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Beyond Multiculturalism: Situating the Role of Islam in India for Peaceful Co-Habitation

Arshi Khan*

After a long Western journey of intellectual shifts and transformation of belief in the natural-moral institutions of society and state, which was theorized by Greek philosophers, the concept of accommodation and living together has generally been understood in a liberal-individualist framework. The purpose, nature and justification of the State has also changed from being the 'whole' and 'form' to a mechanical device standing upon the power of weapons and coercion. The State as a natural institution and law of nature as master of the universe including humanity was later interpreted as a contractual entity authorizing man as the master of the self. Similarly, pluralism, like the *Millet* system, giving wider space to communities in various domains is now situated within the steel-frame of multiculturalism in which 'internal tolerance' is the main and irrevocable condition for its acceptance. As a result, the rationalistic interpretation of multiculturalism has proved to be exclusive in nature, which becomes undesirable in the case of Federal India.

Intellectual Contact with India

The conquest of Sind paved the way for intellectual contact and interaction between India and Arabia. During his brief stay in Sind Muhammad ibn Qasim must have impressed the Indian scholars by his respectful attitude towards the learned. By the time he came to India, a sort of literary-intellectual awakening had got under way in Damascus. A good number of Christian and Jewish scholars were employed by the Arabs to translate Greek, Latin and Syriac works into Arabic. Though the Arabs surely knew about the great Indian mind and the wonderful literary-intellectual works it had produced they did not have access to the intellectual treasure of India or to the men of letters who could translate it into Arabic. Ibn Qasim's conquest, however, opened the window of

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opportunity which the early Abbasids later on capitalized upon to enrich their intellectual heritage.

Among the early Abbasids, two caliphs were especially interested in laying their hand on India's intellectual treasure: these were Al-Mansur (753-774) and Harun Rashid (780-808) who sent scholars to India with the instruction to acquire worthwhile books and also employed Indian men of letters to translate Sanskrit works into Arabic. They showed a special interest in acquiring works on mathematics, medicine, astrology, philosophy, pharmacology and toxicology.

After Ibn Qasim's recall to Arabia, a major portion of Sind again slipped into the hands of Hindu Rajas. No doubt the early Abbasid caliphs had control over Sind but gradually they lost interest in this remote area of their large empire. Multan and some other cities almost continuously remained in Muslim hands but the rest of Sind and Punjab conquered by Ibn Qasim was lost. These areas, especially the Punjab, were brought under Muslim rule when Mahmud Ghaznavi attacked India, and more specifically when Lahore became an important city during the reign of his son, Masud.

Ghaznavi invaded India many times, plundered several Hindu kingdoms but never tried to establish effective control over the conquered territories. Some Muslims wrongly idolize him whereas the Hindus project him as a symbol of "Islamic intolerance and fanaticism". Both are extremist and unbalanced, opinions.

The areas that form Pakistan, parts of Afghanistan and the Indian Punjab were mainly populated by Hindus and Buddhists in the 10th and 11th centuries. The two communities were often at loggerheads; with the Buddhists usually at the receiving end. In the neighboring Islamic world, Baghdad's central authority had weakened, which gave rise to the emergence of a number of dynasties and principalities. These regional Muslim rulers paid lip service to the Caliph in Baghdad but for all practical purposes they were independent. One such regional principality was that of Ghazni, which came into existence towards the end of the 10th century. In 977 Subuktigin, a slave and son-in-law of Alptigin, became ruler of Ghazni. He started a campaign to expand his dynasty and annexed neighboring Khurasan, Sistan and Laghman (Modern Jalalabad) to his kingdom.

Subuktigin's rise alarmed Jaipal, the Hindu Raja of Waihind (modern Hund near Peshawar). Waihind was a reasonably stable kingdom, spread over north-western part of the Indian subcontinent. It felt threatened by the rising power of Ghazni and therefore attacked it in 979. Jaipal was defeated and compelled to pay a large indemnity to Ghazni. He, however, defaulted and

once again attacked Subuktigin to avenge his previous defeat. But this time he suffered more humiliation as he was decisively defeated and forced to cede a large portion of his kingdom (areas located between Laghman (Jalalabad) and Peshawar).

Subuktigin was an able ruler who patronized knowledge. Ghazni, the capital of his kingdom, became a great attraction both for brave soldiers and learned scholars. A large number of Turks joined his army who later on proved to be the vanguard of Mahmud's army that attacked north-western India several times. Subuktigin's major contribution, however, was the building of roads in areas around Peshawar, which played a vital role in stabilizing his kingdom. These facilities were later on used by his son, Mahmud, for his numerous attacks on India.

