

STATE AND RELIGION IN MEDIEVAL INDIA

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Abstract

The penetration of Islam in South Asian sub-Continent coincided with the establishment of feudal state in Medieval India. The expansion of Islam in India which was more egalitarian than Hinduism and proved ideologically more suitable for the stability of medieval states, created by the Muslim rulers. An attempt has been made in this article to evaluate the role of Islam as state ideology in the political stability of medieval India. Despite the attempts by the individual religious advisors to apply orthodox Islamic laws to the Hindus and other non-Muslims, the majority of the Muslim rulers were wise enough to realize that an orthodox approach in dealing with the non-Muslims, comprising the majority of their subjects, would be dangerous for the political stability of their rule. Therefore, the Muslim rulers in general, followed the policy of tolerance towards Hindus and other non-Muslims and were able to win over the support of Indian non-Muslim population and ensured a stable political situation. This article has attempted to explore the interrelationship between the policy of religious tolerance and political stability during the Muslim rules in medieval India. The historical experience of Muslim rule has proved that in any multi-religious society only the policy of religious tolerance could assure political stability.

Hinduism and Islam were the two main religions in medieval India, though the followers of Buddhism, Jainism, and other beliefs were also in considerable number. Hinduism at its early stage, in the 7-8th centuries ousted Buddhism and Jainism and became dominant religion in the sub-continent. It absorbed in itself not only the beliefs of egalitarian primitive tribes but also the religious thoughts of already socially stratified societies. Thus, it provided an ideological base to the early feudal states, grown out of tribal and slavery based political entities. The Hindus had a rigid division of people into different levels. The Brahmins were at the top and were priests; the Kshatriyas were the ruling class and warriors; the Vaishyas were the merchants and traders; the Shudras were the menial workers. Below these were the vast majority of the "untouchables" or the casteless. The people were not allowed to change their caste nor were the intermarriages allowed. Thus, before the penetration of Islam, Hinduism was the only religion in India openly justifying and blessing the existing social inequality, power and privileges of the few, humility and deprivation of the majority of the

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people. There is no doubt about the class nature of Hinduism despite some attempts to see in it all peoples' ideology.¹

The Muslim traders from the Arabia started their penetration into India as early as in the mid of the 7th century but it was not until 712 AD that the first organized Muslim government was established in India. The first known person converted to Islam was the ruler of a small state, Kirining Noor, as result of the preaching of an Arab trader Sheikh Sharif Bin Malik.

In 712 AD a young Arab military commander of Umayyad Caliphate, Muhammad bin Qasim conquered Sindh and introduced Islam as a faith and a way of life in India. Sindh became an Arab ruled area and many regions of the northern Sindh and southern Punjab became tributaries to the Muslim Caliphate.

Muhammad bin Qasim treated the people of the conquered areas well. The non-Muslims were given the right of zimmi.² They were required to pay a nominal tax called Jizzia³ in accordance with Islamic injunctions. The neophyte Muslims were made the subjects of a larger Caliphate state. However, there was no forcible conversion. Sindh and Multan remained part of Umayyad and Abbasid Caliphates for a hundred and forty years later in 977 AD the Fatimids⁴ of Egypt and the followers of the-Isma'ili sect; captured Multan and enforced their doctrine as the official religion. The conquest of Sindh and the areas up to Multan by the Arab Muslims provided a solid base for the diffusion of Islam as belief system.

Some historians view the Arab presence in Sindh as a temporary phase. According to Stanley Lan Poole the Arabs had conquered Sindh but the conquest was only an episode in the history of Islam and India, a triumph without results. However, the Arab conquest cannot be dismissed as of without consequences, since it established Islam in an important manner and India was introduced to the rest of world through the widespread trading activities of the Arabs. In fact, the Arab conquest of Sindh converted it into a centre of Islamic centre.⁵

In the 11th century, when the successors of Mahmood of Ghazni lost western parts of their empire to the Seljuks, Lahore became their capital. Soon after Lahore shot up into prominence as the first Muslim capital in subcontinent and became a center of saints and scholars.⁶ The Gaznvides turned it, according to I.H. Qureshi, into the center of the Indian Islam.⁷

At the end of the 12th century, the entire Northern India came under the rule of the military commanders of the Ghaurids. One of them, Qutub-ud-Din Aibak, in 1206 declared himself the Sultan of Delhi. At the time of their peak, the Sultans of Delhi conquered vast territories in the North India and the Deccan. Later, many states emerged on the remnants of the Sultanate, which were ruled by the Sunni and Shia Muslim Dynasties.

