

Exploring the Jesuits during the reign of Akbar Nahid Jamal

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Abstract

The advent of Europeans in Indian shores holds an enduring ground in history. It turned over the pages of encounter between Indians and Europeans in a new direction that left indebted mark over the Mughal art and culture. Historians explicitly covered the areas of Jesuits missionary activities, expansion and establishing themselves at the Mughal court. The significant narratives in this field cover the core centered and concrete process of the cross-cultural interaction of the Jesuits at various levels in the Mughal India. Therefore, this paper explores the psychology of the Mughals towards the Christianity and approach towards the 'Jesuits' that marked them as an historic figure in Indian history. Based on the contemporary sources, it moves on to reconnoiter; the ways of the Jesuits to survive with the 'quest' of Akbar and thus tried to add new findings to the generally scholarly discussion.

Keywords Jesuits, Europeans, Mughals, religion and Christianity

Introduction

During the first half of the sixteenth century Indian Ocean experienced the encroachment of two dynamic foreign elements-the Portuguese and the Mughals. It was the time when Portuguese established maritime empire in India. Under the protecting flag of Portugal, Christian missionaries could safely go about the country [India] preaching the Gospel. When the contact was established between these two powers- the Mughals and the Portuguese, the enquiring mind

of Mughal sovereign [Akbar] was desirous to become acquainted with the religion of the Portuguese. They were responded through the agency of Society of Jesus (Moraes, 1964). This society had two designs-one was the struggle against the reformation in Europe, secondly to spread Christianity in all over the world. In this way, the Christianity in Mughal India served a different taste. The Mughal court created an ambiance for shared and altercation of different religious doctrines under one umbrella. Though, the impact of Christianity over the Mughal society was not restricted to the conversational standard of *munazara* (religious debates) but had more to pursuit. It had witnessed far-reaching imprints that appears to have stretched out to the entire of the Mughal culture. Ebba Koch (1982) explains the impressive proof of Christian sway over the Mughal Architecture and art. This makes the question of Indian perception of Christianity a complex issue undoubtedly. It is quite interesting that the journey of Jesuit missionaries initiated from the court of fervent Mughal Emperor- Jalaluddin Muhammad Akbar and it seems that the zeal and ability of these missionaries placed them as immense and long-lasting figure in history.

Objectives

This paper explores Mughals emotion for Christianity, was a sign of reverence or oddity. How did Indians perceive it? How did Indo- Persian literature deals with influence of Jesuits in the Mughal realm? What is the hidden reality behind the curtain? In order to revisit and understand the buried layers of Christianity one must first go through the psychology of the Mughals that led to the development of Christianity in India on such a big scale.

Finding and Discussion

Jesuits came in India during the reign of Emperor Akbar and remained in India during the end of 18th century. Among all the Mughal rulers Jesuits put huge influence on Akbar and Jahangir and from the contemporary sources we come to know much about Jesuit's welcome, reception and exposure in Mughal India.

The journey begins-

A reflection on ideology

The story of Akbar's first meeting with the Christian missionaries began in early part of 1573, when he came into contact with the delegation of Portuguese from Goa, represented by Antony Cabral. In 1575, Badauni noticed their influence and asserted that Frangi priests came frequently and his Majesty enquired into the articles of their belief which are based on Reason. In this context, we have clearly seen the ideology of the Mughals that reflects in the implementation of his policies. Most significantly, the contemporary historian of Akbar's reign Abu'lFazl put forward the ideology of Iranian kingship, who believes that man and kingship are independent. His political thinking and religious thoughts are closely interconnected and seeks to present an organised life of a devoted king to mankind to attain happiness (Rizvi, 1975). Abu'lFazl's narrative presented a comprehensive notion of kingship:

“The monarch should have complete trust in God and never forget Him. Keeping in mind the heterogeneous nature of the subjects and wide variety in religions followed by them, Abu'lFazl says that the king must be above religious differences, treats all his subjects with consideration and do what is proper for the time. He should be guided by reason, follow the course of inquiry and avoid blind authority (taqlid). An embodiment of all these... he adopted a policy of ‘Peace with all’ (sulh-ikul) should be the guiding principle of his government” (Fazl,1873-87:285)

Abu'lFazl's idea of kingship is the mirror to look into the mind of the emperor that shows in the implementation of his [Akbar] policies. Moin (2012) argues that the policies of sacred kingship of Akbar depict himself as divine were the influence of Safavid. While Rafat M. Bilgrami(1984) argues that Akbar went to break the entire barrier between different communities and gave equal status to all communities of the subjects, as was the need of the time to expand the power in a country of non- muslims. Although, this is the significant aspect that we have shown in Akbar but it could not be denied that, it was also the call of his inner yearnings to get

engaged with the other religions. Thus, Moosvi (2017) analyses the development of Akbar's religious views belongs to his personal inclination before introducing the policy of *Sulh-iKul*.

