

Faith and Mughal Artwork

The Mughals formed a powerful and diverse empire that ruled over most of the Indian subcontinent from the sixteenth to nineteenth centuries. Though Islamic in name, most of the Mughal emperors often showed specific interest in the religions and cultures of their subjects outside of Islam, making them unique compared to other Islamic rulers. I will argue that Mughal emperors, specifically Jahangir, downplayed the Islamic nature of Mughal rule with fine art; he does this by portraying himself conversing and in reverence of a Hindu, not Islamic, saint, and by respectfully and prominently portraying other non-Islamic religious and cultural figures.

Perhaps the most definitive art that displays the reverence that emperors showed for Hinduism was Jahangir's depiction of himself conversing with a Hindu saint, Gosain Jadrup (image 5). Notice that while Jahangir is dressed like an emperor, he sits in Jadrup's humble cave; both men sit on the ground, their body language not indicative of which man has more power. All in all, Jahangir's willingness to enter the cave, and speak to Jadrup as an equal, means that he has tremendous reverence for Jadrup who is after all a Hindu. This stance is confirmed by the caption, with Jahangir claiming that "association with Jadrup was a 'great privilege'" (image 5 caption). Two further implications can be drawn which crystallize the role of this painting in downplaying the emperor's Islamic identity. The first is that from the caption, we know Jahangir regarded Jadrup as a "master of Sufism" (image 5 caption). This is a very peculiar – traditionally, Sufis are Muslim, and they are known for their mysticism and alleged intimacy with God. For Jahangir to label a Hindu as a "master of Sufism" is suggesting that Jahangir considers Hindu mystics to be able to fulfill Islamic spiritual needs. This clearly indicates that Jahangir's reliance on a Hindu for spiritual needs reduces his reliance on Islam for those needs. Secondly, Jahangir's decision to commission this painting is also telling. Paintings are conceivably expensive and

significant in an era without digitized displays or printing – so by choosing to depict himself conversing with a Hindu mystic means that Jahangir considers this to be significant, and worth remembering for those who view the painting. In other words, Jahangir is eager to be seen closely associated with a Hindu. Again, this tells his subjects that Hinduism can fill at least some of Islam’s spiritual role. Barbara Metcalf agrees with this viewpoint, claiming that “...Mughals in general stand in contrast...in their lack of engagement with the ulama...legitimacy [was] derived more from...holy men...” (Metcalf 14); clearly, “holy men” do not even have to be Muslim. The Mughals readily downplayed their Islamic identity.

Another worthy work to examine is figure 3, where Jahangir is depicted to be handing a book to a (Muslim) Sufi while the Ottoman Sultan and the King of England are in attendance. The clear message is that Jahangir favors the Sufi over the Sultan or King. While this makes sense, since “emperors extended patronage to Islamic thinkers...” (Metcalf 14), and they valued spiritual legitimacy, it is revealing that Jahangir had a Christian king in his court, seemingly on good terms. Also, there is the featuring of the artist’s self-portrait – this, according to the caption, indicates “the high respect in which the painter is held.” Additionally, the painter is a Hindu. All in all, in a painting which only fit 4 other people, Jahangir chose to depict him preferring the Muslim Sufi over the Sultan, and the other two are not Muslim at all. This is a simple reminder that the Mughal emperors were fond of all sorts of religion and culture – not just Islam, diluting the effect that Islam would have had, and downplaying their Islamic identity. They believed that “all religious traditions contained elements of value” (Metcalf 15). This is in line with cultural norms – many nobles were Hindu, and many Mughal emperors patronized art and architecture that were from other faiths, notably Hinduism, even going to lengths to translate Sanskrit works

to Persian (Metcalf 15). There is no question that Islam is now one of many faiths that the Mughals respected, its status downplayed and less central in a diverse society and culture.

We have thoroughly shown that through art, the Mughals were eager to downplay their Islamic identity, embracing other faiths for spiritual guidance and learning. Their motives, however, remain less clear – was it a pragmatic approach to ruling a diverse multi-faith empire? Or was it a legitimate desire to learn? Whatever the case, the Mughals have truly redefined the meaning of an Islamic polity.

References

- [1] Metcalf, Barbara D. *“Islam in South Asia in Practice.”* 2009, pp. 1–40.,
doi:10.2307/j.ctv301gh6.9.
- [2] Image 3 from response paper prompt. *“Jahangir preferring Sufi Shaykhs over King James I of England.”*
- [3] Image 5 from response paper prompt. *“Jahangir converses with Gosain Jadrup.”*