The conquest of India by the Moguls in 16th century created favorable conditions for the integration of Indian lands under a strong central rule. Islam became the official religion of the Mogul Empire.

Since the 13th century, after the establishment of the first vast Muslim state relations between the Muslims and the Hindus became one of the main concerns of the Muslim rulers of India. Islam penetrated into India irrespective of the supercilious policies of some Muslim conquerors. It was preached by the traders, missionaries, Sufis, and Shia-Isma'ilites, who first settled in the coastal areas of India. However, the close contacts with the Muslim world were established only after the emergence of the Sultanate of Delhi. For a couple of centuries, many Muslim rulers used Islam, as a banner for their aggressive policies, instrument of subjugation, tool to suppress any resistance. However, "the forcible methods of conversion to Islam were mainly used for the individual representatives of the feudal aristocracy, since their conversion was helpful to make them vassals of the Muslim rulers. This was the price that some Hindu feudal lords paid for the preservation of their lands, for high social status, having an access to high ranks, and positions in the state apparatus of Muslim rulers."⁸

The Muslim rulers never aimed at converting entire non-Muslim population to Islam. Though, conservative ulema time and again pushed them to do so. For example, in the 13th century some ulema in the court of Sultan Shams-ud-Din Iltutmash suggested to force the Hindus to opt between death and conversion to Islam. The far-sighted among the Muslim rulers were clear that any attempt at forcible conversion to Islam was fraught with widespread rebellion and the Muslims being in the minority would not be in a position to crush it.⁹

Of course, there were individual cases when religious extremism made itself feel during different periods of the Muslim rule in India, however in general the Muslim rulers followed the policy of religious tolerance. This was dictated by the fact that the Muslims were in small

number among the ocean of the non-Muslims and they could not survive without extending their social base. It was not without reason that from among the four orthodox Sunni schools of Muslim jurisprudence - Hanfi, Shafi, Maliki, and Hanbali- the first one because of its tolerance became popular in India. Zia-ud-Din Barani quotes the following statement of the one of the prominent Muslim scholars of Alla-ud- Din Khilji's era; 'None of the Imams, except for the great Abu Hanifa, followed by us, consider that the payment of jizzia by the Hindus is enough. As far as, the Imams of other schools are concerned, they view that the Hindus had only two options, conversion to Islam or death.'¹⁰

The spread of Islam in India owes much to the dedication of the Muslim saints and Sufis (mystics). Among the masses, the new religion gained popularity without any pressure from the Muslim rulers. Generally, Muslim rulers hardly ever interfered with the religion and culture of the Indian people. The people belonging to various strata of Hindu society, and mainly from the lower Hindu castes and the untouchables voluntarily accepted Islam. As Islam declares that all Muslims were equal before Allah, therefore the conversion to Islam gave the representatives of the lower castes a hope to improve their social status. In Bengal, where a large population of peasants belonged to untouchable castes, the ranks of the followers of Islam increased rapidly. Because "it offered to the teeming low castes of Bengal, who had been for ages abject on the outmost pale of Hindu community, a free entrance in a new social organization."¹¹

In the Punjab, representatives of many castes and ethnic groups close to untouchables were converted to Islam. The people of Kashmir, except for the Brahmans and part of the Rajput aristocracy, became Muslims even before the 15th century.¹² The Muslim community in Uttar-Pradesh, Bihar and in the Deccan increased its number thanks to the conversion of rural population, Notwithstanding, the declaration of equality and brother-hood of all Muslims, orthodox Islam could not win over vast majority of the Indian population. As a state religion, it protected the interests of ruling elite, which gradually incorporated local feudal elements. Shah Nawaz Khan, author of *Bibliographic Dictionary* of 18th Century notes, that "for the rude Qazis who controlled courts in the towns, registers of *deshmukhis*¹³ and the orders of zamindars were equal to the Shariah."¹⁴ The masses in India preferred Islam, which was

preached, by the Muslim Sufis. Their ideas and principles found a wide response among the millions of toilers and quite often served as an ideological base for mass conversions. Many religious reformatory movements like Baghti emerged under the direct influence of the Sufism and Muslim syncretism.

