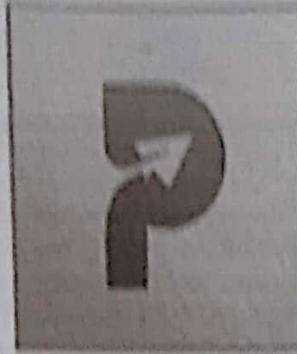


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Akbar the great (1542-1605) and Christianity

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Abstract

The second half of the 16th Century, during the reign of India's third, and widely regarded as the greatest ruler of the Mughal dynasty, Jalal ud Din Muhammad Akbar was also the time when the Europeans were becoming increasingly present on the Indian subcontinent Especially active among them were the Portuguese - both in the political and economic sense as well as in the cultural and the religious dimension. The Mughal Empire was a time period of peaceful religious and cultural flourishing between the hindus and Muslims of India. Akbar is known for his liberal ideas and liberal religious policy. He adopted a policy of mutual understanding and reconciliation among followers of different faiths and equality of all religions. He tried to harmonize the relations. He founded a new religion known as Din-i-Ilahi based on the common points of all religions. Of course, in this endeavor he was not successful position of Christians in the Mughal Empire.

Keywords:-Akbar, Christianity, India, Mughal.

The Christians were in India at the time of Mughals, some in quest of gold, some for adventure, some for converting the 'Great Mogok on religious mission. The professions to which they belonged were confined to commerce, jewellery medicine, surgery, army and artisanship. Their number was not very large if the cross breeds were left out. Their services were best utilised in the army.

With the Portuguese territorial and economic expansion, also the catholic missionaries started arriving in India. The Portuguese actually had a monopoly on promoting Christianity in Asia, and conducting trade in the overseas territories. In 1534 the Diocese of Goa was established, covering in fact the whole East, from the cape of Good Hope to China. The missionaries from the newly founded Jesuit order were sent there, partly for genuine missionary activities. The colonial authorities in Goa supported the mission with various actions, like distributing rice among the poor, providing jobs in administration or even offering military assistance to the local Indian rulers. Akbar undertook a whole range of actions that were supposed to prove that he wanted to be a ruler and protector of all citizens of his realm, regardless of the religions they professed. Among other things, in 1564 the abolished Jizya a poll tax levied. on non-Muslims, which in a sense resulted that only Muslims were full citizens of the empire while the rest of the society was merely tolerated-provided, however, that they humbly endured the condition of being subjected. Consequently, Hindus and Muslims could feel to be equal shares in a common citizenship for the first time. Another restriction revoked by Akbar was a ban on erecting temples in honour of various gods. Therefore, Hindu places of worship began to rise again from the ground in the entire country. Later this privilege was

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also extended to Christians, which allowed the erecting of Churches in Lahore and Agra. In the beginning of 1575, Akbar ordered the erection of a spacious, elegant structure "consisting of four halls, near the new place in Fatehpur in his newly built capital of Fatehpur Sikri. Akbar's dissatisfaction with the Ulema's led him to the decision which eventually was to break their power up. In September 1579, a document known as the Mahzar was announced and signed by the leading 'Ulama-s'.

Akbar's first encounter with Christianity might have been in 1576. The apparently insignified news about two Christian missionaries arrival in Bengal reached the emperor. Refusing them absolution, they served reprov'd some Portuguese merchants who were accused of defrauding the Mughal state treasury by not paying the required taxes. The emperor was very impressed, both because of the nature of the Christian priests and the dogmas of their religion, which he considered exceptionally valuable since it condemned categorically and dishonesty - even in relation to a foreign government. Although his attitude towards the Christian missionaries was very positive, even cordial, Akbar did not stop taking more or less ambiguous attempts to remove the Portuguese from the territories occupied by them on the western coast. The main goal was to regain from the foreign hands the harbours of Diu and Daman. This was justified by the necessity of providing Indian Muslims with the possibility of setting off to Hijaz without additional troubles caused by the Portuguese authorities. However, military actions taken by Akbar against the Portuguese, and acknowledged them to be deceitful and ambiguous. A year later Antonio Monserrate left the court but he was delegated by Akbar to become one of the members of the planned Mughal legation to the king of Spain.

