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Delhi Sultanate:

The Religious Scene Impacting The Political

The introduction of Islam to India in the eighth century through military campaigns resulted in a religious divide between the two major religious communities, Muslims and Hindus.¹ Early Hindus saw the power of their religion challenged by the desecration of their temples and idols, and they needed a religious explanation. They interpreted this as a sign that Muslims were part of evil forces or demons, and because of their geographic otherness, were seen also as unclean (*mleccha*).² This caused a social alienation from Hindus towards Muslims. The Muslim perspective fluctuates more over the span of a couple centuries. Islam classifies people of different religion into three different groups: people of the book (*ahl-i-Kitab*), people who resembled people of the book (*mushabah ahl-i-Kitab*), and unbelievers and polytheists (*kafirs* and *mushriks*). This religious classification of people translated into political treatment. *Ahl-i-Kitab* and *mushabah ahl-i-Kitab* were given the status of *dhimmi*, or protected people, and had to pay *jiziyah*. Originally, the *jiziyah* was something to take pride in, because the money went towards Muslims fighting for the state for all the people.³ However, by the thirteenth century, it transformed into a tax that had become more of an obligation, rather than something to

¹ Stanley A. Wolpert, *A New History of India* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 109-124. Romila Thapar, *Early India: From the Origins to AD 1300* (New Delhi: Penguin Books, 2003), 400-412.

² Munazza Batool, "Hindu-Muslim Religious Encounters during the Delhi Sultanate Period," *Islamic Studies* 60, no. 2 (2021): 173–85, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27088434>.

³ Khaliq A. Nizami, *Some Aspects of Religion and Politics in India during the Thirteenth Century* (New Delhi: The Caxton Press, 1961), 308-311.

be proud of.⁴ *Mushriks* and *kafirs* were treated differently based on the ruler's ideals and interpretations of Muslim texts. Hindus oscillated between classifications, meaning that they were perceived differently during different time periods. When Islam rule was introduced to India, Hindus were first classified in the *mushabah ahl-i-Kitab* category, with *dhimmi* status. During the Ghaznavid period (977-1186), Hindus were placed in the *mushriks* category, because Hindus were seen as rejecting prophethood. Because of this classification, Hindus had to often choose between death, expulsion, or slavery.⁵ In the Delhi Sultanate (1206-1526), military invasions and government policies furthered the two communities apart. However, there was also an increased integration of culture between the two communities, leading to syncretism and positive influence on each other.⁶ Both the religious divide and syncretism heavily influenced the political scene in the Delhi Sultanate and the effects of policies.

During the Delhi Sultanate, Hindus gained back *dhimmi* status, but the prejudices from previous centuries seeped into policies. Many religious philosophers focused on Hindu status due to the increasing focus on administrative reform in the fourteenth century.⁷ For example, Shaikh Hamadānī, a Sufi saint, believed that Hindus should be granted *dhimmi* status, but with many strict restrictions. For instance, Hindus were not permitted “to build their homes in the neighborhood of Muslims,”. They also had to further allow Muslims to rebuild the destroyed temples as mosques and other Muslim hubs.⁸ This was not standard *dhimmi* treatment, so the implementation of this policy shows more significant discrimination against the Hindu community. There were many different taxes being placed on the Hindu population under the Delhi Sultanate. For example, Sultan Ala-ud-din Khalji had a policy of leaving “Hindus just

⁴ Nizami, *Some Aspects of Religion and Politics in India during the Thirteenth Century*, 308-311.

⁵ Batool, “Hindu-Muslim Religious Encounters during the Delhi Sultanate Period,” 185-186.

⁶ Wolpert, *A New History of India*, 109-124. Thapar, *Early India: From the Origins to AD 1300*, 400-412.

⁷ Wolpert, *A New History of India*, 115.

