

RELIGIOUS TOLERANCE IN INDIA FROM TURKS TO MUGHALS: A RETROSPECTION

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ABSTRACT

The Mongols proposed a concept of secular international law; they generally allowed religious tolerance in the first hundred years. Followers of the adopted father of Changez Khan, Ong Khan, were Christians, and the Mongols easily accepted Jesus Christ as a healer. Changez had four sons and all were married to Christian women resulting in many Christian descendants. Weatherford wrote (after Ming troops destroyed it in 1380), "it was probably most religiously liberal and tolerant city in the world." Not a single court in Asia would match this religious tolerance except for that of Akbar, who welcomed all religious people to his court and interacted with the theologians in a friendly debate. Changez Khan himself practiced shamanic which focused on the worship of sky. Most Muslims in India were not converted by sword which is contrary to the widespread belief. Some cases of forced conversions surely did happen in India, but if census data is to be believed then most of the converts were voluntary. The Hindus and Buddhist were brought into early Islamic government as trusted advisors and important military officers. This was a policy that continued under the Delhi Sultanate and also to the Mughal Empire. The peculiarity of Indian soil convinced many immigrant Muslim invaders a life of peaceful coexistence as the preferred option. The Indian Sunnis have peacefully coexisted with their Shia minority better than any place in the Islamic world. Sufi missionaries were given freedom to move everywhere. There are clear indicators that immigrants Muslims have learnt religious tolerance from the Indians and it spread all over the decades from the advent of the first foot of Mongols on Indian soil to that of the last foot of Mughals.

KEYWORDS: Tolerance, Shamanic, Turks, Kafir, Ilkhanate, Chamunda

INTRODUCTION

The Mughals of India were ethnic Turks and not Mongolians as claimed by few historians when they trace the origin of the word 'Mughal' to 'Mongol'. It was Babur (1483-1530), who traced his blood line back to Changez Khan. The Muslims of Central Asia hated Mongols because they destroyed the Abbasid Caliphate and sacked Baghdad in 1258. In the next 300 years after Changez, the Mongol Empire divided into four parts: The Russian Golden Horde (1242-1359), The Iran/Iraq Ilkhanate (1256-1353), The Chinese Yuan Dynasty (1271-1368) and The Indian Mughal Empire (1527-1707). Jack Weatherford says that Timur's descent from Changez Khan was based on "flimsy evidence."^[1] Many historians believe that nothing was good in Timur's conquests and this fact overshadowed the contributions of Mongols. While Timur destroyed cities indiscriminately, Changez Khan formed alliances with people who sided with him. Timur alleged that the Delhi Sultans were liberal in enforcing Islamic law against Kafirs (non-Muslims). Historians claim that before his attack on Delhi in 1398, he had ordered the Hindu prisoners to get separated and declared that everyone who had infidel prisoners with them must put them to death.^[2] About 100,000 Hindus were massacred in one day.

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first hundred years. Followers of the adopted father of Changez Khan, Ong Khan, were Christians, and the Mongols easily accepted Jesus Christ as a healer. Changez had four sons and all were married to Christian women resulting in many Christian descendants. His son Ogodei Khan never objected Buddhist temples and churches at his capital at Karakorum. Weatherford wrote (after Ming troops destroyed it in 1380), "it was probably most religiously liberal and tolerant city in the world."^[3] Not a single court in Asia would match this religious tolerance except for that of Akbar, who welcomed all religious people to his court and interacted with the theologians in a friendly debate. Changez Khan himself practiced shamanic which focused on the worship of sky. This ritual is seen in the choice of blue, instead of Tibetan white, clearly representing the Mongolian Buddhist hospitality scarf. Changez prayed the sky god before each battle, but never did he force this belief on others. His armies have gone to war for centuries with the blessings of their deities.