Thus, when the emperor met Julian Periera in 1578, his ability to explain the tenants of Christianity impressed the emperor and Abu'IFazl mentions "his sound sense and upright conduct won him the favour and esteem of the Emperor" (Maclagan,1932 :23). So, Akbar decided to invite the Jesuits from higher authorities at Goa. He sent a letter to the wise man of *Fīrangto* send the Jesuits to the Mughal court. The *farman* to the Fathers kept running as:

"Order of Jalal-ud-Din the Great, King by God selected. Fathers of the Order of St. Paul, know that I am most benevolently disposed towards you. I send 'Abdulla, my ambassador, and Dominic Pires, to ask you in my name to send me two learned priests who should bring with to carry with them the central books of the Law and the Gospel, for I wish to examine and gain proficiency with the Law and what is ideal and most perfect in it" (Maclagan,1932:24)

To this *farman*, Pope Gregory wrote to Akbar, opening thus:

"May the Merciful God, who delighted to inspire you to listen to the teaching of the evangelical doctrine, transfer you as soon as possible from darkness to light" (Afonso,1980: 119).

This letter of Pope shows the manner in which he tried to fulfil the religious propaganda of conversion. The Portuguese were also doubtful at Akbar's *farman*, Rudolf asserted to his uncle Father Claud before coming to the court, "I am writing to ask your prayers. For we need greatly God's help, as we are being sent, 'like men appointed to death', into the midst of the Mohammadans, whose word is always to be distrusted"(Goldie,1897:58). At one side we have seen these suspicious nature of Portuguese, on the other hand, we have also seems the wisdom in Akbar to deal the situation. In a *farman*, dated 18 December 1573, in which Akbar ordered his officials not to attack the Portuguese, but to give them Portuguese protection, if needed. The Emperor referred to the embassy of Antony Cabral, and explained that the later Portuguese viceroy wanted his friendship. Pius (2016) argues that the preference shown to Jesuits from Goa

might have some intention of Akbar to connect with the Portuguese. He further cited if there is only the matter of religious inquisitiveness then he could chose the pastors from Cochin. Cochin at that time was at its peak to have Christian community. Subrahmanyam (2011) analyses the Jesuit mission as, "In comparison to an Ottoman empire that was portrayed as staunchly attached to Sunni Islam Akbar's Mughal Empire was thus seen as the possible frontier of a conversion that might have massive geopolitical implications" (Subrahmanyam, 2011:258). The reason to look at the Mughal Empire with some sort of confirmation might have its origin in the letter of chronicler Diogo do Couto. This letter recounts the incidence of Badshah Humayun when he encountered a Portuguese on the ship after his defeat from Sher Shah. The Portuguese tried to show the reverence of Humayun to the Christianity. The stanza runs as:

".....on many occasions I [Humayun] have heard my father Babur Paxa say that if Law of Muhammad were to suffer a decline, that I should receive no other than that which has been written by four men.' And thus this Barbarian was so fond of Christians that whenever he saw them, he gave them great honor and grants"(Subrahmanyam, 2011:259).

If we observe the atmosphere of the Mughals and the Portuguese it may be right to some extent to go with the above stated arguments of the modern historians. It may presumably right to state that it was the political need of the time that club up with the 'quest of curiosity' to know every religion. It was documented by Badaūni that the pilgrims going to Mecca by sea had to face difficulties from Portuguese, whose passports had pictures of Mary and Jesus (peace be upon Him!) and Badauni told that 'for Muslims to make use of them 'would mean to countenance idolatry'(Lees, 1865-69:203). Akbar had realized the dominance and the power of the Portuguese over the seas; somewhere inner fear subsists. As if Christianity was only the reason, then Akbar had many Christian Armenians living in the court. For instance- Mirza Khwaja Safar, Mirza Zulfarnain (Hussain, 2011). As a compatible monarch, Akbar was able to solve the issue in the most suitable way so that his inner desire as well as the other issues of politics could be

solved in a better way. While on the other hands Jesuit missionaries also served the dual purpose of maintaining the good commercial relations as well as the conversion of the Emperor Akbar.