⁸ Shaikh Hamadānī, *Zakhīrat ul-Mulūk*, in *Sources of Indian Tradition*, 2nd ed. Vol. 1, edited by Embree, Ainslie T, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 442-443.

sufficient maintenance and not allow them to accumulate hoards” and it was strictly political to make sure the economy does not financially crash.⁹ However, this caused a negative reaction from the Hindu community, furthering the divide. Political demolition of temples also impacted the divide. For example, Sikander Lodi, a sultan of Delhi in the late fifteenth century to the early sixteenth century, “demolished all the unbelievers’ temples, leaving these without name or trace.”¹⁰ The destruction of these temples demoralizes Hinduism. Not only that, in “Mathura and other places that are centers for the Hindus’ bathing, he built guesthouses and bazaars and mosques and theological schools.”¹¹ It further emphasizes a hierarchical relationship between the two communities, with Muslim people being very much higher up than Hindus.

The religious divide was also an outcome of political warfare between Muslim and Hindu states. The two communities were initially divided by geographical borders and a sense of foreignness, rather than religious motives.¹² Due to the natural need for expansion of the Sultanate, many Muslim rulers had to conquer Hindu states. There could have been a potential need to gain resources against the Mongols.¹³ A common war strategy is to plunder temples and community centers and launch military campaigns to undermine the legitimacy of the conquered peoples by disconnecting the political ruler from the religious position he had to fill.¹⁴ A temple represents a king’s power in Hinduism, so destroying these temples would have led to the opponent’s humiliation.¹⁵ Because of these military campaigns, many Hindu rulers put

⁹ Mahdi Husain, “The Hindus in Medieval India,” *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress* 3 (1939): 715. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44252424>.

¹⁰ Nizām ud-dīn Ahmad, *Tabaqāt-i Akbarī*, trans. by Brajendranath De, in *Sources of Indian Tradition*, 2nd ed. Vol. 1, edited by Embree, Ainslie T. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 443-444.

¹¹ Ahmad, *Tabaqāt-i Akbarī*, 443-444.

¹² Cynthia Talbot, “Inscribing the Other, Inscribing the Self: Hindu-Muslim Identities in Pre-Colonial India,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 37, no. 4 (1995): 701, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/179206>.

¹³ Jackson, Peter. “Muslim India: The Delhi Sultanate,” In *The Eastern Islamic World Eleventh to Eighteenth Centuries*, ed. by David O. Morgan and Anthony Reid (Vol. 3 of *The New Cambridge History of Islam*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 106.

¹⁴ Jackson, “Muslim India: The Delhi Sultanate,” 121.

¹⁵ Talbot, “Inscribing the Other, Inscribing the Self: Hindu-Muslim Identities in Pre-Colonial India,” 718.

themselves as the defenders of the Hindu religion, and portrayed Muslims as demons to further legitimize their authority.¹⁶ For example, in 1323, Delhi Sultanate armies captured the Andhra region in southern India and caused the collapse of the Kakatiya dynasty.¹⁷ At this time, the Delhi Sultanate is under the Khalji dynasty, which is only the second dynasty, and relatively early in the empire. To grow the foundation of their empire, they needed to expand further into India, hence why they conquered more southern regions during this time. By 1325, most of southern India was under Delhi Sultanate rule.¹⁸ There was also a lot of Hindu backlash from this attack, and Hindu people further depicted Muslims as demonic forces.¹⁹ The Muslim community then responded by religiously explaining the political warfare through *jihād* and how Hindus were rejecting the message of Islam.²⁰ These conquests also seemed to have an underlying religious motivation. While these campaigns did gain territory, other prominent effects were humiliation of Hindu rulers and gaining loot and slaves from Hindu kingdoms.²¹

There was also a clear acceptance of each other politically, allying with each other for protection. There were many military and marital alliances formed over the set religious boundaries.²² The common danger of the Mongols also drew both religious groups together.²³ Because of the overlap in their daily life between the two communities, there was also significant mutual political influence on each other. For example, Muslims were dependent on Hindu officials for tax collection and keeping order, issuing inscriptions in a bilingual format. Muslim military and administrative tactics were adopted by Hindu policies.²⁴ Because of the mutual

¹⁶ Talbott, "Inscribing the Other, Inscribing the Self: Hindu-Muslim Identities in Pre-Colonial India," 703.

¹⁷ Talbott, "Inscribing the Other, Inscribing the Self: Hindu-Muslim Identities in Pre-Colonial India," 696.

