

Religious Policy of Emperor Shahjahan (1627-1658AD)

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ABSTRACT

This research article explores the features of the Mughal Emperor Shahjahan's religious policy. With the accession of Shahjahan, the Mughal Empire entered upon a new phase because he was not liberal as his father, Emperor Jahangir and grandfather, Emperor Akbar were but the religious tolerance was still the state policy of the government. The influence of Jesuits declined during his period but a number of European travellers have given a picturesque description of fairs, festivals and ceremonies of Shahjahan's Court. Dara Shikoh's friendly relation with Jesuits and his interests in Christianity has also been discussed in this article.

Key Words: Shahjahan, Jahangir, Akbar, Dara Shikoh, India, Jesuits, Mughal, Religion, European Travellers.

Introduction

With the accession of Shahjahan, the Mughal Empire entered upon a new phase. As compared to Akbar, who was liberal in his religious views and Jahangir, who was indifferent to nice questions of theology, Shahjahan was an orthodox Muslim. Born of a *Rajput* mother and to a father whose mother was also a *Rajput* princess, Shahjahan does not seem to be much influenced by these factors. He was thirty-six at the time of his accession and thus old enough to chalk out a policy for himself (Sharma, 1975). Shahjahan did take some pride in calling himself a king of Islam. But he continued the tolerant policy of his grandfather Akbar and father Jahangir in the matters of religion towards his subjects (Ali, 2006). Unlike his father and grandfather, he married no Hindu princess, and thus that mellowing influence was lacking in his harem (Sharma, 1975).

On his accession, the court ceremonies attracted his attention first. The mode of salutation in the court by *Sajdah* had been common, though not compulsory, under Akbar. Under Jahangir the religious officers, the *Qazis*, the *Mir Adals* and *Sadar* were exempt from paying respects to the emperor in that style. *Sajdah* was abolished forthwith as it involved prostration which according to the Islamic traditions is due to God alone (Lahauri, 1964a). The *Zaminbos* (Kissing the ground) was introduced instead of *Sajdah*, but it was also abolished and replaced by *Chahar Taslim* according to which the person had to bow, touch his forehead, eyes and arms four times (Lahauri, 1964a; Manucci, 1908a). The *Chahar Taslim*

remained the court ceremony of salutation, but an exception was made in favor of the theologians of various degree. They were exempted from *Chahar Taslim* and were to salute the emperor by using the common Muslim style of 'wishing peace' (Lahauri, 1964a).

During Shahjahan's reign, court ceremonial breathed more of the Islamic spirit because of his attachment to Islam. Islamic festivals were celebrated with more vigor. All Muslim feasts such as *Eid*, *Shaban*, *Rajab*, *Rabi-ul-Awwal*, *Muharram*, and *Shab-e-Barat* were observed by him (Lahauri, 1964a; Manucci, 1908a). Gifts of money were distributed to the *ulema* and *sufis* assembled there. An amount of seventy thousand rupees per annum was set apart for distribution in charities; an amount of rupees ten thousand was also distributed during the months of *Muharram*, *Rajab*, *Shaban* and *Rabi-ul-Awwal* (Lahauri, 1964a; Manucci, 1908a). These festivals were court festivals, Hindus and Muslims alike attended them, made presents to the emperor who, in his turn, gave gifts to the *Amirs*. The *Eids* and *Shab-e-Barats* were occasions of great rejoicing.

A number of European travellers during the period under review have given a picturesque description of fairs and festivals celebrated by different sections of people. There were social, religious, seasonal and regional festivals, and some of them were jointly celebrated by all the communities like his predecessors. Shahjahan also took keen interest in the fairs and festivals of his people.

Both Mandelslo and Thevenot write that an important festival was that of *Shab-e-Barat* (the night of record) which fell on the 14th day of the month of *Shabhan*. Thevenot witnessed the feast of *Shab-e-Barat* in Surat. He notes that the Muslim believed that on the night the angel examines the departed souls and recorded the good and bad deeds they had done in their life time. The Muslims on this occasion prayed, gave alms and offered presents to one another. They ended the festival by burning lights and kindling bonfires in the streets and public places and exploded great many fire-works (Surendranath, Thévenot, & Gemelli Careri, 1949). Mandelslo's account is corroborated by Thevenot who had himself witnessed these celebrations (Commissariat, 1931). Contemporary Persian Chronicler Abdul Hamid Lahuri states that Shahjahan was very particular about this festival and observed it regularly with great pomp and show (Lahauri, 1964b).