Before penetration in India, Islam had already established it self in the Middle East as an ideology, used by the ruling circles for the justification and sanctification of their feudal order. Therefore, the Muslim rulers of India did the same. Practically all Mughal rulers used religion for the consolidation and expansion of their rule but in somewhat different way. For example, Akbar tried to create an artificial syncretic religion Deen-e-illahi as an alternative to Islam, Hinduism and other religions. Thus, he attempted to expand the social base for his rule by wining over the sympathies of the Hindu feudal class in rural areas and traders, and artisans in towns. So-called Deen-e-Ilahi combined the ideas of Baghti, Sufism, and some Muslim sectarian thoughts, particularly preached by the Mehidism. Apart from using the slogan of unity of all religion (one of the basic principles of Baghti trends), this religion called not only for the free interpretation of religious dogmas but also pushed for their adaptation to concrete conditions. At the same time the preachers of Deen-e- Illahi were not ready to put an end to the caste system. Pointing out this fact, Soviet scholar K.Z. Ashrafyan writes that "Deen-e-Ilahi and its real inventor and inspirer Abu-al-Fazal Allami" contrary to the Baghti teachings, had given his tacit consent to the caste inequality.¹⁵

Of course, the religious policy of Akbar was dictated by his ambitions to strengthen the social base of his mighty empire by accommodating Hindu feudals and moneylender cum traders in the state structure. At the same time, this policy reflected the objective process of the integration and synthesis of Indian culture with the cultural traditions of the people of Central Asia and the Middle East.

In the course of its diffusion across the subcontinent, Islam could not escape the influence of the indigenous Indian religions. Ibn-e-Batuta and Amir Khosrow observed that the new comers not only adopted local languages but also Indian customs and the elements of Hindu ceremonial rites.¹⁶

This can be explained by the fact, that the greater part of the Indian Muslims in 15th century was Indian by origin. No wonder, that for many centuries they continued to worship local deities, show respect for the Brahmins, celebrated typical Hindu festivals like Holi, Divali, and the Indian New Year. Even they worshipped their saints in Hindu manners.¹⁷ Mughal emperor Jahangir in his memoirs writes, that during his travel in Kashmir he arrived in Rajur village, on the bank of the Jehlum River, which was converted to Islam as early as in 15th century. Notwithstanding, the heresy of the times of paganism yet survived among its inhabitants. However, they did not force widows to self-immolation like Hindus but they were buried alive in the tombs of their husbands.¹⁸

Many neophytes Indians Muslims continued to name their children like Hindus. Many sacred cities of the Hindus, places of their worship and pilgrimage were also revered by the Indian Muslims. At some places of worship, they fed "the eternal fire" (dhuni) and even some Muslims were the followers of the Yogis.¹⁹

Many sources of the 18th and 19th centuries provide evidences that the Muslims of non-Indian origin also had castes, such as Syeds, Sheikh, Mughals, and Pathans. The first two included the people having religious knowledge such as ministers of religion, theologians, and scholars while the remaining two belonged to land cultivators including feudal and peasants.

The acceptance of the new religion by the Hindus did not completely remove the caste barriers among them. They continued to be divided into hierarchical placed endogamous communities. However, the castes among the Muslims were not identical to the Hindu caste system. In contrast with the Hindus, there was no strict mutual subordination of the castes. No attempts were made to regulate trade of every Muslim caste or force a scrupulous adherence to inner caste endogamy. The emergence of such castes evidences that the majority of the Indian Muslims were the converted Hindus who did not abandon customary forms of social organization and links. At the same time, they claimed for a position higher than the previous one.

The Hindus and the Muslims both were the bearers of the Indian culture. Persian, which was used in the Delhi Sultanate as official language, during Mughal period became the language of feudal

aristocracy and intelligentsia. The Mughal period produced some prominent Hindu poets, like Khatri Bhopal Rai and Lala Anand Rai, and chronologists as Ram Lala, author of *Tuhfat-ul-Hind* written in line with the traditions of Muslim historiography. He was of the view that the imposition of Muslim rule in India was divine predetermination. He considered Shivaji, the rival of the Mughal emperor Aurangzeb, a sinner and doomed-person. In the time of Akbar, sacred books of the Hindus, *Mahabharata*, and *Ramayana* were translated into Persian.²⁰ In 17th century, emperor Shnhjahan's son Darn Sh.-jkoh translated *Upanishad* and many other Sanskrit works.²¹

Urdu languages, including its literary and spoken versions were developed under the direct influence of Persian. This language started its evolution in the Punjab during the 11th and 12th centuries in the Gaznevi state. Later, in the 13th century, Urdu became popular in Delhi then in the Deccan, there in the 16th century it became a court and literary language. After the conquest of Bijapur and Golkonda by Aurangzeb, these cities also came under the influence of Urdu. The 18th century produced number of poets in Urdu like Mirza Rafi Sauda (1713-1781), Khwaja Mir Dard (1784), Mir Taqi Mir (1733-1814) and others.

