

## The Religious and Social Scenario during the Sultanate Period

**Indu Rathee,**

Associate Professor, Tika Ram College of Education, Sonipat, Haryana, India

---

### Abstract

It is true that religion by itself could not act as a sole dividing factor in the Indian society but it is also a fact that it has been exploited by some self-seeking politicians devoid of national consciousness and obsessed with religious fanaticism effecting the division of India on sectarian basis. Even after the partition, India has a sizeable population of Muslims and in the back ground of our cultural heritage, the religious harmony is imperative in shaping the Indian society in its socio-economic and socio-cultural dimensions where all communities may merge their individualities in a manner that the emerging society becomes neither Hindu or Muslim nor Christian etc. This paper contains critical analysis of religious and social scenario of the mughal era.

**KEYWORDS:** Religious and Social Scenario, Sultanate Period

---

### Introduction s

Religion has remained a very important factor in Indian society thought out the known historical period. In medieval Indian society too the religion permeated every aspect of public life. Both the major communities, the Hindus and Muslims were being guided by their religious tenets rituals and injunctions. At the opening of the fourteenth century Buddhism had nearly disappeared from India and Jainism was confined to a narrow region in the West. Islam was confined to some scattered settlements in Northern India and a fringe of the coast of South. Generally the orthodox Brahmanism reigned supreme over nearly the whole of India, but it had ceased to be homogenous sect, and was practically a heterogeneous compound of the relics of the various developments in the past. The conquest of Islamic invaders was attended by extensive settlements of the foreigners and their number was being increased by constant migrations from the Islamic lands by mass conversions of the indigenous people to their faith. The settlers remained a distinct social unit thus introducing a permanent cleavage of the Indian population along the religious lines. Though by the fifteenth century, Islam as a socio-cultural force was firmly rooted in the soil of India. Yet the two powerful religious communities were never totally synthesized or reconciled. During the Sultanate period Indian civilization witnessed a conflict between two social systems Hinduism and Islam under a new political structure based on exotic religious denomination. The Hindus, having lost their national independence and the socio-economic set up were put on the defensive including their religious leadership. Rendered defenseless they were thoroughly demoralised and as such sought shelter in their rigid caste system. The Hindus had to pay jajiya, a tax levied on them because of them being Hindus or infidels. The Hindus were called zimmi and the Muhammadans thought them as Ahel-e-Zimma. The non-muslims who were living in a Islamic state had to pay this tax because the Muhammadans used to protect them and their properties and also they were kept aloof from military services. According to Barani the Sultans never interfered with the persona for religious affairs of Hindu cultivators except receiving the tax levied on them.

### **Social Scenario in the Sultanate Period :**

The Islamic society of the Sultanate period was divided depending upon the low birth and high birth, persons learned and illiterate, wise and foolish. A distinction was also made on the basis of property and occupation. However these distinctions were insufficient to divide the Muslim population to constitute a caste system as it existed in the then Hindu society. The ruling elite of the Sultanate could be vaguely classified into two categories i.e. the *ahel-saif* or the *umara* and the *ahle-qalam* or the *ulama*. The *ahle-saif* or *ahle-Shamshir* (men of the sword) belonged to the warrior class and their military rank determined their social status in the aristocracy. They constituted the backbone of the Sultanate and were a part of the sovereign power. The *ahel-qalam* were the Muslim theologians, scholars and administrators who were known as the *ulama* and constituted the brain of the Sultanate. The *ulamas* held a firm hold over the missionary organs of Islam. And controlled the mosques, *Khanqahs*, educational institution and the holy shrines. They were the part of the administration also and the *Sadr-us-Sadur*- the minister in charge of the ecclesiastical departments; and *qazi-ul-quzat* the chief justice, usually acted as spokesman of the *ulamas* and were treated as their representative by the latter. The *ulamas* therefore exercised a great influence on the policies and functions of the state. Among the Arabs, higher social status was enjoyed by *Sheikhs* who claimed their descent from *Qureshi* tribe of the prophet and they were split into three branches. The *Siddiqi*, *Faruqi* and *Abbasi*, The *Sayyads* also held a superior status in society and they claimed their descent from *Fatima*, daughter of the Prophet. Then there was an ordinary class of non-privileged Muslims who were termed as *Awam-o-Khalq*.

