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# Comparative Study of Religious Tolerance in Mughal and Ottoman Empires

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**A B S T R A C T**

*This comparative study examines frameworks and practices of religious tolerance in the Mughal (c. 1526–1707) and Ottoman (c. 1453–1700) empires. While both states were Islamic polities ruling over highly plural populations, they differed in administrative structures, legal pluralism, fiscal regimes, and patterns of elite incorporation. We analyze five domains—(1) legal pluralism and the interplay of **sharīʿa** with imperial law (qānūn/qānūn-i shāhī), (2) religious taxation and exemptions (e.g., **jizya**, tax remissions, frontier privileges), (3) representation of non-Muslims in administration and guilds, (4) institutional autonomy (millet, **waqf**, panchayat, local adjudication), and (5) cultural patronage and interfaith diplomacy (translation bureaus, court debates, shrine networks). Drawing on secondary scholarship, we argue that the Ottoman **millet** architecture codified communal autonomy more explicitly, whereas Mughal accommodation peaked under Akbar's **sulh-i kul** and a cosmopolitan court culture that valorized translation, debate, and shared aesthetics. Shifts under Jahangir, Shah Jahan, and Aurangzeb demonstrate how fiscal and military*

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*pressures could recalibrate tolerance. A heuristic visualization translates qualitative narratives into a 0–10 index across the five domains to illuminate convergences and divergences without claiming quantitative precision. The findings underscore that "tolerance" operated as a negotiated, policy-contingent equilibrium rather than a fixed essence, varying by region, reign, and social stratum.*

## INTRODUCTION

The Mughal and Ottoman empires were among the early modern world's most expansive and culturally diverse polities. Each governed multi-confessional populations with entrenched local laws, corporate privileges, and sacred geographies. Their legitimacy thus hinged on managing difference: not merely by tolerating it, but by weaving plural norms into imperial rule. In both empires, **sharīʿa** coexisted with imperial decrees—**qānūn** in the Ottoman domains and **qānūn-i shāhī** in the Mughal context—enabling pragmatic adjustments to taxation, land management, guild regulation, and jurisdiction.

Ottoman rule developed the **millet** system, which afforded Christian and Jewish communities corporate legal autonomy in personal law, education, and worship under recognized hierarchies. This structure integrated non-Muslim elites in fiscal administration, especially in the Balkans and urban centers such as Istanbul and Salonika. In parallel, a robust **waqf** economy underwrote schools, hospitals, soup kitchens, and religious infrastructure across communities.

Mughal governance attained a different—but comparably accommodative—equilibrium under **Akbar (r. 1556–1605)**. Akbar's **sulh-i kul** (universal peace) signaled courtly ecumenism through abolition of the pilgrimage tax, remission of certain discriminatory imposts, inclusion of Rajput elites, and institutionalized intellectual exchange (translation of Sanskrit epics, debates among Jesuits, Jains, Sufis, and Brahmins). Subsequent reigns modulated this balance: Jahangir and Shah Jahan continued selective incorporation and patronage, whereas **Aurangzeb**—amid protracted warfare and fiscal strain—reimposed **jizya** and tightened certain moral regulations while still relying on Hindu officials and regional brokerage.

Importantly, "tolerance" in both empires was **graded and negotiated**. It varied by province (e.g., Bengal vs. Deccan; Rumelia vs. Anatolia), by corporate status (ashrāf vs. artisan guilds), and by frontier dynamics where military-fiscal incentives could supersede doctrinal uniformity. This article proposes a comparative framework centered on institutional design and policy instruments rather than moral typologies. We synthesize scholarship into five indicators that capture how law, fiscal regimes, officeholding, communal autonomy, and cultural patronage co-produced workable pluralism.

We do not reduce complex histories to numbers; instead, we use a **heuristic index** to visualize relative emphases and shifts, foregrounding the interpretive nature of evidence. The goal is to facilitate cross-imperial comparison while keeping the qualitative texture—royal decrees, waqf deeds, revenue manuals, court chronicles, and travelers' narratives—front and center.