Peter Mundy, Mandelslo, Fryer and Norris write that the *Muharram* was one of the most important festivals of the Muslims, particularly the *Shias*. Peter Mundy described about it in detail. However, he has not given an accurate description of *Muharram*; he claims to have witnessed the ceremony at Agra. Regarding its background, Mandelslo rightly notes, "The Muslim Month of mourning called *Muharram* is the anniversary of Imam Hussain whose death at *Karbala* is one of the most tragic events in the history of Islam" (Commissariat, 1931; Fryer, 1912b; Mundy, 1914a; Norris, 1959).

The contemporary evidences of Bernier, Manucci, Fryer, Ovington and Norris show that *Eid-ul-Fitr* or the festival of breaking the fast, also known as *Eid-ul-Saghir* or the minor feast began on the eve of *Shawal* and continued for two days. This day of rejoicing came after the long drawn out fast of *Ramzan*, and was

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therefore particularly welcomed (Bernier, 1891; Fryer, 1912b; Manucci, 1908a; Norris, 1959). According to Fryer, during the Mughal age the sight of the new moon which preceded the *Eid-ul-Fitr* was proclaimed by firing of guns and blowing of trumpets. Fryer further affirms that even parsimonious Aurangzeb used to celebrate this festival with great enthusiasm (Fryer, 1912b). Fryer's account of this festival is the most detailed one. Bernier, Manucci, Ovington and Norris merely amplify Fryer's description without adding anything new.

Peter Mundy witnessed *Eid-ul-Zuha* festival on June 19, 1632. He calls it the feast of Goats which the Muslim observed in the memory of Abraham, when he went to sacrifice his son Issac, in whose place he found standing a goat. He describes it as the most prominent festival that fall on the 10th of *Zul-i-Hijja*, the month of pilgrimage to Mecca (Mundy, 1914b). The same views are also found in *Akbarnama* and *Tuzak-i-Jahangiri* (Fazal; Jahangir, 2001). According to Manucci, the sacrifice of a camel would be performed in his (emperor's) presence with the ceremonials. The king used to participate and preparations were made both in the capital and in the provinces well in advance. The people assembled in large numbers in the *Eidgah* at the scheduled hour. The emperor rode in procession and sometimes even took up his quarters at the *Eidgah* (Manucci, 1908b). Fryer also notes that sacrifice of a quadruped, such as a goat, a sheep or even a cow perfect in all times, made on this occasion (Fryer, 1912b). Thus the travellers present a fair picture of this festival. A few other Muslim festivals such as *Akhiri Chahar Shamba*, *Bara Wafat*, *Chehellum* and *Eid-i-Milad* were observed, but they were not important enough to attract the travellers' attention.

When Shahjahan was coroneted he had vowed to send for the Hajj pilgrimage two scholars, who would carry Indian goods for poor people in Mecca and Madina (Farooqi, 1986). An amount of fifty thousand rupees was set apart to be sent to Mecca in installment. Occasionally a royal *Mir-i-Haj* was appointed to take these offerings and serve as the leader of the pilgrims going to Mecca (Lahauri, 1964a). The imperial capital Shahjahanabad that was created by the emperor saw a daily hosting of elaborate rituals by both the emperor and the nobility. Public rituals of Islamic secular and religious life were enacted in the bazaars, public bath areas, *sarais*, gardens and mosques of the city (Richards, 1993).