In the expansion of the role of Urdu as literary language in Northern India, and the reduction of the role of Persian, US scholar Lehman sees the symptoms of the political crisis of the Mughal Empire.²² However, according to P. Hardy, the development of Urdu was one of the manifestations of the Hindu-Muslim cultural synthesis. It was also reflected in the Mughal style of architecture, a beautifully combination of the Muslim and the Hindu achievements in this field. Many palaces and forts were erected in this style all over India, including famous palaces of Man Singh and Raja Jai Singh in Amber. Many masterpieces of architecture were created in India by dint of talent and hard work of Muslim and Hindu masters. Many researchers have observed that Ahmadabad the capital city of Muslim Gujarat, was built by the "royal artisans of Rajputana", while the royal artisans, of the Raja Vijianagar erected the capital of the Muslim dynasty of Bijapur.²³

In painting, miniature style of Behzad²⁴ court painter of Sultan Hussian Baikari of Herat (1460-1560), was quite popular. From the time of Akbar's reign, Hindu artists dominated the royal painting workshops. During this period, Mughal fine arts were under strong influence of local

traditions therefore main subjects of the artists' were people, animals, apart from Indian wall-decor motifs and relief.

Abu-al-Fazal, an advisor, and friend of Akbar was a prominent scholar of Hindu culture and religious traditions. In his views about state, he combined the Muslim judicial doctrine of *Ishraki*²⁵ the principles of ancient Indian political thoughts, he was also influenced by mystical ideas of Hinduism and Islam, reflected in his interpretation of the "complete man". According to Abu-al-Fazal, only a man capable of creating conditions for peaceful life and performance of religious duties could be declared a "complete man" and only emperor Akbar qualified for this title.²⁶ Therefore, it was the religious duty of every noble and commoner to be loyal to Akbar. The Mughal aristocracy, while addressing to the emperor, used titles of *Murshad-e-Kamil* (complete guide), *Pir-e-Dastgir* (holy mentor). The Rajput aristocracy used title of *Jagat ho sain* (world spiritual lord) for the sovereign.²⁷

According to Abu-al-Fazal, it was the duty of a sovereign to guarantee general peace for the Hindus and the Muslim alike because he was the ruler of all his subjects irrespective of their religious affiliation.²⁸

Shaikh Ahmed Sarhandi or Mujaddad Alif Sani, a religious personality contemporary to Akbar, head of the Naqshbandi Sufi Order, held an opposite position. He called for purification of Islamic thoughts of the non-Islamic or local Indian religious or philosophical "adulterations". The teachings of Ahmed Sarhandi indicated that because of the evolution, the Sufism was losing elements of religious tolerance, which was the characteristic feature of it at the early stage.

In the 17th century, during the reign of Aurangzeb, who was the follower of the Naqshbandi Order, Puritanism of Islamic thoughts became a state policy. The construction of new Hindu temples was banned and some early built were destroyed. He also introduced some measures restricting in service promotion of the Hindus. At the same time, the number of the Hindu Mansabdars (military officers with civil functions) during his rule considerably increased because of the occupation of the Deccan States and the inclusion of many local Hindu feudals in the state structure. By the end of his reign, as calculated by M. Akhtar Ali, Hindus comprised 32% of the total number of the Mansabdars.²⁹

It deserves mentioning that Aurangzeb generally prosecuted the preachers and the followers of heretic movements but was kind to the Brahmins. J. Chandra observed that Aurangzeb patronized Brahmanism by allotting them lands.³⁰

In 1679, Aurangzeb re-imposed jizzia on the non-Muslims, abolished by Akbar. Soviet scholar, K.Z. Ashrafyan considers that Aurangzeb took this action not because of discrimination against the Hindus. Actually, he wanted to re-fill his treasury, depleted due to continuous wars and reduction of revenue from the jagirdars. Mainly peasants, low-income traders and artisans had to bear the burden of this tax. However, the poor paid four times less than the rich did but in monetary terms, it comprised 5% and 0.5% of the maximum income of the former and the latter respectively.³¹

The above-mentioned facts convince that Aurangzeb's Muslim orthodoxy and policy of religious intolerance were not directed against the Hindu population in general. He used this policy as an ideological weapon against, the Muslim sectarian mass movements, (which were using the banner of religious sectarianism) and anti-Mughal uprising of certain non-Muslim ethnic groups striving for the creation of their own states. This is not a coincident that this policy was implemented more brutally after the rebellions of the Mahdists, the Jats, (1669), the Bundels (1667), the Satnamis (1676) and of the Sikhs (1675).