Despite the constant friendliness of the emperor himself, the missionaries experienced overt hospitality at his court, which on the one side, was traditionally exposed by the machinations of other Europeans, who began arriving in increasing numbers to the realm of the great Mughal. Consequently, the unique position which they enjoyed, practically having a monopoly on contacts with Akbar, was weakened so significantly that when in October 1605 the emperor was lying on his deathbed, the Jesuits were not allowed to assist at his side.

Akbar as a Man of Religion

Despite worldly success which Akbar achieved in an abundant measure he appears to have been a sincerely religious man, although it would be too much to say with Sir Wolseley Haig that he was a Prophet and mystic. The Emperor, struck by the contraction between the material and spiritual aspects of life, asked: have the religious and worldly tendencies no common ground? His spiritual awakening started in his early youth. According to AbulFazl, during the siege of Mankot in 1557 - when Akbar was barely fifteen - he experienced religious ecstasy and suddenly broke away from the camp into a distance where he spent many hours in solitary meditation. On the completion of my twentieth year, he says, I experienced on internal bitterness and from the lack of spiritual provision for my last journey, my soul was seized with exceeding sorrow: Some years later he often listened to Mir Sharif reading books on spiritual lore and tears would roll down his eyes.

Badauni, an Orthodox sunni and an unfriendly critic of Akbar, says that he would 'it many a morning alone in prayers and melancholy near the place in a lonely spot with his head bent over his chest,



and gathering the bliss of early hours. The Jesuit Father found him melancholic. In his happy saying Akbar tells us that one right his heart was weary of the burden of life, when suddenly between sleeping and waping a strange vision appeared to him and his spirit found some comfort. Such vision come to him from time to time. In later life he prayed four times a day in reverence to the sun, fire and light. He says: there exists a bond between the creator and the creature which is not expressible in language. He thought that 'The formless' was 'apprehensible by force of imagination.

Akbar's contact with christianity began during the silge of surat in 1573. A Portuguese priest named Julian Pereira, coming from Satgaon in Bengal, took part in the disputations in the ibadat - khana in 1578. He advised Akbar to send for some learned Portuguese priests from Goa where college of Jesuit missionaries had been set up for theological study and propagation of Christianity. The Emperor invited khree Jesuit missions to his court, permitted them to propgate their faith, and even sent his sons to receive instructions from them.

The first Jesuit mission arrived at FathpurSikri in 1580. It had three members. Rudolf Aquaviva, an Italian, Antony Monserrate, spaniard, and Francis Henriquez, a Persion convert who acted as interpreter. It received a gracious welcome. Akbar received with profound reverence a copy of the Bible and asked AbulFazl to translate the Gospel. A chapel was built in the place for the mission's use. Father Monserrate was appointed to give the Emperior's son murad a few lessons in christianity any he accompanied the Emperor to Kabul in 1581. The father took part in the discussions at the Ibatat - Khana, but their intolerance and bigotry placed Akbar in an embarrassing position and he had to give them a mild warning. They asked him to dismiss all his wives save one; but apart from other reasons, he could not attend the Rajput princes by driving away their drughters from his Haremharem, Though impressed by some christian ideas, he could not accept the doctrines of the Trinity, of the virgin birth of the son, and of the Incanation. The Fathers were disappointed in their hope that the Mughal Emperor would turn out to be the second Constatine. Several subsidiary factors contributed to the failure of the mission, such as the hostility of the Imperial harem, the opposition of the queen Mother MariyamMakani, and the disapproval of the Muslim and Hindu clergy and nobility. In 1582 there were local hostilities between the Mughals and Portuguese for the Possession of Daman. The mission broke up but Akbar asked Monserrate to proceed to Philip II of spain with two Mughal courtiers and Aquaviva was undble to proceed to Europe, and the mission to Philip II was given up.

