

**A Beacon of Hope: Fatehpur Sikri and Akbar's Vision as a Symbol of
Peaceful Co-Existence for Hindus and Muslims**

An Integrated Ethnographical Analysis

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Abstract

The never-ending strife between Hindus and Muslims, which has persisted through the centuries to the present day, has been studied extensively. Although this conflict has been extensively studied, the discourse on this subject has typically focused on the irreconcilable issues between the group. This research study thus sought to explore the extent to which the celebration of Indo-Islamic syncretism, as embodied in the Mughal monument of Fatehpur Sikri, could serve as a motivating force to promote the peaceful co-existence of Hindus and Muslims. Through an adapted ethnographic approach that combined historical, contemporary, and architectural variations, consisting of a review of relevant literature and interviews of a tour guide and three domestic visitors, three themes were identified. First, it would seem that the roots of the Hindu-Muslim conflict throughout history and the continuous communal violence between the two groups today has led to their ignorance of the underlying syncretic intent and traditions of the Fatehpur Sikri. Despite the bleakness of this reality, the second theme offers a contrasting picture of hope. It illuminates how Emperor Akbar, the third Muslim Mughal emperor and the creator of the Fatehpur Sikri, presided over a golden era characterized by the peaceful co-existence of diverse religious groups. As such, his syncretic governmental policies and lifestyle hold forth the promise of Indo-Islamic syncretism in overcoming differences between ethnic groups. The third theme offers an in-depth examination of how the monument of Fatehpur Sikri serves as a palpable literal and symbolic

representation of the rich and diverse Indian heritage that unifies Hindu and Islam elements and the ultimate reminder of the possibility of peaceful co-existence between Hindus and Muslims.

Introduction

As a passionate aficionado of my Indian heritage embodied in the resplendent monuments that dot the landscape of this nation, it has been a real struggle for me to reconcile them with the never-ending conflict between the Hindu and Muslim communities. The rule of Narendra Modi's BJP party, with its provocative anti-Muslim policies and concept of Hindutva or the superiority of Hinduism, has created an environment that has fomented anti-Muslim sentiments and created a hostile, riot-ridden environment (Smith 1).

It is hard to pinpoint precisely when or why the animosity between Hindus and Muslims was first engendered. For some, it originated with the invasion of the Mughal conquerors in the 16th century, which led to the widespread imposition of Islam over the Hindu subjects (Smith 2). Given the fact that the character of the two religions, in terms of the codes of acceptable behavior and desired lifestyles, clashed with one another, it would seem that conflict was inevitable (Smith 2). It certainly didn't help that the rule of most of the emperors of the Mughal dynasty had left an imprint of oppression that created a gulf between the two groups (Smith 2). Others have attributed the aggravation of the strife between the two groups to the imperialist policy known as the "divide and rule" approach of the British who sought to exploit the pre-existing ethno-religious divisions between the two groups their colonial rule India (1857- 1947) (Sandhu 1).

In the 20th century, the irreconcilability ultimately culminated in India-Pakistan partition of 1947 with the creation of Hindu-majority India and the Muslim state of Pakistan (Smith 1) Yet despite this separation, Hindus and Muslims who constitute 79.8% and 14.2% of the population in India, respectively, continue to be mired in conflict today (Smith 1). Relationships between the communities have been constantly marred by outbreaks of

violence characterized by rampant killings and property destruction, which are condoned by biased federal and state governments that favour one group over another (Smith 1).

Against this backdrop, it would seem as though the peaceful co-existence between Hindus and Muslims is a pipe dream that cannot possibly transpire. However, what many may have forgotten is that Akbar, one of the Mughal emperors who ruled India from 1556 to 1605, had led a kingdom in which Hindus and Muslims, along with other religious groups, lived together in harmony, based on his adoption of Indo-Islamic syncretism. The Fatehpur Sikri, the capital city he built from the ground up, is the Indo-Islamic legacy that encompasses and celebrates the diverse traditions of the Indian heritage. Perhaps, in this age of strife between the Hindus and Muslims, the much-visited Fatehpur Sikri could stand as a beacon of hope and moral compass for India's leadership and its people. It is the intent of this leadership to shift the discourse on the Hindu-Muslim conflict towards this direction.

Description of Research Study

Research Aim and Research Approach

The research aim of this study was to explore the extent to which Indo-Islamic syncretism, as embodied in the Mughal monument of Fatehpur Sikri, can serve as a motivating force to promote the peaceful co-existence of Hindus and Muslims. The selection of Fatehpur Sikri for this research report is deliberate. As the legacy of Emperor Akbar who had ruled over a harmonious kingdom in which Muslims and Hindus co-existed peacefully, it is a literal symbol that what seems to be a pipe dream of peaceful co-existence was once a quotidian reality.

This research study sought to employ an integrated ethnographic approach in order to examine a socio-culturally sensitive topic from the lens of a beautiful historical monument in the hope that it offers a perspective that transcends the human fray. Derived from the field of anthropology, ethnography refers to the scientific study of humans, human behaviour and societies in the past and present (Isaac 43). Although ethnographic research conventionally involves researchers observing and/or interacting with a study's participants in their real-life

environments, an integrated ethnographic approach was adopted for the purpose of this study for several reasons, both intended and imposed.