Religious tolerance was not always practiced. Persecution sometimes occurred during the reigns of Nestorian Mongol and Buddhist rulers of the early Ilkhanate (Central Asia), but things changed with conversion of Mongol Ghazan to Islam (1304). Ghazan mercilessly destroyed Buddhist temples and forced conversion to Islam. Halaku, Changez's grandson, founded the Ilkhanate and his aim was to take Baghdad which was the center of Islamic learning and also the seat of the Abbasid Caliphate. Halaku's mother and his two wives were Christians with the help of which he forged alliance with Christians in Georgia and Armenia surprisingly against the Muslims of Iraq. Baghdad fell in 1258 and Halaku ordered that the evacuation of the city before the looting began. Christian troops were sent to secure churches and destroy the property of Muslims. Weatherford had described the destruction after defeat of Baghdad: "The Christians of Baghdad joined with their fellow believers and looted their own city and slaughtered the Muslims, they felt that their salvation had finally come. Many Centuries of hatred spilled out as they destroyed mosques, and converted many of them to churches." About 80,000 people were massacred and the fire consumed the entire city. Weatherford emphasizes that it was the Christian troops seeking revenge and who sacked the city. Several other accounts also report the same i.e. Halaku's troops slaughtered the Muslims who decided to remain in the city.

Most Muslims in India were not converted by sword which is contrary to the widespread belief. Some cases of forced conversions surely did happen in India, but if census data is to be believed then most of the converts were voluntary. The famous example of reconversion was that of Harihara and Bukka, the founders of Hindu empire Vijayanagar (1336-1565). They were converted to Islam in 1327 by Muhammad Tughlaq. An example of mass reconversion is Mysore, where it is said that Tipu Sultan (1750-1799) ordered all his subjects to get converted to Islam. But today only 5 percent people in the Mysore are Muslims and the adjoining Malabar Coast has about 30 percent Muslims,^[4] because they settled in this area as traders in the 8th Century. If talked about voluntary conversion, there is a direct correlation between places controlled by Delhi Sultans and Mughal emperors who have maximum Muslim population, but the census data has even proved this wrong. Correlation exists in the knowledge of maximum Muslim populations where Sufis traveled. It may also explain the fact that East Bengal was far away from the focal point of Islamic power became a Muslim country, Bangladesh. Sufi missionaries played major role to the peaceful spread of Islam and religious tolerance in India, Indonesia and Malaysia.

It is still a topic of debate that the invasion of Aryans and their settlement on Indian earth by defeating indigenous tribes was assimilation and accommodation or destruction and displacement. What so ever it may be the ultimate polity was a federation of Indian tribes under the leadership of a Hindus or a Buddhist or a Jain king. This gradually developed as a political model for the kingdoms in India and in Sri Lanka, Malaysia, and even Indonesia. In his research on Sri Lanka,

Stanley Tambiah writes: “The polities had central royal parts encircled by satellite principalities and few provinces replicating the center on a small scale and at the outer margins had even more bigger and autonomous tributary principalities.”^[5] The biggest advantage of such type of governance was the religious tolerance. This also eliminated the necessity of military campaigns and other different oppressive measures. Herman Kulke also states: “the relation between Hindus and the tribes was never free of tensions; it was generally of peaceful character, if we compare it with the capture of northern America by European settlers, it was certainly one of the greatest achievements in the Indian history.”^[6] If observed critically it is noticed that the main liability which developed was that at the situation of outside invasion it became very difficult to organize the provinces for the defense. The absence of loyalty to the central authority proved disastrous when India was subjected to multiple Muslim invasions.

In any invasion, the Hindu king formed political alliances with the local tribal chiefs and sometimes religious alliances with the local priests also. This resulted in the rule of religious syncretism instead of the religious exclusivism which was typical of Christian and Islamic governments. Early inscriptions of 5th and 6th centuries in Orissa reveal land donations to goddess Maninageshvari, Lady of the Jeweled Serpent, her shrine located on a steep hill, Ranpur. It was also observed that there was a respectful division of religious labor in which the tribal priests organized rituals for the original idol, a round stone, and the priests used to perform worship of the Durga statue, which was symbol of the Hindu indigenous deity's power. The ‘Durga’ (sometimes Chamunda) was kept besides the indigenous idol, probably always as a complement, but never as a replacement. Kulke writes: “She represented the real overlord of the state and symbolised the joining link between Raja and the tribe because both are subjects of the goddess.”

