

## **Emperor Jahangir's Policy on Religious Tolerance (1605-1627)**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*This research article is an endeavor to highlight the prominent aspects of the Mughal emperor Jahangir's policy of religious tolerance towards the non-Muslim subject during his reign (1605-1627). During this period, the number of European travellers began to increase in India. They were from different European countries and belonged to different fields of life. Narratives of these travellers give enough information about the religious policy of Jahangir's period. European travellers' accounts and contemporary primary sources are used to give a comprehensive idea of Jahangir's policy of religious tolerance. Jahangir's respect for Hindu saints and dealing with Sikh Guru are also the part of this article. Jahangir was also interested in Christianity, so the Jesuits' activities in his court and their influence upon him are also discussed in this research article.*

**Key Words:** European Travellers, India, Jesuits, Mughal, Religion, Tolerance.

### **Introduction**

Nur-ud-Din Jahangir's enthronement at Agra took place on 3<sup>rd</sup> November, 1605, a week after his father's death (Smith, 1988). He assumed the style of Nur-ud-din Muhammad Jahangir Padshah Ghazi, the first name meaning 'light of the faith' and the third 'world-seizer'. He inherited Akbar's liberal policy and tried to follow it (Sharma, 1975). One aspect to which adequate attention has not been paid is his religious policy. This received only limited attention in Beni Prasad's biography of the emperor, (Prasad, 1962) and the chapter in S.R Sharma's work, *Religious policy of the Mughal Emperors* has obviously a case to argue, namely that the Muslim reaction to Akbar's liberal policy led Jahangir to make departures from it (Sharma, 1975).

One major argument for a change in Jahangir's religious policy has been linked to the accession crisis. It has been said that Jahangir in order to obtain the throne placated the Muslim nobility by offering, through Shaikh Farid Bukhari, a leading Indian Muslim noble and the Mir Bakhshi to reverse or modify his father's policy of tolerance and give up the *Din-i-Illahi* allegedly established by Akbar (Prasad, 1962) (Tripathi, 1963) (Yasin, 1958). The orthodox seems to have greater faith in Jahangir than in his father. He was characterized as being less favourably

inclined to the Hindus and the Muslims in general were asked to make persistent efforts to wean him from the customs and ceremonies of the Hindus (Sharma, 1975). But this view has already been contested (Habib, 1960). In actual fact, there is no contemporary evidence to this effect, except that of the Jesuit fathers, who reported that though up to his accession, Jahangir 'had been looked upon almost as a Christian', he had now 'sworn another to the Moors to uphold the law of Mafamede'. As evidence of this, they cited three acts: (a) Orders for cleansing of mosques; (b) restoration of Muslim fasts and prayers; and (c) the assumption of the title Nuruddin Muhammad Jahangir, which they interpreted to mean 'The splendour of the Law of Mafamede, Conqueror of the World' (Guerreiro, 1930).

Jahangir himself has written very clearly about his title. "It stuck me that the work of sovereigns is World-seizing (Jahangiri). I should style myself Jahangir and since my accession took place at the rising of the (holy) presence of the Great Luminary (the sun) and the illumination of the world (by its rays), I took the title Nuruddin; and since I had also heard in the days of my prince-hood from the Indian sages that after the expiry of the reign of Jalaluddin Akbar Padshah, a person named Nurduddin would become the manager of the affairs of the Empire, this too was in my mind. So I took the style and title of Nuruddin Jahangir" (Rogers, 2015).

It can be seen that Jahangir here omits the name Muhammad altogether from the titles and styles of both his father and himself and the two reasons he gives for the title Nuruddin are both unconnected with Islam. Indeed, the first clearly affirms his respect for the sun is an important feature of Akbar's religious beliefs- and the second exhibits an anxiety to have a title similar in meaning to his father's *Nur* (light, illumination) to follow *Jalal* (splendour, glory); a suggestion moreover that he ascribes not to Muslim theologians, but to Indian sages which rather hints at Hindu astrologers and the likes (Ali, 2006). Thus the Jesuits were as wrong in seeing in it an assurance to Muslim theologians as they were in believing that Jahangir has previously been on the point of becoming Christian (Ali, 2006). In fact Jahangir had not the least intention of disavowing his father's religious beliefs and policies. It is not only indicated by the enthusiastic way in which he praises them in his memoirs, but also by his public decision to continue with what is now popularly, but inaccurately, known as *Din-i-Illahi* (Ali, 2006).

