

Inter-faith Relations in Medieval India

The communal history emphasises confrontation between Islam and Hinduism throughout medieval India. In fact communal historians tell us that it was war between Hindus and Muslims from *Muhammad bin Qasim's* invasion down to contemporary India. They also maintain that partition of India in 1947 was the natural consequence of this religious war. In other words, partition was inevitable and natural result of this inter-religious war. Needless to say this is grossest distortion of Indian history. Besides being grotesque it is harmful for the process of nation building. Such a history is written to serve needs of contemporary communal politics.

In fact history is much more than mere narration of events. A historian has to analyse these events and try to understand complex processes behind them. No event can be adequately understood without understanding complex processes and motives of the actors concerned. The simplistic theories like spread of Islam by sword can hardly hold water and no discerning historian who is aware of complexities of historical processes. In any society different trends co-exist.

What happens at the level of ruling classes does not necessarily reflect the social processes at people's level. Political confrontation does not necessarily translate into religious confrontation too. The communal historians depict war between two rulers – one Muslim and the other Hindu – as war between Islam and Hinduism. They completely ignore the fact that these were wars for political power and not for religious supremacy.

Also, these historians completely ignore the fact that various other trends existed at social levels. There was close inter-action between Islam and Hinduism and several syncretic traditions came into existence. Several communities had amorphous, and not sharply defined identities as Hindus and Muslims. There came into existence sects like *Husaini Brahmins*, *Pranam Panthis*, *Meo Muslims* and several others who were amalgam of Hindu and Muslim cultural and religious traditions.

The Sufi saints and Bhakti saints borrowed from each other as well as from local traditions and shaped new belief systems. Many low caste Hindus readily adopted these new beliefs and doctrines and gave birth to new communities which could not be identified as Hindu or Muslim communities. And many low caste Hindus and Dalits converted to Islam to enhance their social status and human dignity. No coercion was involved. Since the Sufis adopted local dialects for communication and also local customs and traditions the low caste Hindus and Dalits could easily identify themselves with the Sufi idiom and embrace Islam. Most of the converted Muslims came from these social strata.

Also, there was constant dialogue between Hindu and Muslim saints and scholars. Hindus learnt Persian and Arabic and Muslims Sanskrit. *Alberuni* who came to India with *Mahmoud Ghaznavi* in 11th century, mastered Sanskrit language and studied Mahabharata and Ramayana and wrote its epitome on India. Mahabharata and Ramayana were translated into both Arabic and Persian languages by Muslim scholars as well as Hindus. *Dara Shikoh* also mastered Sanskrit language and translated Upanishads into Persian and named it as *Sirr-e-Akbar* (The greatest Mystery).

Dara Shikoh even wrote that Hinduism does not negate monotheism and found that the monotheistic verses contained in the four Vedas have been collected and elucidated in the Upanishad, which is an ocean of monotheism. *Dara Shikoh*, for this reason undertook a literal and correct translation of the work with the help of the Pandits and the Sanyasis of Benaras and accomplished the work in 1076 A.H. *Dara Shikoh* writes about Upanishads:

"Any difficult problem or sublime idea that came to his mind and was not solved in spite of his best efforts, becomes clear and solved with the help of this ancient work, which is undoubtedly the first heavenly Book and the fountain-head of the ocean of monotheism and, in accordance with or rather an elucidation of the Kur'an."

Dara Shikoh in his *Majma'ul Bahrayn* had done painstaking comparative study of Hindu and Muslim traditions and shows that content are same though languages are different. Islam uses Arabic and Hindu scriptures Sanskrit or other Indian languages. He compares *OM* with *Ism-e-A'zam* in Islamic tradition. He says that the Hindu monotheists (*muwahhidan-e-Hind*) do not agree on the exact meaning of *OM* as Muslims do not agree on exact meaning of *Ism-e-A'zam*. Some Hindu monotheists say that *OM* consists of three letters i.e. 'a', 'w' and 'm' and 'a' stands for Aditya, 'w' stands for Warma and 'm' stands for Mitra. Thus it means God since these are names of God.