Legal Pluralism and Imperial Law

In both the **Mughal** and **Ottoman Empires**, governance was characterized by a delicate synergy between **sharīʿa** (Islamic religious law) and **qānūn** (imperial or sultanic regulations).

This dual system allowed rulers to balance Islamic legitimacy with the pragmatic needs of empire-building.

**Ottoman Context**

The Ottomans developed **qānūnnāmes** (imperial law codes) that complemented sharīʿa.

These codes regulated taxation, land tenure, military obligations, and administrative conduct—areas not fully covered by sharīʿa.

Jurists (ʿulamāʾ) oversaw religious law through the office of the **şeyhülislam**, while sultanic decrees held binding power, enabling flexibility in governance.

In practice, courts often mediated disputes by blending religious rulings with **customary law** and imperial directives, especially in mixed communities across the Balkans, Anatolia, and Arab provinces.

**Mughal Context**

The Mughals inherited the Indo-Islamic legal mosaic, balancing **sharīʿa** with **qānūn-i shāhī** (imperial edicts) and administrative manuals like **dastūr al-ʿamal**.

While **qāzīs** adjudicated sharīʿa cases, the emperor's court often intervened to settle inter-communal disputes, particularly involving Hindu and Jain communities.

Akbar institutionalized **sulh-i kul** (universal peace), which justified the accommodation of diverse legal and religious practices within the imperial framework.

The Mughal system allowed significant space for **customary law (ḥuqūq-i ʿurfī)** in agrarian contracts, caste-based dispute resolution, and village panchayat rulings, provided they did not directly contradict the emperor's sovereignty.

**Comparative Dimension**

Both empires **did not see sharīʿa and qānūn as rivals** but as complementary tools. Sharīʿa ensured religious legitimacy, while qānūn provided administrative flexibility.

The Ottomans leaned toward more **formalized codification** through qānūnnāmes, whereas the Mughals relied on **case-by-case imperial decrees** and flexible adaptation of local customs.

Mixed jurisdictions—where disputes between Muslims and non-Muslims arose—were negotiated with **legal pluralism as a pragmatic necessity**, ensuring stability across multi-confessional societies.

**Taxation, Exemptions, and the Political Economy of Tolerance**

One of the most direct ways empires expressed tolerance—or its limits—was through their **fiscal policies**. Taxes tied to religious identity not only shaped social hierarchies but also defined the **bargains of loyalty and service** between states and their multi-confessional populations.

**Ottoman Empire**

The most prominent fiscal instrument was the **jizya**, a head tax levied on adult non-Muslim males. While discriminatory in principle, it was often offset by exemptions for clergy, women, children, the elderly, and those providing state service.

The Ottomans also levied **avarız** (extraordinary wartime levies), which could be negotiated or remitted for Christian villages on vulnerable frontiers, provided they supplied soldiers, pack animals, or provisions.

Strategic exemptions reinforced loyalty: frontier Orthodox populations, Armenian merchants, and Jewish financiers often received fiscal privileges in exchange for military or commercial service.

The empire's **millet system** embedded tax collection within communal hierarchies, ensuring predictability while allowing religious communities to manage fiscal obligations internally.

**Mughal Empire**

Under early Mughals, the **jizya** was applied variably; Akbar famously **abolished it (1564)** as part of his **sulh-i kul** policy. Its suspension symbolized imperial ecumenism and eased Hindu–Muslim relations. Aurangzeb, facing military exhaustion and fiscal strain, **reimposed jizya in 1679**, sparking discontent among some communities.

The pilgrimage tax, levied on Hindus visiting sacred sites, was also abolished under Akbar, reflecting his efforts to reduce religious burdens.

Exemptions were widespread: service castes, frontier chieftains, and temple estates often negotiated fiscal leniency in return for political loyalty or military aid. Rajput chiefs integrated into the Mughal **mansabdari** system enjoyed hereditary tax privileges.

Fiscal reforms such as **dastūr al-ʿamal** standardized revenue demand, but they also left room for **customary taxation**, which accommodated caste and local practices.

