

RELIGIOUS TRENDS OF THE MUGHAL AGE

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Survey of the Preceding Age: Islam had reached the sub-continent long before the advent of Muslim political power. Even in this early pre-political phase, Islam had had important repercussion on Indian thought and life. No less an authority, Dr. Tara Chand ascribes the unityism of Sankracharya to the influence of Islam. With the establishment of Muslim political power, Muslim religious thought and activity began to assume a more elaborate, articulate and organized shape. The religious classes viz, the Ulama and the Mashaikh played a very important role in the spreading of Muslim culture and faith in Indo-Pakistan in the pre-Mughal period. The Ulema, the doctors of Muslim Law, represented the orthodox aspect of the faith. They were well versed in the Islamic lore and gave an authoritative interpretation of the doctrines and percepts of Islam. They underlined the importance of tradition and discipline in religious matters. It was, however, the Mashaikh, the Mystics who played the leading role in the propagation of Islamic ideas. Humble in address, speaking the dialect of the people, they spread far and wide and by their preaching, their noble bearing and sympathetic approach they won respect for their faith. There was much that appeared to be common to Sufism and Hindu mysticism. The dhikr of the Sufis resembled the japna of the Hindu yogis, the pir and the guru occupied almost identical places in their respective systems. Even the spiritual contents of the two systems had something in common. Thus started, almost unnoticed, a slow and silent among the mystic orders was the Chishtia Silsilah. From Khwaja Moinuddin Ajmeri (Died 1236) to Sheikh Nizamuddin (1238-1325) there is an unbroken succession of great mystics, who set up a very high level of idealism in their profession and practice. They kept aloof from Kings and courts but mixed with the people, and when Sheikh Nasiruddin asked in permission of Sheikh Nizamuddin Aulia to leave Delhi and lead a secluded life, the preceptor remarked "you must remain Delhi and suffer the company of men." A certain amount of strain between the Ulema and the Mashaikh was always there. Sheikh Qutbuddin Bakhtiar Kaki Qazi, Hamiduddin Nagauri and Sheikh Nizamuddin Anbia were accused of anti-shariah practices by the orthodox ecclesiastics of their times. The great mystics generally laid emphasis on the observance of the Shariat but the bolder spirits among their followers sometimes transgressed the bounds of religious propriety. A number of such mystic zealots were executed during the reign of Firoz Shah. One of these had claimed divinity.

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BHAKTI MOVEMENT

An interesting product of the interaction between Islam and Hinduism was the Bhakti cult. It was an attempt from the Hindu side to incorporate such of the elements of Islam, especially of the Islamic mysticism, into Hindu faith as were easily assimilable. The Bhakti cult taught devotion to a personal God. It helped mitigate caste distinctions. It laid emphasis on fervor and devotion as against forms and dogmas of religion, and considered the various religions as different paths to a common goal. The Bhakti hymns breathed the spirit of Persian Sufis poetry. The *dsahas* of Kabir (1440-50) and the writings of Nanak (1469-1530) re-echo the strains of the lyrics of Hafiz and Jami.

MAHDAVIST MOVEMENT

The sixteenth century was an age of religious ferment. With the first millennium of Islam in sight, it was also an era of expectation and religious tension. The tension set into motion forces which worked in several directions. One product of this tension and the feeling of expectation was the Mahdavid Movement. Mulla Mohammad of Jounpur, who proclaimed himself Mahdi in 1495 at Mekkah was a man of different stamp than the many other Mahdis of history. He was a man of extraordinary intelligence and scholarship. His life was throughout marked by piety and nobility. Unlike the other Mahdis, he never aspired for political power. On two occasions, when his disciples offered him armed assistance to overcome his enemies, he spurned their offer and remarked "wield the sword on your inordinate desires. The helper of Mahdi is God."

"His success was primarily due to his sincerity and fervor, the purity of his character and the selflessness, whose personality had a chastening and purifying influence on their lives.....Robbers and bandits would leave their profession and adopt dhikr and contemplation and would dedicate their lives to God. He breathed a spirit of love and amity among his contemporaries....It was the honesty and integrity, the resignation and unworldliness of Syed Mohammad which appealed to his audience, and secured converts to his way of thought." (vide Mahdari movement in India by Dr. S.N Rizvi, Medieval India Quarterly, Aligarh, 1950).

