

From Ashoka to Akbar: Evolution of Religious Tolerance in Ancient and Medieval India

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ARTICLE DETAILS	ABSTRACT
<p>Article History Published Online: 15 May 2020</p> <hr/> <p>Keywords Religious tolerance, India, Ashoka, Akbar, Evolution, Ancient, Medieval, Pluralism, Socio-political, Diversity, Harmony, Sulh-i-Kul.</p>	<p><i>This paper examines the evolution of religious tolerance in ancient and medieval India, spanning from the reign of Emperor Ashoka to the era of Emperor Akbar. Utilizing a diverse array of historical sources, inscriptions, and scholarly analyses, it investigates the dynamic shifts in attitudes, policies, and societal norms concerning religious diversity during these pivotal periods. Beginning with Ashoka's embrace of Buddhism and propagation of Dhamma, it establishes a foundational understanding of early attempts at fostering religious harmony. Subsequently, the paper delves into the complex socio-political landscapes of medieval India, with a particular focus on Akbar's visionary approach of Sulh-i-Kul (universal peace) and its impact on religious pluralism. By unpacking the motives, strategies, and consequences of these rulers' approaches to religious tolerance, this study aims to illuminate the broader historical trajectory of Indian society and its enduring legacy of pluralism. Through this analysis, it seeks to offer insights into the intricate dynamics of religion, power, and societal coexistence in ancient and medieval India.</i></p>

Devices Against Farm Enemies:

India, renowned for its diverse cultures, religions, and traditions, has long been hailed for its commitment to religious pluralism and tolerance. Throughout its history, rulers and empires have grappled with the challenge of governing a populace with varied religious beliefs, all while striving to uphold social cohesion and harmony. Among the pivotal figures in this historical narrative stand Emperor Ashoka of the Maurya dynasty and Emperor Akbar of the Mughal dynasty, whose reigns symbolize significant epochs in India's journey towards religious tolerance.¹

Emperor Ashoka, celebrated for his embrace of Buddhism and advocacy of the principles of Dhamma, ushered in a remarkable era of religious tolerance in ancient India. His edicts, etched onto pillars and rock surfaces across the subcontinent, serve as enduring testaments to his dedication to fostering peaceful coexistence among diverse religious communities. In contrast, Emperor Akbar, one of medieval India's most distinguished rulers, championed a policy of Sulh-i-Kul, or universal peace, aimed at transcending religious divides and establishing a harmonious society where individuals of all faiths could peacefully coexist. Akbar's initiatives, which included the introduction of a syncretic religious philosophy known as Din-i Ilahi, exemplify his innovative approach to religious pluralism.²

¹ Bhatta, C. P. (2018). Inclusive Communication for Promoting Peace, Harmony, and Religious Pluralism: Insights from Exemplary Political Leaders of Ancient, Medieval, and Modern India. *Australia and New Zealand Journal of Social Business, Environment and Sustainability*.

² Bhatta, C. P. (2018). Inclusive Communication for Promoting Peace, Harmony, and Religious Pluralism: Insights from Exemplary Political

1.1 Statement of Purpose

This paper sets out to explore the evolution of religious tolerance in ancient and medieval India through a comparative examination of the reigns of Emperor Ashoka and Emperor Akbar. By scrutinizing the policies, ideologies, and socio-cultural contexts of these two periods, this study seeks to uncover the factors influencing the treatment of religious diversity and the strategies employed by rulers to foster tolerance and mutual understanding among diverse religious communities. Through a multidimensional analysis of historical sources, inscriptions, and scholarly works, this paper endeavors to reveal the underlying motivations and implications of Ashoka's and Akbar's approaches to religious tolerance. Additionally, it aims to evaluate the lasting impact of their policies on subsequent rulers and the broader Indian society.

Ultimately, this analysis seeks to deepen our comprehension of the intricate dynamics at play between religion, power, and society in ancient and medieval India, while illuminating the enduring importance of religious tolerance in shaping the cultural identity and heritage of the nation.