Subuktigin breathed his last in 997. After a brief struggle for the throne he was succeeded by Mahmud Ghaznavi. An ambitious and brilliant general, he carried out several campaigns against the Indian Rajas. He is condemned for ransacking not only the palaces of the Rajas but also the temples, including that of Somnath. There is evidence to suggest that even the Hindu Rajas used to attack and ransack temples but this cannot justify Ghaznavi's plundering of temples because he knew Islam well and had studied the Islamic *Shariah*. He should, therefore, have known that ransacking and plundering of the religious places of non-Muslims was forbidden in Islam.

Mahmud Ghaznavi was first and foremost an emperor and should be judged on the basis of all the facts available about him. After defeating Jaipal in 1001, he recruited a large number of Hindu soldiers and officers in his army and used them as a counter-weight to his own Turkish army officers. If he attacked India, he also invaded neighboring Muslim principalities as well as Central Asia, which was under Muslim rule. His attacks on Muslim rulers were as severe as those on the Hindu Rajas. In 1003 Sistan, a part of Mahmud's kingdom, revolted against him but were ruthlessly suppressed by his Hindu forces. The Hindu officers ransacked the Jama Mosque of Zarang and killed the Muslims who had sought refuge inside it, nor did his army spare the city church.

In fact, the areas which form Pakistan, parts of Afghanistan and Iran, as also some areas of Central Asia were in great turmoil in the late 10th and 11th centuries. There were Hindu as well as Muslim kings competing with each other. Subuktigin and his son Mahmud Ghaznavi were such adventurous rulers. However, Mahmud Ghaznavi was an exceptional genius and a brilliant military general. The way he successfully attacked Somnath in Gujrat after crossing a long hostile territory that included deserts and marshy lands, bears testimony to his great military skills. The problem with him, however, was that

he was a poor administrator. He conquered large territories, defeated kings and destroyed kingdoms but never tried to establish his rule over them nor provide good governance for the welfare of the people as Muhammad ibn Qasim had done a few centuries previously. In fact, he was more interested in establishing a kingdom in Muslim areas of India (now in Pakistan), Afghanistan, Iran and Central Asia than in setting up an empire in the conquered territories of India. Only in the latter part of his career did he include Lahore in his kingdom and appoint a governor there to look after his interests in India.

We have already noted that Mahmud Ghaznavi, besides being an able general, was a highly educated man. He patronized knowledge and learning and made Ghazni almost a rival to Baghdad. He invited a scholar of al-Beruni's caliber to his capital who, however, excelled more during the reign of his son, Masud.

Al-Beruni is important here. He represents an altogether different, even unique tradition. While Ghaznavi conducted a military campaign with the objective of attacking India, al-Beruni engaged in an intellectual endeavor to get to know this vast country, its people, culture, religion, languages and intellectual heritage and to introduce them to the world of Islam.

Al-Beruni was a multi-disciplinary scholar in the Arab-Islamic tradition of his age. He wrote books on astrology, medicine, astronomy, science and history. He also translated Greek and Sanskrit texts into Arabic and Arabic works into Sanskrit. There is evidence to suggest that he wrote at least one book in Sanskrit in which he discussed the manner of construction of an astrolabe. Al-Beruni's sole purpose, as he himself claimed, was to spread scientific knowledge among the Hindus. It would not be erroneous to conclude that al-Beruni was a true servant of knowledge who believed in its universality or globalization. He eagerly learnt from Indians and gave to them with equal passion what he possessed and they did not.

The book that has survived to our time and which made al-Beruni famous the world over is his *Kitab al-Hind*, a book in which he engaged in an objective study and discussion of the sciences, social customs and religion of the Hindus. Before writing the book, he learnt Sanskrit with great difficulty in order to benefit from the books and scholars writing in that language. He also devised his own methodology for the study of foreign religions and cultures. In his introduction to *Kitab al-Hind* he criticizes the tendency to misrepresent other religions or societies or even to depend on second-hand information contained in books that were written in one's own language. The methodology he adopted was to gather materials about the Hindus from their own authentic books to understand which he had learnt Sanskrit. His following remarks are marvelous:

This book (*Kitab al-Hind*), is not a polemical one. I shall not produce the arguments of our antagonists in order to refute such of them as I believe to be erroneous. My book is nothing but a simple historic record of facts. I shall place before the reader the theories of the Hindus exactly as they are, and I shall mention in connection with them similar theories of the Greeks in order to show the relationship existing between them.¹

Employing the above methodology, al-Beruni studied India's intellectuals and their great mental and academic achievements. He discovered to his amazement that India had produced a large number of eminent philosophers, excellent mathematicians and great astrologers. He also appreciated the Sanskrit scholars of his time and praised their mental prowess. He was unhappy with numerous social practices but praised whatever he found of superior quality. In this regard he was particularly impressed by the large-sized water tanks dug at religiously important bathing places and conceded that the Muslims were not able to construct things of this sort.