Gradually as the indigenous cults attracted kings to the tribal villages for worship, the villagers soon started making pilgrimages to the royal temples, one of them the Jagannath temple in Puri. This temple became the most important pilgrimage place in Eastern India. Many Kings like Anangabhim III (13th Century) got considerable fame and legitimation also by regularly financing the annual ‘Jagannath Yatra’ festival which involved the participation of about all the villages in the area. Royal power further increased by the practice of royal grants of land to Brahmin families attached to the court who then built temples and also introduced caste hierarchy over the control of the same. It is stated that Rastrakuta King Govinda IV donated about 1400 villages to the Brahmins.^[8] Many instances show that the tribal chiefs were offered Kshatriya status in return for their allegiance. These kingdoms had central administration and the Brahmins gradually became the first bureaucrats. Gradually they extended their power quite far from their traditional religious duties. These Brahmins were accepted as well suited for the job as mentioned in the Bhagavata Purana that “they possess nothing, still having no craving for wealth and kingdom” (5.5).

Many instances of sacrificial rites were noted during Hindu goddess worship. The early human sacrifices gradually got replaced by more humane but yet violent animal sacrifices which regularly offered to goddess Durga and Kali, in NE India and Nepal. Many Hindu kings in South Asia went to war after offering animal sacrifice to goddess Durga. According to Hindu mythology she is fiercer warrior than the contemporary male gods. Many soldiers credit goddess Durga for the 1998 victory on Pakistani militants in the Kargil war. According to theology, the male gods also drew their power from the ‘shakti’ which means goddess Durga.^[9] One inscription from Orissa reveals parallels to the Hebrew belief of Yahweh, the Warrior, in which the deity wins battles rather than armies of soldiers. There is also one instance when King Hatakesavra got attacked by the neighboring Khandpara, then goddess Bhatarika assured him to defeat the enemies: “I shall go in the disguise of a milkmaid and sell (poisoned) curd. The soldiers (of Khandpara) will eat the curd and become

unconscious. Holding the sword, I shall kill the soldiers of Khandpara.”^[10] This Goddess is the leader of armies and is equivalent to Yahweh, Lord of armies. This is a type of violence approved by religion, but is never done for the purpose of conversion of the enemy to conqueror's religion. It limits the violence by sacrifice to the military campaigns only and produces a generally followed policy of religious tolerance.

There are many proves providing details of the first appearance of Islamic invaders in South Asia. The discovery of a dock at Lothal in Sind has proved that the ancient Indians had trade relationship with Western Asia. Arabic traders sailed in Indian waters much before the birth of Prophet Muhammad. They gradually established themselves along the Malabar Coast, Sri Lanka and finally Malaysia and Indonesia. The latter is now the largest Muslim nation in world. The Buddhist-Hindu empires as far as in Java, Sumatra and Malaysia reached their climax in the 13th century. Islam spread eastwards as the rulers in Java and Sumatra were converted. The merchant class remained Hindu and the island of Bali still retains its Hindu culture with really amazing grace and integrity. In 708AD a contingent of Sri Lankan ships sailing to Damascus were attacked by the pirates off the coast of Karachi. The Arab ruler demanded compensation from Dahir, the Hindu king of the province of Sind but Dahir refused. Al-Hajjaj (661-714), the viceroy of the Umayyad Empire, sent three back to back expeditions to Sind which was unsuccessful. Hajjaj's son-in-law Muhammad bin Qasim, finally defeated Dahir, mainly due to treachery from Dahir's wife, Ladi. Few historian give credit to the superior military leadership for the victory.

Qasim entered Punjab and was probably preparing to invade Kashmir when Caliph Sulaiman recalled him to Iraq. It is said that Sulaiman hated Hajjaj, who died in 714 AD, Qasim was imprisoned and killed (A story in which the two daughters of Dahir complained Sulaiman that they are chastised by Qasim before being presented as a gift to him). Historians believe that Qasim's success was not only due to far superior military but also due to some additional factors. First, the Buddhist population of Sind was having discontent with their Hindu rulers. Second, Qasim responded well to Buddhist and Hindus who surrendered and thereby discarded unnecessary bloodshed and destruction. The third reason for Qasim's success in Sind was that he found support from the lower castes, the Jats and the Meds. The caste discrimination prevailed in Hindus and this motivated thousands of lower caste Indians for conversion to Islam and Christianity. Qasim took a decision that proved crucial for the Muslims to rule India for the next 800 years. Qasim chose the Hanafi School which was liberal in terms of treatment of non-believers from the four schools of Islamic law. The Maliki, Shafi'i, and Hanbali Schools propagated that kafirs (non-believers) in lands conquered by Muslims should be either converted or executed. The Hanafi interpretation permitted to treat Hindus, Buddhists, and Jains the status assigned to Jews and Christians. The kafirs could continue to progress under Islamic rule but they have to pay the religious tax (Jajiyah). Among the Later Muslim rulers few were more orthodox than Qasim, but they also nevertheless accepted that Hindus, Jains, and Buddhists be allowed to live peacefully. These sultans were believed that Hanafi clerics were chief religious advisors, because the Hanafi school had become more dominant in the Central Asia by 12th Century.^[11] if seen through a global prospective the Islamic rule in India was mostly theocentric and never theocratic. The Hindus were allowed to settle their disputes according to their law.

