

## ISLAM AND HINDUISM IN INDIAN HISTORY — CONFLICT OR CONFLUENCE?

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History remains a source of controversy in many respects among the succeeding generations. Much depends on who interprets it and what motivates the interpreter. History by itself or historical facts *per se*, though made much of, do not make much sense. This might come as a startling statement for many but historians with insight into history would readily agree there is much truth in it. Let us examine this in more detail.

The historians know that facts don't speak by themselves; rather they are made to speak. E.H. Carr<sup>1</sup> talks of 'cult of facts' and goes on to say: "The facts are available to the historian in documents, inscriptions and so on, like fish on the fishmonger's slab. The historian collects them, takes them home, and cooks and serves them in whatever style appeals to him".<sup>2</sup> He also observes in the same vein, "It used to be said that facts speak for themselves. This is, of course, *untrue*. The facts speak only when the *historian calls on them*: it is he who decides to which facts to give the floor, and in what order or context. It was, I think, one of Pirandello's characters who said that a fact is like a sack — it won't stand up till you've put something in it".<sup>3</sup> (emphasis supplied).

Facts have their own significance; there is no attempt to run them down. However facts as recorded in history in cold letters, written or printed, do not reveal the whole truth. Perhaps truth may never be known. Not to speak of history, most of us do not know the whole truth behind contemporary events, however significant they might be. Let us take a communal riot, for example. Every news paper carries its own version. A reader gets more confused than enlightened if he reads say, four different news papers — one in English, one in Hindi, one in Urdu and one in Malayalam. The crucial aspects who started it, why and what was triggering



event are endlessly debated and different conclusions derived. Was the triggering event shouting of slogan against a community or was it a throwing of stone in retaliation on a procession, we are never sure. Why a riot was engineered? Some one blames a religious community, some politicians, others antisocial elements and some socio-economic conditions. All these uncertainties remain despite thorough investigations and in depth analysis in respect of *contemporary events*.

And yet when it comes to distant historical events, say demolition of a temple or a mosque, imposing of *jizya* or a tax, we speak with such certainty and assertiveness as if it not only happened before our very eyes but with full knowledge of all background events and motives. Selected events, mixed with ideological fervour, are often passed on as 'sacred facts' to lay public causing great deal of problems in the contemporary world. One must, therefore, adopt a very cautious approach to history. It is neither sacred nor sacrilegious, neither unmixed blessing, nor sheer curse. It is neither tale of woes and bloody conflict nor a story of harmony and confluence of cultures. Like our contemporary world it has something of everything. A perceptive historian would see a historical event in all its complexities.

Demolition of a temple or a mosque may be an incontrovertible historical fact. But mere fact of demolition does not tell us the whole story. They have not always been demolished on account of religious fervour though the same may not always have been absent. It may have been motivated by more earthly reasons like lust for plunder, humiliation of a ruler in whose domain the place of worship happens to be located, punishing those who have converted it into a centre of conspiracy, to meet shortage of resources, etc. A cautious historian would thoroughly examine the event keeping various possibilities in mind and draw some *probable* conclusion without asserting either way. Also, he would see the event in various contexts: religious, social, economic and political.

Let us consider some examples. King Harsha of Kashmir (A.D. 1089-1101; not to be confused with the seventh century emperor Harsha) "systematically melted down all metal images throughout the length and breadth of his kingdom, with just four exceptions", says Kosambi. He also tells us "The work was carried out under a special minister for uprooting gods (*devotpatana-nayaka*). Each



image was publicly defiled by leprous beggars who voided urine and excrement upon it before dragging it through the streets to the foundry. *Not the slightest theological excuse was offered.* The king did have a Muslim bodyguard of mercenaries, but went out of his way to offend them by eating pork".<sup>4</sup>

It is obvious that king Harsha was not motivated by his religious fervour to defile images. He was a man of culture and excellent litterateur and even supported Brahmins within reason and honoured a Buddhist preceptor whose pleading, in fact, rescued the four images, two of the Buddha. His motive in defiling the images, according to Kosambi, was more of economic. "The metal was needed", Kosambi maintains, "to finance the king's desperate and expensive wars against rebellious Damara barons".<sup>5</sup>