Multicultural Atmosphere and the quest of knowledge

Therefore, the missionaries comprised of the Italian Rodolfo Acquaviva, the Catalian Antony Monserrate, and the Persian convert from Hurmuz, Francisco Henriques came to the court (Maclagan, 1932:24-25). The coming of the Jesuits was recorded by court historians. Badaūni explicitly states the nature of dialogue between the two communities at the arrival of first mission:

“There came Learned men from Europe (Afranja), called as Padres (Padri), and their infallible head (Mujtahid- iKamil) known as the Pope (Papa). They brought the Bible (injil) and gave contentions in the favour of Trinity and proved the truth of Christianity (nasraniyat), and wishing to spread the doctrines of Jesus (millet-iisawi). His Majesty ordered Prince Murad to take few lessons from the Bible, and Shaikh AbulFazl was charged to translate it. Instead of usual 'Bismi' illah r- rahmanr'rahim the following lines were used (in the Gospel): Ai nam-itu Jesus o Kristu" (O thou those names are Jesus Christ and Christ), and Shaikh added another half, in order to complete the verse Subhana-k la siwa –k Yahu (We praise Thee, there is no one besides Thee, O God!)” (Lees, 1865-69: 260).

This is the initiating point of meeting of the two diverse modes of cultures. Badaūni reported this incidence and witness the influence of the Portuguese at the court during 1575-76. In an orthodox tone, Badaūni remarks, “whatever imagination their [Jesuits] intellect invents, God laughs at the intellect of the people of that creed” (Maclagan, 1932:25). In this way the *munazara* initiated in Akbar's presence where discussions over different issues started. The theme of these debates focuses on the tenants of trinity, God-the Son, His demise, Muhammad, Alcoran, the Day of Judgment, death, restoration (Monserrate, 1922:25). They also throw light on the ideologies that made the difference between the two religions, Islam and the Christianity. Father Rudolf also tried to proof the authenticity of his faith by comparing the tenants of

Christianity from that of the Quran (see plate 3.1). To proof his faith authentic, Jesuits brought with them the Greek translation of Quran. At the time Jesuits became intense and using callous words for Islam, Muslim theologians cried out '*Astagfirullah*'. To make a balance, as the Muslim scholars did not have the copy of Gospel, so it was decided to make an ordeal by fire (Afonso,1980). The Jesuits originally marked in their literatures that the trial started from the opponents and, they [Jesuits] denied by proclaiming it was not the appropriate way to do. But the Mughal version of the incident echoed contradicted to the former story. As per Mughal records, it was Acquaviva, who tossed the contest to his Muslim oppositions, The Padre's verdict endorsed as:

"If this faction [Muslims] have such an opinion of our Book [the Gospel], and regard the Furqan (the Quran) as the pure word of God, it is proper that a heaped fire be lighted. We shall take the Gospels in our hands, and the 'Ulama of that faith shall take their book, and then let us enter that testing-place of truth. The escape of any one will be a sign of his truthfulness" (Fazl, 1873-87: 296).

Akbar always tried to dig the Fathers to know more about the tenants of the faith. Once he asked Monserrate, "Why Christ did not come from the cross, why Christ allowed St. Thomas to put his fingers into his wounds and what was meant by 'sitting at the right hand of God.'" He also discussed the celibacy of the clergy, the Last Judgment, the status of the Paraclete, and the connection of the Quran to the Gospel" (Maclagan, 1932:35). These conversations give a confirmation to the Fathers that the emperor was near to conversion. The king also made interrogations with them [Jesuits] in his private quarters, and they additionally went with him on hunting expeditions and military. Aside from these conversations we are well aware that the first and the second Jesuit missions did not attain the desired results for the Jesuits. After all, the missions were launched at the will of the Akbar. The hopeless Monserrate revealed his animosity as:

"It may be suspected that Jalal-ud-din Akbar was moved to summon the Christian priests, not by any divine inspiration, but by a certain curiosity, and excessive eagerness

to hear some new thing, or a design to devise something novel for the destruction of souls” (Afonso,1980:126).

Eventually, Leitao and Vega also decided to go back by claiming that, “arrogance of that barbarian who has turned himself into a prophet and legislator, saying that the time of Law of Mahoma is already over”(Subrahmanyam,2011:260).Abu’lFazl mentions to the year 1579-80 as the one when much disturbance was brought by the Jesuit mission (Fazl,1873-87: 272).

Reality behind the curtain

The regular presence of Jesuits, in spite of failing in their goals raises the question: was there any sort of connection between the regular presence of Jesuits and the wish of Akbar to reside them in the court or was there any other drive other than religious cause. We come across such evidences that reveal the governor Albuquerque have had political agenda to remain aware of the activities of the Mughals. It also came into knowledge that one major tension was the Mughal’s expansion into the Deccan. Secondly, higher authorities advised to send an accomplished person for the religious program that could be capable of handling the situation in the most suitable manner. Therefore, Jeronimo Xavier thought to be the one who could achieve both the objectives (Subrahmanyam, 2011).Nizami (1989) also supported that there were some political undertones to Jesus activities.