Al-Beruni, objective as ever, also criticized the evil customs of the Hindus. The 14th chapter of his book is entitled "The Strange Manners and Customs of the Hindus" wherein he seems to be bitterly complaining against the Brahmins' bad habit of concealing knowledge from others:

We can only say folly is an illness for which there is no remedy, and the Hindus (al-Beruni probably had the Brahman scholars in mind) believe that there is no country but theirs, no nation like theirs, no science like theirs. They are haughty, foolishly vain, self-conceited and stolid. They are by nature niggardly in communicating that which they know and they take the greatest possible care to withhold it from men of another caste among their own people, still much more, of course, from any foreigner.²

Al-Beruni was equally vehement and forthright in his criticism of the Muslims. He did not spare even Mahmud Ghaznavi, who had invited him, and whose son, Masud had patronized his scholarly pursuits. He lamented that Ghaznavi's plundering of India had not only antagonized the common people but also the scholars who had fled from the areas conquered by Muslims to faraway places like Kashmir and Benaras with their intellectual treasure.

We have noted that Ghaznavi's army had a considerable number of Hindu officers and soldiers. They perhaps also participated in Mahmud's campaigns against the Hindu Rajas. But quite probably these were the people who had not been treated well by their coreligionists, specially the Rajas and men in high positions. Oppressed or at least marginalized in their own societies they opted for service in Mahmud's army.

¹ Edward C. Sachau, *Al-Beruni's India*, Delhi 1993, p. 7.

² *Ibid.*, p. 22.

Although, in the areas conquered and the cities plundered by Mahmud Ghaznavi the people had acquired a general aversion towards all Muslims, when peace returned the commercially-minded people were quick to take trade caravans to Muslim-dominated areas and cities. Some adventurous Muslims also dared to settle in Hindu-dominated areas such as Kashmir. Some xenophobic Hindus disapproved of their king's good behavior and attitude towards the Muslims, by and large the relationship between the Kashmiri Hindus and the Muslims, both the Turks and the local converts, was one of mutual understanding and coexistence.

Mahmud and his sons and successors had no interest in any areas beyond the Punjab and ruled over this agriculturally rich region from Lahore. After Mahmud's death the plundering of India stopped but the legacy of al-Beruni continued to flourish in Lahore. During the reign of Masud, Lahore in particular became a great centre of culture and learning. Many historians have referred to it as a mini-Ghazni which attracted poets, scholars, administrators and religious personalities from all over the Arab-Islamic world. Persian culture and language flourished during the reign of Masud; even scholars from India are reported to have come to and benefited from Lahore's vast scholarly treasures. This way, we may say, al-Beruni's scholarly tradition continued to exist even after his death.

Muslim rule in India, as also beyond Lahore and the Punjab, was to be established in late 12th century. A new great general, Shihabuddin Ghauri, had arisen on the horizon. He first conquered the declining empire of Ghazni, the small Muslim principalities of Multan and Uch and then turned to Indian kings or Rajas and subdued them all, one by one. Unlike Mahmud Ghaznavi, Ghauri was not only a great military general but also an excellent administrator. He often returned to Afghanistan for recuperation and reinforcement but only after appointing competent governors to look after and administer the conquered territories. Like Muhammad ibn Qasim he also employed the policy of including defeated enemies in his administration or leaving them in charge of their dominions provided they agreed to pay *Khiraj*. He also kept the local administration intact and thus succeeded in ensuring the continuity of the civil services whatever form they took.

Ghauri was fortunate in that he had the services of a good number of highly talented officers. One such officer was his most trusted slave, Qutbuddin Aibak whom he appointed as his viceroy in Delhi with responsibility for looking after Ghauri's Indian possessions.

Ghauri died in 1206. His successors were incompetent and began fighting among themselves. Aibak, aided and advised by a number of generals and

administrators who had played important roles in Ghauri's Indian campaigns, declared his independence, thus laying the foundation of the first Muslim Indian state to be ruled from Delhi. Interestingly, the dynasty he established is known as the Slave Dynasty because he himself was a slave who had been sold to the Qazi of Nishapur when he was a child. The Qazi gave him a good education when he discovered that his slave was quite brilliant. Upon the death of the Qazi Aibak was sold to Ghauri, whom he served with great distinction and whose most trusted officer he became.