It is obvious that with the help of their religious policies, Akbar, Aurangzeb and his brother and rival in the struggle for the throne Dara Shakoh, pursued the same objectives - strengthening of the Mughal Empire. Akbar's course, based on the synthesis of various beliefs was fruitful, as it matched the prevailing at times centripetal trends in India while the analogous concept of Dara Shakoh lacked real base because of different circumstances.

In the 17th century, the situation completely changed. The centrifugal trends predominated because feudal elite of many ethnic groups tried to use peasant uprisings for achieving their objective, establishing their own states. The anti-Mughal movements of the Mrathas and the Sikhs, related with the maturity of their national consciousness, proceeded under the slogan of revival of the traditional spiritual values and religion. In these conditions, Aurangzeb's efforts to

strengthen the Muslim state at any cost, including the support of the most conservative elements of the ruling elite, proved futile.

Despite the failure of Aurangzeb's policy, the ideas of Islamic Puritanism remained attractive for a considerable section of the Muslim population. For example, Islamic Puritanism was later reclaimed by Shah Wali Ullah (1703-1762). Shah Wali Ullah appealed to pay attention towards the dogmas of early Islam and recalled the need-for Jihad against infidels. He openly reproached the Hindu customs and practices, and called for the purification of the faith.³²

With the decline of Mughal Empire, an increasing number of the representatives of the Muslim ruling elite began to believe that the lost glory of the Muslim rule could be returned only after imposition of purified Islam which manifested itself in the religious intolerance in relation to non-Muslims.

Conclusion

The historical experience of the Muslim rule in India shows that long as the Muslim rulers followed the policy of religious tolerance and accommodation Muslim rules in the subcontinent remained relatively stable. The tragic execution of Dara Shikoh, true follower of the his forefathers policy of tolerance and the triumph of Aurangzeb adherent of orthodox approach for the Hindus gave imputes to the feelings of communalism not only among the Muslims but also other religious communities. Many of the representatives of religious communities began to use religious feelings of the masses for achieving their political objectives. The rise of religious fanaticism shaken the very foundation of the Mughal empire and dealt a serious blow to the efforts of the preceding Mughal rulers for a strong, sustained, and centralized state based on harmony between the Hindus and Muslims. It was not a coincidence that after the death of Aurangzeb in 1707, the Mughal Empire began to fall like house of cards. In eighteenth century Mughal India was overwhelmed by chaos and political disintegration which weakened India at a very crucial point of her history. It was the beginning of the colonial expansion of imperialistic European colonial powers in the subcontinent.

The historical experience of the policy of religious tolerance followed by the Muslim rulers in India and its replacement by the religious narrow-mindedness later leading to tragic consequences have

not lost its importance even today. In present scenario when the whole world in general and Pakistan in particular is waging a war against religious bigotry the study of the religious policy of the Muslim rulers is quite relevant. It can provide a guideline for the policy makers of Pakistan.

References

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2. Zimmi or Dhimmi - Non Muslim living under Muslim rule. Originally these terms was used for ahl-al-kitab or people of holy books Christians and Jews but in India Hindus were also included in this category.
3. Jizya- capitation tax paid by the zimmis for protection by the Muslim state and as a compensation for exemption from military service.
4. The Fatimids(909-1171A.D) political and religious Ismali Shiite dynasty of North Africa and Middle East claiming their descent from Hazarat Fatima(R.A) the daughter of the Holy Prophet Hazarat Muhammad (S.A.W).
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21. K.Z.Ashrafyan. *Feudalism in India*, p.184.
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23. K.Z.Ashrafyan. *Feudalism in India*, p.184.
24. Kamaleddin Behzad (1450-1535) was painter of Persian and head of the royal ateliers in Heart and Tabriz during the late Timurid and early Safavid periods.
25. *Ishraqi*: Literally means illumination, the philosophy of enlightenment of Shihab-ud-Din Suharwardi in which God is conceived as the light of the lights. For details see, Mehdi Amin Razavi, *Suhrawardi and the School of Illumination*, London: Routledge, 1997.
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