Jahangir continued with some exception to his father's practice of allowing non-Muslims to build public places of worship. His friend, Bir Singh Bundela, built a magnificent temple at Muttra and he raised another magnificent place of public worship in his own state as well (Sharma, 1975). More than seventy new temples were built in Benares alone towards the end of his reign. They were however not yet completed when Jahangir died (Lahori, 1875). He allowed the Christian Fathers to open a church at Ahmadabad in 1620 and another at Hooghly. At Lahore and Agra Christian public cemeteries were allowed to be set up (Felix, 1916). But when he made war on the Hindus and Christians, these considerations were sometimes withdrawn. When Mewar was invaded, many temples were demolished by the invading Mughal army. When he was at war with the

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Portuguese, the church at Agra was closed and the churches elsewhere also suffered similar indignities (Foster, 1978). These exceptions apart, Jahangir usually followed the path shown by his father. It is interesting to note that some of the Hindu shrines of Knagra and Muttra continued to attract a large number of Muslim pilgrims besides their Hindu votaries (Rogers, 2015).

Jahangir also continued to allow as Akbar had done, Hindu pilgrims to visit, without hindrance to their holy places. Coryat estimated the number of annual pilgrims to Hardwar in Jahangir's reign at 400,000. Roe was prepared to take it even to half a million visitors (Roe, 1899). In some places at least certain days of Hindu fasts were observed as public holidays when no buying or selling-even foodstuffs was allowed. Jahangir followed the footsteps of his father in the matter of abolition of the *Jiziya* and the pilgrimage tax and opening highest public services to the non-Muslims (Srivastva, 1979).

Jahangir continued and extended Akbar's practice of gifts and grants of Brahmins and temples. In his first regnal year (1605-1606AD) while marching against Khusrau, he gave large amounts of money to Sheikh Fazlullah and Raja Dhiradhar to distribute among the *faqirs* (needy Muslim religious men) and Brahmins (Rogers, 2015). In 1621, Jahangir diverged from his way to visit Hardwar, one of the established important places of worship of the Hindus, where Brahmins and recluses retire in lonely places to worship God in their own way. There he distributed gifts in cash and kind to each of them according to their deserts (Rogers, 2015). The documents in possession of the Vrindavan temples of the Chaitanya sect show how Jahangir went on adding to the grants of both the temples and their votaries. He converted Todar Mal's temporary grant of 89 *bighas* 9 *biswas* to Madan Mohan temple into permanent grant in 1613. He added at least two more temples to the list of temple recipients in Akbar's *farman* of 1598, giving ten and fifteen *bighas* (1613 and 1614). During the period 1612-1615, he made at least five new grants to Chaitanya- divines, aggregating 121 *bighas* (Mukherjee & Habib, 1988).

The same policy was reflected in Jahangir's continuing the same access of non-Muslims to mansabs in the Mughal imperial service. Out of a total of 172 known holders of high mansabs in 1621, 30 or 17.4 per cent were Rajputs and other Hindus; this was virtually the same proportion as in 1595 when out of 123 holders of high mansabs, 17.9 per cent were Hindus (Ali, 1985).

It is evident that the open celebration of Hindu religious customs and festivals was continued just as in Akbar's time. The cultural contact between Hindus and Muslims sought to be established by Akbar through participation in Hindu festivals and Persian translations of Hindu books continued. Jahangir's association with Jadrup Gosain continued Akbar's traditions of bringing together the learned of all religions (Rogers, 2015). Guerreiro tells us that on his accession Jahangir restored the fairs and festivals of the Muslims (Payne, 1930). Pelsaert gives an account of the celebration of the Muharram. In 13<sup>th</sup> year of its reign, Jahangir kept the fast of Ramzan and in the evening he visited all the local *Sheikhs* and *Saiyids*

to break fast with them. In the 17<sup>th</sup> year, he celebrated *Rakhi* festival and called it Nighadasht (Rogers, 2015). He ordered the Hindu amirs and the head of the officers should fasten *Rakhis* on their arms (Rogers, 2015). He also participated in *Vasant* and *Dasehra* festivals. He met the yogis on the night of the *Shivaratri* in his eleventh year, when he was staying the night at Sangor, renamed by him Kamalpur in Bengal (Rogers, 2015). *Dasehra* was celebrated by the emperor by holding reviews of troops and elephants (Rogers, 2015). The Christians were publicly allowed to celebrate the Easter, the Christmas, and other festivals (Payne, 1930). Thus there was no restrictions whatsoever on the public celebration of religious festivals. Even Jesuits were given 50 rupees per month as an allowance and 30 rupees for the help of poor and needy Christians (Payne, 1930).