It is obvious, that *munazara* discussions in IbadatKhana were decisively moulded the Akbar’s view towards the Christianity. Regardless, of this there is another side of the matter that seems more significant in many ways. Despite it, Akbar did not convert as Christian but proved himself a ‘Rational thinker.’ Like, he wanted the collection of European literature in the imperial libraries. He was always demanded to send the books of the religion. The letter is sent to Philip II, the king of Spain in April 1582, and came to be known as *farmān – rīwa –i- Firāng*:

“Our language is not the same as yours; we trust that you will rejoice us by sending to these parts a man ready to speak to us these wonderful objects of research in a clear way. It has been brought to our notice that the published books, for example, the Bible, the Gospels (Injil) and the Psalms of David (Zabur). Book of Moss (Taurat) have been

translated into Arabic or Persian. Should these books are profitable to all, weather translated or not be procurable in your country, send them”(Haider,1988:10).

Subsequently, Akbar wanted to discern the doctrines of Christianity emanated from the Europeans themselves. As an outcome of the problems of both the Indians and Europeans, in 1595, Father Jerome Xavier arrived with the third Jesuit mission with Father Emmanuel Pinheiro and Brother Benedict De Goes. Jerome Xavier served the purpose of both the Mughals and the Europeans. In this approach Europeans thought to be send a highly intellectual man to transfer all the matters of need (Subrahmanyam, 2011). Therefore, Xavier emerges as the one who could fulfill the demands of both the sides. Impressed by Xavier's potentialities, Akbar ordered the compilation of lot of European literature. This work was done within the collaboration of MaulanaAbd-us-Sattar bin QasimLahori (Maclagan,1932). Xavier admitted the motive of the compilation of this text was only the imperial desire. The Jesuit also compared Akbar's propaganda with that of Abgar, the king of Edessa. *Mirat* opens with the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit who are the one God (Khan, 2014). '*Dastan-iMasih*' or '*Mirat-ul-Quds*' was divided into four segments:

- Nativity and the Infancy of Christ,
- Miracles and Teaching,
- Death and Suffering,
- Resurrection and Ascension

P.M Calvalho (2012) states, *Mirāt –al Quds* (Mirror of Holiness) marks the exceptional moment in the relations of an Islamic ruler with the members of a Catholic Order and in a broader sense, interactions between the East and the West (see plate 3.2).The other work that had been compiled on the will of Akbar was the life of twelve Apostles in Persian. This work couldn't be finished during Akbar's period and was displayed in its last structure to Jahangir in 1607, by the Fathers of Lahore and is said to have been appreciated by the king. The text is

mainly a treatise of an exchange between a padre and Muslim scholar in front of a king. This was in five sections:

- The necessity for a Divine law,
- What Christ teaches in regards to God and proofs of it being confirmable to wisdom,
- The divinity of Jesus Christ, (Lord),
- Commandments of the Gospel and their contrast from those of Muhammad, and,
- The strength bestowed by Christian confidence and its prevalence over different religions.

In the whole course of inter faith dialogue Xavier's contribution was one of the mile stone in the exposure of Christianity in India. Curiously, the third mission to the Mughal court would keep going for just about two centuries, until 1773 (Maclagan, 1932). Xavier produces the master pieces of learning by mixing the Western ideologies with Persian writings. Father Jerome employed a language that can be represented as straight forward, direct, and simple, with plenteous application of idiomatic articulations. Badaūni (1972) specify one book of Christian doctrines but do not mention the title. He further says that Christians are quite similar to Hindus; both considered music as a part of their spirituality. From this we can conclude that Badaūni somehow wants to show that the religion of European is similar to Hindus when both the religions are radically different.

During the hold of forty-nine years, the Mughal sovereign demonstrated a liberal and fervour attitude towards religion, and the endeavours of mid-1580s to build up his contemplations in the form of the policy of *Sulh-ikul* made his rule long lasting (Rizvi, 1975). The Mughal court appears generous towards every religious sects and showed keen interest in dealing them. These schemes also included the Persian version of Sanskrit texts such as the *Mahabharata*, and others (Truschke, 2016). But the spirit that Mughals revealed for Christian missionaries is unique in itself. His reverence for Christianity is furthermore apparent in one of the most marvellous structures of Fatehpur Sikri, the *Buland Darwaza*, in 1570s. This Gate of

Magnificence is brightened with a few Quranic inscriptions which read as: “Jesus Son of Mary said: The world is a bridge pass over it, but builds no houses on it. He who hopes for an hour may hope for eternity. The words endure but an hour. Spend it in prayer, for the rest is unseen” (Raza, 1992:248). Simultaneously, the expression showed the divine devotion of Akbar towards Jesus. It may presumably right to say the inclination towards Christianity is somewhere also exists due to the description in Quran. In a symbolic sense, Akbar was manufacturer of secular notions that totally dependent on the will of a concerned person. Thus, Mughal state became an icon of secular norms of numerous identities irrespective of caste and religion.