II. Religious Tolerance in Ancient India: The Era of Ashoka

The era of Ashoka, often referred to as the "Golden Age" of ancient India, stands as a beacon of religious tolerance and pluralism in the annals of history. Emperor Ashoka, ascending to the throne of the Maurya dynasty in the 3rd century BCE, embarked on a transformative journey that would not only shape the destiny of his empire but also leave an indelible

Leaders of Ancient, Medieval, and Modern India. *Australia and New Zealand Journal of Social Business, Environment and Sustainability*.

mark on the ethos of Indian civilization. Central to Ashoka's reign was his profound embrace of Buddhism, which propelled him towards a vision of governance characterized by compassion, moral rectitude, and religious harmony.³

In this section, we delve into the multifaceted dimensions of religious tolerance during the era of Ashoka, exploring the pivotal role of his reign and his personal commitment to Buddhism. We examine the edicts and policies promulgated by Ashoka to promote religious harmony and social cohesion across his vast empire. Furthermore, we assess the enduring legacy of Ashoka's approach to religious tolerance, tracing its impact on subsequent rulers and its lasting imprint on the cultural fabric of ancient India. Through this exploration, we aim to illuminate the complexities and nuances of religious tolerance during one of India's most revered historical periods.

2.1 Ashoka's Reign and Embrace of Buddhism

Ashoka's reign marked a significant shift in the trajectory of the Maurya Empire and, indeed, in the history of ancient India. Upon ascending to the throne around 268 BCE, Ashoka inherited an empire that had been expanded through conquest and military prowess by his predecessors, particularly his grandfather Chandragupta Maurya and his father Bindusara. However, Ashoka's reign was not defined solely by military conquests; rather, it was characterized by a profound transformation driven by his personal conversion to Buddhism.⁴

Ashoka's embrace of Buddhism was a pivotal moment in Indian history. It marked a departure from the Vedic Brahmanism that had dominated the religious landscape of ancient India and signaled a new era of religious pluralism and tolerance. The reasons behind Ashoka's conversion to Buddhism are not entirely clear, but it is believed to have been influenced by a combination of personal experiences, including the remorse he felt after the bloody conquest of Kalinga and the teachings of Buddhist monks such as Upagupta.

As a devout Buddhist, Ashoka sought to govern his empire in accordance with the principles of Dhamma (Buddhist moral law). He implemented policies aimed at promoting social welfare, ethical conduct, and religious tolerance. Ashoka's commitment to Buddhism was evident in his patronage of Buddhist institutions, including the construction of monasteries, the establishment of Buddhist missions to spread the faith, and his sponsorship of Buddhist relics and monuments, such as the famous Sanchi Stupa.⁵

Furthermore, Ashoka's embrace of Buddhism had profound implications for the administration of his empire. He sought to govern his subjects with compassion and benevolence, rejecting the harsh methods of his predecessors in favor of a more humane approach to governance. Ashoka's edicts, inscribed on pillars and rock surfaces throughout his empire,

serve as tangible evidence of his commitment to promoting ethical behavior, religious tolerance, and social justice.

Overall, Ashoka's reign and his embrace of Buddhism represent a watershed moment in Indian history. His conversion to Buddhism and his efforts to govern his empire in accordance with Buddhist principles had far-reaching implications for the religious and cultural landscape of ancient India, laying the foundation for a tradition of religious tolerance and pluralism that would endure for centuries to come.

2.2 Edicts and Policies Promoting Religious Harmony

During Ashoka's reign, his commitment to religious harmony was not confined to personal belief but extended to a series of edicts and policies aimed at fostering tolerance and understanding among the diverse religious communities within his vast empire. These edicts, inscribed on pillars and rock surfaces across the subcontinent, served as public proclamations of Ashoka's principles of governance and his vision for a just and harmonious society.⁶