First of all, a *historical ethnographic approach* was used to explore the real-life environment of Akbar, in the form of his policies and way of life at Fatehpur Sikri and beyond. As it was not possible for this researcher to travel back in time to Akbar's Mughal dynasty to do actual observations (much as she would have loved to), this ethnographic exploration was done through a review of literature on the Mughal dynasty during Akbar's reign (Isaac 43).

Second, a contemporary ethnographic approach pertaining to Fatehpur Sikri was used, which focused on the visitors' experience of Fatehpur Sikri and their understanding of what it stood for. This analysis not only provided a window into their temporal experience of the monument, but also offered insights into the current social realities of Indians through the lens of their perceptions of the role that this monument plays today in contemporary India.

Finally, architectural ethnography was also employed in this analysis through an examination of the characteristics of the Fatehpur Sikri. As the making of architecture demands both historical thinking and adaptation to the time-based rules and regulations that govern its construction, the analysis of the architectural patterns of the construction of these monuments provides a window into the culture from which these styles are derived (Kaijima 5). With regards to this research study, the examination of a sampling of Fatehpur Sikri's architectural features similarly offers an additional perspective into the celebration of the Indo-Islamic heritage of the exemplary era.

It is important to emphasise that my research study is centred upon the extent to which the syncretic elements embedded within the Fatehpur Sikri and the intent of its creator encapsulate the possibility of the peaceful co-existence of Hindus and Muslims. By exploring this topic through this integrated, multi-pronged ethnographic approach, my hope is to address the topic of strife between Hindus and Muslims from a positive and refreshing perspective. As such, the Fatehpur Sikri constitutes a focused centrepiece for how an Islamic ruler created an environment of religious tolerance in his kingdom among his subjects from diverse religious groups and the potential for its resurrection.

Data Collection

Data were gathered from two key sources. First, secondary research was conducted through a survey of research papers from books and peer-reviewed journals. This search covered the Mughal Dynasty including Akbar's syncretism and architecture of this era, along with the fraught history of Hindus and Muslims in India. Second, primary research was done through email and audio interviews with an experienced tour guide of Indian monuments and three domestic visitors regarding their knowledge and experience of the Fatehpur Sikri. The interview questions revolved around their perceptions of the monument in terms of the following areas:

- the role it occupies in contemporary India;
- their observations of its unique architectural features;
- awareness of its embodiment of Indo-Islamic syncretism;
- their opinion on religious identities; and
- their feelings about the monument from their lens of being Hindu/Muslim (see Interview Questions in Appendix A).

It is important to point out that the tour guide provided a reservoir of knowledge in terms of his own study of the history of the Mughal dynasty as Ph.D. degree holder on this subject and his experience of leading different groups of tourists.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was used to analyse the data. Several steps were followed. First of all, an interview done via audio WhatsApp with a visitor of the Fatehpur Sikri was transcribed. Next, multiple readings of the transcribed interview and the email interviews were done to ensure familiarity with the data. At the same time, relevant literature regarding the Hindu-Muslim conflict, the Mughal Dynasty, Indian monuments, and the architecture of the Fatehpur Sikri were also reviewed critically through the use of annotations and a reading log. Finally, the coding of the data was then performed through a critical reading of the different sets of data to identify emergent themes that were further clustered into the final themes.

Findings and Discussion

This research study revealed three significant themes that at once illuminate the entrenched nature of divide between Hindus and Muslims, as well as the promise of the original syncretic

intent and traditions of this monument. The subsequent sections will provide a detailed discussion of these three themes:

- Ignorance of the Underlying Syncretic Intent and Traditions;
- The Promise of Indo-Islamic syncretism; and
- Potential for Peaceful Co-existence.

Theme 1: Ignorance of Underlying Syncretic Intent and Traditions

Despite the fact that Akbar intended Fatehpur Sikri to be a religiously tolerant place that celebrated both Hindu and Muslim traditions, this syncretic intent appears to have escaped Indians today. Many of the domestic tourists who visited this monument were unable to recognise the underlying syncretic traditions that were meant to bind Hindus and Muslims together. In fact, Siddharth, a tour guide, highlighted the fact that many Hindus were hesitant to visit the mosque:

I travelled with a group of 20 people, mainly Hindus. Almost all of them were wary of going to the mosque, many to the fort as well. They felt, as Hindus, they should not visit a Muslim place of worship.

Siddarth's experience with this group of Hindus offers invaluable insights into why the syncretic traditions of Fatehpur Sikri had gone unnoticed. The Hindu tourists' discomfort is symptomatic of the fundamental distrust and lack of respect of traditions between Hindus and Muslims, which has been characterized by a fraught history of mutual destruction.

One contemporary example that marks the "monumental" strife between Hindus and Muslims is the Hindus' demolition of the Babri Masjid in 1992 — a mosque in Ayodhya (Islam 345). The city of Ayodhya is a city in India where Lord Rama, a Hindu god was born. Not wanting a mosque built on their holy land, based on a dubious claim, not backed by any archaeological evidence, that the mosque was built on the ruins of a temple, 200,000 adherents of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), the party of the ruling state government, destroyed the mosque (Smith 1). An investigation by the Ministry of Home Affairs of the Government of India led to the arrest of many BJP leaders for propagating the demolition of the religious site and revealed that the BJP state government not only failed to intervene on behalf of the Muslim population, but also might have planned the attacks (Smith 1).