**Elite Incorporation and Minority Officeholding**

Religious diversity in both empires was managed not only by legal/fiscal tools but by **bringing minorities into the machinery of rule**. Officeholding created constituencies vested in imperial stability and translated pluralism into everyday governance.

**Ottoman Empire**

**Institutional channels**

**Kalemiye (scribal-bureaucratic) & iltizām (tax-farming):** Non-Muslim financiers—especially **Armenian sarrafs** and **Greek/Armenian tax-farmers**—underwrote minting, provisioning, and customs farms. The Istanbul **Amira** (Armenian magnate) houses became indispensable to treasury liquidity.

**Dragomanate & diplomacy: Phanariot Greeks** dominated the **Grand Dragoman** posts at the Porte, brokered treaties, and supplied polyglot expertise. From the 18th c., leading

Phanariots (e.g., Mavrocordatos, Ypsilantis) served as **hospodars of Wallachia and Moldavia**, governing tributary principalities on the Sultan's behalf.

**Urban guilds (esnaf):** Craft corporations were multi-confessional; **non-Muslims could serve as kethüda (guild head)**, especially in trades with strong Christian/Jewish participation (silk, wine, metalwork, printing). Communal courts handled internal discipline, while kadı courts validated contracts.

**Court service & medicine:** Jewish, Greek, and Armenian **physicians, jewelers, and architects** held privileged access at court; their skills translated into tax remissions and protection.

**Converted elites:** The **devshirme** pipeline filled the **kapıkulu** (Janissary/household) ranks with Balkan-born converts who, while Muslim by service, anchored **Christian provincial networks** in the imperial center—another vector of incorporation.

**Logics of inclusion**

Expertise (languages, finance, navigation of European markets) + embeddedness in provincial communities made these elites ideal **intermediaries**.

The **millet** hierarchy dovetailed with officeholding: communal leaders collected taxes, mustered labor, and liaised with kadıs and governors, binding minority elites to Ottoman order.

**Mughal Empire**

**Institutional channels**

**Mansabdari (rank-holder) system: Rajput nobles** (e.g., Raja Man Singh, Jai Singh I) held high **zāt/sawār** ranks, commanded armies, and governed **subas** (provinces). Their service rested on **marital-diplomatic alliances**, tax privileges, and recognition of temple endowments.

**Revenue-bureaucratic cadre: Kāyasth** and **Khatri** scribal castes staffed **dīwānī** (finance) and **qānūngō/amil** offices across North India; they standardized survey, record-keeping, and assessment under **Todar Mal's** revenue reforms.

**Bankers & contractors:** Jain/Marwari **sarrafs** and **multānī** firms financed military campaigns, bill-of-exchange (hundī) circuits, and crown karkhānas (workshops), receiving farmān-based protections and tax concessions.

**Urban corporations: Mahajan/panchayat** bodies represented multi-caste merchant-artisan interests in cities (Agra, Lahore, Ahmedabad). They mediated labor discipline, settled debts, and negotiated octroi, often with Hindu officeholders as brokers to the faujdār or subahdār.

**Religious specialists as negotiators:** Brahmin, Jain, and Sikh leaders could obtain **fiscal remissions** or protections for shrines and fairs, embedding communal authority within imperial patronage networks.

**Logics of inclusion**

Akbar's **sulh-i kul** framed Hindu service as normatively legitimate; later rulers adjusted the mix but **retained Hindu scribes, bankers, and Rajput commanders** because of their territorial clout and administrative know-how.

Officeholding **converted local authority into imperial capital**: Rajput fortresses secured frontiers; Kāyasth registers underwrote revenue extraction; merchant credit stabilized cashflow.

**Comparative Patterns & Effects**

**Structured corporatism vs. negotiated brokerage:** The **Ottoman** model leaned on **communal corporatism** (millets + guilds + tax-farms) and **formal diplomatic offices** (dragomans). The **Mughal** model relied more on **personalized brokerage** through **mansabs**, **farmāns**, and **case-by-case privileges** to Rajput lineages, scribal castes, and merchant houses.