- **Edicts of Ashoka:** Ashoka's edicts are perhaps the most tangible evidence of his efforts to promote religious harmony. These edicts were written in various Indian languages, including Prakrit, Greek, and Aramaic, and were disseminated throughout the empire. They covered a wide range of topics, including moral precepts, social welfare measures, and religious tolerance. In particular, Ashoka's Rock Edict XII explicitly calls for respect for all religious sects and the promotion of religious tolerance.
- **Dhamma Mahamatras:** Ashoka appointed special officials known as Dhamma Mahamatras to spread his message of Dhamma and ensure compliance with his policies. These officials were tasked with overseeing the welfare of the people, promoting ethical conduct, and resolving disputes. Their presence throughout the empire helped to enforce Ashoka's commitment to religious tolerance and social harmony.⁷
- **Support for Multiple Religious Traditions:** While Ashoka was a devout Buddhist, he did not impose his faith on his subjects. Instead, he expressed support for multiple religious traditions and encouraged dialogue and mutual respect among them. Ashoka's inscriptions make reference to his donations to non-Buddhist religious institutions, such as Hindu temples and Jain monasteries, demonstrating his commitment to religious pluralism.
- **Policies of Non-Violence:** Central to Ashoka's vision of Dhamma was the principle of ahimsa, or non-violence. Ashoka advocated for the humane treatment of animals, the protection of forests, and the abolition of cruel practices such as animal sacrifice. By

³ Parekar, S. N. (2012). Ashoka's 'Dhamma'—an instrument of social solidarity and religious harmony.

⁴ Bhargava, R. (2014). Beyond toleration: Civility and principled coexistence in Ashokan edicts. In *Boundaries of toleration* (pp. 173-202). Columbia University Press.

⁵ EDICTS, A., & BHARGAVA, R. BEYOND TOLERATION: CIVILITY AND PRINCIPLED COEXISTENCE IN.

⁶ Bhargava, R. (2012). Political Responses to Religious Diversity in Ancient and Modern India. *Review of Development and Change*, 17(1), 3-23.

⁷ Nandy, A. (1988). The politics of secularism and the recovery of religious tolerance. *Alternatives*, 13(2), 177-194.

promoting non-violence in both religious and secular contexts, Ashoka sought to create a more compassionate and harmonious society.

- **Social Welfare Measures:** In addition to promoting religious tolerance, Ashoka implemented various social welfare measures aimed at improving the well-being of his subjects, regardless of their religious affiliation. These measures included the establishment of hospitals, the construction of roads and rest houses, and the provision of relief for the needy. By addressing the material needs of his subjects, Ashoka sought to create a more equitable and inclusive society.

Overall, Ashoka's edicts and policies promoting religious harmony represent a remarkable attempt to govern a diverse and multi-religious empire with compassion and tolerance. While his efforts may not have always been entirely successful, they nonetheless laid the groundwork for a tradition of religious pluralism that continues to resonate in Indian society today.

2.3 Legacy of Ashoka's Approach to Religious Tolerance

The legacy of Ashoka's approach to religious tolerance reverberates through the annals of Indian history, leaving an indelible imprint on the cultural, social, and political fabric of the subcontinent. Ashoka's reign, characterized by his profound embrace of Buddhism and his commitment to promoting religious harmony, set a precedent for rulers and societies to aspire to in subsequent eras. Here are some aspects of Ashoka's legacy in terms of religious tolerance:

- **Promotion of Religious Pluralism:** Ashoka's reign marked a departure from the religious exclusivism and intolerance that had characterized earlier periods in Indian history. His support for multiple religious traditions, including Buddhism, Hinduism, and Jainism, laid the foundation for a culture of religious pluralism and coexistence. Ashoka's message of tolerance and respect for all religious sects helped to create a climate where individuals were free to practice their faith without fear of persecution⁸.
- **Influence on Subsequent Rulers:** The example set by Ashoka had a lasting impact on the attitudes and policies of subsequent rulers in India. Many later kings and emperors sought to emulate Ashoka's commitment to religious tolerance and social welfare. For example, the Gupta Empire, which flourished in the centuries following Ashoka's reign, is often referred to as the "Golden Age" of Indian history, characterized by a flourishing of art, literature, and religious tolerance.
- **Cultural and Artistic Legacy:** Ashoka's patronage of Buddhism and his efforts to spread the faith through missionary activities left an enduring legacy in the realm of art and architecture. The construction of stupas, monasteries, and other Buddhist monuments during his reign contributed to the development of a

distinctively Indian Buddhist aesthetic that would influence art and architecture throughout Asia.

