

Study Material for History Honours SEM 4 CC-9

Concept of Inclusive State in Medieval India

ShimaDatta

Probable questions: 1.How would you account for the emergence of inclusive state in Medieval India?

2.Elaborate on the evolution of religious tolerance in Medieval/ Mughal India with special reference to Sufism and Akbar's religious policy of sulh-i kul.

Indian society has been a multi-religious society since ancient times ,being the birth place of four religions-Buddhism,Jainism,Hinduism and Sikhism.In course of time both Islam and Christianity found followers and preachers.Indeed,accepting and not merely tolerating diverse religions is an integral part of Indian civilizational ethos.

True, a new chapter began in the politico- religious history of the Indian subcontinent with the establishment of Delhi Sultanate in 1206. But an important aspect of Islam in India was its very early acceptance of a long-term coexistence with Hinduism despite all the violence that occurred in military campaigns and conquests.The advent of Islam during the Sultanate and Mughal period did play an important role in the Islamisation of India's political culture. But given the religious diversities and sectarian divisions amongst the Muslims,acolossal,monolithic or uniform Islam backed by state power could never establish itself in India.Instead interactions between various strands of Islam and diverse Indian religious traditions led to the emergence of new forms of religious cults and sects,the most prominent being Sufism,bhakti and Sikhism.

Ever since historians such as K.S.Lal,U.NDayand R.P.Tripathi described the Delhi Sultanate as a theocratic state,(that is,a state which recognizes god alone as the ultimate ruler),the nature of the state under the Delhi Sultanate has become a debatable subject. The very nature of kingship in the Delhi Sultanate ,that is,the strong element of violence(just two bloodless dynastic changes out of nine that took place at that time) clearly shows that the king was neither the shadow and instrument of God(Zilluah)nor the servant of the caliph.It is to be noted that the word Sultanate is derived from the word " sult"which means power,authority and the domination of one man over others.Hence historian Vipul Singh has cogently argued that religion and spirituality had no place whatsoever in the new political scenario of the Delhi Sultanate.The medieval state came to be governed by the dictates of power and force or istila alone.

One cannot agree with historians such as K.A.Nizami,Qureshi and Mohammad Habib who have stated that the Sultanate was a secular state.It is to be noted that religion and politics were inseparable and the term 'secular' had not yet acquired its modern- day connotation in our period of discussion.

Historians Raziuddin Aquil and Muzaffar Alam are of the view that the Turkish sultans of the Delhi Sultanate, had realized that it was difficult to rule a predominantly non-Muslim population by using a narrow interpretation of the Shariat(Muslim Law).Here in lies the significance of contemporary scholar Ziauddin Barani's most important book,Fatawa-i Jahandari(Precepts on Governance),where he advocated the concept of Zawabit.Zawabit was a gesture of political expediency especially in a

situation when the Sultan was unable to implement the regulations of the shariat in totality and tried to evolve a “secular” or non-theocratic law. The *zawabit* or the state laws, was therefore one of the most remarkable contributions of Barani to medieval states as it enabled the Sultans to ignore the pressure of the *ulamas*, “ who quite often wanted the Sultans to present the *Kafirs* or *Hindus* with the choice of death or Islam”. (R. Aquil)

The Sultans of Delhi often used religion either to mobilize the nobility or to provide the Sultan with a justificatory ethos. The primary role of the *ulema*, who occupied an important position as the religious head of the Sultanate, was to uphold the Islamic religio-moral order as far as possible to do so. This often became a contentious issue as the Sultan’s ultimate objective was not glorification of Islam but political success. This resulted in a number of clashes of interests between the *ulema* and the Sultan. Given the fact that the majority of the subject population was non-Muslim, the Sultan was particularly keen upon functioning in a politically tactful manner. As Irfan Habib says, “ that a politically astute Sultan who understood the issues at hand, adopted a policy of compromise and moderation.” That upholding the banner of religion was not the Sultan’s sole concern becomes clear when we note that some of the Sultans such as Iltutmish, Balban, Alauddin Khalji kept the theologians or the *ulema* at bay. Besides, Alauddin Khalji and Mohammad bin Tughlaq even inducted the non-Muslims or *Hindus* in important government posts, as Barani mentioned in his book, on grounds of necessity. So it may be concluded that the Sultanate was far from a shariat driven Islamic state as no concerted effort for a complete political and religious transformation was ever undertaken.