**Financial intermediation as leverage:** In both empires, **minority financiers**—Armenian/Jewish/Greek sarrafs in the Ottoman case; Jain/Marwari bankers in the Mughal—gained political weight by solving imperial liquidity and logistics.

**Administrative depth:** Ottoman communal heads integrated tax collection and education within recognized hierarchies; Mughal **dīwānī** offices drew on Hindu scribal expertise to make **survey/assessment** legible across diverse agrarian regimes.

**Risk and resilience:** Wartime strain could narrow apertures (e.g., factionalism in Istanbul; Mughal late-seventeenth-century moral regulation), yet **functional dependence on minority talent** kept doors open—tolerance persisted as **utilitarian pluralism**.

**Guild/corporate leadership:** Both settings allowed **non-Muslim leadership** in crafts tied to diasporic skills (printing, silk, gems), binding urban prosperity to imperial peace.

**Bottom line:** Elite incorporation transformed pluralism into **state capacity**. By channeling minority skills and networks into revenue, credit, and rule-making, both empires converted difference from a liability into a resource—albeit through different institutional grammars.

**Institutional Autonomy: Millet, Waqf, Panchayat**

Beyond royal decrees and imperial taxation, the everyday governance of plural societies in the **Ottoman** and **Mughal** empires relied heavily on **corporate bodies** that mediated between communities and the state. These institutions—religious, social, and economic—provided a framework of **autonomy** that anchored tolerance not only in law but in daily practice.

**Ottoman Empire**

**Millet System**:

The Ottomans developed a corporatist model of religious autonomy, known as the **millet** system, in which Christians and Jews were organized into officially recognized communities.

Each millet, under its religious hierarchy (e.g., **Greek Orthodox Patriarch in Constantinople**, **Armenian Patriarch**, **Chief Rabbi**), oversaw matters of **personal law, education, worship, and charity**.

The state recognized their authority to administer marriage, divorce, inheritance, and schooling, while ensuring their leaders collected and remitted taxes to the treasury.

**Communal Courts and Synods**:

**Church synods** and **rabbinical courts** arbitrated disputes within their congregations, reducing the need for imperial intervention unless cases crossed confessional lines.

This fostered legitimacy by allowing subjects to be judged by familiar norms while maintaining overall loyalty to the Sultan.

**Waqf Endowments**:

The **waqf (pious endowment)** was central to Ottoman governance, underwriting **schools, mosques, soup kitchens, bridges, fountains, and hospitals**.

Endowments were not exclusively Muslim; Christian and Jewish communities had their own parallel foundations, often recognized by the state.

Waqf autonomy meant communities controlled their welfare infrastructure, giving them **socio-economic independence** while easing state expenditure.

**Mughal Empire**

**Panchayat Councils**:

Local **panchayats (village or caste councils)** served as self-governing bodies for Hindu, Jain, and merchant communities.

They handled **dispute resolution, debt arbitration, and social regulation** (marriage, caste codes, occupational rules).

Panchayats provided continuity with pre-Mughal traditions, which the state generally recognized as long as they did not challenge imperial sovereignty.

**Temple and Monastic Endowments**:

Hindu and Jain temples managed extensive **land grants (madad-i maʿāsh)** and endowed properties, functioning as welfare institutions and centers of learning.

These grants often received imperial **farmāns (royal orders)** of protection, particularly under Akbar, who extended legitimacy to multiple faith-based institutions.

**Islamic Waqf Institutions**:

Parallel to Ottoman practice, Mughals sanctioned **waqf endowments** for mosques, madrasas, and shrines.

Sufi khānqāhs (lodges) doubled as spaces of spiritual guidance, social charity, and inter-communal interaction, reinforcing the empire's pluralist ethos.

**Comparative Insights**

**Corporate Autonomy vs. Local Custom**:

The Ottomans emphasized **corporate religious autonomy** through a highly structured millet system.

The Mughals leaned toward **localized customary autonomy**, tolerating caste and panchayat adjudication within the imperial order.