Essentially, a ruling state government had deliberately neglected its responsibility of caring for the interests of all its constituents. This incident sparked off communal violence between Hindus and Muslims across the country over the next decade. Bombings in 1993 by Muslims targeted at Hindus in Mumbai and a long-running campaign of anti-Muslim violence in Gujarat in which around 2,000 Muslims were murdered and 100,000 forced to flee constitute only a small sampling of the atrocities committed on both sides (Smith 1).

Against this conflictual backdrop, in which the respective monuments of both ethnic groups are not protected, it is little wonder that one of the interviewees, Simran, harked back to this episode to articulate her fear for the long-term preservation of Fatehpur Sikri: “I hope those group of Hindus do not destroy the Fatehpur Sikri Fort like they did the Babri Masjid.”

Her fear for the integrity of the historical architecture of India is not unfounded. The history and beauty of monuments do not offer it protection against the ever-shifting political winds of change from pro-Muslim to pro-Hindu factions. Under the current Modi government of the BJP party, characterised by the concept of Hindutva and ethnocentrism, the syncretic nature of Indian heritage has come under siege (Smith 1). As recently as 21st May 2020, Modi commissioned Bimal Patel to redesign the essence of Delhi comprising the most prominent buildings of New Delhi such as the Rashtrapati Bhavan (house of the President) the house of the Parliament and more, which was built by Edward Luyten, a British architect, during the British Rule (Kapoor 1). What makes this commission so alarming is that India stands to lose a vital part of its syncretic heritage, as Lutyens and his fellow architects had used elements from all the architectural styles of Indian history: Hindu temples, Mughal forts, Jain and Buddhist edifices to festoon these buildings (Kapoor 1).

What these episodes illuminate is that the deep-seated historical conflict between the two religious groups has created an atmosphere of ambivalence and even resentment towards the glorification of traditional monuments of either side. For Hindus, their admiration of non-Hindu architecture, particularly the ones created during the Mughal dynasty, is often tainted by their sense of guilt of betraying their own kind, given the checkered legacy of the Mughal rule.

In fact, there is considerable literature such as Alexander Mikaberidze’s *Conflict and Conquest in the Islamic World: A Historical Encyclopedia, Volume 1* that portrayed the Mughal era (1526–1850) as a period of “Islamic loots” (271). Many Hindus believe that the

Mughals “stole” art and wealth from India. During the era of their rule, some of the Mughal rulers ran a despotic centralised state that did not allow for private land ownership and autonomous village communities. The situation was captured in the following account (1656-1668) of Francois Bernier, a respected French traveller:

...if we call to mind that the *omrahs* (nobles in court) of Hindustan cannot be proprietors of land, or enjoy an independent revenue, like the nobility of France, or of other Christian states. Their income, as I said before, consists exclusively of pensions which the king grants or takes away, according to his own will and pleasure. When deprived of this pension, they sink at once into utter insignificance, and find it impossible even to borrow the smallest sum. (qtd. in Oaten 70)

Saisha, a History major in her 20s, also elaborated on this: “The emperor thus reaped all the benefits... while the populace from the nobles to the peasants got none.”

While this negative impact of the Mughal Empire is true to a large extent, one should draw a distinction between the early rulers of the Mughal Empire whose reign ended with the rule of King Jahangir in 1627 and their successors. Essentially, the Mughal Empire shifted from an accepting and religiously tolerant environment that reached its peak during Akbar’s reign and then fell prey to the ethnocentrism of Islam in the hands of his successors.

However, the Mughals, after the rule of the Emperor Jahangir, started deviating from those of syncretism towards ethnocentrism centred on Muslims as the superior race. At this juncture, many of the syncretic aspects of the Mughal Empire began to diminish. According to Siddharth, “The reason the Mughal Empire declined was ... because they lost direction of how to keep their citizens pleased...”. There was no specific reason for the shift that has been documented. Both Shah Jahan, the third last Mughal ruler, and Aurangzeb, who came after him, did not understand the syncretic intent that was the ideology of the Mughal Empire. As an example, Aurangzeb imposed *Jizya*, a military tax on non-Muslims who were not fighting for Mughal Empire in 1679. This tax had been abolished by his great-grandfather, Akbar, due to its discrimination against Non-Muslims. Aurangzeb’s rule led to a decline in the Mughal Empire due to his pro-Muslim policies that made the Hindus feel marginalised.

The ethnocentrism of their policies was also captured in the architecture of this late phase of the Mughal era. For instance, Shah Jahan's commissioned Taj Mahal was a largely Islamic monument. One of the chief differences is the choice of construction material. Shah Jahan's choice of the marble to build the Taj Mahal is particularly significant as a political and cultural statement. It constituted a departure from the material typically used to construct most Indian monuments including the Fatehpur Sikri fort — sandstone (Ali 2).



Fig. 1a. Image of Taj Mahal by www.britannica.com from: "Taj Mahal." *Britannica*, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Taj-Mahal>. Accessed 8 June, 2020.



