

CHAPTER - IV

Chapter Four

ISLAM AND ITS IMPACT IN INDIA

Arabia, the birth place of Islam, is a peninsula connected with both Africa and Asia, but geographically somewhat isolated. Although the great empires of antiquity surrounded it, there were few penetrations into the interior. Much of the territory, which is approximately one-third the size of the United States, is high, rocky, and barren, with only a few fertile regions dotted here and there in the valleys of small streams or around oases. In search of water and grass for their cattle, herdsmen travel from one oasis to another, taking their belongings with them. There are a number of small cities along the coast line, but most of the population is migratory.¹

The Arabs, who were Semitic in their cultural background, loved warfare and were sought by the Persian and Byzantine states to serve in their armies. Armed conflict among the different tribes was common; plundering the borderland cities and robbing caravans were accepted as legitimate practices. The people were mystics, inclined to worship nature gods. In the typical Arab there was a

1. Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan. The History & Culture of The Indian People. Vol. V. The Struggle For Empire. pp. 467-473

prevailing individualism and much self-reliance. He was not inclined to submit to centralized organizations - political, economic, or social. In spite of the unsettled state of their existence and their wild nomadic life, these people were progressive in many ways.²

When mention is made of this Arabian or Mohammedan empire, this does not imply the existence of a state with a well-defined boundary, but applies, instead to many groups of people of varying culture spread over broad territories and bound together by a common devotion to a religious faith. At certain seasons of the year, the tribes endeavored to make pilgrimages to such favored spots as Mecca, where the Kaaba, a sanctuary for the famous Black Stone, was a center of veneration. Fighting stopped for four months in each year, in order that the faithful might congregate at Mecca. The people took advantage of this meeting to exchange wares and bits of learning that they had gathered in their travels. This was the condition in Arabic regions on the eve of the birth of Islam.

2. Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan. The History & Culture of The Indian People.
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FOUNDATIONS OF ISLAM

Mohammed, the founder of Islam, was born in Mecca, in 571A.D. He had no unusual talents, and some of his critics believe that he was subject to epileptic fits, in which condition he is reputed by his followers to have made his contacts with God. He married a rich ~~woman~~, named Khadijah, whose wealth and personal influence in Mecca were great assets. Many of his teachings were not new, but were adopted from Arabic folklore. His conception of God was that of the Old Testament, and he accepted Jesus as a prophet, along with Abraham and Moses; but he himself, so his followers declared, was the latest and greatest of the prophets. He assumed the title of Praised One, much the same as Gautama acquired the name Enlightened One, and as Jesus came to be called the Anointed One.

A great part of the Koran, the Mohammedan Bible, is not made up of the actual teachings and sayings of Mohammed, but is a revelation of what other people have attributed to him. While the Koran may not be of divine origin, it is, nevertheless, a remarkable book, which should be read in its entirety to be appreciated fully.

The believers in faith are charged to serve but one god, to honor their fellow men to be honest, to be frugal and to be temperate.³

CHARACTER OF ISLAM

The form of worship is much simpler than that practiced in most Christian churches. There is no priesthood, in the Christian sense of the word, and the mosque is a place for prayer and for reading the Koran, rather than for a formal service. It is a personal and individualistic religion, the faithful Mohammedan needs no intermediary between himself and his god. The form of worship is to recite the creed ("There is but one God, and Mohammed is his prophet"), to pray five times a day, to fast, to give alms to the poor, and to make at least one pilgrimage to Mecca. The next world is graphically described in the Koran. Hell is depicted as a dismal place. "Those who were committed to hell must live a measurable life in burning wind and scalding water in a black smoke. Heaven is described as a superoasis. "Youths shall continue in their bloom forever.... and there shall accompany

3. Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan. The History & Culture of The Indian People.
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them fair damsels having large black eyes; they resembling pearls hidden in their shells They shall have their abode among trees free from thorns and trees of Mauz loaded regularly with their produce from top to bottom; under an extended shade, near a flowing water and amidst fruits in abundance."⁴

Mohammed was a religious teacher and a social reformer, and the Koran is both a book of religion and a book of law. The conduct of life and details of etiquette are carefully regulated. Wines and other intoxicating liquors are prohibited, as is gambling. Infanticide and murder are condemned, and kindlier treatment of slaves is recommended. In contrast with Christianity, the Mohammedan form of worship is extremely simple. There is a conspicuous lack of sacraments, sacerdotal priesthood, and ecclesiastical hierarchy. Religion, to the faithful Mohammedan, is an everyday affair, not a concentration of religious practices into one holy day in the week. Islam, a dynamic religion, today is winning converts with ease at the expense of other religions.⁵

4,5. Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan. The History & Culture of The Indian People. Vol. V. The Struggle For Empire. pp. 467-473