Aibak was not a military general and, therefore, never tried to conquer new territories but he was a highly educated and able administrator and organized the new Muslim state with great efficiency. For ninety years, slaves or their descendents ruled the country from Delhi and played a vital role in establishing Muslim rule in India.

It is to be noted that the early conquerors, rulers and administrators were mainly Turks, but there were also Tajiks, Khaljis, Tughlaqs and Afghan Pathans. Iltutmish was a Tajik and after him the Tajiks ceased to matter in Delhi's court. However, the other Turks, the Khaljis and the Tughlaqs ruled over India for about two hundred years. The Afghan Pathans, too, had their chance but only in the 15th century. The Lodhi Pathans ruled over India till the establishment of the Mughal Empire in 1526. The period of Muslim rule, from the early 13th to the early 16th centuries, is generally referred to as the Sultanate Period in Indian history.

The Sultanate period was remarkable for the relationship between the ruler and the Islamic *Shariah*. Ghauri/Aibak and their successors established a Muslim state in a predominantly non-Muslim country and thus faced the question: of how to deal with the non-Muslims. Muhammad ibn Qasim had faced the same dilemma and had solved it by declaring the Hindus (including Buddhists) as *Dhimmis*, i. e. people under Muslim protection. The Sultans of Delhi adopted more or less the same policy and extended protection to the non-Muslims who accepted their suzerainty. It is, however, difficult to say if the policy was always implemented in its true spirit and to the letter.

It was natural for the Turkish rulers, who often called themselves "soldiers of Islam", to adopt and enforce Islamic law in India. From all the available historical accounts it is clear that almost all the Sultans accepted the supremacy of Islamic law, though some of them did not enforce it in actual practice. The general rule, however, was respect for the *Shariah* and the accommodation of the *Ulama* as far as possible. Some early Sultans were so particular about the *Shariah* that they sought and received approval of their rule in India from the ineffectual Khalifa in Baghdad. All this has led some people to believe that

the Delhi Sultanate was a theocracy but this, however, is a quite mistaken conclusion.

An Islamic state in the above sense as conceived and established by the Prophet and his immediate pious successors can never be a theocracy. Moreover, it is difficult to believe that Ghauri and his associates had conquered India in order to set up an Islamic theocracy. It would be more accurate to say that once they had a territory to rule over they adopted the law of the Muslim world as mainly understood by the Hanafi school of *Fiqh* as predominantly practiced in Central Asia, their ancestral homeland. In public they claimed to be bound by the *Shariah* and conveniently ignored it when they found it against their interests. The Sultans' relationship with the enforcers of Islamic law has been well depicted in the following passage:

The sultan could not, perhaps, be deemed to possess 'absolute' power, because in theory he could not do anything contrary to the *Shariah*. In practice, there was no control over him, and he controlled everything. He made the laws that, though called *Dawabit* or regulations, could cover all aspects of life. It was expected that these regulations would not contravene the *Shariah*, unless it was absolutely necessary. The Sultan appointed and dismissed the Sadra as-Sudur, the chief Qadi, the Shaikh al-Islam and all the provincial and local Qadis.³

There were, no doubt, people like the famous historian Barani who were opposed to some policies of the Delhi Sultans. Barani bitterly criticized the Sultan's sympathetic attitude towards the Hindus and the newly-converted Muslims of Indian origin. His thinking was that the Sultans should have been harsher on the Hindus, denying them the status of *Dhimmi*. Likewise, in his opinion, the Muslims of Indian origin had no right to higher education and, therefore, no claim to the holding of high-ranking positions in the state. Barani was, however, an exception. Moreover, his bitterness owed more to his disgraceful ousting from the royal court than to a well-thought out ideology.

The general practice of the Sultans and the *Ulama* was one of tolerance and accommodation towards one another. They seem to have been following the blueprint prepared by Fakhri-Mudabbir, a highly reputed thinker of the early Sultanate period. Fakhri-Mudabbir was a distinguished scholar-statesman who had enjoyed the company of Muhammad Ghauri and Aibak, and seems to have been close to Iltutmish. His excellent work, variously styled as *Adab al-Muluk wa Kifayat al-Mamluk* (Rules for the Kings and the Welfare of the Subjects) and *Adab al-Harb wa al-Shuja'ah* (Rules of Warfare and Bravery) has not yet seen the light of the day. The first part of this book is a work of political theory, dealing with the privileges and responsibilities of kings, with