The Muslim scholars, on the other hand, differ on the exact interpretation of *Ism-e-A'zam*. Which name of the Allah out of His names is *Ism-e-A'zam*? Some say it is 'Al-Hay' and some say it is 'Al-Qayyum' is *Ism-e-A'zam* and some say it is 'Al-Rahim'. Thus there is no agreement on *Ism-e-A'zam* as there is no agreement on the exact meaning of *Om*. Similarly there are three names of *Ishwar* in the Hindu tradition i.e. 'Satyam', 'Shivam' and 'Sundaram'. These three names of Allah are mentioned in the

Qur'an too i.e. Haq (Truth), Jabbar (Mighty) and Jamil (Sundaram). The difference is of language, not of content.

There are many more examples of Hindu-Muslim togetherness or dialogue in India. Many Muslim sects adopted local traditions so as not to appear aliens to Indian cultural environment. The *Ismaili Nizaris* in Gujarat adopted local prevalent nomenclature for describing their religion. They called religion as Satpanth or Nizar Dharma or Mahamarg. The *Bishnoi Path* of Rajasthan also appears to be an amalgam of *Nizari Isma'ilis* and local Hindu tradition.

A Panjabi Sufi saint *Bullhe Shah* maintained that I am neither Hindu nor Muslim. He borrowed from both traditions and forged a new path, which was essentially syncretic in nature. *Dominique-Sila Khan* rightly points out in her book "Crossing The Threshold – Understanding Religious Identities in South Asia":

"The Hindu-Muslim inter-face should not, however, be viewed as the convergence of two fixed straight lines, but rather as the encounter between various fluctuating sets of lines representing the religious movements which have their historical roots either in the Muslim countries (prior to penetration of Islam in South Asia) or the Indian subcontinent." (page 30)

Pran Nathis of Gujarat are an interesting sect resulting from coming together of Islamic and Indian beliefs. *Pran Nathis* believe that the Prophet of Islam is an avatar of Krishna. Krishna lived in Satyug and the Prophet lived in Kalyug. Their sacred book is known as *Qulzum Sharif* and contains verses from Gita (Geeta) as well as from the Qur'an. They do not worship any idol but recite from the Sacred Scripture.

There are many instances of sharing of the sacred space by the two communities. Now of course the communal elements are raising political controversies but for centuries common people have believed in shared sacred spaces in several parts of India. The case of *Baba Budangirni* comes to mind. The Muslims worship their as a grave of a Muslim Sufi saint and Hindus worship it as Dattatray. Common people never made any distinction but now the Sangh Parivar politicians are claiming it as a Hindu temple and creating law and order problem now and then.

Dominique-Sila Khan has also given several examples from Rajasthan and other places in her above-mentioned book. She points out that in many villages of Shekhawati (Rajasthan), such as Mundawara, Losal and Kachriawas, near Sikar, Manihars (Muslim bangle-makers) and other artisan castes make vows and offerings to deities, such as Bherji or seven goddesses locally referred to as Sat Mamai, a particular clan of them established near Sikar even accept Shitla Mata, the goddess of smallpox, as their lineage deity and celebrate her annual festival in the same way as the Hindus. For these people *Shitla* is the protector deity of their clan.

One finds similar traditions in Ajmer among the followers of *Mu'in al-Din Chishti* (died 1236). It is said, for instance that number of Hindu female devotees, who claim to have been granted the boon of a son, have vowed to visit the shrine each Friday, dressed in green saris. A Jain lady who was blessed with the son by the Chishti Saint has named her child as Chirag.

Shivaji's grand father was also supposed to have been blessed with two sons after praying at the dargah of Shah Sharifji in Ahmednagar and so he named these two sons as Shahji and Sharifji and Shivaji was the son of Shahji. No doubt than that Shivaji had great respect for Sufi saints and used to take blessings from Sheikh Yaqub, a Sufi saint from Konkan area before going for crucial battles.