Fig. 1b. Image of Fatehpur Sikri by <https://www.tajmahal.gov.in> from: “Fatehpur Sikri.” Taj Mahal Gov., <https://www.tajmahal.gov.in/fatehpur-sikri.aspx>. Accessed 8 June, 2020.

The use of marble, a material commonly used by the rich, not only turned the Taj Mahal into an aristocratic construction, which heightened its estrangement from the ordinary populace, but also constituted a shift from the sandstone of the Indian heritage. As such, the Taj Mahal remains today a concrete representation of the extent to which the ethnocentrism of Shah Jahan has permeated into the Mughal architecture and the shift in the policies of the Mughal Dynasty.

Unfortunately, despite the fact that the red sandstone Fatehpur Sikri was built by an enlightened Mughal emperor with syncretic sentiments, this distinction has become blurred by the passage of time and its association with the Mughal Empire due to the negative legacy left by Aurangzeb and Shah Jahan.

In more recent decades, the irreconcilability of these two groups is no better epitomised than by the 1947 partition labelled as the most chilling and devastating event of Indian history. This episode is aptly captured in Ahmed’s statement: “The Partition of India in 1947 was... a gory consummation of a long process of mutual demonising and dehumanising by Hindu and Muslim extremists” (1). It led to the largest migration of people in history (around 15 million) and the creation of Pakistan, a predominantly Muslim state, during which 1–2 million people were brutally massacred as they were forced to flee from their homes across the border.

Yet the partition did not resolve the conflicts between these two groups: “In the post-independence era, it became a model of violent conflict resolution invoked and emulated by ethnic and religious extremists and the hawkish establishments of India and Pakistan” (Ahmed 1). Multiple wars were fought between the nations during the 20th century in 1948, 1965 and 1999 over the sovereignty of Kashmir, not to mention the 1971 conflict that resulted in the creation of Bangladesh, in lieu of East Pakistan (Ahmed 1).

The tensions between the two countries over Kashmir has been further exacerbated with the ascension of Modi’s BJP party to power. In August 2019, tension broke out between India and Pakistan over the revocation of the Article 370 and 35a of the Indian Constitution. This article removed the special status of Kashmir, meaning that the special laws made for Kashmir such as the revocation of the dual citizenship status granted to the residents of

Jammu and Kashmir, as both citizens of the state and India. Essentially, they are now only citizens of India. This law also has other implications that essentially erodes away Kashmir's autonomy from the Indian state with impingements on property rights and the scrapping of a separate flag for the state. In general, their autonomy was disrupted (Smith 1).

More recently, with the pro-Hindu BJP at the helm advocating the practice of Hindutva that aims to establish the hegemony of Hinduism over other religions (Smith 1), the divide between Hindus and Muslims has been further deepened. Hindutva is an ideology that seeks to define Indian culture in terms of Hindu values, which is fundamentally opposed to the secular India envisioned by the fathers of India's constitution (Bhat 1).

To top it off, the BJP has actively pursued anti-Muslim policies that essentially legitimise anti-Muslim sentiments. A quintessential example is the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) passed by the BJP government on 11th December 2019. This Act fast-tracks citizenship for six religious communities from India's neighbours, namely Hindus, Sikhs, Buddhist, Christians, Parsis, and Jains who arrived in India before December 31, 2014, with the sole exception of Muslims. In addressing the implications of this bill, M. Mohin Alam Bhat highlighted how it transgresses the secular founding principles of the country:

Citizenship law defines a country's political and constitutional identity. Laying down rules that determine membership in our political community only on the basis of one's religious beliefs completely violates this principle. (1)

Such a provocative measure sparked fierce protests by Muslims opposing the CAA and several episodes of violence with various vigilantes taking matters into their own hands.

Based on the discussion above, it is evident that both Hindu and Muslim communities have inflicted and suffered unimaginable violence on one other throughout Indian history. One can thus understand how the long shadow of conflict cast over them can make it difficult for Indians — Hindus and Muslims alike — to adopt an unbiased outlook towards Indian History and architecture.

In the eyes of the Hindus, the Fatehpur Sikri is purely Muslim due to its association with a Mughal emperor. How could they genuinely recognise and celebrate a monument erected by

a Mughal from a religious group that has been responsible for the loss of their fellow Hindus in the wars fought with Pakistan? How could they believe that peaceful co-existence with fellow Indian Muslims is possible?

Theme 2: The Promise of Indo-Islamic Syncretism

Yet the conceptualisation of such a possibility — peaceful co-existence between Indian Hindus and Muslims who can genuinely embrace their shared traditions — may not be as idealistic as one may think. After all, one only needs to hark back to the reign of Akbar, the Mughal emperor who ruled India from 1556 to 1605. His rule exemplifies the promise of Indo-Islamic syncretism through his implementation of policies that promoted religious tolerance lifestyles, which exceeded even those of his predecessors.