The second Jesuit mission came in 1591 after the Propagation of the Din - l - Illahi. This shows that Akbar continued his religious quest till the closing years of his life. Father Leo Grimon, a learned Greek missionary met the Emperor in 1590. Through him Akbar sent a letter to the Jesuit society of Goa requesting it to send to his court some missionaries so that in disputations with my doctors I may compare their several learning and character. A mission consisting of two priests and a lay brother, led by Duarte Leitaao, arrived at Lahore, but it returned to Goa within a few months because it found that the Emperor was not really inclined to embrace Christianity. In 1594 Akbar requested the the Portuguese authorities in Goa to send some learned priests who could give him lessons on Christianity. A mission led by father Jerome Xavier reached Lahore in 1595. A Church was



Constructed and many persons belonging to the low strata of society were converted. Akbar allowed the Christians to practise their religion openly. A Christian mission was established at agra.

The missionaries did not confine their enterprise to the field of religion they tried to advance the commercial interests of Portugal and Spain and to thwart those of England. Xavier remained in Mughal Court till 1602. Although the third Jesuit mission failed as its predecessor had failed to convert Akbar. It secured permission failed to build Churches at Cambay. Labore, Hughli (In Bengal) and Agra and though its efforts catholicism found a footing in Northern India.

Badaoni writes that Akbar had renounced Islam in his later years, he adopted many anti - Islamic measures and even persecuted the pious Musalmans on account of their religious views. Similarly, the Jesuit missionaries, who had failed to convert Akbar to Christianity, falsely charged him of apotasy and hypocrisy. The impartial researchers have found no substance in such accusations levied against Akbar. Badaoni's hostile and rather malicious attitude towards Akbar, and the prejudiced accounts of the Christian missionaries have been too thoroughly expiated by modern historiographers to need any more elaboration in this study.

In response to Akbar's request, and in hope of his prospective conversion, a mission consisting of two Jesuit priests and a lay brother was sent from Goa and reached Lahaur in 1591. But very soon it appeared that in fact, the emperor did not intend to adopt Christianity. It is highly probable that his declarations suggesting his devotion to Christianity were never truly sincere. He might have valued Christian dogmas above those of other religions. However, he never declared openly and desire to be baptized nor admitted publicly that he was a follower of Christ. The second mission failed very soon, which was most likely caused by the strong resistance of the influential members of the royal Court. The Partakers of the expedition returned to Goa after several months.

However, despite the absence of Christian missionaries in the immediate vicinity of Akbar his tolerant attitude towards Christianity as well as towards other religions - was constant and strong. A farman issued in 1603 guaranteed his right of Christians to preach and carry out conversions as well as to erect Churches not only in Agra and Lahaur but also in Bombay and Thatta. Akbar's three grandsons - offspring of his youngest son Daniyal who died in 1604- were even baptized although they converted back to Islam soon. Yet, it was in all probability a purely political play, designed to eliminate these three grandsons from fight for succession after Akbar's death.

The third and last time Akbar renewed his wish to investing the secrets of faith in christ in 1594 when he sent a request to the Portuguese Viceroy in Goa asking him to delegate priests to his court. Having experienced two earlier unsuccessful missions, the Jesuits were rather reluctant to send another expedition, but the secular authorities of the colony = definitely for political reasons insisted on meeting the demand of the Great Mughal.

Conclusion

In the declining years of Akbar's reign, political tension between the Portuguese colonial authorities and the Mughals was growing and this situation inevitably affected the presence of Christian mission at his court to some extent. Akbar was an excellent and shrewd politician. He treated his



Christian guests with great reverence and fondness as well as maintained friendly contacts with the authorities in Goa, but his real intentions towards the Portuguese were not friendly. Despite the constant friendliness of the Emperor himself the missionaries experienced overt hostility at his court, which on the other hand, fuelled by the machinations of other Europeans, who began arriving in increasing numbers to the realm of the great Mughal. Consequently, the unique position which they enjoyed, practically having a monopoly on contacts with Akbar, was weakened so significantly that when in October 1605 the emperor was lying on his deathbed, the Jesuits were not allowed to assist at his side.

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