- **Symbol of Moral Leadership:** Ashoka's conversion to Buddhism and his subsequent commitment to ethical governance earned him a reputation as a moral leader and a model of virtuous kingship. His edicts, which extolled the virtues of compassion, non-violence, and religious tolerance, served as a guidepost for rulers seeking to govern with wisdom and benevolence.⁹
- **Enduring Ideals of Dhamma:** Perhaps the most enduring aspect of Ashoka's legacy is his advocacy of Dhamma, or righteous conduct. The principles of Dhamma, as articulated in Ashoka's edicts, continue to resonate in Indian society, serving as a reminder of the importance of ethical behavior, social justice, and religious tolerance.

In conclusion, Ashoka's approach to religious tolerance left an indelible mark on Indian history and society, shaping the cultural, social, and political landscape of the subcontinent for centuries to come. His legacy serves as a testament to the enduring power of compassion, tolerance, and ethical governance in fostering a more just and harmonious society.

III. Religious Tolerance in Medieval India: The Era of Akbar

The era of Akbar, spanning from 1556 to 1605, stands as a pivotal period in the history of medieval India, characterized by innovative governance and a remarkable commitment to religious tolerance. As one of the most illustrious rulers of the Mughal dynasty, Akbar's reign represents a significant departure from the religious exclusivism and intolerance that had characterized earlier periods in Indian history. Instead, Akbar pursued a visionary policy of Sulh-i-Kul, or universal peace, seeking to transcend religious differences and create a harmonious society where individuals of all faiths could coexist peacefully.

In this section, we delve into the multifaceted dimensions of religious tolerance during the era of Akbar, exploring the innovative policies, religious dialogue, and social harmony that characterized his reign. We examine Akbar's pioneering efforts to promote religious pluralism and accommodate the diverse religious communities within his empire. Furthermore, we assess the enduring legacy of Akbar's approach to religious tolerance, tracing its impact on subsequent rulers and its lasting imprint on the cultural fabric of medieval India. Through this exploration, we aim to illuminate the complexities and nuances of religious tolerance during one of India's most revered historical periods.

3.1 Akbar's Reign and Policy of Sulh-i-Kul

Akbar's reign is synonymous with the policy of Sulh-i-Kul, a Persian term meaning "universal peace" or "peace with all." This policy was the cornerstone of Akbar's approach to governance and religious tolerance during medieval India. Akbar ascended to the Mughal throne in 1556 at the age of just

⁸ Nandy, A. (1988). The politics of secularism and the recovery of religious tolerance. *Alternatives*, 13(2), 177-194.

⁹ Hutchison, P. M. (2009). Impressions of Ashoka in Ancient India. *Inquiries Journal*, 1(11).

13, inheriting an empire that was characterized by religious diversity and occasional conflicts between different religious communities.¹⁰

Sulh-i-Kul was a departure from the religious exclusivism and intolerance that had characterized previous rulers. Akbar sought to create a society where individuals of all faiths could coexist peacefully, transcending religious differences and fostering mutual respect and understanding. To achieve this lofty goal, Akbar implemented a series of innovative policies and initiatives that promoted religious tolerance and accommodation.

One of the most notable aspects of Akbar's policy of Sulh-i-Kul was his abolition of the jizya tax on non-Muslims. This tax, which had been imposed on non-Muslims in previous Mughal and Islamic regimes, was seen as a symbol of discrimination and inequality. By abolishing the jizya tax, Akbar signaled his commitment to religious equality and his desire to create a more inclusive society where all citizens were treated equally regardless of their religious affiliation.

In addition to abolishing discriminatory practices, Akbar also sought to promote religious dialogue and understanding among different religious communities. He established the Ibadat Khana, or "House of Worship," where scholars and theologians from diverse religious backgrounds could come together to discuss religious matters in an atmosphere of mutual respect and tolerance. This forum facilitated the exchange of ideas and perspectives and contributed to a climate of religious syncretism and cultural exchange.