The attitude of the governing aristocracy towards the Muslims of the Turkish origin and indigenous elements was different. While the former were generally tolerated and respected, the latter were kept at a distance with mistrust. The everyday life of the common people was usually devoid of amusements. Though the game of *changan*, riding, racing, hunting, and archery were very popular as outdoor sports among the nobility and better classes of society, but the poor people seldom indulged in them. Though the *Sayyads* and *ulamas* were well respected in society and were supposed to be pious and learned, yet there are many instances where some *ulamas* did not conform to the standard of their desired conduct and thought and thus they failed to live upto the high ideals. However the clan of *ulamas* consisted of men both of liberal and narrow views, of spiritual as well as mundane outlook. *Amir Khusrau* also speaks of the *ulamas* of evil minded attitudes as *sycophants* who surrounded the Sultan and *Maliks* and gave their opinion on *Shariat* with the view to get recognition of their knowledge by the court through a false display of their learning. Yet there were “men true to the spirit of their faith-Islam and fearless enough even to risk their lives in speaking the truth.” At that time slavery among the Muslims was in practice and slaves were treated as a separate class. In society and they were put at the bottom of the social order. *Barani* records the advantages and disadvantages slaves were treated as a separate class in society and they were put at the bottom of the social order. *Barani* records the advantages and disadvantages of slavery in *Fatawa-i-Jehandari* as Owing to large number of slaves the king looked powerful and dignified most of the slaves are reckless and shameless there can be no permanent security against their revolt. But the inner sense of equality and brotherhood in Islam provided the Slaves in many cases with opportunities to rise in the

social scale and brought them to the highest position in the state. This fact is evident from some of the slaves becoming the progenitors of the ruling dynasties.

The position of women in the period under study was far from being satisfactory. In both the communities, Hindus and Muslims, the superiority of men was recognized over women almost in all affairs of social life. Men were considered to act as custodians of the honour and chastity of women. Jaise reflects this impression of the people in Padmavat, you are a woman and deficient in sense that man is a fool who takes the advice of women folk at home. However Muslim women received far more liberal treatment in matters of inheritance than their Hindu counterpart by getting equal share of the property received by the male inheritors after the father's death. Still on account of the social conventionalities Muslims regarded the women mentally weak and deficient in wisdom. Muslims and Hindus alike put an exaggerated value on the chastity of women while its absence in men was encouraged because of an unhealthy attitude developed on all sides. Dowry at the time of marriage of girls became important as a result the marriage of girls became a big problem specially those of poor parents, which could only be performed due to the generosity of those who were economically well off. The widow remarriage was allowed among Muslims but amongst the upper caste Hindus it was conspicuously absent. The Hindu widows were a discarded lot and they were not allowed to participate in social functions such as marriage because their appearance was considered inauspicious. The Hindu women were guarded in the light of Manu's verdict that a girls should be protected under the supervision of her father in her childhood, by her husband in her youth and after the husband's death, by her sons. The women should never be left unsupervised and free.

The study of the Sultanate period reveals the prevalence of the custom of Sati among the widows of the Hindu community specially those of the upper classes. This practice of burning of widow on the pyre of her deceased husband was well respected and has been admired even by Muslims as something very noble. Amir Khusrau observes in reference to Sati custom among Hindu windows; "Though this is not allowed in Islam, yet what a great achievement it is if this practice is made lawful also had a great praise for the heroic spirit of a Sati who burns for truth to her lord, if there is truth in her hearth, then the fire is cooled.