The Hindus and Buddhist were brought into early Islamic government as trusted advisors and important military officers. This was a policy that continued under the Delhi Sultanate and also to the Mughal Empire. 'Kaksa' was the second most powerful Hindu advisor in Qasim's administration. It was often said that "Kaksa took precedence in the army before all the nobles and commanders. He collected the revenue of the country and the treasury was placed under his seal.

He assisted Muhammad ibn Qasim in all of his undertakings. . . .^[12] Qasim once went beyond the Hanafi law by allowing a Buddhist stupa to be rebuilt with the permission of ulama of Damascus. Only the Hanafi clerics criticised the destruction of kafir temples, but they also had reservations on new temples of infidels to be built or repaired. Al-Hajjaj explained that the infidels "have been taken under our protection, and we cannot in any way stretch out our hands upon their lives and property. Permission is given them to worship their gods. Nobody must be forbidden and prevented from following his own religion."^[13] Such early generous acts set a precedent for Islamic rule in India and that sometimes discouraged even the orthodox Muslim rulers from enforcing strict religious policies.

Let us examine the fate of Jagannath temple in Puri under Delhi Sultanate. In 1230 AD King Anangabhim III tried to consolidate his rule by saying that he rules "under divine order" and he is the "son and vassal of the Lord of Puri," who now is the royal deity of Orissa. King Anangabhim declared that any attack on Orissa is an attack on the Lord of Puri. He was under considerable pressure because of the Islamic incursions on Eastern India. Earlier in the same century Sultan Iltutmish conquered Kashi and continued the destruction of temples and idols which had begun since 1194 AD. Anangabhim's determination to protect Hinduism also reflects in his new capital in Cuttack "Abhinava Varanasi."^[14] Hindu Rulers' doubt on Muslim advances in Orissa did prove to be well doubted. In 1361 AD, Sultan Firoz Shah conquered Orissa and destroyed the Jagannath temple along with the stone idol, but luckily the indigenous wooden idol of the deity was saved. The Jagannath cult remained officially inactive thereafter but the rituals based on the temple continued at certain regional temples and also at some secret sites. For the next two hundred years the Hindu kings established their control on Puri till it was attacked again in 1568 AD by the Afghan general Kalaphar. He managed to search out the wooden image and got it burnt. Kulke explains that the priests of Puri had to hide the image of Jagannath more than a dozen times in the mountains of south Orissa and in some islands in the Chilka Lake."^[15]

The Mughals under Hindu commander Raja Man Singh defeated the Afghan forces in 1590 AD, but they were allowed to retain control on Orissa except the Jagannath temple. Mughal emperor Akbar stopped Man Singh from attacking Ramachandra, the ruler who rebuilt the Jagannath image in his capital Khurda and was trying to reestablish it at Puri. It can't be said that Akbar's action was based completely on his liberal policy of religious tolerance, but clearly also because of the political advantage in controlling the revenues of this pilgrimage site and also getting popular support by legitimizing it and supporting the popular Hindu king. After Akbar's death, Orissa again turned into chaos, although this time by the Hindu Kesav Das, who was appointed as governor of the Mughals. He attacked Puri and burnt the temple and looted away the temple treasury. The priests were successful again to hide the idol, but they failed to reinstall it. It was Prince Shahjahan under Jahangir's reign who gave them permission to reinstall it as he passed through Orissa in 1623 AD. Shahjahan reaffirmed Akbar's policy that temples were state property and hence should be maintained. Robert E. Eaton states that by moving in the 'Jagannath Yatra' festival procession "Shahjahan's officials ritually demonstrated that it was the Mughal emperor, operating through his appointed officers, who was the temple's and hence the god's ultimate lord and protector."^[16] Kulke writes that Salbeg, a Muslim poet, celebrated Lord Jagannath in his song. Kulke has summarized 300 years of Islamic rule in Orissa as the presence of decades of religious tolerance and mutual cooperation for the welfare of the country, despite the religious fanaticism.