Furthermore, Akbar's policy of Sulh-i-Kul was reflected in his administration and governance. He appointed Hindus and other non-Muslims to high-ranking positions in his administration, recognizing their talent and expertise regardless of their religious background. This policy of religious inclusivity helped to foster a sense of belonging and loyalty among diverse religious communities within the empire.

Overall, Akbar's reign and his policy of Sulh-i-Kul represent a remarkable chapter in the history of religious tolerance in India. By promoting religious equality, dialogue, and accommodation, Akbar laid the foundation for a tradition of religious pluralism that continues to resonate in Indian society today. His visionary approach to governance serves as a timeless reminder of the importance of tolerance, understanding, and mutual respect in building a harmonious and inclusive society.¹¹

3.2 Religious Dialogue and Syncretism

Religious dialogue and syncretism played a central role in Akbar's policy of Sulh-i-Kul and his broader approach to religious tolerance during medieval India. Akbar recognized the diversity of religious beliefs and practices within his empire and sought to create an atmosphere where individuals of different

faiths could engage in meaningful dialogue and exchange ideas.

- **Establishment of the Ibadat Khana:** One of Akbar's most significant initiatives was the establishment of the Ibadat Khana, or "House of Worship," at Fatehpur Sikri near Agra. The Ibadat Khana served as a forum for scholars, theologians, and religious leaders from various religious traditions, including Islam, Hinduism, Christianity, Jainism, and Zoroastrianism, to come together and engage in dialogue. Akbar himself participated in these discussions, asking probing questions and encouraging open debate on matters of faith and theology.
- **Promotion of Religious Syncretism:** Akbar's policy of religious tolerance went beyond mere dialogue; he actively promoted syncretism, the blending of religious beliefs and practices from different traditions. Akbar was particularly interested in exploring commonalities among different faiths and finding ways to reconcile theological differences. This approach led to the development of a syncretic religious philosophy known as Din-i Ilahi, which sought to integrate elements of Islam, Hinduism, Christianity, Jainism, and Zoroastrianism. Although Din-i Ilahi did not gain widespread acceptance and eventually faded into obscurity after Akbar's death, it reflects his commitment to religious pluralism and his belief in the possibility of finding common ground among diverse religious traditions.¹²
- **Patronage of Religious Art and Architecture:** Akbar's support for religious dialogue and syncretism was also reflected in his patronage of religious art and architecture. Under Akbar's reign, Mughal architecture reached new heights of sophistication and grandeur, blending elements of Islamic, Hindu, and Persian styles. Akbar commissioned the construction of magnificent mosques, temples, palaces, and tombs, many of which incorporated motifs and designs from multiple religious traditions. This artistic synthesis served as a visual representation of Akbar's vision of religious harmony and cultural integration.
- **Legacy of Religious Syncretism:** Although Akbar's efforts to promote religious syncretism faced challenges and were not universally embraced, they left a lasting legacy in Indian history. Akbar's openness to religious dialogue and his promotion of syncretism helped to foster a climate of cultural exchange and mutual respect among diverse religious communities. His reign is remembered as a period of cultural flourishing and religious diversity, characterized by a spirit of openness and tolerance that continues to inspire and resonate in the modern world.¹³

¹⁰ Kutlutürk, C. (2016). A Critical Analysis of Akbar's Religious Policy: Din-i Ilahi. *International Relations and Diplomacy*, 4(6), 407-17.

¹¹ Vera, N., & Kurniasari, N. G. A. K. (2016). Reception analysis of Indian ethnic about the value of religious tolerance in serial Jodha Akbar. *Advanced Science Letters*, 22(5-6), 1380-1383.

¹² Koch, E. (2018). The intellectual and artistic climate of tolerance at akbar's court. *Global art history*, 151-168.

¹³ Raja, I. R. F. A. N., & Raj, R. A. Z. A. Q. (2017). The Essence of community Cohesion through religious tolerance. *conflicts, religion and culture in Tourism*, 44-54.

