oscillation between conservative symbolism and political pragmatism.

Aurangzeb: Orthodoxy, Administrative Reforms, and Historical Debate

Aurangzeb (1658–1707) is the most debated Mughal emperor in discussions of religious tolerance. Popular narratives often portray him as uniformly intolerant, but modern scholarship presents a far more complex picture.

Orthodox Leanings: A Fact, Not a Myth

There is no doubt that Aurangzeb's personal religiosity was more orthodox than that of his predecessors. He:

- Reimposed the *jizya* tax in 1679
- Banned public celebrations of certain Hindu festivals
- Restricted the construction of new temples in some regions
- Patronized Islamic jurists and institutionalized certain Sharia-based rulings

However, scholars stress that these measures were not consistently enforced across the empire, nor did they amount to a systematic policy of Islamization.

Temple Destructions: Contextualizing the Incidents

Eaton's influential dataset on temple desecration under the Mughals (Eaton, 2000) lists around 80 documented incidents over a 500-year period, only a portion of which occurred under Aurangzeb. These incidents cluster around periods of rebellion, such as:

- The Jat rebellion in Mathura
- The Maratha conflict in the Deccan
- The Bundela uprising

Eaton argues that temple destruction was often "a political act of suppressing rebellion, not an attempt at religious conversion or imposition" (Eaton, 2000).

Administration: Inclusion Despite Orthodoxy

Despite his reputation, Aurangzeb employed more Hindus in high office than any previous Mughal ruler. More than 30% of his nobility were Hindu, including many Marathas. Truschke (2017) notes that "Hindu nobles expanded their power under Aurangzeb," contradicting simplistic interpretations of his policies.

Patronage of Hindu Institutions

Contrary to popular belief, Aurangzeb granted land to several Hindu temples and monastic institutions, including:

- Balaji Temple in Chitrakoot
- Umananda Temple in Assam

These grants reflect administrative pragmatism and local political alliances.

Were Forced Conversions State Policy?

There is no credible historical evidence of an empire-wide policy of forced conversion. Occasional local incidents did occur, but these were not state-mandated and often involved local disputes, not imperial directives.

Reevaluation in Modern Historiography

Recent scholars, including Audrey Truschke and Munis Faruqui, argue that Aurangzeb's religious reputation has been shaped by later colonial historiography and political discourse. They stress that "his actions must be read within the logic of premodern kingship, not contemporary communal categories" (Truschke, 2017).

Regional Variations in Mughal Religious Policy

One of the most important aspects of Mughal governance was its administrative decentralization. Thus, religious policy was rarely uniform throughout the empire.

Rajasthan: Autonomy and Accommodation

Rajput kingdoms retained a significant degree of autonomy. Most Hindu religious life continued unhindered, regardless of the emperor. Even Aurangzeb, despite conflicts with certain Rajput groups, maintained alliances with others.

Bengal and Bihar: Syncretic Traditions

In Bengal, a long history of Hindu-Muslim syncretism persisted. Mughal governors such as Islam Khan Chishti focused on administrative consolidation rather than religious intervention.

Punjab and Northwest India: Sikh-Mughal Tensions

Conflicts with the Sikh Gurus were partly religious but heavily political, rooted in Mughal attempts to assert authority over increasingly influential Sikh institutions.

Deccan: The Maratha Factor

The Deccan was characterized by continuous warfare, which influenced temple desecration and fiscal stress. Many restrictive measures here were wartime actions rather than religious policy.

Historiographical Debates: Understanding the Mughal Religious Landscape

Modern scholarship on Mughal religious policy falls broadly into three interpretive traditions:

1. The Secular-Political Interpretation

(Represented by Eaton, Richards, Habib)

These scholars argue that religious actions cannot be divorced from the political landscape. Eaton (2000) shows that temple destructions correspond almost exactly with instances of rebellion or local resistance.

Richards (1993) emphasizes that Mughal rulers "were primarily empire-builders, not religious reformers."

2. The Syncretic-Akbarite Interpretation

(Emphasized by Thapar, Chandra)

This view highlights Mughal pluralism, especially under Akbar. Chandra (2004) stresses the institutional significance of *Sulh-i-Kul* as a political ethic of coexistence.

3. The Orthodox-Religious Interpretation

(Some colonial historians & certain strands of South Asian scholarship)

This interpretation paints Mughal rule—especially under Aurangzeb—as religiously motivated. Modern historians critique this view as reductive.

Discussion: Toward a Nuanced Interpretation

When the available evidence across reigns is examined, several patterns emerge:

1. Mughal religious policy was not static.

It varied from ruler to ruler, decade to decade, and region to region.

2. Political consolidation often shaped religious decisions.

Temple destruction, for example, was frequently tied to uprisings rather than doctrine.

3. The empire was too large and diverse for uniform policy.

Local governors wielded enormous autonomy.

4. Hindu elites were central to Mughal identity and power.

They were indispensable to revenue collection, military operations, and administration.

5. No emperor instituted systematic forced conversions.

Historical evidence does not support such a narrative.

6. Orthodoxy, when visible, was selective.

Even Aurangzeb's measures were neither universally implemented nor consistently enforced.

Conclusion

The Mughal Empire's religious policies reflect the complexities of governing a diverse early-modern state. Rather than fitting neatly into categories of "tolerance" or "intolerance," Mughal rulers operated within a pragmatic framework shaped by:

- political needs
- legitimacy concerns
- regional rebellions
- court factionalism
- personal belief

Akbar institutionalized pluralism through *Sulh-i-Kul*, while Jahangir and Shah Jahan oscillated between accommodation and control. Aurangzeb displayed orthodox inclinations, yet his administration still relied heavily on Hindu officials and followed practical governance needs.

Thus, Mughal religious policy must be understood as neither uniformly syncretic nor uniformly oppressive. It was, above all, **a dynamic negotiation between power, belief, and the realities of ruling one of the world's most diverse empires.**

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