Historian Muzaffar Alam has shown that a clearcut distinction existed between the meaning of Shariat laws for Muslim jurists and for philosophers and intellectuals who wanted to break free from the clutches of sunni Muslim orthodoxy. This was reflected in the two sets of writings on Muslim political ideas – *akhlaq* and *adab*. The approach of the *adab* literature was narrow as according to it shariat was to be the guiding principal of governance. But the inclusive *akhlaq* texts were marked by their distinct departure from orthodox sunni positions on the regulations of shariat. It offered broadbased political advice to the rulers. Khwaja Nasir-ud- din Tusi’s classic work *Akhlaq-i-Nasiri* is a classic example of this literature. Religion did occupy an important place in this political ideal, but the connotations of the shariat were broadened to ensure that religious differences among the subject population did not determine state policy in such matters as justice. Thus no discrimination was to be made between people on the basis of their religion. It is believed that Khwaja Nasiruddin’s *Akhlaq-i-Nasiri* played an important role in the evolution of Akbar’s religious policy of *sulh-i kul*.

Any analysis of religious tolerance in medieval India will remain incomplete without a discussion on the contribution of Sufis. The Mongol irruption in central and west Asia in the first half of the 13th century witnessed large-scale immigration of Muslims, including many Sufis. Sufism or Islamic mysticism (Sufism originates from the Arabic term for mystic *sufi*, which in turn is derived from *suf* or wool, probably as a reference to the woollen clothing used by them) in terms of popularity and spiritual influence were unparalleled in India. What distinguished Sufism from other forms of Islam was the belief that a human soul could achieve union with God. This belief was later formulated as the doctrine of “*wahdat-ul-wujud*” (unity of existence, or monism as a reality) by Ibn-i-Arabi. In the

opinion of historians such as Salma Ahmed Farooqui and others, this sufi concept of wahdat-ul-wujud is reflected in the formulation of Akbar's policy of Sulh-i-Kul or peace with all.

Of the various Sufi orders or silsilas that emerged, four enjoyed considerable importance in India. Two of these, the Chishtis and Suhrawardis, flourished in the Sultanate period. While the Qadiri and Naqshbandi orders gained importance in the Mughal period. Sufism's greatest contribution to Indian culture is considered to be the example it set for religious and cultural co-existence. Indian Sufi orders showed that Muslim and non-Muslim religious traditions could prosper side by side and learn from each other, thereby providing a shining example of fruitful syncretism. The belief in Wahdat-ul-wujud and several techniques of meditation brought the Sufis spiritually very close to certain strands of non-Muslim religious traditions such as Advaita Hinduism which believed that the atma (human soul) and parmatma (God) were one and same, a theory similar in principle to wahdat-ul-wujud.

While the Sufis found much to learn from Hindu disciplines such as yoga, which influenced their meditation techniques, the teachings of both Kabir and Guru Nanak show the clear imprint of Sufi Islam. The criticism of idol worship, of "useless" rituals, the emphasis on human equality, and the worship of, and excessive devotion towards one God can all be traced to Sufism. In the case of Sikhism, whole sections of the Guru Granth Saheb consist of Sufi poetry. The Sufis played a significant role in the growth and development of vernacular literature, (Urdu, Hindi, Punjabi, Sindhi) and their contribution to the spread of poetry and music (qawwali) is equally notable in the process of cultural accretion between the Muslim and non-Muslim communities. Historian Richard Eaton has shown that the message of peaceful co-existence of the Sufis along with the efforts of their Bhakti counterparts heightened the atmosphere of religious tolerance and helped create a society free of religious and sectarian tensions.

Akbar was deeply interested in religion and philosophy. At the outset, Akbar was an orthodox Muslim. But by the time he reached adulthood, mysticism, which was then being preached throughout the country began to influence him. Gradually, he turned away from the path of narrow orthodoxy. According to the contemporary critic of Akbar, Abdul Qadir Badauni (author of Muntakhab-ut-Tawarikh), the mutual animosity between Abdun Nabi and Makhdum-ul-Mulk, two senior officials in charge of religious affairs of the state, was one of the reasons for Akbar's gradual aversion for official Islamic tradition.