Some of the ceremonies introduced by Akbar to increase the regnal splendour of his court continued. The New Year was celebrated as of old (Rogers, 2015) and the festival of *Nuroz* was celebrated for many days (Foster, 1978). Weighing of the emperor continued (Rogers, 2015). Jahangir had himself weighed during an eclipse in order to ward off evil (Rogers, 2015). When he was told that some evil was likely to befall Prince Khurram, he had him weighed as a protective measure (Rogers, 2015). Employment of Hindu astrologers for fixing auspicious hours for most things continued and Muslim nobles took up the fashion and kept Hindu astrologers attached to them (Pelsaert, 1925).

Except for forcible sati, the Hindus were to be left free to follow their beliefs and customs. The author of the *Dabistan-i-Mazahib* goes further and tells us that Jahangir even appointed a judicial authority to deal with disputes among Hindus. Sri Kant of Kashmir, appointed to this post, says the author, was a scholar of repute in all the branches of Indian learning (*shastra*), *smriti* (law), *kavi* (poet), *tark* (dialectics), *vaidya* (medicine) *gyotish* (astrology), *patanjali* (breath-control) and *vedant* (pantheism). His Majesty Nuruddin Muhammad Jahanigir appointed Sri Kant to the office of Qazi (judge) of the Hindus so that they might be at ease and be in no need to seek favour from a Muslim, as it has been discussed in the Persian book titled ‘Dabistan –e-Mazahib’.

In allowing Hindu practices, Jahangir even imposed bans on cow slaughter, which was distinct from, and in addition to the prohibition of animal slaughter on certain days. There was a ban on cow slaughter (presumably in the Punjab) which Akbar had imposed. Jahangir continued this for he continued his father’s ways (*suluk*) in the world of religion and made no difference of any degree in that path. Shahjahan, however, rescinded the ban (Ali, 2006). The ban was in force also in parts of Gujarat, for the English at Surat could not be allowed to buy ‘bullocks and kine’ for meat in 1614 since ‘the king had granted his *firman* to the Banians for a mightie summe yearly to save their lives’ (Purchas, 1906). The ban seems to have been enforced more strictly in 1622 when Raja Bikramajit was sent by Shahjahan to govern Gujarat on his behalf. Pietro della Valle found the ban in force at Cambay in 1623 (Grey, 1892).

To some extent, Jahangir continued practice of his father of holding religious discussions with the followers of different faiths. Guerreiro speaks of his

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discussing religious questions with the Jesuits in 1607 (Payne, 1930) but in this case, unlike Akbar's discussions in the *Ibadat Khana*, it was the king alone who sat listening to the discourse of the Fathers on Christianity. A mansabdar or two and the king's reader are said to have taken much part in discussion. The king would now and then try to bring his Muslim courtiers in to the circle of conversation but it was usually only the king listening to the Jesuits. Jahangir saw the famous Muslim saint Mian Mir, at Lahore in order to benefit by his discourses (Rogers, 2015).

Jahangir had however, distinct views on matters of religion and these being largely similar to those of Akbar, did not fit in with popular Hinduism. Like Akbar, he was critical of the theory of incarnation (*hulul*) and of image-worship. Describing a discussion with *Pandits* (Hindu sages), in conformity with his father's custom, he argued that God, who is infinite, cannot be limited to particular space 'length, width and depth', of physical bodies; nor, if His presence is seen as that of divine light, can it be made specific to just ten bodies (presumably, Vishnu's incarnations); nor can this be the exposure of divine attributes in some frames only, for miraculous powers have been possessed by men in every religion. The Brahmans responded that they held them to be divine incarnations so that meditating on them they could reach God. Jahangir could not, however, agree that such bodies and images could assist in the devotee's union with God (Rogers, 2015).

Jahangir continued Akbar's work of bringing the learned of the two communities together by having translations of Hindu sacred books made under his patronage. Two Persian renderings in verse of the *Ramayana* were made during his reign. Girdhar Das, a Kaisith of Delhi, rendered Valmiki's *Ramayana* in to verse, called it *Ram Nama* and dedicated it to Jahangir. Jahangir asked Sayid Muhammad to prepare a plain, unvarnished Persian translation of the Quran and send it to the court by his son Jalal-ud-Din (Rogers, 2015). Persian and Arabic translations of the Bible were also presented to Jahangir by the Jesuit Fathers (Payne, 1930).