In certain other matters Shahjahan continued the old practices. He sat daily in the salutation balcony and in order to make it more comfortable for his subjects to see him there, he caused roofs to be set up in the court yard below the salutation balconies in Agra, Delhi and Lahore (Lahauri, 1964a). He continued the customary annual ceremony of *Tula Dan* weighing himself against deferent commodities and giving them away-Manrique, Mandelslo, Tavernier, Bernier, Manucci, Thevonat, Careri, Fryer and Ovington note that while imitating the Hindu fashion the Mughal emperors were also weighed against certain precious metals and commodities on birthday celebrations. Manrique, who witnessed at Lahore the ceremonies connected with the anniversary of Shahjahan's birthday in July 1641. He observes that all the articles included in the final round of weighing were distributed among the poor people. After this the king returned to the throne where dish bearing

eunuchs advanced, with trays of gold filled with artificial fruits, in silver representing almonds, hazel-nuts and many other kinds and species of fruits which he distributed among the princes and nobles (Surendranath et al., 1949). This statement of Manrique is amply supported by Mandelslo, Tavernier and Thevenot (Commissariat, 1931; Surendranath et al., 1949). Manucci, Bernier and Thevenot write that after the weighing ceremony the king ascended the throne in the later part of the day and, as Thevenot opines, the king received sumptuous presents from this nobles amounting to millions of rupees (Bernier, 1891; Manucci, 1908b; Surendranath et al., 1949). Following the footprints of their predecessors, Shshjahan and Aurangzeb also held another festival on the anniversary of their coronation. Aurangzeb probably abolished the customary rejoicings on this occasion in his 21st regnal year (November, 1677) but otherwise continued to observe the festival as pointed out by J.N Sarkar (Sarkar, 1972-74).

Thevenot and Fryer give considerable details of *Nauroz*, which was originally a Persian festival. Peter Mundy gives a picturesque description of the lavish display of wealth and magnificence on this occasion. According to him, the Mughal king used to celebrate the *Nauroz* at the capital. Shahjahan used to sit on this peacock throne under a stately pavilion made from cloth of gold, specially erected for this occasion. The king was surrounded by his nobles, “all making the greatest shows of magnificence and mirth in feasting, presenting recreating, with several shows and pastimes and dancing wenches, fighting of elephants etc” (Mundy, 1914b).

The governors also imitated emperor in celebrating this festival. From his personal experience, Peter Mundy writes that Baqar Khan, the governor of Gujrat, celebrated the *Nauroz* on March 9, 1632, while he was on his way to Ahmadabad (Mundy, 1914b). Both Fryer and Thevenot record that on this occasion all persons of importance were supposed to give costly gifts to the emperor who in response offered his favors. The celebration of *Nauroz* was abolished during the reign of Aurangzeb but he merged it into the coronation festival which used to be held in the month of Ramzan (Fryer, 1912a; Surendranath et al., 1949).

Popular Hindu festivals like *Diwali* and *Holi*, enchanted a number of European travellers. Peter Mundy briefly speaks of the meaning of *Diwali*, its month of celebration and the light arrangements for Diwali night (Mundy, 1914b). But Fryer captures the true spirit of this festival in his account (Fryer, 1912a). However, both Fryer and Peter Mundy are silent about the attitude of Shahjahan and Aurangzeb towards the Hindu festivals. Peter Mundy, Mandelslo, Manucci, Hamilton and Thevenot describe the celebration of *Holi* festival at great length. Thevenot gives a pictorial description of this festival (Surendranath et al., 1949). Peter Mundy, Mandelslo, Manucci and Hamilton also describe this festival but none of them say a word about the participation of Shahjahan and Aurangzeb in this festival (Commissariat, 1931; Manucci, 1908b; Mundy, 1914b).

Shahjahan kept astrologers at court. He was a patron of painting, even of portrait painting. Many great paintings of his court are still preserved of his time. He is said to have discontinued the use of the *Ilahi* calendar, but documents of his

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reign are in existence bearing the *Ilahi* dates (Lahauri, 1964a). The *Amal-i-Salih* by Muhammad Salih Kambu almost always gives both the *Ilahi* and the *Hijri* dates. The *Badshahnama* of Lahauri frequently uses the *Ilahi* calendar.

The emperor used to make the *tika* sign on his forehead of the Hindu Rajas when they acceded to their titles. Shahjahan, though he would not discontinue it, delegated this task to his prime Minister (S. M. Khan, 1986). Music and dancing remained in fashion at the court. Manucci writes that *Kanchani* were obliged to attend the court of Shahjahan twice a week and to give their performance at a special place which the king had assigned to them (Manucci, 1908a). Manucci, Bernier, Thevenot Careri and Norris refer to the *Jashans* or social gatherings, which along with *Mina Bazars* (fancy fairs), dancing, music, storytelling formed a very important indoor diversion for Shahjahan and the persons belonging to well to do classes (Bernier, 1891; Careri & de Thévenot, 1949; Manucci, 1908b; Norris, 1959).