Similarly, if we keep the socio-economic and political context of Aurangzeb's time we would see that his imposition of Jizya too was not motivated merely by his religious fervour which undoubtedly he did not lack. The depletion of resources in his costly Deccan wars was no less contributory factor. But again for political compulsions his son Bahadur Shah had entered into a secret treaty with the Rana of Mewar in 1681 agreeing to abolish the *jizya* and to grant other favours to the Rajputs in return for military support whenever he should enter into a contest for the throne with his brothers. Pacts of similar nature had also been concluded with the Rajputs by his brothers A'zam and Prince Akbar.<sup>6</sup>

It is very unfortunate that for political reasons the medieval history was over-simplified as an arena of unrelieved conflict between Hindus and Muslims. The ideologues on both sides did their best to fit the history into their ideological mould blatantly ignoring all other factors. As pointed out above, a cautious and honest historian has to discover all possible factors behind a historical event in order to fully comprehend it. How an ideologue perceives and how a ruler behaves makes an interesting contrast. This contrast can be seen in all its sharpness in a dialogue between 'Ala' al-Din Khalji and Qadi Mughith.

When 'Ala' al-Din inquired from Qadi Mughith about the *Shar'i* (Islamic juristic) position of Hindus the Qazi unhesitatingly replied:

According to the *shari'a* a *kharaj* paying Hindu is one who when the *muhassil* (tax collector) demands silver of him, he should pre-



sent gold respectfully and in all humility. If the *muhassil* spits in his mouth, he should open it without any sign of contempt and in this condition too he should serve the collector to the best of his capacity . . . The meaning of spitting in the mouth is that the *zimmi* (the protected i.e. the Hindu) should show utmost servility and that the religion of Islam be held aloft and the false religion be humiliated . . . .

Hearing the speech of the Qadi, 'Ala' al-Din laughed and said O Mughith you are an '*alim* (a theologian) but you have no experience. Though I am illiterate I have experience. You should understand that this way a Hindu will never submit to a Muslim unless he is deprived of all his possessions. . . I enforce whatever I find in the interest of the people. People remain indifferent and do not obey my orders. Therefore it becomes necessary for me to strictly enforce orders. I do not know whether they are right (according to the *shari'a*) or not. Whatever I find in the interest of the country I decree. . . .<sup>7</sup>

One can very well see the difference in perception as well as approach. The ideologue has his own theory and a ruler his pragmatic compulsions. It is not, therefore, surprising if they cannot appreciate each other. However, the historians with communal approach often fail to appreciate these compulsions of both or worse still, deliberately ignore them and draw oversimplified or mischievous conclusions. If the Qadi Mughith is quoted it would make horrifying reading as such and could become a powerful instrument in straining relations between the two communities. However, apart from the fact that theologians like him did hardly influence political policies, it will also have to be seen what motivated the Qadi in his rabid anti-Hindu pronouncements: love of religion; lack of understanding of empirical reality; contempt for the natives (which in cases like Dia' al-Din Barani also includes native converts of lowly origin to Islam); or competition with other court theologians. Either any one of these or combination of several of these factors might account for what theologians like the Qadi say. It would be naive as well as dangerous to accept such statements at their face value.

Also, there is the question of conversion to Islam. This problem has also been frequently exploited by the communalists from either side of the religious divide. This problem too, needless to say, has



often been oversimplified and conversions often blamed on religious coercion. It is hardly appreciated that religious coercion was but one factor among many and played relatively minor part. Political motivation, social situation and preaching by Sufi saints also played significant role.