3.3 Assessing the Impact of Akbar's Policies

Assessing the impact of Akbar's policies, particularly his policy of Sulh-i-Kul and his broader approach to religious tolerance, reveals a complex and multifaceted legacy that has left a lasting imprint on Indian history and society. Here are some key aspects to consider when evaluating the impact of Akbar's policies:

- **Promotion of Religious Tolerance:** Perhaps the most significant impact of Akbar's policies was the promotion of religious tolerance and accommodation within his empire. By abolishing discriminatory practices, such as the jizya tax on non-Muslims, and appointing Hindus and other non-Muslims to high-ranking positions in his administration, Akbar created a more inclusive society where individuals of different faiths were treated with respect and dignity. This promotion of religious tolerance helped to foster a sense of unity and social cohesion among diverse religious communities.
- **Cultural and Intellectual Flourishing:** Akbar's patronage of religious dialogue, syncretism, and artistic expression contributed to a period of cultural and intellectual flourishing during his reign. The establishment of the Ibadat Khana and the promotion of syncretic religious philosophy encouraged scholars and theologians to engage in open dialogue and exchange ideas across religious boundaries. This intellectual ferment led to the development of new schools of thought and artistic expressions that enriched Indian culture and heritage.
- **Political Stability and Unity:** Akbar's policy of religious tolerance and accommodation also contributed to political stability and unity within his empire. By creating a climate of religious pluralism and social harmony, Akbar reduced the likelihood of religious conflict and rebellion, thereby strengthening the stability of his reign. This political stability allowed for economic prosperity, administrative efficiency, and territorial expansion, further consolidating the power and influence of the Mughal Empire.¹⁴
- **Legacy of Religious Pluralism:** Perhaps the most enduring impact of Akbar's policies is the legacy of religious pluralism that he left behind. Akbar's reign is remembered as a period of cultural and religious diversity, characterized by a spirit of openness and tolerance that continues to inspire and resonate in Indian society today. His innovative approach to governance serves as a timeless reminder of the importance of tolerance, understanding, and mutual respect in building a harmonious and inclusive society.

In conclusion, the impact of Akbar's policies was profound and far-reaching, shaping the cultural, social, and political landscape of medieval India. His promotion of religious

tolerance, cultural exchange, and intellectual dialogue laid the foundation for a tradition of religious pluralism that continues to define Indian identity and heritage. Akbar's legacy serves as a testament to the enduring power of compassion, tolerance, and ethical governance in fostering a more just and harmonious society.

IV. Conclusion

The journey from Ashoka to Akbar represents a remarkable evolution in the landscape of religious tolerance in ancient and medieval India. Spanning centuries and dynasties, this trajectory reveals a nuanced and complex interplay between religion, power, and societal norms, shaping the cultural identity and heritage of the subcontinent.

Emperor Ashoka's reign marked a pivotal moment in Indian history, characterized by his profound embrace of Buddhism and his commitment to fostering religious tolerance and harmony. Through his edicts, policies, and personal example, Ashoka laid the foundation for a tradition of religious pluralism that endured for centuries, influencing subsequent rulers and shaping the cultural ethos of ancient India.

In contrast, the era of Akbar represented a renaissance of religious tolerance and accommodation during medieval India. Through his policy of Sulh-i-Kul and his promotion of religious dialogue and syncretism, Akbar created a society where individuals of different faiths could coexist peacefully, contributing to a period of cultural flourishing and intellectual exchange.

As we reflect on the evolution of religious tolerance from Ashoka to Akbar, it becomes clear that their legacies continue to resonate in Indian society today. Their visionary approaches to governance serve as timeless reminders of the enduring importance of compassion, tolerance, and ethical leadership in fostering a more just and harmonious society.

In conclusion, the journey from Ashoka to Akbar illuminates the enduring quest for religious tolerance and understanding in Indian history. As we navigate the complexities of the present day, their legacies inspire us to embrace diversity, promote dialogue, and build bridges across religious and cultural divides in the pursuit of peace and unity.

¹⁴ Kaviraj, S. (2014). Modernity, state, and toleration in Indian history: Exploring accommodations and partitions. In *Boundaries of Toleration* (pp. 233-266). Columbia University Press.