Both Manucci and Manrique record about the promulgation of sumptuary laws. According to Manucci, Shshjahan prohibited the public as well as private sale of wine, contrary to his father, who had only prohibited public sales. When it was discovered that giving without drink made Christians indifferent gunners, they were allowed to manufacture their own drinks (Manucci, 1908a). Regarding Shahjahan's attitude towards the prohibition of the slaughter of animals, Manrique discovered that in Bengal, the killing of animals held sacred by the Hindus was considered a crime and punishable with the amputation of a limb. Compounding for it, by paying a fine and spirit away the culprit after he had been whipped, was however possible (Manrique, 1929). It is reasonable to suppose that these prohibitions were not confined to the districts visited by Manrique but were observed elsewhere as well to respect the sentiments of Hindus.

Shahjahan did not re-impose *Jizia* but he revived the pilgrimage tax. It was a burden and an obstacle in the way of the Hindus who wanted to fulfill their religious injunctions. On the importunity of a Hindu scholar of Benares, Kavindaracarya, who led a deputation to the emperor against this re-imposition? The emperor remitted it and thus allowed his Hindu subjects religious liberty (Sharma, 1975).

Shahjahan continued in all its basic aspects the tolerant policy of his grandfather Akbar and father Jahangir. In the thirty years of his reign from 1628 to 1658, he continued to appoint and promote Rajputs to high ranks. In 1637, out of a total of 194 known holders of high mansabs, 35 or 18 per cent were Hindus; this was the same proportion as in 1621 (Ali, 2006). We find that out of 563 nobles, there were 110 Hindus in his reign (Lahauri, 1964a). Besides this, there were 175 Hindu nobles with the title of *Raja* or *Rai* in the reign of Shahjahan commanding a rank of 500 to 5000 (Zahiruaddin, 1977). We have no complete list of the grandees of Jahangir's reign, but the Dutch traveller De Laet in his work on India records that there were 439 *mansabdars*. De Laet however has not mentioned how many of the *Amir's* were Hindus (Laet, 1928). At the end of the tenth year of Shahjahan, the number of the Hindu mansabdars of 500 and above was 76 out of a

total of 419 (Lahauri, 1964a). At the end of Twentieth year, there were 97 Hindus out of a total of 453 (Lahauri, 1964c). The Hindus thus secured 21 out of 34 new creations.

In the revenue department besides the four provincial diwans ranking as commanders of 1000 or more, there were others occupying less exalted stations yet discharging equally responsible duties. Rai Sobha Chand was the diwan of Lahore in the twelfth year (Lahauri, 1964c). Rai Mukand Dar was a *Diwan-i-Tan* and *Diwani-i-Bayutat*. He served for some time as the officiating revenue minister in the twelfth year (Lahauri, 1964c). Rai Dayanat Rai, who was a commander of 1000, became the *diwan* of all the Mughal territories in the Deccan (Lahauri, 1964c). Beni Das served as the diwan of Bihar (Lahauri, 1964c). Rai Raghu Nath affiliated for some time as the imperial Finance Minister, whereas Rai Chandar Bhan was officer in charge of the *Dar-ul-Insha*, the Secretariat (Sharma, 1975). We further find that on the outbreak of the war of succession Maharaja Jaswant Singh was the premier noble of the empire (Khafi, 1925), holding the rank of commander of 6000. Thus under Shahjahan, Hindus occupied a higher status in the government. They counted among them the mightiest subject and the highest public servant, the imperial finance minister and several provincial ministers of finance, besides several military commanders of great fame. On the whole, however, one may hold that no dislodgment of Hindus from the public services seems to have taken place.

Much of the belief that Shahjahan reserved or modified the religious policy of his grandfather rests on his order of the sixth regal year (1633-34AD), in which he is said to have ordered the destruction of temples whose construction had not been completed. According to an official order, no new temples could be built or even repaired (*The Shahjahanama of Inayat Khan*, 1990). But about the demolition of temples in Kashmir in the times of Shahjahan, Bernier's account is corroborated by Abdul Hamid Lahauri (Bernier, 1891; Lahauri, 1964c).