What lay at the foundation of Akbar's policy of peaceful co-existence with all his people of different religious persuasions in the 16th century was this concept of "Universal Kingship" (Elahi 17). He believed that peace was only possible in his kingdom if the different groups were at peace with one another. As such, Akbar extended his religious tolerance to the whole Empire by bringing together a synthesis of all religions known to him through the concept of *Din-I-Ilahi* (a religion that is a synthesis of Hinduism and Islam). The concept had many features, but the most prominent one was "dedication of the soul in love of God and union with God — the preserver of all" (Elahi 17). At its core, this concept bears a close resemblance to Sufism that Akbar also propagated as well. For Sufism advocated for the devotion to God, which transcended religious and caste barriers, to allow for the creation of a universal brotherhood. More than just a religion, it offered a means of establishing a socio-cultural order that allowed for the introduction of syncretism to his empire (Elahi 17).

Actively practising what he preached, Akbar created an environment that fostered religious understanding, respect and inclusion, by setting an example for others. His identification of the moral or guiding principles of the universe was derived from his dialogues with not just Muslims and Hindus, but also Christian missionaries, Zoroastrian Priests, and Hindu Sanyasis (Elahi 12). Moreover, he also actively promoted the exchange of learning between Muslims and Hindus in various ways. Akbar ordered renowned Hindu mythological texts, such as the *Mahabharat* and *Ramayan*, to be translated into Persian, so as to enrich Persian literature and increase tolerance for Hinduism amongst his kingdom (Elahi 19). In 1575, he even erected a building in the Fatehpur Sikri known as *Ibādat Khāna*, or the House of Worship, in which

regular religious discussions on various religions (Hinduism, Islam, Jainism etc.) were held on Thursday evenings, for learning purposes (Elahi 11). Furthermore, he also invited Jesuits to the Mughal courts in order to cultivate an atmosphere centred on learning and acceptance (Jarric 5).

Akbar's non-discriminatory policies could also be found in his governance. As Titus [KYC5] described, "Akbar's governmental policy [sought] a closer identification of Muslims and Hindus in one great commonwealth" (Graham 1). Akbar employed the *mansabdari* (ranks of officials) system to provide ranks to various nobles, displaying no discrimination in his appointment of Hindus as governors of various provinces. Hindus could hold vital positions such as the finance minister as well. He also appointed a judge that was neither Hindu nor Muslim to adjudicate on cases between Hindus and Muslims to ensure the least amount of bias (Elahi 18).

Furthermore, Akbar's syncretic policies also allowed for the diverse religious practices of non-Muslim religion. One distinctive feature about his rule, as opposed to his counterparts, was his permission to allow for the religious conversion of non-Muslims. Under previous Mughal rulers, many Hindus had been forced to convert to an Islamic faith. Akbar broke away from this practice by allowing Hindus to revert to their original belief systems. A direct implication of this was that practitioners of other religions and Islam could peacefully co-exist without having their religious activities monitored by the state. In fact, Akbar even participated in Hindu festivals as well and forbade the consumption of beef in his kingdom in accordance with Hinduism (Elahi 8). The full extent of Akbar's embrace of syncretism is no better exemplified than in his personal life. Many of his wives were Rajput (Hindu) princesses who were allowed to practise the religion of their choice, which included rituals and festivals . (Elahi 8).

Ultimately, although Akbar was recognised as a strong Muslim leader during his rule, he distinguished himself most of all by his support of other religions. While Mughal rule would subsequently be tainted by the legacy of his successor, Akbar's respect for the rich diversity of the Indian heritage, as encapsulated in his avant-garde vision of syncretism, remains intact in his monuments such as the Fatehpur Sikri. Its preservation as a representation of Indo-Islamic syncretism holds forth the promise that peaceful co-existence of Hindu and Muslim communities is possible.

Theme 3: Potential For Peaceful Co-existence

The exploration of an Indian monument as a symbolic representation of the potential for Indian Hindus and Muslims to co-exist would not be complete without a thorough examination of the syncretic architectural features of the Fatehpur Sikri. A concretised culmination of Akbar's vision and a city he built from the ground up, Fatehpur Sikri encompassed features that were inextricably interwoven with his philosophy of syncretism. In the remainder of this section, the syncretic characteristics of the different buildings in Fatehpur Sikri will be presented.

For a start, it is important to point out that Fatehpur Sikri comprises three key complexes dedicated to three core functions as follows:

1. *Sahn-i-Ibadat* (The Sacred Complex) that comprises religious buildings of the city such as Jami Masjid, Buland Darwaza, tomb of Shaikh Saleem Chishti, etc.



Fig. 2a. Image of Buland Darwaza by whatinindia.com from: “Buland Darwaza.” *Cultural India*, <https://www.culturalindia.net/monuments/buland-darwaza.html>. Accessed 8 June, 2020.



Fig. 2b. Image of Jama Masjid by en.wikipedia.org from: “Jama Masjid Delhi” , *Wikipedia*, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jama_Masjid,_Delhi. Accessed 8 June, 2020.

2. *Sahne-i-Khas* (The Royal Complex) that consists of Palaces, Bazaars, horse and camel stables, etc.



Fig. 3. Image of The Royal Complex by www.tripadvisor.in from: “Panch Mahal-Fatehpur Sikri, *Tripadvisor*, <https://www.tripadvisor.in/ShowUserReviews-g797802-d324678-r274260627>. Accessed 8 June, 2020.