Sayyid Muhammad Husayni bin Ja'far Makki, a widely travelled saint of fifteenth century better explains reasons and circumstances of conversion to Islam in India.<sup>8</sup> In his compilation *Bahr al-Ma'ani*, Makki, who was disciple of Shaikh Nasir al-Din Chiragh-i Dihli, explains that the conversions of Islam did not lead to an elevation of the soul, as the converts recited the *kalima* only to get more merit in this world. He then goes on to explain various reasons for conversion: one was fear of death and enslavement (coercion); another one was preaching by saints and the third one, Makki says, was the 'bigotry of the ancestral religion' i.e. the social situation of untouchables and backward castes. They found Islam far more democratic and respectful of human dignity (although in medieval feudal society this also proved to be rather illusory as social discriminations could not be done away with in practice).

*Jizya* has been thought to be another cause of conversion. Irfan Habib has shown that it was not by any means a light tax. Citing an example from the Punjab village he shows that out of 280 males in a village, 185 were held assessable and of these 137 paid the minimum rate of Rs. 3, annas 2, per annum which at that time would have meant a month's wages for an unskilled city worker. Thus it was a regressive tax and hit the poorest hardest.<sup>9</sup>

However, A.J. Syed rightly points out it being an important source of revenue discouraged the state from conversion. The *jizya* seems to have been systematically applied during the Aurangzeb's reign (for reasons stated earlier) but even during his reign one can hardly point out the instances of mass conversions. Syed says, "Conversion would mean loss of revenue to the state which was always in need of more and more money. I wonder how genuinely the state would encourage conversions. A tax so burdensome specially for the poor could be a great inducement for change of religion but the evidences of conversion do not support this presumption".<sup>10</sup>

A historian ought to see a ruler or his rule in the total social context. The conclusions are likely to be distorted if it is seen in



abstract, or torn from the socio-political context. Undoubtedly personality has its own significance and must be given the credit due to it. However, failure or success of the personality also has to be seen in proper context. It was no sheer accident of history that Akbar was a great liberal and Aurangzeb, a religious bigot. Both liberalism of Akbar as well as bigotry of Aurangzeb must be seen in its social context and the role it played. Akbar, it should also be admitted, eminently succeeded because he *chose* a liberal course at a time when the Mughal empire needed the support of Rajputs and other Hindus for its further consolidation. Moreover, it was a period of prosperity and the empire did not face great crisis. Liberalism thrives only in such social circumstances. Akbar would have faced difficulty, if not severe problems, had he chosen to follow bigoted course. His social milieu could not have admitted of such a policy.

One must remember that apart from personal trait liberalism and fanaticism are also functions of social and economic condition. A severely crisis ridden society would need sharper, firmer and what would appear to those outside the system, a more fanatical approach. Seen from this angle, like Akbar's liberalism, Aurangzeb's bigotry also had a social role to play. Unlike Akbar's period, Aurangzeb's period faced a severe economic crisis because of the long wars he fought. The empire though apparently expanding was beginning to loose its inner vitality. Aurangzeb was personally orthodox and put his orthodoxy to political use. In the event of crisis his options too, narrowed down. His ancestor Babar, when faced with imminent defeat, had to take vow not to drink to induce his Muslim army to fight with greater determination. Aurangzeb, faced with political crisis, had to resort to Islamic orthodoxy, to win greater support of his Muslim nobles. Thus he came to be greatly lauded by the orthodox Muslims and held to be a model Muslim ruler. Aurangzeb may have tried to avert the crisis in his own way but in a pluralist society like that of India, with its own intra-religious tensions, cannot become a political ideal.

Percival Spear has given an interesting characterisation of Aurangzeb. "He (Aurangzeb)", says Percival, "lacked the magnetism of his father and great grandfather but inspired an awe and even terror of his own. In his private life he was simple and austere in striking contrast to the rest of the great Mughals. In religion he was an orthodox Sunni Muslim who thought of him-



self as a model Muslim ruler. He differed from Akbar in consciously tolerating Hindus rather than treating them as equals, but his supposed intolerance is little more than a hostile legend based on isolated acts such as the erection of a mosque on a temple site in Benaras".<sup>11</sup>