The orthodox looked upon Syed Mohammad as a religious and political rebel. The Syed himself claimed for his teaching complete conformity with Islam. He laid great emphasis on the otherworldly aspect of religion. He taught renunciation of the world. Dhikr, which meant the performance of prayers in a state of utter absorption in God, was the foremost duty, and all that which interfered with the practice of dhikr, eg, the quest of knowledge or the earning of livelihood was unlawful (vide, Medieval India Quarterly, Aligarh, 1950). The Mahdi enjoined on his followers to withdraw themselves from society and to live in *Daeras* (worship circles). They were

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not to depend on charity and gifts, nor were they to busy themselves with earning wealth. Accumulation of wealth was indeed proscribed. Private and public service were similarly proscribed as they entailed dependence on others. "Whatever was obtained by joint effort was distributed equally among all the members of the Daera....Nobody was allowed to receive more than his share." The Mahdi's own son and daughter-in-law were not allowed anything beyond their due share. Nobody was allowed to store anything for further use. The Mahdavis went about fearing the advent of the resurrection every moment.

After Syed Mohammad's death in 1505, his work was continued by his son and successor Syed Mahmud. He encouraged the establishment of various *dearas*, which now became the vehicle of propagation of the Mahdavi mission. The persecution and banishment of the Mahdavis led to the multiplication of the *daeras* and to a widespread propagation of the Mahdavi faith.

The subsequent history of Mahdavidism is a chequered one. The Mahdavis professed to remain aloof from politics. But they held wealth and worldly power in contempt and considered the rulers and ruled as equals. Unlike most of the orthodox *ulema* of the day, they refused to observe the court etiquette. This, along with their general opposition to the orthodoxy in profession and practice and their condemnation of the *ulema* for their worldliness and wealth, soon brought them into conflict with the legally constituted authority. The *ulema* represented them to the sultans as a menace to their authority. Mulla Abdullah Sultanpuri was instrumental in inducing Islam Shah Suri to persecute the Suris. Sheikh Abdullah Niazi annoyed the Suri Sultan by greeting him with a plain *Assalamo Alaik*. He was therefore grievously flogged at the instigation of Mulla Abdullah....Sheikh Alai of Bayana was another notable mahdavi who met a similar fate. On his conversion to Mahdavidism, he had forsaken all his worldly riches and had become a powerful protagonist of the new faith. He had immense success as a preacher and won many adherents. He was summoned to the capital by Islam Shah but had shortly afterwards to be banished from the capital as many officials and nobles were falling under his spell and joining the new faith. He was exiled to Hindia but there the governor of the place himself fell under his charm, and so the Sheikh had to be exiled from there too. His case was referred to Sheikh Budh of Bihar who reported favorably but his recommendations were tempered with in transit by his own son with a view to please Mulla Abdullah. Subsequently, at the instigation of the Mulla, Islam Sheikh asked him to abjure his faith. On his refusal he was flogged and he died at the third stroke. This happened towards the middle of the sixteenth century.

The last in the line of the great Mahdavi preachers was Miyan Mustafa of Gujrat. The orthodox *ulema* of Gujrat wanted Akbar to execute him for his heterodoxy. But when he was brought before the Emperor, he was able to

convince him of his sincerity. In the discussions and disputations that followed, he worsted his critics. Akbar showed him great favor. He died in 1575 while returning from the royal court to Gujrat.

THE SHATTARI ORDER

It was an old order which originated with Sheikh Bayazid Bustami (753-845). It was brought to India by Sheikh Abdullah Shattari. Unlike other mystic saints, he lived in a princely fashion and went from place to place with his band of uniformed followers asking people to join his order. After his death at Mandu in 1485, his work was continued by his disciples, Sheikh Mohammad Ala and Sheikh Hafiz of Jaunpur. The former spread the order in Bengal, and it was the Bengal branch which produced the greatest saint of the order, Syed Mohammad Ghaus of Gawaliar. Sheikh Hasiz was also fortunate in having a line of able disciples, the most notable among them being Sheikh Buddhan who “popularized the Shattari silsila in Northern India.”

Syed Mohammad Ghaus, the greatest figure of the movement, was deeply influenced by wujudy philosophy. For many years he lived a life of physical penances and austerities and spiritual ecstasy. Early in life he wrote a book entitled *Jawahir-i-Khamsa*, which invited the censure of the orthodox camp on account of its bold and unrestrained expression of pantheistic ideas. Later on the saint issued a revised version of the book, omitting or altering many of the objectionable passages. Another of his work, *Bahr-ul-Hayat*, the ocean of life, “discusses the influence of Hindu ideas on Muslim mysticism. It was indeed a percussion of *Majma-ul-Bahrain* of Dara Shikoh. Syed Mohammad Ghaus’s knowledge of Hindu mystic thought was intimate and deep, his approach was sympathetic and unprejudiced. He had intimate relation with the Hindus. He would stabd up to welcome every Hindu visitor. His hobby was keeping bulls and cows. (2)