Jahangir made war on certain social evils. The public sale of intoxicants, *bhang* and wine was forbidden (Rogers, 2015). No one was allowed to drink wine without permission and Roe records some cases where certain nobles were punished for drinking (Roe, 1899). Herein Jahangir reversed Akbar's practices of allowing the sale of wine for medical purposes and in moderation, and confirmed to the Muslim law by prohibiting public sale. But he was a hard drinker himself, and it is difficult to say whether he was any more successful in dealing with the problem than his father had been. The fact that the order prohibiting public sale was issued twice, immediately after his coronation and in the fourth year, proves that at any rate, the first order might have remained ineffective for some reason (Sharma, 1975). The castration of children in Bengal was also forbidden. He continued his father's disregard of Hindu religious sentiments by prohibiting sati without permission. The burning of child widows, whose marriage had not been

consummated, was ordinarily prohibited, though special permission could be granted by the governors (Foster, 1978). In other cases as well, permission had to be obtained and is naturally prevented unwilling Satis. At Agra, the emperor himself decided all these cases (Foster, 1978).

Jahangir's relations with Sikhs were not cordial. The Sikhs incurred his displeasure because *Guru Arjun*, the fifth Sikh *Guru*, had blessed the rebel prince Khusru. It was when Khusru was fleeing before his father, and in dire distress, he had asked the Sikh *Guru Arjun*, at Tara-Taran for assistance. The holy man, it is said, merely by compassion gave the fugitive 5000 rupees. When the report came before the emperor Jahangir, he summoned the *Guru* and sentenced him to capital punishment. On the intercession of some influential Hindus, the capital punishment was commuted into fine of 200000 rupees, but *Guru Arjun* refused to pay the fine and was therefore, imprisoned. He died in prison as a result of torture (June 1606) (Smith, 1988). Chandu Lal of Lahore, who had stood surety for payment was also put to death. Thereafter, the emperor refrained from interfering with the Sikhs. His action against *Guru Arjun* was prompted by political consideration. Jahangir wrote in his diary that Arjun was converting Muslims to his religion and therefore, he was anxious to "close the shop" of the Sikh *Guru* (Rogers, 2015).

There is then the equally contemporary account of the Jesuits accompanying the Court. They attribute the action against *Guru Arjun* solely to the circumstance that when Khusrau was fleeing to Lahore (Payne, 1930).

The *Guru* congratulated him and placed his tiara (*sic*) on his head. The *Guru* was apprehended, and upon the intercession of 'certain Gentiles', a fine of 'a hundred thousand crusadoes' (Rs. 250,000) was imposed on him. For this a 'wealthy Gentile' became his surety. The *Guru*, however, declined to pay it; failing which the unnamed surety proceeded to seize his worldly possessions including furniture and cloths. When this proved insufficient, the *guru* was subjected to every kind of ill usage to force him to produce the money. At last, the poor man died, overcome by the miseries imposed upon him by those who had formerly paid him reverence. Failing to secure the amount the surety himself had to face confiscation of his own possessions and imprisonment, during which he died.

From this independent evidence, it is surely clear that Jahangir's action against *Guru Arjun* had as its cause political despotism, not religions persecution, and that Jahangir ordered the imposition of a heavy fine on *Guru Arjun* and not his execution. This view is also supported by English traveller Terry. He writes about the reign of Jahangir that "in India every man has the liberty to preach his own religion freely" (Foster, 1978).

The emperor's relations with the jains proved to be far from satisfactory. The Jains offended him because Man Singh Suri, leader of a sect among them had

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advised Raja Rai Singh of Bikaner to support Khusru against Jahangir. When he visited Gujrat in the twelfth year of his reign, he accused the Jains having built temples and made them centers of disturbance (Srivastva, 1979). Their religious leaders were accused of immoral practices (probably of going about naked). They were generally believed to be a troublesome class of Hindus (Sharma, 1975).

So Jahangir expelled all the Jains from the imperial territories in 1617 (Rogers, 2015). Dr. Beni Prasad holds that the order was later on withdrawn (Prasad, 1962). The Jain tradition also records that order of Jain's expulsion was withdrawn some time during his reign. Dr. A.L. Srivastava observes that the persecution of the Jains was partly due to political and partly to religious considerations (Srivastva, 1979).