Muslim society in the mean time was fast becoming Indianized. Several ceremonies connected specially with marriage and death were common as they are communities. The Indian bridal decoration. The solah singar had already become familiar to Muslims, and has often been mentioned by the name shaft-o-nub by Khusrau and other there was a large class of people with modest incomes. The lowest strata of Muslim society comprised of the peasants and cultivators and they were usually of Indian origin and also included workmen, artisans and domestic servants. Their mainstay was their landed properties, small or large, and many of them were actively engaged in the cultivation of the land. The arts of calligraphy and epistolography (insha) which were assiduously cultivated by most of them, often provided remunerative sources of income. Business and trade were mostly in the hands of Hindu merchants who were famous for their large scale mercantile activities and fabulous wealth.

#### **Religious Scenario in the Sultanate Period :**

However, religious scenario of this period was full of long crusade against the Hindu religion, culture and civilisation. K.M. Munshi remarks about the state of religious

intolerance of those times; “It was one of the ceaseless resistance offered with one relentless heroism, or men, from boys in teens to men with one foot in the grave, the flagging away their lives for freedom; of warriors defying the invaders from fortress for months.. of women in thousands court in fire to save their honour of children whose bodies flung into the wells by their parents so that they might escape slavery, of fresh heroes springing up to take the place of the dead and to break the volume and momentum of the onrushing tide of invasion.” The medieval chronicles are full of distressing tales of the oppression of Hindus who were taken as the enemies of faith-Islam. The eminent historian, Dr. A.L. Srivastava also indicates the same gory tales of the Hindus being under a perpetual threat from Muslim zealot’s, throughout the Sultanate period (1206-1526) a wide gulf separated the two communities and that, to say nothing of enjoyment of any kind of rights and privileges, the very lives and property of the Hindus were in perpetual danger. If they could not be converted to Islam enmasse or butchered in cold blood, it was because of their great numerical superiority and physical strength. The Hindus who were called Kafirs or infidels were denied the right of existence in a truly Islamic state and they were dubbed external enemies of the Islam and condemned as Kable garden zadni or those who were fit to be beheaded or extirpate for example Saiyed Nuruddin Mubarak advised Iltutimish to carry out the above Islamic injunctions but he could not follow it because of its ill effects on the administration as the Hindus were in great number. The medieval chronicles made one believe that the Muslim conquerors were staunch and good Muslims because their primary aims and motives in wars were religious rather than political But according to Prof. Muhammad Habib, the wars taken up by Mahmud Ghazni were secular exploits for the greed of glory and gold. Prof. Habib further observes that; “Islam’s worst enemies have ever been its own fanatical followers.” As a matter of fact, aggressive fights for territorial possessions and economic exploitations could have the sanction of the Quaranic law in right earnest for jihad, and it is possible that the law of jihad was used by the earnest for jihad, and it is possible that the law of jihad was used by the war lords as a face-saving device for their mis-deeds of temple razing and the destruction of other Hindu holy places. Even there is no doubt that the religious milieu during the Sultanate period was far from being harmonious. Dr. P.Saran observes that we hardly know of any period or any region under Muslim domination in which very large number of Hindus did not fight in the armies of their Muslim sovereign. We can hardly find an example of a war which was fought by Muslim rulers purely on a religious cause. Most, if not all, wars fought by them were actuated by political motives and worldly ambitions.

A it was impractical for the two segments of the population to remain unaffected by each other, it was therefore their compulsion to accommodate and tolerate each other as much as it was possible. There are instances which prove the impact of Hinduism on Islam and vice versa. Dr. Tara Chand’s observations in this context are note-worthy; “Not only did Hindu religions, Hindu art, Hindu literature and Hindu science absorb Muslim elements, but the very spirit of Hindu culture and the very stuff of Hindu mind were also altered. and the Muslims reciprocated by responding to the change in every department.” The mutual contact brought the reciprocity of ideas and influences in all fields including religious practices. Dr. Tara Chand further comments on the religions practice prevalent during the Sultanate period: The Hindus offered sweets at Muslim shrines, consulted the Quran as an oracle, kept its copies to ward off evil influences, and celebrated Muslim