It was Aurangzeb who thought that Akbar had been too liberal in allowing new temple construction. According to him Islamic law protected only the existing temples. In 1659 AD Aurangzeb supported the right of Hindu priests to practice their rituals on their traditional sites, which was against the desire of his officials in Kashi. Interestingly Aurangzeb

presumed that the Hindu priests were, in addition of their regular duties, "praying for the continuance of the Mughal Empire." Eaton made interesting discovery as to why some existing temples were destroyed even though Aurangzeb had allowed them to remain elsewhere. Eaton in his research finds number of temple destroyed, some even before Mughal rule and had the same pattern. In every case the temple was grounded as punishment due to the disloyalty of Hindu officers. The temple was the state's property and "as an extension of the officer" was "liable for punishment."^[17] The Hindu population did not understand this legal point any better than today's researchers and so they perceived this as an act of outrage against Hinduism.

Eaton gave a new interpretation of Aurangzeb's decree of 1669AD that "the schools and places of worship of the irreligious are subject to demolition." Most of the historians have interpreted this decree which was supposed to be carried out throughout the Mughal Empire. But Eaton argues that in his decree Aurangzeb focused on quite specific things. He responded to the charges that the Hindu priests and other religious institutions had been spreading "blasphemous books" in the region of Thatta, Multan, and Kashi. In 1692AD Aurangzeb sent an order to demolish Jagannath temple, but the local Muslim officers were bribed, and in order to implement the order the temple was shut down. It was again reopened after Aurangzeb's death in 1707AD. In 1724AD the temple was again threatened, but Raja Ramachandra II organized a fake conversion to Islam and thus skilfully managed to hide the idols. Once again the unseen political pressures from the tolerant ancestors prevented even the most orthodox Muslims from following the Islamic law or even complying with the imperial decrees.

CONCLUSIONS

History is itself a proof that Tipu Sultan's attempt to convert Mysore to Islamic state was failure, the Hindus, Buddhists, and Jains throughout the Indian Subcontinent had high regard for the Muslims saints. A historical example is a holy shrine on a hill in Mysore which is dedicated to the Hindu sage 'Dattatreya'. The priests in charge of the shrine often used to quarrel among themselves, so at last they chose a Sufi saint, Baba Qalandar Shah, to do the rites at the site. Even today the place is a mixture of Arabic and Sanskrit. Pilgrims today receive Prasad given by Hindu priests who are descendant of the Baba Qalandar Shah.^[18] Religious syncretism has taken place wherever and whenever different religions have come across each other. South and East Asian people are much liberal and accept others beliefs gracefully. They consciously or unconsciously practice these mixed religious traditions happily. Take the example of the Muslim Meos, living southwest of Delhi, celebrate Diwali and Dassehara. They also celebrate the birth of Krishna and give respect to the Hindu god Hanuman. The Muslims are so absorbed in the Hindu culture that many of them even cannot recite the kalamah, the affirmation of the Islamic faith. The other Mina tribe, living in the same region, is Muslim but worship Hanuman and Shiva. In North Delhi few Muslims offer prayers to both Kali and Allah at their own shrines.

In Gujarat, the Hussaini Brahmans (who trace their name from Mohammed's grandson Hussain), consider Atharaveda as their sacred book. M. Mujeeb although speculates that "it could be said that they were not really converts to Islam, but had adopted such Islamic beliefs and practices as were not deemed contrary to the Hindu faith."^[18] In the Pakistani province of Sind, the Muslim followers of Agha Khan considered him the tenth incarnation of Lord Vishnu and their worship rituals contain an even mix of Hinduism and Islamic ideas. In conclusion it can be said that India has natural and liberal openness to the new religious ideas. This peculiarity of Indian soil convinced many immigrant Muslim invaders a life of peaceful coexistence as the preferred option. The Indian Sunnis have peacefully coexisted with their Shia minority better than any place in the Islamic world. Sufi missionaries were given freedom to move everywhere. These are clear

indicators that immigrants Muslims have learnt religious tolerance from the Indians and it spread all over the decades from the advent of the first foot of Mongols on Indian soil to that of the last foot of Mughals.

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