3. *Sahn-i-Rayyat* (The Public Court) that includes Diwan-i-Aam, the imperial workshop, the Aankh Michauli, the Girls’ School, and Anoop Talao (Ali 102)

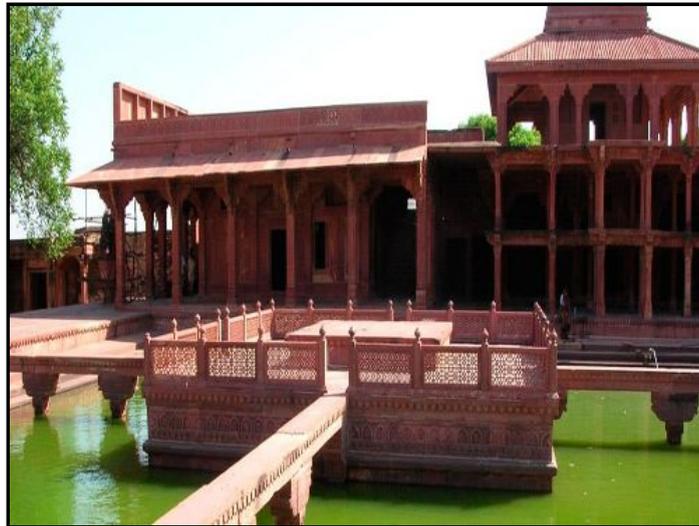


Fig. 4a. Image of The Diwan-i-Aam by www.liveindia.com from: “Diwan-i-Aam Fatehpur Sikri”, *LiveIndia*, <http://www.liveindia.com/fatehpur-sikri/diwan-i-aam.html> Accessed 8 June, 2020.

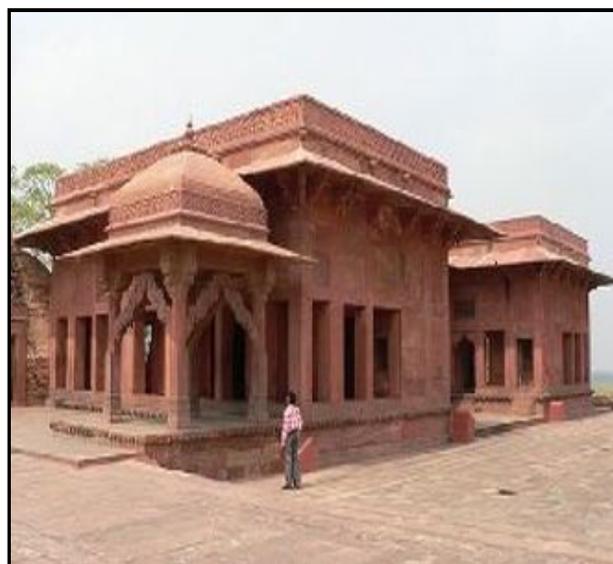


Fig. 4b. Image of The Aankh Michauli by www.indianholiday.com from: “Aankh Michauli Treasury”, *Indianholiday*, <https://www.indianholiday.com/tourist-attraction/fatehpur-sikri/monuments-in-fatehpur-sikri/ankh-micholi-treasury.html>. Accessed 8 June, 2020.



Fig. 4c. Image of The Girl’s School by commons.wikimedia.org from: “File: Girl’s School at Fatehpur Sikri.jpg”, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Girls%27_School_at_Fatehpur_Sikri.jpg. Accessed 8 June, 2020.

A close examination of a sampling of buildings reveals a fine balance of integrating both Muslim and non-Muslim styles. For instance, in recognition of the Islamic tradition, the royal buildings were built at 45 degrees to the riverbed so as to align them with the strict axis of the mosque towards *Qibla* (the direction for Muslim prayers). This element is a predominant feature in the structure of any Islamic city (Ali 102).

Furthermore, the traditionally rich and fanciful Indian style is tempered by the lightness and simplicity of Islamic style in several of its structures (Ali 101). This can be seen in the traditional Indian trabeated system, the architectural styles of various Indian Buildings.



Fig. 5. Image of the Trabeated Indian System by www.researchgate.net from : “Syncretic Architecture of Fatehpur Sikri: A Symbol of Composite Culture”, *Researchgate*, https://www.researchgate.net/figure/Stable-showing-Traditional-Indian-Trabeated-System_fig3_267627154 , Accessed 8 June, 2020.

Another distinctive Muslim architectural building of Fatehpur Sikri is *Anup Talao*, a raised platform in the centre of water with a four pathways converging to it from all sides. Its design is meant to evoke the *Mughal Charbagh* (“Four Gardens”) that symbolises paradise in Islamism (Ali 104).

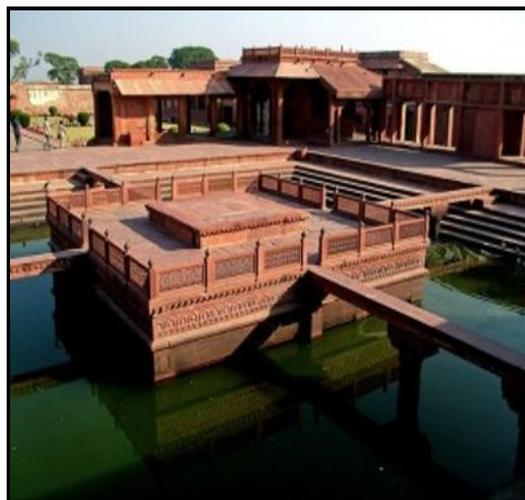


Fig. 6. Image of the Mughal Charbagh by <http://www.adaagra.in> from: Fatehpur Sikri, *adaagra*, <http://www.adaagra.in/FatehpurSikari.html> , Accessed 8 June, 2020.