Here Spear makes an interesting point. "He differed from Akbar in *consciously tolerating* Hindus rather than treating them as equals . . ." Aurangzeb, despite his medieval Islamic orthodoxy, could not have followed the policy of intolerance towards Hinduism. In fact no ruler, howsoever bigoted, can survive in a religiously pluralist society, by following a policy of intolerance towards one or the other religion. The real choice in such a society is not between tolerance and intolerance, but is between tolerance and equal respect. For Aurangzeb tolerance was a compulsion and respect a *choice*. He went by compulsion both for reasons of his personality traits as well as situational compulsion, as pointed out above. The situational compulsion was also such that despite his orthodoxy, he had also to marry a Hindu wife to ensure Rajput loyalty. He could not deviate from this course laid down by his great ancestors.

Aurangzeb did demolish temples but the real motives have to be properly assessed. It seems to be an act more of political than of religious intolerance. Some of his farmans, still extant, and produced by temple keepers at Benaras and elsewhere, make the charge of intolerance appear untenable. One of such *farmans* quoted by a historian Jnan Chandra makes an interesting reading. This *farman* was issued on a complaint lodged by a Brahmin of Benaras. The *farman* issued on 15 Jumada I, 1065 A.H. (10 March, 1659) reads as under:

Let Abul Hasan worthy of favour and countenance trust to our royal bounty, and let him know that since in accordance with innate kindness of disposition and natural benevolence, the whole of our untiring energy and all our upright intentions are engaged in promoting the public welfare and bettering the conditions of all classes, high and low. In accordance with our holy law, we have decided that the ancient temples shall not be destroyed but new ones shall not be built.

In these days of our justice, information has reached our noble and most holy court that certain persons interfere and harass the Hindu residents of the town of Benaras and its neighbourhood; and the Brahmin keepers of the temples, in whose charge these ancient temples are; and that they further desire to remove these Brahmins from their ancient offices, and this intimidation of theirs cause distress to that community.

Therefore our royal command is that, after arrival of this lustrous order,



you should direct that, in future, no person shall in unlawful way interfere or disturb the Brahmins and other Hindu residents at these places, so that they may as before, remain in their occupation and continue with peace of mind to offer prayers for the continuance of our God-gifted empire, so that it may last for ever. Treat this order as urgent.<sup>12</sup>

Mr. Jnan Chandra has quoted several such *farmans* of Aurangzeb which go to show that after all he was not at least a purposeless or reckless demolisher of temples. Some historians with their own biases have rushed to such conclusions based on some events without thoroughly probing the purpose.

## II

History is not all about rulers only. It must be studied at several levels. Common people do also play an important role so also do the community of thinkers, philosophers, litterateurs, poets and saints. At this level too history is no less rich and complex. One may discover more harmony and confluence of ideas at this level. The conflict of ideas may also be there but this conflict enriches more than it destroys whereas conflict of rulers destroys more than it enriches.

No one can deny the fact that the conflict and confluence of ideas immensely enriched our culture, art and architecture, no less than theological thought. Nanak and Kabir were products of this confluence of theological thought. Both imbibed generously from Hinduism as well as Islam. Both derided theological exclusiveness and hypocritical ritualism. They were concerned with the essence and not outward appearances and found no area of conflict.

Sufis had their own contribution to make in bringing the two great religions and religious ideas together. Many Indian sufi saints were votaries of Muhiyuddin Ibn 'Arabi's doctrine of *wahdat al-wujud* (lit. unity of Being) which had far reaching implications in doing away with man made barriers of ritualistic religions. If everything, including human beings, is manifestation of God and His Being what is the rationale of condemning the follower of this or that religion. It is true that some theologians like Sirhindi vigorously opposed this doctrine and pronounced their own doctrine of *wahdat al-shuhud* (unity of perception) but nevertheless a sizeable section of sufis did follow Ibn 'Arabi's revolutionary doctrine and brought about closer relationship between the followers of two re-



ligions in India.