One of the first actions which Akbar took, after he became the emperor was to abolish the poll tax or jizyah which though not a heavy tax, was disliked because it made a discrimination on ground of religion. At the same time around 1560s Akbar abolished the pilgrim tax imposed on the Hindus for bathing at holy places such as Prayag, Benarasetc. He also abolished the practice of forcibly converting the prisoners of war into Islam. This laid the essential foundation of an empire based on equal rights to all citizens, irrespective of their religious beliefs.

Akbar's attitude towards his Hindu subjects is closely linked with his views of how a sovereign should behave towards his subjects. These views as explained by AbulFazal were an amalgam of Timurid, Persian and Indian ideas of sovereignty. According to AbulFazal, the office of a true ruler was very responsible one which depended on divine illumination (farr-i-azadi). Hence, no one could stand

between God and a true ruler. A true ruler was distinguished by a paternal love towards his subjects without distinction of sect or creed, a large heart so that the wishes of great and small are attended to. It was also the duty of the ruler to maintain equilibrium in society by not allowing people of one rank of profession to interfere in the duties and obligations of another. Above all he was not to allow the dust of sectarian strife to rise. All these together constituted what has been called the policy of Sulh-i-Kul or "peace to all" or equal toleration of and respect to all sections, irrespective of their religious beliefs.

In his quest to ascertain truth and to find out the principles of genuine religion, Akbar built a hall called IbadatKhana or the Hall of Prayer (1575) at Fatehpur Sikri. To this he called selected theologians and some of his nobles who were known for their intellectual attainments and discussed about religious and spiritual matters with them. The proceedings at first were confined to the Muslim theologians and as they wrangled, shouted, and abused each other even in the presence of the emperor, Akbar felt disgusted and it further alienated him from them. Convinced that he had to take a serious interest in the religions and cultures of non-Muslims in India, Akbar arranged for discussions to take place involving not only mainstream Hindu and Muslim philosophers but also Christians, Parsees, Jains and even the followers of Charvaka, an old Indian school of atheistic thinking at the IbadatKhana. This broadened the discussions and it showed his inclination to implement Sulh-i-Kul. But historian R.P. Tripathi says the patience and open-mindedness of Akbar at the Ibadatkhana instead of bringing credits brought growing discredit to him and the ulemas began to circulate rumours about Akbar's desire to forsake Islam.

To further strengthen his position in dealing with the ulamas, Akbar issued a declaration or Mahzar (1579), which asserted that if there were conflicting views on the interpretation of Quran among the mujtaddids, then Akbar was entitled to choose any one of the interpretations. Further, if Akbar issued a new order 'in conformity with the Quran and calculated to benefit the nation', all should be bound by it. Historian Satish Chandra has pointed out that at a time when there were bitter sectarian conflicts among the Muslims in different parts of the country, Akbar wanted the widest toleration. There is little doubt that the Mahzar had a salutary effect in stabilizing the religious situation in the empire.

Akbar tried to emphasise the concept of sulh-i-kul or peace and harmony among religions in many other ways as well such as he set up a big translation department and books such as Bible, Gita, AtharVeda, Mahabharata and even Quran were translated into Persian for the first time. It is believed that in enrolling murids, or disciples for his tauhid-i-Ilahi, or din-i-Ilahi, (it was not a new religion founded by Akbar as asserted by Badayuni, rather an order of sufistic type, a product of his genuine interest in comparative religion) Akbar had some political purpose as he wanted a band of loyal nobles and others who would support him in his concept of a state based on sulh-i-kul, that is, equal toleration of and respect to all sections irrespective of their religious beliefs.

Nobel laureate Amartya Sen has emphasized in his book *The Argumentative Indian* that the most important point that Akbar made in his defence of a tolerant and pluralist society was his focus on the role of reason. Even in deciding on one's faith one should be, Akbar argued, guided by the path of reason (rahi... aql) rather than led by blind faith. It won't be an exaggeration therefore if we conclude that in medieval India, the most powerful defence of toleration and of the need for the state to be

equidistant from different religions came from a Muslim Indian emperor, Akbar. It is not for nothing that the Time Magazine listed Emperor Akbar among the twenty five top political icons of all times.