One can also give example of *Abdul Quddus Gangohi* a fifteenth century Sufi saint who wrote his *Rushdnama* which is also known as Alakhbani. He identified the doctrine of *wahdat al-wujud* (unity of being) with philosophy of *Gorakhnath*, one of the original founders of the Nath Panth. He identifies Alakh Niranjana (formless and immaculate God of the *Naths*) with *Khuda* of Islamic tradition in India.

There are several such examples of synthesis of Islamic and Hindu local traditions. It would thus be wrong to maintain that there was confrontation between Islam and Hinduism in India all through. They lived in peace and harmony and profoundly influenced each other. It is also wrong to say that Muslims have not been part of Indian mainstream. These instances prove that they very much have been part of mainstream.

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Zusammenfassung: Interreligiöse Beziehungen in Indien des Mittelalters

Der Autor beschreibt die vielfältigen Beziehungen zwischen Muslimen und Hindus in Indien des Mittelalters und zeigt auch eine Reihe von synkretistischen Strömungen auf. In vielen Regionen Indiens entwickelten sich oft neue Gruppierungen bzw. Sekten. Auch wurden heilige Texte aus der hinduistischen Tradition gewissermaßen

islamisch inkulturiert und dann mit den entsprechenden islamischen Begriffen versehen, so dass selbst der Monotheismus des Koran nicht als Problem im Blick auf die vielen Götter der lokalen Kulte empfunden wurde. Aus den niedrigen Kasten, besonders von den Dalits, gab es Übertritte zum Islam, um gesellschaftlich auszustiegen. Die verbindende Kraft zwischen beiden Religionen bildete der Sufismus. In der Landbevölkerung war es durchaus auch üblich, an den Schreinen und heiligen Orten der anderen Religion anzubeten, das heisst auch, dass im Prinzip die Gläubigen mit unterschiedlichen Traditionen friedlich zusammen lebten.

Résumé: Relations interreligieuses au Moyen Âge en Inde

L' auteur décrit les relations diverses entre musulmans et hindous dans l' Inde du Moyen Âge et montre aussi une série de tendances syncrétistes. Dans beaucoup de régions en Inde souvent de nouveaux groupes ou de nouvelles sectes se développaient. En plus des textes sacrés de la tradition hindoue furent inculturés quasi d' une manière islamique. Et plus tard on les avait marqués par des termes islamiques afin que même le monothéisme du Coran ne soit pas éprouvé comme problème, voyant le grand nombre des dieux et des cultes locaux. Dans les castes basses, particulièrement dans les Dalits, il y avait des conversions en islam pour avancer dans la société. Le sufisme avait la force de relier les deux religions. Dans la population rurale il était tout à fait habituel de prier aussi aux autels et aux lieux sacrés des autres religions, c' est à dire que les croyants des traditions différentes convivaient en paix.

Traducción: Edeltraud Reindl-Beckel

Resumen: Relaciones interreligiosas en la India de la Edad Media

El autor describe las diversas relaciones entre musulmanes e hinduistas en la India de la Edad Media y muestra también una serie de tendencias sincretistas. En muchas regiones de la India se desarrollaban con frecuencia nuevos grupos o sectas. Los textos sagrados de la tradición hinduista fueron en cierto modo inculturados, y con ello previstos con la correspondiente terminología islamista, de tal manera que el mismo monoteísmo del Corán no se podía ver como un problema, en la visión de muchos Dioses de los cultos locales. En las castas bajas, especialmente entre los Dalits, hubo conversiones al Islam para ascender socialmente. La fuerza de unión entre ambas religiones creó el sufismo. En la población rural era también usual adorar otras religiones en los relicarios y lugares sagrados, es decir que en principio los creyentes de diversas tradiciones convivían pacíficamente.

Traducción: Yenny Buholzer Sepúlveda

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