feasts, and the Musalmans responded with similar acts. Not only this, there are many instances of pagan practices prevalent among the Muslims though it is against the tenets of Islam. Offerings were made to some imaginary pirs like Manik Pir, Ghora Pir, Kumbhira Pir, and some Madari pir for fulfillment of ones desires. Milk and fruits were offered to Manik Pir. But there was definite conflict between free thought and authority, between fanatical orthodoxy and religious tolerance inspite of the fact that the new conditions and ideas were introduced by the coming of Muslims in the Hindu society. It was through the intellectual and religious frictions that the new ideas of spiritual dimensions were generated and thoughts, feelings, modes and behaviours found new directions for development. The mutual contact brought some reciprocity of ideas and influences. Both the communities during the Sultanate period continued their respective customs. Hindus continued their ancient customs of pilgrimages to Prayaga, Puri, Konark, Gaya, Varanasi and so froth. The sentiment of veneration for the cow continued unabated and the high respect paid to the cow by inhabitant of Calicut is noticed by Abdur Razzaq.

The religion of Islam underwent substantial change and gradually the barriers between the two communities were removes and a process of Indianization started. The manifestations of this process were visible in every walk of life and the Muslims had already adopted many habits, ways and manners of the Hindus which created in fact an Indian character, a general Indian personality which we can not resolve into component elements.

Though there existed a rigid attitude on both sides. Hindus and Muslims could not afford to live in water tight compartments due to the proximity and interdependence in many ways specially for social compulsions. R.C. Majumdar observes that while Islam was a proselytizing religion and kept its doors wide open for converts, Hinduism had a hundred doors for exit and none for entrance. The consequence was that the Hindu rank was considerably thinned by conversion on a large scale, which added to a handful of foreign Muslims hundred of times their number. Thus though a lot of intolerance and hatred existed among Hindus and Muslims, there was an unavoidable mutual impact as Dr. Tara Chand puts it, "the Muslims who came to India made it their home. They lived surrounded by the Hindu people and a state of perennial hostility was impossible. Mutual intercourse led to mutual understanding." Though there was a burning desire of Islamic fanatics to deprive Hindus of their rights of religious liberty, some of those who were in authority were not influenced by their religious sentiments in framing of policies towards the non-Muslims. Barani feels disgusted and enraged while recording this freedom in the times of Firoz Shah, in the cities of Musalmans the custom of infidelity are openly practiced, idols are publicly worshipped, and the tradition of infidelity are adhered to with greater insistance than before. May be these people in power and authority were conscious of the Prophets injections 'He who torments the zimmis torments me' and there are stray of religious toleration and broad-mindedness though this policy of impartial attitude towards Hindus was not followed by every one who happened to be at the helm of affairs. R.C, Majumdar, therefore, comments; "While the political status of the Hindus was not such as to inspire their love or goodwill towards the Muslims, the social and religious differences were so acute and fundamental that they raised a Chinese wall between the two communities." It is true that the two segments of the then population could not maintain their social obligations and activities without each other,

yet the religious scenario in the Sultanate was full of paradoxical influences and remained eventful through constraints and curses, Prof. Qureshi's view in regard to the Sultanate period is not untrue that it was a period of "Muslim empire where the Muslims constituted as rulers and the Hindus the ruled." Therefore, inspite of stray effort made by both sides for a mutual understanding for a cordial relationship between the Hindus and Muslim, rays of optimism were scant to dispel the confusion of the predicament created by inept rulers of alien faith and origin and a state of demoralization and pessimism took over the entire Hindu population specially in the northern part of this country.

