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Q2

Examine the main aspects of Akbar's religious syncretism.

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2025 · GS I · 10 marks · Indian Heritage and Culture

Indian culture will cover the salient aspects of Art Forms, literature and Architecture from ancient to modern times.

Core demand of the question

- State what Akbar's religious syncretism tried to do
- Cover sulh-i-kul, **Ibadat Khana**, abolition of jizya, Hindu marriage and Rajput alliance
- **Examine limits:** orthodoxy, later reign, and that syncretism was also statecraft

Revision summary

Sulh-i-kul meant a public peace that did not rest only on Islamic juristic privilege.

Akbar abolished jizya, married Rajput houses, and opened the **Ibadat Khana** to several faiths.

Din-i-Ilahi was a small court discipleship, not a popular religion.

Abu'l Fazl praised the experiment; Badauni condemned it.

The policy was both spiritual search and the need for a composite imperial elite.

Introduction

Akbar's religious policy was not a modern textbook of secularism. It was a **Mughal answer** to ruling a **Hindu-majority empire** with a Muslim court. Syncretism here means drawing Rajput blood, Hindu ritual, Sufi language and a personal quest into **one imperial peace**. The Persian name for that peace was **sulh-i-kul**, peace with all.

Body**Court, conscience and the Rajput house**

Akbar ended the **pilgrim tax** and, in 1564, the **jizya** on non-Muslims, which was a loud signal that the empire would not live only on a jurist's distinction between believer and protected subject. He married **Rajput princesses**, most famously from Amber, and gave their kin **mansabs** and governorships. That was theology as alliance. Hindu nobles could rise without converting. Temple grants continued even as the emperor sat in a mosque.

At Fatehpur Sikri he opened the **Ibadat Khana**, a house of debate where Sunni ulama, Shia voices, Jesuit priests such as **Aquaviva**, Hindu pandits, Jains and Zoroastrians argued. **Abu'l Fazl** in the Akbarnama and Ain-i-Akbari framed the king as a just light, not as a sectarian captain. Akbar listened to **Shaikh Mubarak** and to Sufi currents from **Ajmer**. He took part in Hindu festivals, had the Mahabharata rendered as the **Razmnama**, and allowed the Jesuit chapel in Agra. **Din-i-Ilahi** was a small imperial discipleship around the emperor, not a mass church. It borrowed sun veneration, vegetarian days and a cult of loyalty. Most nobles stayed outside it. **Birbal** is remembered inside that circle; **Badauni**, the conservative chronicler, hated the whole experiment.

What syncretism was not

Orthodox opinion never vanished. **Shaikh Ahmad Sirhindi** later spoke for a sharper Sunni line. Akbar himself used force in war; Chittor was not a seminar. Syncretism did not mean every village temple was safe from a local officer. It meant the **centre** refused to make sharia the only public law of the empire.

The examination is therefore mixed. Akbar's syncretism widened the elite, reduced a poll tax, and made Indian Islam speak to Indian gods in the same court. It was also **statecraft**: a Timurid king needed Rajput cavalry and a reputation for justice. Later Mughals did not all walk the same road. That does not erase what Akbar built at Sikri.

Flow diagram

Akbar -> Sulh-i-kul

Sulh-i-kul -> Jizya ended 1564

Sulh-i-kul -> Rajput marriage and mansab

Sulh-i-kul -> Ibadat Khana debates

Sulh-i-kul -> Din-i-Ilahi circle

Ibadat Khana debates -> Jesuit / Jain / pandit

Rajput marriage and mansab -> Amber and other houses and other houses

Conclusion

- **Akbar's syncretism was sulh-i-kul in practice:** no jizya, Rajput marriage, open debate, and a small imperial cult. It was faith and politics together. It did not convert the whole ulama, and it did not need to, in order to change the Mughal state.

Facts & figures

Jizya, 1564

Akbar abolished the poll tax on non-Muslims, a reversal later undone in Aurangzeb's reign.

Ibadat Khana

The debate hall at Fatehpur Sikri where the emperor heard Muslim, Christian, Hindu and Jain arguments.

Razmnama

The Persian court version of the Mahabharata, a cultural half of the same syncretic project.