It is true the sufis and saints did not promote rationalism. Their pronouncements and rituals often resulted in dissemination of superstitions but that is a different story. What we are looking for here is closer relationship or fusion between Hindus and Muslims. One cannot but admire the role of *sufis* who believed in the doctrine of Ibn 'Arabi (i.e. *wahdat al-wujud*) in this respect. What Mirza Ghalib said in 19th century India "when communities dissolved, they became parts of faith (iman)"<sup>13</sup> was reflection of this inherited doctrine.

It is this doctrine which assumes the form of *sulh-i kul* (absolute peace) in Abu'l Fazl's thought system. The celebrated Iranian poet Hafiz had put it in very simple words 'ba Musalman Allah Allah, ba Barehman Ram Ram' (i.e. say Allah Allah to Muslims and Ram Ram to Brahmins). Abu'l Fazl was Akbar's theoretician as well as conscience keeper and he owes much to Abu'l Fazl and his doctrine of *sulh-i kul*. It is undoubtedly medieval form of liberal (though not rational) humanism and came closest to our modern day thought of secular humanism.

Many *sufis* adopted local Hindu idiom and attempted creative assimilation of Islam with Hinduism. Some Isma'ili Aghakhani da'is (summoners to the faith) described the Prophet Muhammad as *awtar* of Brahma and 'Ali as the *awtar* of Vishnu, 'Ali as incarnation of Rama and Muhammad as that of Vidur Vyasa.<sup>14</sup> Similarly a Dawoodi Bohra poet Saiyedi Sadiq 'Ali who is greatly revered by the Bohras borrows the parables of *Panch Tantra* in his *Nasihah* (Exhortation) and describes *Imam al-waqt* (Imam of the period) as *satguru* (true guide).<sup>15</sup>

As a result of this confluence of Islamic and Hindu thought some syncretic religious movements also came into existence the most interesting of which is *Pranami Panth* of Gujarat.<sup>16</sup> They are estimated to be around half a million and are found in Punjab, Bihar, U.P., M.P. and even in Nepal, besides Gujarat. Their temple is known as *dham*. According to the Pranamis Krishna and the Prophet Muhammad are one. First Krishna appeared in India and then the Prophet in Arabia. One Deochandji Maharaj is founder of the sect who founded it in Amarkot in tenth century.

Pran Nathji from Jamnagar (Gujarat) became disciple of Deochandji and wrote a book called *Qulzum Surup* which is considered



a sacred scripture by the Pranamis. Their dhams have a copy of this book kept on a pedestal and the Pranamis, bow before it and do *arti*. They have other books as well written in honour of the Prophet whom they highly revere. The rulers of Bundelkhand had adopted this creed. Chatrasal, a ruler of this region had adopted Pranami Panth and had fought with Aurangzeb on the question of religion. He is buried at Mahuba. *Qulzum Surup* has many verses in praise of Muhammad.

It is interesting to note that the followers of Pranami Panth apply *tilak* (vermillion) on their forehead, wear sacred thread and also grow tuft of hair (*choti*). But they denounce idol worship. They believe in one God, Lord Krishna, Prophet Muhammad, Deochandji and Pran Nathji. They also show respect to the rightly guided caliphs who succeeded the Prophet but accord greater reverence to Ali whom Shi'a Muslims hold as the first legitimate successor to the Prophet.

Dara Shikoh whom Shahjahan favoured as his successor was great believer in the doctrine of *wahdat al-wujud*. He translated some of the Hindu scriptures in Persian with the help of great scholars of Sanskrit from Benaras. He wrote a book *Majma' al-Bahrayn* (i.e. Meeting of Two Oceans) in which he tries to synthesise two great religions, Islam and Hinduism. He denies artificial barriers. Says he in one of his verses: "God emancipated me from Kufr and Islam and graced me with honour; let me disappear in your own Being. Keep me aloof from the chosen as well as the common people".<sup>17</sup> He, in one of his *rubai's* (quadret), says that the waves, the drops, bubbles etc. are different forms of same water. The reality is the ocean. Similarly there are different names for different creeds, different races but they are all parts of the same reality namely the one Being which is linked with ocean. You may use different names to describe the truth but they are all different names of God.<sup>18</sup>