The attitude of the Sheikh soon brought him into conflict with the orthodoxy. During the saint’s sojourn in Gujrat, he was condemned to death by Sheikh Ali Muttaqi. Sultan Mahmud referred the matter to Sheikh Wajih-ud-din Alavi, the leading scholar of Gujrat. He was also impressed and charmed by the personality of the saint. Not only he tore up the condemnatory fatwa of Sheikh Muttaqi but himself became an ardent admirer of the saint and lived to be one of his principal successors (khalifa). It bears an eloquent testimony to the greatness of Mohammad Ghaus that he should have made an easy conquest of a great scholar of mature ideas and long standing. The Sheikh’s support of Syed Wajih-ud-din secured the saint from further attacks from the orthodox camp. The Shattari saints in India had very intimate relations with kings and Emperors and held jagirs from them. This uncommon of piety and plenty invited unfavorable comments from contemporaries and Shattarisin their defense advanced the unconvincing plea that they mixed with the rich for the sake of the poor. Sheikh Abdullah

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Shattari and after him Sheikh Bahauddin had close personal relations with the Khilaji Sultan of Mandu and lived at his court.

Syed Mohammad Ghaus of Gawaliar established a lifelong relation with the Mughals. He actively helped Babar in the reduction of the fort of Gawaliar. He and his brother, Sheikh Bahlol, had great influence with Humayun. Sheikh Bahlol was highly respected and trusted by Humayun. When Hindal rebelled at Agra during Humayun's absence in Bengal, the Sheikh was entrusted by the emperor with the task of treating with the rebel prince. The mission cost him his life for the prince got him murdered. He was known for his learning and piety as well as for his riches and political influence.

After Humayun's defeat and exit from India, Syed Mohammad Ghaus very wisely left for Gujrat in order to avoid any untoward affair with Sher Shah. He lived there for about 18 years and visited Champanir, Baruch and Ahmedabad. He obtained great influence there and in Sheikh Wajihuddin he found an illustrious disciple who propagated his mission and founded a powerful branch of the silsila in Gujrat.

Ghaus remained loyal to the Mughals even in their adversity and kept himself in touch with Humayun through correspondence. Sometime after the Mughal restoration, the saint set out from Gujrat and reached Agra in 1558. Humayun's death (1556) had deprived him of an old friend and patron. The saint did not feel happy in the new dispensation. Akbar showed him due respect but his Sardar-i-jahan Sheikh Gadai did not take to him kindly. Mulla Abdul Qadir thus notes these affairs in his characteristic style: "the saint's arrival was displeasing to Sheikh Gadai, who on account of pettiness, enmity and jealousy....which to the saints of India is their mutual relations are the very necessities of life, looked on his arrival as a case of opening a shop above his own shop." He pointed out to Bairam Khan certain passages in the saint's work entitled "Mirajia" in which he had described his own ascension (mi'raj) and claimed certain superiority over prophets. The powerful regent used his influence against the saint. A series of disputations and controversies took place which put the saint in a very awkward situation. He therefore retired to his jagir at Gawaliar where he passed the rest of his life. The saint remained loyal to Akbar and when the latter visited Gawaliar, he showed the young king great affection and even enrolled him among his disciples. Akbar however, did not attach any importance to it. Sometime later, Akbar utilized the good offices of the saint in bringing to submission the powerful Afghan noble, Fatah Khan. The saint died in 1563 and is buried at Gawaliar. His mausoleum there is one of the most notable monuments in the city. He was like his brother a rich man and had a jagir of one crore dams at Gawaliar. Abul Fazl, in spite of his catholicity of outlook, does not speak well of the saint.

The Shattari order did not last long after the death of the saint. The movement failed as it lacked elements of popular appeal. It had a highbrow atmosphere. Its pantheistic philosophy was incomprehensible to the common

people.¹ As Mr. Khaliq Nizami has pointed out “the Shattaris neglected the common man. They fixed their gaze on palaces and mansions....the silsila identified itself so closely with the state and the rulers that its prestige waxed and waned with the attitude of the rulers.....Akbar’s indifference so completely smashed the organization that it could not regain its prestige.”