The documents of that very period from Vrindavan show a different attitude altogether. Not only the grants of Madan Mohan temple and sister temples renewed during the period, but some local officials obstruction to the ringing of the bell at the Madam Mohan temple was condemned by an imperial *farman* of 24 November 1634AD in the most stringent terms. The worship of the deity is here described as "divine worship" (*Ibadat-i-Ilahi*), a strange slip for an emperor of Islam. The grants for the other great temple of Virndavan, the Govind-Dev temple, were not only confirmed, but management of the temple itself was handed over to the Amber rulers (Ali, 2006). Dara presented stone railing to the temple of Keshav Rai at Mathura and in 1639 Shahjahan granted 300 *bighas* for the upkeep of Maharaja Man Sing's mausoleum (Hussain). A letter written during the year 1643-44 (1053 A.H) to Jai Sing, Raja of Jaipur, conceded him full liberty to appoint the presiding priest at the temple of Bindraban built by Man Singh (Sharma, 1975). Man Singh's mother had died in Bengal and by a letter dated August 1639, Shahjahan granted two hundred *bighas* of land to be attached to her mausoleum in order to ensure its perpetual up-keep (Sharma, 1975). From these particulars it is

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clear that Shahjahan never intended even in his early years of his reign, any departure from the traditional policy of religious tolerance.

Shahjahan forbade inter marriages of Hindus and Muslims which were common in the districts of Rajauri and Bhimbar in Jammu. The Hindus of this region used to marry Muslim girls and to convert them to their faith. Shahjahan ordered that the converted Muslim girls should be restored to their fathers and the Hindus who had married them must either pay a fine or become Muslims themselves. Lahauri writes that in case of Hindus they had been actually absorbing a number of Muslim girls to Hinduism. So widespread was the practice of converting Muslim girls to Hinduism that these ordered discovered more than 4000 such women (Lahauri, 1964a, 1964c). A large number of Muslims were converted to Hinduism by the vairagis. The author of the *Dabistan-i-Mazahib* speaks of these conversions as if from his own personal knowledge. Two Muslim nobles are mentioned among these converts, Mirza Salih and Mirza Haider (Fani).

When the Sikh Guru, Hargobind, took up his residence at Kiratpur, in the Punjab he succeeded in converting a large number of Muslims some time before 1645. In the words of *Dabistan-i-Mazahib*, not a Muslim was left between the hills near Kiratpur and the frontiers of Tibet and Khotan (Fani). The Mughals conquered Kiratpur in 1645 and it is possible they might have made some efforts at reconverting the people. But the Muslim chroniclers are silent about the fate of any such attempt.

With the death of Jahangir and the accession of Shahjahan the fortunes of the Jesuits entered on a new phase. Free alike from the indifference of his father Jahangir and the fanaticism of his son Aurangzeb, Shahjahan adopted the attitude of the ordinary orthodox Muslim ruler. He had no strong friendship or dislike for either Portuguese or Christians as such (Maclagan, 1932).

The time had gone by when the Jesuits might exercise a right of access to the sovereign, and they had to be content with a certain amount of patronage from persons near the throne. The king's father-in-law Asaf Khan had been consistently favorable to them (Rev. Father Felix, 1916). Prince Dara Shikoh was a great friend of the Jesuits and particularly of Father Buzeo (Rev. Father Felix, 1916). Father Busi was sent to the mission to meet Dara known interest in scientific questions and he became very intimate with the prince, receiving from him special tokens of respect and affection. When he first went to Delhi in 1650, it was his function to revive the intercourse between the Jesuits and the court. With Dara himself he had during the visit to Delhi, two long conversations on the Christian faith and these conversations were resumed during latter visits to the capital (*Annual letter 1650. The Name of the Father deputed to Delhi in 1650 is not given in the letter, but he was almost certainly Busi*).⁶⁵ But how far he was able to incline Dara to an acceptance of the Christian faith is hard to determine (Maclagan, 1932).