Nonetheless, such a core Islamic element is ‘neutralised’ with various other features characteristic of Indian monuments. A key element is the widespread use of the red sandstone in the construction of one of the most important constructions in Islamic History. The Jama Masjid, arguably considered to be second only to Mecca, as well as the entire Sacred Complex, is built in red sandstone.

The only exception is the tomb of Sheikh Salim Chisti. This is due to the tomb being erected in a period after Akbar’s reign. During Akbar’s reign, marble was frugally used. In fact, it is even possible that Akbar had built the original tomb in sandstone, which was then rebuilt by his grandson, Shah Jahan, in marble, when the latter constructed the Taj Mahal (Ali 103). This is an example of how the latter Mughal Emperors turned their back on Akbar’s philosophy of syncretism.



Fig. 7 Image of the Tomb of Sheikh Salim Chisti by www.makemytrip.com from: Fatehpur Sikri, *makemytrip*, https://www.makemytrip.com/travel-guide/fatehpur_sikri/tomb-of-sheikh-salim-chisti-monuments.html , Accessed 8 June, 2020.

Apart from the sandstone, symbols of syncretism can also be found across these monuments as well. For instance, various Hindu motifs have been symbolically used in the buildings such as the *Padma* (lotus flower) at the apex of an arch (see fig. 8a) and *Kirtimukha* (iconography used in Hindu temples) at the base of a column (see fig. 8b). There are even Jewish features incorporated in the symbols such as *Satkona*, a six-pointed star representing Judais (see fig. 8c). Akbar even erected two Rajput statues at the gate of Fatehpur Sikri. They are all traditional crowning elements of Indian temples.



Fig. 8a. Image of the Lotus Throne by www.tripadvisor.in from: Lotus Throne, *tripadvisor*, https://www.tripadvisor.in/ShowUserReviews-g797802-d324682-r383897052-Lotus_Throne-Fatehpur_Sikri_Agra_District_Uttar_Pradesh.html ,Accessed 8 June, 2020.



Fig. 8b. Image of the Kirtimukha by en.wikipedia.org from: Kirtimukha, *Wikipedia*, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kirtimukha>, Accessed 8 June, 2020.



Fig. 8c Image of The Star of David by www.britannica.com from: Star of David, *Britannica*, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Star-of-David> , Accessed 8 June, 2020.

It is also notable that the Fatehpur Sikri was built by Indian artisans, specifically Gujarati artisans, who incorporated their own styles into their work, such as the rich decorations of Indian artifacts, thus leaving behind a cultural legacy of the region. One can see their work in the *Sultaness* (Turkish Sultana's house in the Fatehpur Sikri), which is extensively decorated from floor to ceiling with floral and figurative representations of Indian decorations. Another great example is the richly-carved pillar at the centre of the interior of *Diwan-e-Khas* (Royal Court). Its 36 brackets lift up the lotus throne at the very top of this pillar.



Fig. 9a. Image of Turkish Sultan's Rich Decorations www.solobackpacker.com from: Most Impressive Buildings of Fatehpur Sikri, Turkish Sultana's house, *solobackpacker*, <https://www.solobackpacker.com/turkish-sultanas-house-fatehpur-sikri/> , Accessed 8 June, 2020.

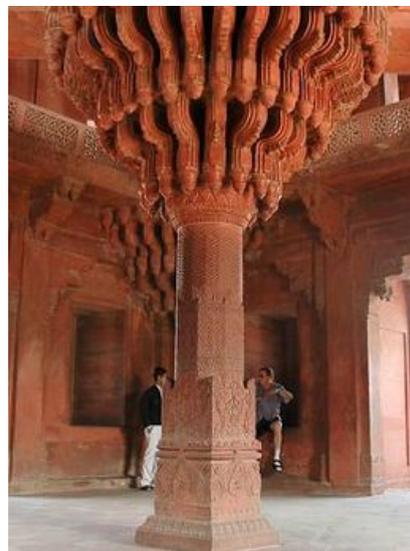


Fig. 9b. Image of Pillar at *Diwan-i-Khas* www.architecture.com from: Diwan-i-Khas (Hall of Private Audience), Fatehpur Sikri: the Carved Pillar, <https://www.architecture.com/image-library/RIBApix/image-information/poster/diwanikhas-hall-of-private-audience-fatehpur-sikri-the-carved-pillar/posterid/RIBA9265.html> , Accessed 8 June, 2020.

Therefore, through this discussion, one can see the extent to which Akbar embraced his syncretic approach to ruling his subjects by building a place that encompasses the diversity of religious traditions. It integrated his simultaneous devotion to his Muslim teaching and his reverence for the Hindu culture (Bajwa 1). In fact, Akbar used to sit at a throne pavilion on the Western side of the *Diwan-i-Aam* (the Public Court) with his officials for *Jharokha Darshan*, a Hindu ceremony (Ali 102). It was evident that he was setting an example of how a diverse community could live in peace and harmony with one another.