Apart from the sufis, the poets, litterateurs and writers also brought about confluence of thoughts and enriched what can be described as composite culture. It is very difficult to go into those details. Scholars like al-Beruni also made very rich contribution with his book *Kitab al-Hind*. He not only grasped the essence of Hindu philosophy but also learnt Mahabharata thoroughly. He had great admiration for Hindu thought and philosophy. All this has



been recorded in his book on India. He had accompanied Mahmud Ghaznavi. While Mahmud demolished and looted the temple of Somnath, al-Beruni busied himself in collecting treasure of Hindu philosophy. Unfortunately much is talked about desecration of Somnath temple in our history text books but hardly anything is mentioned about Al-Beruni and his work on India.

Amir Khusro was another noted personality worth mentioning here. A celebrated poet and man of versatile talents; he was great admirer of India and enriched its culture immensely. His contributions to Indian culture can never be forgotten. He was a poet, an historian and also a musician who invented musical instruments. He was very proud of being Indian and compares India with paradise and feels it would be difficult to find its match in the world. He also mentions its fauna and flora in this connection. One can go on mentioning example after example. What is important to stress here is that it was not all conflict between the two great religious communities. There was much more meeting ground both on religious as well as intellectual and cultural plane but the latter aspects got de-emphasised. Our contemporary political conflict got projected in the past and we began to look at history in the light of this conflict. After all we read history in the light of our own contemporary interests.

*Do facts speak for themselves?*

## NOTES

1. E.H. Carr, *What is History?*, Penguin Books, 1972.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 9.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 11.
4. D.D. Kosambi, *The Culture and Civilisation of Ancient India in Historical Outline*, Delhi, 1972, p. 186.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 187.
6. See Satish Chandra, *Parties and Politics at the Mughal Court 1707-1740*, Delhi, 1959, pp. 23-24.
7. See Khaliq Ahmad Nizami, *Salatin-i-Delhi Ke Mazhabi Rujhanat*, Delhi, 1958, pp. 233-239.
8. See A.J. Syed's presidential address to Medieval Indian Section, Indian History Congress, 27-29 December 1985, "State, Religion and Society in Medieval India Problems of Interpretation", p. 22.
9. See Irfan Habib, *Agrarian System of Mughal India*, Bombay, 1963, pp. 119-20. Cf. A.J. Syed, *op. cit.*, pp. 21-23.
10. See A.J. Syed, *op. cit.*, p. 25.
11. Percival Spear, *A History of India*, Penguin, 1968, vol. II, pp. 55-56.



12. See Jnan Chandra, "Aurangzeb and Hindu Temples", in B.N. Pande (ed), *National Integration — A Collection of Seminar Papers*, Allahabad, 1970, pp. 44-45. Cf. B.N. Pande, *Islam and Indian Culture*, Patna, 1985, p. 43.
13. ملتیں جب مٹ گئیں اجزاء ایمان ہو گئیں
14. See Khwaja Hasan Nizami, *Fatimi Da'wat-i-Islam*, Delhi, 1338 A.H., pp. 197.
15. See *Nasihati Saiyedi Sadiq 'Ali*, Bombay, n.d., It is published in Arabic script but the language is Arabicized Gujarati which is Bohras' religious diction.
16. For details of this interesting syncretic sect see *Fatimi Da'wat-i-Islam*, op. cit., pp. 225-230.
17. See Dara Shikoh, *Sakinat al-Awliya*, Urdu tr., Delhi, n.d., p. xvii.

خداوند مرا از کفر و اسلام  
مرا گم ساز اندر هستی خویش

ربائی داده، با خود بخش اکرام  
جدا گردان هم از خاص و هم از عام

18. *Sakinat al-Awliya*, op. cit.

یک ذره ندیدیم ز خورشید سوا  
حق را بچہ نام کس تواند خواند

هر قطره آب هست عین دریا  
هر اسم که است، است از اسماء خدا