The Christians themselves brought about the destruction of some of their religious privileges. The Jesuits at the Mughal court had been mixing politics with religion and they had little to complain about when on the outbreak of hostilities with the Portuguese at Hugli, Shahjahan ordered the dismantling of their church at

Agra and the destruction of their church images. He allowed them, however, the right to hold their religious ceremonies in the houses they were permitted to retain (Rev. Father Felix, 1916). In fact the Portuguese attitude was very cruel in Bengal and Arakan because they made slaves of large number of Mughal subject, and of these slaves they made Christians boasting, says Bernier, "That they made more Christians in a twelve month than all the missionaries in the Indies do in ten years" (Bernier, 1891).

The Portuguese maintained a rigid attitude towards all non-Christians in their own settlement. Augustinians, and to a lesser degree the Jesuits, exercised a powerful influence there. No mendicant was allowed in the settlement, no call to prayer was permitted, and the minor heirs of deceased man of property were enslaved and baptized (K. Khan, 1972). But Shahjahan interfered with open public worship in the Christian fusion in churches, allowing Christians, however, to hold religious ceremonies in the privacy of their own houses. Later on when the Jesuits wanted money to extend their house of Agra they received a handsome contribution from the Dutch and English resident at that place (Maclagan, 1932).

Mandelslo, Bernier and Manucci record that the artillery of Shahjahan and Aurangzeb was managed mainly by European-the Dutch, the English, the Portuguese and the French. It was of two kinds, heavy artillery and light artillery. Both Mandelslo and Bernier noticed that the Mughal had a great train of artillery but essentially inferior, as the heavy artillery was ineffective (Bernier, 1891; Commissariat, 1931; Manucci, 1908a). Having remained in charge of Dara's guns during the war of succession, Manucci observes that the Persian artillery was as efficient as the Mughal was inefficient. Although Shahjahan prohibited the public sale of wine but these Europeans were allowed to manufacture their own drink (Manucci, 1908a).

The period of Shahjahan reminds one of the time of Akbar, in that there was once again a movement to bridge the great gap between Hinduism and Islam and evolve a common language for both religions (Ali, 2006). The most celebrated spokesman of this trend was Prince Dara Shukoh, the eldest son of Shahjahan. Dara Shukoh had immense interest in religious matters from an early age, and he was an admirer of the famous Qadri mystic, Miyan Mir and a disciple of Miyan Mir's spiritual successor (*Khalifa*) Mulla Shah Badakhshi. Miyan Mir was known for his extreme friendliness with non-Muslim religious leaders; and he prescribed respect for all faiths for his disciples. Dara Shukoh's interest under his influence extended from Muslim mysticism to vedantic philosophy (Ali, 2006).

Another type of prose literature which after the reign of Akbar was revived by Dara Shikoh, was the translation of Sanskrit work into Persian. He himself translated the technical terms of Hindu Pantheism, the *Upnishads*, *Bhagwat Gita*, and *Yog Vasisht* (Saksena). His munshi Banwali Das translated *Parobodh Chandra Uday* in to Persian and named it *Gulzar-i-Hal*; and one Ibn Har Karan translated the Ramayan. Dara Shikoh wrote a life of Muslim saints, and called it *Safinat-al-Aulia* (Saksena). The period of Shahjahan's reign partially coincided with what is described as the most brilliant epoch in the development of Hindi

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literature and language. The emperor could hardly remain aloof from its influence. He spoke Hindi, was fond of Hindi music, and patronized Hindi poets. The Hindi poets who were then connected with court were Sunder Bas, Chintamani and Kawindra Acharya (Saksena).

At the intellectual level a very important creation of Shahjahan's time was the book *Dabistan-i-Mazahib*, one of the most important books ever written in India on comparative religions. Its author was not Mohsin Fani as is widely believed, but a *parsi*, who omits to name himself. The author is clearly at home in ancient Persian Arabic and even Sanskrit. He seems deliberately to have trained himself for the task and travelled widely to collect material on religions and religious sects. His book, completed sometime between 1653 and 1658AD, sets out to give an impartial and detailed account of all religions derived from their own books and followers (Ali, 2006).

Though Shahjahan was a more orthodox king than his two predecessors but his reign saw a considerable flowering of the tolerant spirit, for which the Mughal state, by its refusal to be censorious of such thought, if not by more positive support (which too came from Dara Shukoh, the crown prince), could reasonably claim credit. The European travelers' accounts also affirm Shahjahan's tolerant religious policy towards his subjects.

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