Jahangir's relations with the Jesuits were very friendly since his early youth. As a prince he had shown even greater kindness to the Jesuits than Akbar himself and his confidences to Father Xavier led them to hope that "God would one day work in him a great miracle" (Jarric, 1926, p.183). After his reconciliation with Akbar, his intercourse with the Fathers became more open and even more intimate. They gave him sacred images and paintings. And seeing the inadequacy of the church at Agra, he persuaded his father to allow another to be built and himself subscribed a thousand crowns for the commencement of the work (Jarric, 1926). It is no matter of wonder, therefore that when he came to the throne in 1605, the hopes of the Jesuits ran high (Payne, 1930). When he came to Lahore in 1606 after defeating his son Khusru, the Fathers met him outside the city and were favourably treated (Maclagan, 1932). In the following year (1606) when the fathers exhibited a crib in Lahore church on the following Christmas, he sent them several candles of fine wax (Payne, 1930). In Agra church, the picture of Jahangir was placed at his own request, so that the fathers remember him when they made their prayers to God. Provision was made for a church at Ahmadabad and later on for a cemetery at Lahore (Felix, 1916).

The Fathers were granted generous allowances, ten rupees a day being given to Father Xavier and small sums to the others (Foster, 1978). Fathers were given comfortable houses for their residence (Foster, 1978). Jahangir allowed Jesuit Fathers to convert people to Christianity (Foster, 1978). In 1607, many people were baptised (Payne, 1930). In royal palace, there were many Christian pictures and these were the pictures of Jesus and the Virgin Mary (Foster, 1978). Jahangir used the seal with bearing representations of Christ and the Virgin for official documents. Finch, the contemporary English traveller states that Jahangir affirmed before all his nobles that Christianity was the soundest faith (Foster, 1978). Jahangir took the extra ordinary step of ordering, or allowing his nephews, sons of his deceased brother Danial to be instructed in the Christian religion by Father Corsi and then publically baptized by Father Xavier (Roe, 1899). Whatever view may be held regarding the object which Jahangir had in view the incident itself was remarkable one (Maclagan, 1932). The English traveller Hawkins who was

then in Agra put aside his Protestant prepossessions during this ceremony (Maclagan, 1932).

In 1607, church processions with full Catholic ceremonial were allowed to parade the street (Payne, 1930). Christians were very well treated in India as compare to any other Muslim country of the world and were allowed to worship freely in their churches (Foster, 1978). Jahangir had great taste for Christian pictures and was aware of their religious background (Payne, 1930). Thomas Roe writes that “He speaks respectively of our Saviour” (Foster, 1978,p.331). During the latter years of Jahangir, the Jesuit mission was fully reinstated in the favour of the sovereign writing. In 1623, the superior of the mission speaks of his continued kindness to the Fathers and recounts several incidents indicating his reverence for the Christian faith. We are told for instance how he rebuked an Armenian for not wearing the cross, and how he upbraided a nobleman, who spoke of Christ as “Isa” or “Jesus” instead of using the phrase “Hazrat Isa” or the “Lord Jesus” (Maclagan, 1932).

The account of European travellers and Christian missionaries at Jahangir’s court throw a good deal of doubt on Jahangir’s Islam. The Jesuits unaccustomed to religious liberty as they had seen in Europe, seem to have been as much dazzled by the toleration granted by Jahangir as they had observed under Akbar. To them, if a man believed in the truth of religion, he could only prove it by persecuting the non-believers. If Jahangir listened to their statements of the merits of the Christian religion, he lost caste among Muslims (Sharma, 1975). There is no trustworthy evidence to bear out the fantastic suggestion that Jahangir either left Islam or intended ever to leave it.

In the light of Jesuits and European travellers’ accounts, we can say that Jahangir ordinarily continued Akbar’s policy of toleration. He experimented in the simultaneous maintenance of several religions by the state. He did not, in most cases, make any distinction between Muslims and non-Muslims in public employment. He placed no restrictions except in the case of the Jains, on the public celebration of religious fairs and festivals (Sharma, 1975). His actual approach to Hindus and Hinduism was fairly closely in line with that of his father. For all this Jahangir seems to deserve far more credit than has usually been assigned to him by historians.

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