The above discussed facts shows that Akbar and his way to ‘know the truth’ of every religion and the way in which he expressed the sacred and profane of every sect is admirable. However, the efforts of missionaries resulted in granting permission from the king to spread Christianity among the natives and with the help of Father Corsi, the mission was initiated and many conversions took place. But at the same time many peoples were against the Portuguese and did not like the Akbar’s favour for the Jesuits. For instance the viceroy Qulij Khan in Gujarat did not like Portuguese and thus his religion. In this way, the Jesuits remained at the Mughal court till the last years of Akbar’s life. It was a subject of controversy among the historians whether Akbar died as muslim or Christian. But Jahangir in his memoirs asserted that on his death-bed, Akabr repeated the *Kalimat-ush- Shahadat*, and he ordered Sadrjahan to repeat SuraYasin, so that he might be enabled to render up his soul with as little struggle as possible (Jahangir, 1863-4). As the emperor did not accept the concept of *injl* and the Jesuits’s hope became faint. As a ‘secular monarch’ he always displayed the extreme admiration and religious fervour towards the Christianity and even participated in the festive of the Christians such as - Christmas crib (Monserrate, 1922). Even the *shast* resembled the crucifix. He [Akbar] also appreciated the system of monogamy in their faith, ‘Since you reckon the reverencing of women as part of your religion, and allow not more than one wife to a man, it would not be wonderful if such fidelity and life-sacrifice was found among your women’ (Fazl, 1873-87:314). As the Father’s hope of the conversion of the emperor was failed, then the Jesuits planned a

proselytising mission in the capital. The missionaries of the first Jesuit mission were not enough capable of performing evangelizing activities of the masses. They remain within the court circle. The third mission Jesuits Father Pinheiro and Jeronimo Xavier made the mass conversion in a logical approach.¹ The missionaries started street preaching but the most eye-catching device is the celebration of ceremonies. They [Jesuits] performed their festive publicly. Badauni also described the way of preaching adopted by the Jesuits:

“And beating of gong after the manner of the Christian and exhibition of the form of one Person of the Trinity, and Cunabula which is the way keeping festival and other such childish games became of daily occurrence.”(Badauni,1865-9:364).

Not only had this monarch given the *farman* to construct churches in 1603 in the provinces of Agra, Lahore, Bombay and Thatta but also granted the liberty to preach Christianity in his domain. Father Felix informed about the *farman* issued for the construction of churches in Cambay (Felix,1916). Moreover, the emperor gave the allowances for the maintenance of the churches that was continued by Jahangir.

Conclusion

To sum up, the coming of the Jesuits to Mughal Court is of immense historical importance as they served as the first step in making the ground for the future endeavour of Europeans. It is the intellectual cords of Jesuits that club up with the ‘quest of curiosity’ and liberal approach of the emperor Akbar for learning something ‘novel’. From our analyses, we can say that Christianity imprinted his sway over the whole Mughal society that also appeared due to some sort of interconnection and inter linkage between Islam and Christianity. To the Jesuit missionaries, Akbar was at first an inspiration, then a puzzle and eventually an unpleasant disenchantment. However, the Jesuits were cordially greeted by the emperor every time but their high hopes of Akbar’s conversion had to face bitter consequences. But the motives of spread of Christianity among the common masses seems successful to some extent. Many conversions took place. Lastly it may be right to state that Akbar was a man of analytical mind. As a monarch he was capable enough to fulfill his inner yearnings as a man to the implementation of the policies as

that of monarch. He created a secular atmosphere that makes possible to breathe and live freely not for Indians but also for Europeans. In this way, the exposure of Jesuits initiated by Akbar continued in the 18th century and presently Christians enjoyed a good space in India.

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Plate: 3.1 Rudolf Acquaviva and another Jesuit debating with Muslim Divines Before Akbar *Akbarnāmah*¹

¹J.V.S Wilkinson, *The Library of Chester Beatty*, pl. 36.



Plate 3.2: The adoration of Mary from *Mir'āt al Quds*²

²<https://images.app.goo.gl/wvBsoFG2ydHzPVq56>. Accessed on 12 april 2017.