Historically, Sufism was a religious system that developed within Islam in course of time had imbibed several beliefs which are also essentially of Hindu origin and which, in one form or another, were already familiar to the Hindus and the majority of the Indian Muslims converted from Hinduism, who came into contact with the great Sufi teachers. It is not strange, therefore, that in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries it came to be a common practice with the bulk of the Indian Muslims to be attached to some religious preceptor, usually a Sufi, just as the Hindus considered the guidance of a Guru to be essential for one's spiritual salvation, so that almost every religious-minded Muslim linked himself up with one Sufi Silsila (chain) or another as a sine qua non of respectability and religious awareness.⁶

The religious life of the Indian Muslims was agitated not only by periodic outbursts of Puritanism directed mostly against any tendency that smacked of Hinduising Islam, but also by the Shiah-Sunni differences which became accentuated after the establishment of the Mughal rule. Babur, the founder of the Mughul empire in

6. Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan. The History & Culture of The Indian People.
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India, was a devout Sunni who had been deeply influenced by the teachings of a Transoxanian saint, 'Ubaidullah Ahrar, but was, at the same time, remarkably tolerant towards the Shiah faith, and his cortege contained several notable Shiahites who had served him faithfully during all his hectic career.⁷

Akbar acceded to the throne of his father, he was faced with a situation which was not at all pleasant to his peaceful nature and which, moreover, was fraught with a grave danger of inter-communal strife on a large scale and the disintegration of the empire as a consequence. There were on the one hand the bigoted Sunni 'Ulema represented by the Shaikhul Islam Makhdum al-Mulk, and the Sadar-us-Sudur (Supreme Judge) Abdum-Nabi, both of whom had dominated the state policy to a considerable extent during the Suri period and who had continued to maintain their privileged position under Humayun and Akbar. As custodians of the Law, their verdict was looked upon as final on all religious and social matters, and the young emperor, who had not had the advantage of liberal education himself, had perforce to seek their guidance and to abide by their decisions during the early years of

7. Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan. The History & Culture of The Indian People. Vol. V. The Struggle For Empire. pp. 467-473

his reign. Any show of open hostility towards them might have cost him the support of a large and powerful section of the orthodox Muslim community, a risk which he could ill afford to take at that stage. On the other hand, the Sufis of the Chishtiya school had been gradually losing their hold on the minds of the influential Muslims ever since the death of Khwaja Nizam-ud-din Auliyah of Delhi who might be regarded as the last of the great mystic saints of India, and consequently their restraining and chastening influence was no longer there to counter the bigotry of the Sunni Ulema. The emperor on his part was deeply conscious of his own duties as a ruler and realised full well that a certain amount of harmony among the various religious communities living in this vast country was essential for effective administration, and that could only be brought about by curbing fanaticism and intolerance in whatever form they might make their appearance.⁸

The second and a bolder step taken by the emperor, now in open revolt against the 'Ulema, was to declare himself to be the spiritual as well as the secular head of the State and to be authorised to make any such changes in the Law (Shariat) as he deemed to be in

8. Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan. The History & Culture of The Indian People. Vol. V. The Struggle For Empire. pp. 467-473

conformity with the general welfare of his subjects. This act of Akbar's has a strangely remarkable resemblance to what an almost contemporary western ruler, Henry the Eighth of England, had done in order to free himself from the over-bearing tutelage of the Church of Rome. Scriptural authority was however, needed for this drastic measure, which was readily supplied by Shaikh Mubarak, who brought to the emperor's notice certain Quranic verses and traditions of the Prophet sanctioning such powers for a Muslim ruler.⁹

The comparative ease with which Akbar could adopt these drastic measures, emboldened him to advance a step further. This was the promulgation of a new religion based on a four-fold path of renunciation, called the Din-i-Ilahi in which the emperor appeared as not only a prophet but an "avatar" of God himself to whom all homage was due and before whom every one should prostrate himself exclaiming all the while "Allahu Akbar" a form of greeting which may mean "Allah is Great" as well as "Akbar is Allah."¹⁰

9,10. Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan. The History & Culture of The Indian People.
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The Din-i-Ilahi, however, remained little more than a freak and failed to exert any influence on the popular mind. Some of Akbar's closest and most devoted associates flatly refused to accept the new religion.

Akbar's innovations did not, as we have said above, produce any wide repercussions in the religious life of the Indian Muslims since he made no attempt to propagate his new religion among the masses, but some of them did affect their social customs, such as the sanctioning of marriages with non-Muslims, the legalizing of brothels, the banning of cow slaughter, and the permission to shave beards, preventing a Hindu widow becoming Sati.