AKBAR (1553-1603)

Akbar was endowed with a deeply religious mind and a keenly inquisitive temperament. There is ample evidence of his religiosity and conformity in the early years of his life. He would, for example, himself recite the call to prayers and even clean the mosques. During the formative period of his life, he came under certain liberal influence which gave depth as well as breadth to his religious outlook. His regent Bairam Khan was a shia. His Persian tutor Abdul Latif was so liberal in ideas that the Shias considered him a Sunni and the Sunnis dubbed him a Shia. He taught to his royal pupil the doctrine of Sulh-i-kul or universal peace based on concept of broad toleration of various peoples and faiths. Sheikh Gadai who became his Sadrus-Sadoor or minister of Ecclesiastical Affairs in 1559 was a Shia. In 1662, Akbar freed himself from the tutelage of Bairam. He now began to work out a new policy towards the non-Muslims. The new policy was inaugurated by Akbar’s marrying Raja Bihar Mal’s daughter in 1562. The new imperial consort was allowed to retain her faith and was indeed provided with all the facilities to practice it in the royal palace. The two succeeding years witnessed the abolition of tax on Hindu pilgrims and of Jiziya.

These events are a clear evidence of a change in outlook, if not of a change in religious beliefs. About a decade before the advent of Sheikh Mubarak and his son at the court, Akbar had already struck out a new direction for himself. Partly this may be ascribed to the disgust which he felt at the conduct of the leaders of orthodoxy, who should in fact be largely considered responsible for the decline of the fortunes of Islam in contemporary India. Makhdum-ul-Mulk Mulla Abdullah Sultanpuri had a distinguished career as a scholar. Humayun gave him the title of Makhdum-ul-Mulk; Sher Shah made him Shaikh-ul-Islam. He exercised tremendous influence under Islam Shah but he misused his powers partly to enrich himself and partly to persecute those who differed from him on religious problems. When he died, he left behind immense treasures- 3 crore rupees and several boxes full of silver bricks. He persecuted the Mahdavis and their sympathizers and the Shias. One detail of his personal life would suffice to show the pattern of his religious conformity- at the end of every year he temporarily handed over his hoard of gold and silver to his wife in order to escape zakat. Abdunnabi as the Sadar-us-Sadoor had in his hands an unlimited patronage whose distribution was shamelessly dishonest and

¹. Med. India Quarterly, 1951.

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corrupt. Local ecclesiastics improved upon the examples of their superiors. What is more, the orthodoxy was divided against itself. Makhdumul Mulk started a regular campaign against Abdunnabi and said that prayers could not be offered under his Imamatus as he was suffering from piles. Sheikh Abdunnabi was retaliated by declaring him an ignoramus. Haji Ibrahim Sirhindi declared the wearing of yellow and red colored clothes lawful, in order to ingratiate himself with the Emperor. The chief Qazi declared the Haji's declaration heretical.

These mutual recrimination and anathematization of the ecclesiastics served to discredit the whole set of them. Their understanding of Islam was unimaginative and uninspiring. With a damnable divergence between their own profession and practice, they set up to persecute others for alleged lapses for correct behavior. Akbar's disgust with them might have remained a negative feeling but for the arrival of Sheikh Mubarak at the psychological moment. The Sheikh had been hunted from place to place like a beast of prey by the orthodox party for his heterodox views. What is more, in point of intellect and learning, the Sheikh and his sons were superior to their opponents and could beat them on their own ground. It is rather a controversial point whether Abul Fazl and Faizi were Muslims or heretics. The general view has been that they were responsible for Akbar's religious vagaries. A modern writer* has attempted to show that while both of them passed through a phase of skepticism, they regained faith subsequently. Faizi's tafsir of Quran is advanced as an argument in his favor. Abul Fazl was intellectually more gifted of the two and it was in fact he who supplied Akbar with most of his ideas. Akbar indeed had fully shown the trend of his mind much before Abul Fazl's advent at the court, but the latter's intellect gave Akbar's vague spiritual dissatisfaction a definite direction and shape. Possibly, Islam as presented by a section of the orthodox ulema failed to satisfy the deep spiritual cravings of both Akbar and Abul Fazal, and this brought them very closer to each other.

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THE IBADAT KHANA

Akbar's quest for truth led to the setting up of the Ibadat Khana and the debates on religion held therein. The behavior of the ulemas at these gatherings, their unseemly disputes over precedence in seating order, their mutual recrimination and their hairsplitting arguments made Akbar feel sick of them. He ordered Mulla Abdul Qadir Badayuni to turn out anyone who misbehaved, and the Mulla, who himself belonged to the orthodox school, said in an aside that a host of ulema would lose their seat if the order was really enforced. The Ibadat Khana, which in the beginning admitted