¹⁸ Talbott, "Inscribing the Other, Inscribing the Self: Hindu-Muslim Identities in Pre-Colonial India," 696.

¹⁹ Talbott, "Inscribing the Other, Inscribing the Self: Hindu-Muslim Identities in Pre-Colonial India," 697.

²⁰ Jackson, "Muslim India: The Delhi Sultanate," 105.

²¹ Jackson, "Muslim India: The Delhi Sultanate," 106.

²² Talbott, "Inscribing the Other, Inscribing the Self: Hindu-Muslim Identities in Pre-Colonial India," 707.

²³ Nizami, *Some Aspects of Religion and Politics in India during the Thirteenth Century*, 323.

²⁴ Talbott, "Inscribing the Other, Inscribing the Self: Hindu-Muslim Identities in Pre-Colonial India," 707.

respect between the two communities, the Delhi Sultanate functioned better as a political entity. An example of this is in *Tabaqat Akbari*, when Sikander Lodi consulted his court's religious scholars about his recent destruction of temples. The Muslim scholars said that it was "not authorized [by the Sharī'a] to lay waste ancient temples."²⁵ This shows religious tolerance from the Islamic law, and furthermore how it was not in accordance with the Sharī'a when Sikander Lodi demolished Hindu temples. The *dhimmi* status given to Hindus gives them protection of their religion, and, combined with the syncretism and influence, it shows that there was mutual respect between the two communities. Some Hindus were well respected throughout the Sultanate, able to rise up through the social class, and even given government positions.²⁶ Even though there is a clear barrier, there was cooperation and political respect between the two communities.

The proximity and the coexistence of religious traditions within the Delhi Sultanate led to mutual influence. Hinduism had many monotheistic tendencies, which provided a religious common ground between the two groups. Muslim scholars explained these tendencies by stating that the Hindu people misunderstood important Muslim teachings and used Hindu ignorance as an inclusive concept.²⁷ Muslim mystics upheld the principle that spiritual insight could be gained by a Hindu the same way it could be gained by a Muslim.²⁸ When Sufism entered India, it became more aligned with Hindu and local traditions. These traditions added new perspectives and depth for Sufism.²⁹ Sufis also had an interest in studying and understanding Hindu mysticism, which shows a level of appreciation.³⁰ Many principles of Sufism were very

²⁵ Ahmad, *Tabaqāt-i Akbarī*, 443-444.

²⁶ Husain, "The Hindus in Medieval India", 719.

²⁷ Batool, "Hindu-Muslim Religious Encounters during the Delhi Sultanate Period," 189.

²⁸ Nizami, *Some Aspects of Religion and Politics in India during the Thirteenth Century*, 318.

²⁹ Saiyid A. A. Rizvi, "Islam in Medieval India." in *A Cultural History of India*, ed. by Arthur L. Basham, (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997), 284.

³⁰ Batool, "Hindu-Muslim Religious Encounters during the Delhi Sultanate Period," 193.

compatible with the ideas circulating in Hinduism. For example, the Unity of Being, a Sufi doctrine that emphasizes the oneness of the world, goes hand in hand with the Hindu concept of the oneness of all beings in an underlying reality. These concepts circulated between the thirteenth to fifteenth centuries, which was exactly when these two cultures had the most interactions with each other.³¹ The proximity between the two communities and the emergence of similar intellectual ideas suggests that the cohabitation of both groups directly influenced these developments. This syncretism further suggests that it was a way to break the religious barrier.

The political and religious treatment of Hindus under Muslim rule gives a better sense of medieval Islam as a whole. Many sources focus on the treatment of Christians, Jews, and Zoroastrians under Muslim rule. Analyzing another religious group under Muslim rule gives a more complete idea of what medieval Muslim rule was like. It also gives a better understanding of medieval Islamic intellectual developments and how Muslim scholars used other traditions around them to better their own understanding of the world. This is seen with Hinduism and Sufism, and this approach furthered both religions' intellectual developments.

³¹ Rizvi, "Islam in Medieval India.", 286-287.

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