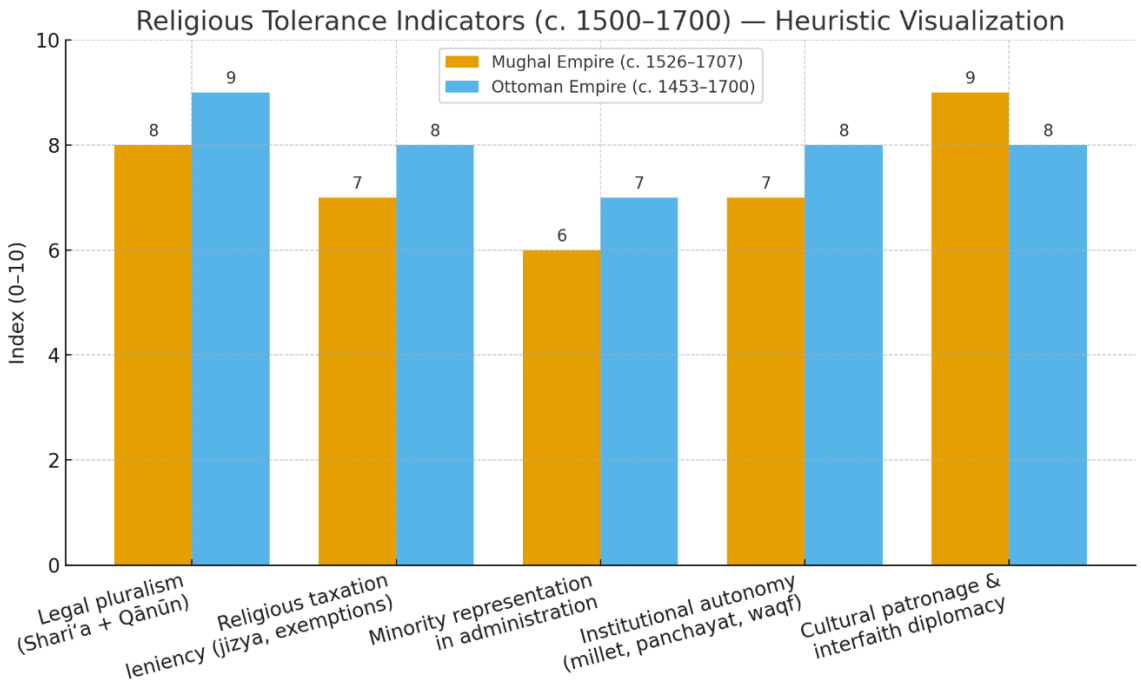
**Waqf as Social Infrastructure**:

In both empires, waqf/endowments anchored **education, welfare, and public works**, thereby stabilizing plural societies and reducing the fiscal burden on the state.

**Negotiated Tolerance**:

These institutions exemplified tolerance as **delegated governance**: empires devolved authority to communal bodies, who in turn secured local loyalty while ensuring imperial revenue.

Autonomy was never absolute—imperial courts could intervene—but by allowing communities to rule themselves in personal and religious matters, both empires translated tolerance into daily life.




**Summary**

Both empires institutionalized religious difference to sustain imperial scale. The **Ottoman millet** framework formalized communal autonomy and anchored non-Muslim participation in fiscal and urban life, supported by extensive **waqf** networks and codifying **qānūnnāmes**. The **Mughals** under **Akbar** pursued **sulh-i kul**, fostering elite incorporation (notably Rajputs), remitting select discriminatory taxes, and promoting a cosmopolitan court that legitimized rule

through cultural brokerage. Later Mughal decades saw a shift toward moral regulation and revenue exigencies that narrowed—but did not abolish—pragmatic coexistence.

The comparison shows tolerance as a **policy bundle**—legal, fiscal, and cultural—that waxed and waned with military pressures, regional bargains, and elite coalitions. When fiscal capacity was adequate and frontier conflicts manageable, accommodation widened; under stress, rulers reasserted disciplinary instruments while retaining selective brokerage with key non-Muslim constituencies. Understanding these dynamics clarifies how early modern Islamic empires governed plural societies without modern secularism, and why the legacies of their institutional choices persisted into colonial and national eras.

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