SUFISM

The central ideal of the Naqshbandi school of Sufism which Syed Ahmad represented was to bridge the gulf, as far as possible, between orthodoxy and mysticism, in other words, to purge the Sufistic discipline of all such beliefs and practices which Islam did not sanction or which in some cases were actually repugnant to its spirit. Thus the new system rigidly banned the holding of pantheistic beliefs, the listening to music (sama) as a means of

attaining spiritual ecstasy, the keeping of long vigils (chilla and muraqaba), the loud and prolonged repetition of certain religious formulas (zikr), the big concourses of men and women at the shrines of saints (Urs) and the practice of making vows and offerings in the name of these saints for the achievement of worldly ends (nazr and nayaz). We find Syed Ahmad, therefore, waging a relentless crusade against all these things, as they had in his opinion a demoralising effect and corrupted the religious beliefs of the Muslim masses, and, paradoxically enough, while making apparently fantastic claims about his own spiritual trances, rigidly enjoining conformity with the orthodox belief and practice upon his followers.¹¹

In addition to reforming Indian Sufism, a second task to which Syed Ahmad devoted himself with characteristic energy was to wean the Indian Muslims of certain social customs and practices which they had borrowed from their Hindu neighbors, and to raise up their moral outlook and social status generally. It pained him to see the Muslim converts still adhering to some of their old un-Islamic ways as much as to find that in spite of the Muslim rule in this country,

11. Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan. *The History & Culture of The Indian People*. Vol. V. *The Struggle For Empire*. pp. 467-473

the Muslims were in some spheres of life actually in an inferior position and were deprived of their legitimate rights and privileges, religious or otherwise, due to the very lenient policy of the rulers towards the non-Muslims. He advocated a firm and strong attitude towards the Hindus in order to make them realise that they could not sort it over the Muslims inspite of their subordinate position, and may on the whole be described as an irreconcilable opponent of all attempts at Hindu-Muslim unification or rapprochement whether religious or social. He insisted on the necessity of the presence among Muslims of a supreme religious leader at all times who may keep their religion free from the dross of shirk and ilhad (polytheism and heresy), and with this end in view developed the theory of qayyumiyat, i.e. the existence of a qayyum (sustainer) in the world.¹²

With the accession of Aurangzib to the throne of Delhi, the Sufi movement in India seems to have received a definite set-back. This stern monarch, himself an orthodox and pious Muslim, was intolerant of heresy in any form and was always prompt in punishing drastically any open breach of the Law (Shariat). This,

12. Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan. The History & Culture of The Indian People. Vol. V. The Struggle For Empire. pp. 467-473

coupled with a general intellectual decline, was certainly responsible for any new religious ideas being developed in the 17th century in Muslim India. Aurangzib's reign had heralded the triumph of Shariat against tariqat. The emphasis was now on the codification and clarification of the Muslim law as expounded by the great jurists, and any attempt at original thinking was not only discountenanced but actively opposed. It was sought to confine Islam to narrow channels and to deprive it of all elasticity of belief, thus creating an atmosphere of religious bigotry and intolerance.¹³ There can be little doubt that Aurangzib's policy was dictated by laudable moral ideals and he worked sincerely for rooting out corruption and dishonesty both in religious belief and worldly conduct, but it is equally true that he did not achieve any remarkable success in his efforts. On the other hand he succeeded in intensifying mutual distrust among the various sections of his subjects without bringing about any general moral uplift among the Muslims. The banning of wine and music had been tried before his time as a means of stamping out moral delinquency and had failed to achieve the desired object. Some of his officials were thoroughly corrupt, and he was painfully conscious of this fact and bitterly realised the failure of his mission at the end of his long reign.

13. Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan. The History & Culture of The Indian People. Vol. V. The Struggle For Empire. pp. 467-473

To sum up this brief survey of the religious life of the Indian Muslims during the Mughul period, we might say that on the whole this period marked the decline of the pantheistic form of sufism and that the moderate schools, like the Naqshbandiya and Qadiriya became more popular than the Chishtiya school which had exercised undisputed sway over the minds of the devout Muslims in the preceding period. This was partly due to the fact that no outstanding saint of the Chishtiya sect appeared in India during this period and partly to the emergence of certain bitter critics of that sect who, helped by the prevalent political and social conditions, succeeded in attracting a large number of followers. Religious divines and scholars continued to hold lucrative posts as qazis and muftis, but their power over their royal masters suffered a sharp decline, due to their worldly greed and cupidity combined with senseless bigotry and parochialism. The accounts given by contemporary historians of the fabulous wealth which some of them managed to amass by all sorts of questionable means and their high-handed actions in dealing with those who had the temerity to differ from them in religious matters, clearly show the extent of their moral turpitude, so that it was they themselves who were really responsible for their downfall and not any radical change of attitude towards religion on the part of the rulers or their subjects.

Islamic Art and Architecture developed in India in the background of religious vicissitudes that Islam faced during the Muslim rule in India.