#### **References:**

- Ahmed Aziz :- Studies in Islamic Culture in Indian Enviroment; Oxford-1964.  
Hussain, W. :- Conception of Divinity on Islam and Upanishads; Calcutta-1939.  
Hussain, Y.:- Glimpses of medieval Indian Culture; Bombay-1957.  
Iqbal, Mohammad:- The Reconstruction of Religious thought in Islam; Oxford-1934.  
Macdonald, D.B:- The Religious Attitude and Life in Islam ; Chicago-1906.  
Ojha, P.N. :- Aspects of Medieval Indian Culture; Ranchi-1961.  
Ashraf, K.M.:- Life and condition of the people of Hindustan, Delhi-1970.  
Azad, Abdul Kalam, Maulana:- The Tarjman al-Quran , Asia Publishing House Bombay-1968.  
Benerjee, Francios :- Travels in Mughal Empire (1956-58) Translated in English by A. Constable, S. Chand & co., New Delhi-1968.  
Bhattacharya Bhabhani:- Glimpes of Indian History, Sterling Publisher, New Delhi-1980.  
Burn, Richard.:- The combridge History of india (Edited) vol. Iv, The Mughal Period, Universety press, Cambridge-1937.  
Chandra, Satish:- Mughal Religious Policies, The Rajputs and the Deccan, New Delhi-1993.  
Dass, Gupta, S.N:- A History of Indian Philosophy, London-1932-40.  
Dowson, John Professor:- History of India Vol. II, Calcutta-1953.  
Dutta R.C.:- Later Hindu Civilisation (500-1200A.D.), Calcutta-1965.  
Habib, Mohammad:- Sultan Mahmud of Ghazni, Aligarh-1951.  
Hussain, Mahdi:- Rhla (Ibn Batutah), Baroda-1953.  
Hussain, S.Abid:- The National Culture of India, New Delhi-1956.  
Hussain, Yusuf :- Glimpses of Medieval Indian Culture, Calcutta-1957.  
Kabir, Humayun :-The Indian Heritage, Bombay-1955.  
Macauliffe, Max Arthur :- The Sikh Religion, S. Chand & Co. New Delhi-1963.  
Majumdar, R.c.:- (i) The Delhi Sultante (edited) Bhartiya Vidya Bhavan, Bombay-1960.  
(ii) The History and culture of the Indian People (The Mughal Empire- Edited) Bhartiya Vidya Bhavan, Bombay-1974.  
Mehta, J.L. :- The History of Medieval India Sterling Publications, New Delhi-1983.  
Monier, Williams :- Religious thought and Life and India, 4<sup>th</sup> ed., London-1891.  
Moreland, W.H. :- India at the Death of Akbar, London-1920.  
Prasad, Beni:- History of Jahangir, Indian Press, Allahabad-1940.  
Radha Krishanan, S. Dr. :- (i) Indian Religions vision Books, New Delhi-1979.  
(ii) Bhagavad Gita, Oxford university Press, New DELhi-1992.  
(iii) Hindu view of Life, London 1926.  
(iv) An Idealist view of life, London-1957.  
Rashid , A. :- Society and culture in medieval India, Calcutta-1967.

- Rizvi, A.A. Saiyid:- (i) A History of sufism in, India Part one New Delhi-1986.  
(ii) A History of sufism in india, Part Two, New Delhi -1992.
- Sarkar, J.N. Sir :- (i) A Short History of Aurangzeb, Calcutta-1954.
- Sharma, S.R.:- (i)The Crescent in India, Delhi-1986.  
(ii) Mughal Empire in India (tenth ed), Agra.
- Srivastava, Ashirbadi Lal:- (i) The Mughal Empire (1526-1803), Agra-1972.  
(ii) Akbar The Great, Agra -1962.  
(ii) Studies in Indian History.Agra-1974.
- Tara Chand :- Society and State in the Mughal period, Delhi-1961.  
(ii) Aurobindo: Gitanjali (ninth ed.) New Delhi-1993.
- Vivekananda Swami :- (i) Selection of the complete works of swami Vivekananda (3rd ed.), Calcutta-1987.  
(ii) Bhakti Marg, Nagpur-1971.
- Zaehner, R.C.:- Hindu and Muslim Mysticism, London-1960.
- Zimmer, Heiwrich:- Philosophies of India New York -1951.s