The most important contemporary representation of Akbar's vision are the Sufis. Akbar named his son after a Sufi saint and later erected a building in his name. Sufis are a contemporary representation of devotion to god instead of the commitment to barriers of caste and religion. Siddharth further elaborates on this "The Sufis are a secular force that hold a great potential for unifying society. By listening to their chants, peace descends upon you. Akbar used to fund the Sufis as he felt if he did, peace would prevail upon his kingdom."

Conclusion

The discussion of these three themes has provided a complex picture of the effectiveness of a monument like Akbar's Fatehpur Sikri in bringing the Hindu and Muslim communities together and reminding them of a golden era of peaceful co-existence. As shown in Theme 1, the conflict between the Hindus and Muslims, which originated from the Mughal dynasty has raged for centuries, save for occasional respites that might have barely registered in the country's record. The antagonism between the two groups, exacerbated by biased governments, differing ideologies, colonization and more, has resulted in massacres and

mutual destruction of monuments that encapsulated their rich cultural traditions (Smith 1). It is little wonder that

an Indo-Islamic syncretic monument like Fatehpur Sikri has been obfuscated by the blood-stained veils of bloodshed and tragedy. As far as Hindus in the present day are concerned, the Fatehpur Sikri was built by Akbar, a Mughal emperor, one of several who had looted India and oppressed Hindus.

Nonetheless, the discussion of Akbar's endeavour to create a kingdom that allowed for the happy co-existence of all groups based on the understanding, respect and inclusion of diverse cultures in Theme 2 offers a showcase of what peaceful co-existence between Hindus and Muslims can look like. Unlike his predecessors nor his successors, he formulated and actively promoted an inclusive ideology that fostered mutual understanding through learning and cultural exchanges of knowledge. His personal behaviour and policies allowed for the possibility of growth and progress for all his subjects.

While Akbar's era may seem to be buried by the dust heaps of history, the physical legacy of his time, the Fatehpur Sikri, examined in Theme 3, remains a potential reminder of his love for the Indian heritage and his vision of an Indian land for all. The deliberate incorporation of both Islamic and Indian influences in the monument of Fatehpur thus offers the most concrete symbol of ultimate vision of a unified India.

By examining the age-old strife between Hindus and Muslims through an atypical lens of an Indo-syncretic monument, this research study sought to resurrect Akbar's golden era during which Hindus and Muslims co-existed. In his celebration of the diversity of the religions not only in the construction of the monument, but also in the environment he created, Akbar's approach reminds us about a succinct truth. We are *Indian*: our identities are not confined to either Hinduism or Islamism; rather, they encompass the rich diversity of Hinduism, Islamism, and many other influences, including our colonial history. All of these aspects have left an imprint on our psyche and our landscape to constitute our Indian heritage. It is important for us to realize that the monuments we tear down, such as the Babri Masjid, do not just hurt the Muslim population, but all of us. For it is a loss for the entire Indian community, an irreplaceable missing piece of the mosaic of India's rich cultural heritage.

Instead of turning one another, how can we Indians — both Hindus and Muslims alike — bring back to life a past of peaceful co-existence? Here are some recommendations:

- Advocacy for equitability of all religions to exclude majoritarianism, manifested in almost all kinds of nationalisms to create a nationalist identity;
- Promotions of concepts such as Sufism that aim to establish a secular environment; and
- Valuation of monuments for their Indian heritage, which transcend the Hindu/Muslim divides.

To prevent the repeating of tragedies of which the Babri Masjid event is only one, Hindu and Muslim communities must fight to preserve each other's monuments, understand their legacy, in solidarity with one another. The mosques and temples are a fundamental part of the richness of the Indian heritage, which all Indians should be proud of. They are a glorious representation of what can happen when the richness of the traditions of all communities are celebrated and embraced. The promise of Indo-Islamic syncretism can be realized, Myra, a Hindu who visited Fatehpur Sikri, put it so aptly:

Well, more than being a Hindu or Muslim, we are Indians. And as an Indian, we will always remember the historical importance of the building and always appreciate the efforts of Mughal emperor Akbar who played a key role in laying the foundation of this monument...

Myra's statement can be considered to be laying the groundwork of a tentative rapprochement between Hindus and Muslims. It is important to start somewhere. Why not at the Fatehpur Sikri?

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Appendix A

Interview Questions

1. Why would you visit this monument?
 2. What other monuments would you visit if you went to the town of Fatehpur Sikri?
 3. What have been some of the comments that you have heard from Hindu and Muslim tourists/residents in the neighbourhood from India? What are the differences between their comments?
 4. What comments did they mention about the different palaces?
 5. Apart from being a tourist attraction, what contemporary role do you think this monument serves in the community?
 6. Were there any symbols you remembered in the monument when you visited, any example of syncretism/ architectural features etc.?
 7. As a Hindu/Muslim, how do you feel about this monument? Why do you feel this way?
 8. Do you have any opinion on King Akbar's reign?
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