³ M. Mujeeb, *The Indian Muslims*, New Delhi, 1995, p. 37.

separate chapters giving the qualifications and functions of different officers of state - Wazir Mustaufi, Wakil, Mushrif, Amir-al-Hajib, Amir-i-Dad and Sahib-i-Barid. In chapters dealing with different levels of dignitaries, Fakhr has drawn (on) the administrative pattern set up at Ghazni following the models of Baghdad and Bukhara, on old historical works, on books on statecraft and on various theological works to illustrate and elaborate his views. The remaining book is a manual dealing systemically and in some detail with the art of war and warfare. This book, in which a distinguished scholar-statesman of the age lays down the basis for the administration and military organization of Muslim India, was doubtless intended by the author to be a guide-book for rulers. It was presented to Iltutmish and, as the contemporary histories show, the government organization set up by Iltutmish corresponded very much to the structure visualized by Fakhri-Mudabbir.⁴

Although Fakhr does not refer to the office of Sadr al-Sudur, it was, however, an integral part of the Islamic state. The Turks were usually religious-minded and had a great respect for the Islamic law as well as the office of Shaikh al-Islam. Even the rulers who often ignored the *Shariah* lacked the courage to openly criticize or abolish the religious office. The Ulama, too, were normally intelligent men who asked or expected from the rulers only what was possible in a given context or circumstance. It is easy to criticize the Ulama for their association with the royal courts or for their employment in a system which was not fully Islamic but the critics forget the fact that in those days the best way to exercise checks and balances on kings and emperors was possible only by joining their administration. Surely the *Ulama* ignored the excesses of the kings in many cases but just by their presence in the administration they exercised a positive influence on many other important and high-ranking officials. By being practical in their attitude towards the kings, the *Ulama*, perhaps, behaved wisely, for a confrontational policy would have harmed the very causes that they espoused. By so doing they, in a sense, 'separated' the office of the *Ulama* from that of the rulers but only in practice, not in theory. According to M. H. Syed:

The line indicated by Fakhr-i-Mudabbir was followed with the good sense shown by rulers like Iltutmish and practical, broad-minded jurists like Qadi Minhaj al-Siraj. From early days it became the practice that so long as a Sultan undertook to safeguard the honor and the observances of Islam, did nothing in open defiance of the principles of the *Shariah*, appointed Qadis and made arrangements for religious education and observance of religious practices, the

4 M. H. Syed, *History of Muslims in India*, p. 136.

Ulama did not interfere in the affairs of the state, which the Sultan and his officers administered according to their lights.⁵

Clearly, the Sultanate of Delhi was not a theocracy nor was it in any sense anti-Hindu. This is not to suggest that the Hindus did not suffer under Muslim rule. In times of war the army might be defeated, but it is only natural that the vanquished side would suffer more loss of life and property than the victors. This also happened to the defeated Hindus, when it was the high-ranking army officers, bureaucrats, courtiers and governors who suffered the most as the majority of them were replaced by Muslims of Turkish or other origin while the low-ranking officials, specially the revenue-collectors, usually continued in the performance of their routine duties. When the war came to an end and gave way to a normalization of peaceful relations, the two communities, the Hindus and the Muslims, mixed with one another and gradually laid down the foundation of what later on came to be known as Indo-Islamic culture or which in the Mughal period shaped as what is known as a composite culture. In the social-economic structures, no doubt, the Muslims had the dominant position but then among Muslims, too, the Turks were better off than the Tajiks or the Afghans etc.

Moreover, there was always a tussle between the foreign and native Muslims. The Muslim converts, along with the Hindus, usually faced discrimination in some areas. But some emperors who felt weak against the Turks and other nobles of “foreign” origin used the native Muslims and Hindus to keep them in check. Even some highly-qualified scholars, Barani included, were utterly opposed to the appointment of the native or newly-converted Muslims and the Hindus to high positions. However, the Sultans and the great majority of the *Ulama* felt otherwise and gave them equal opportunity to excel in the respective fields and even opened the gates of their Madaris to the children of the so-called low-born Muslims as well as Hindus. The attitude of the Sultans towards the Hindus is also reflected in their policy of awarding them the status of *Dhimmah*.⁶ Though scholars like Barani were not well-disposed towards the Hindus even they had to accept them as “protected people”. The majority of the *Ulama*, being practical, treated the Hindus as protected people like the people of the book and imposed upon them a liability for the payment of the *Jizya* or *Khiraj* taxes, which, in most cases, were purely nominal. Moreover, the Sultans were quite lenient in collecting broader approach towards their Hindu subjects as they needed them for a variety of reasons ranging from financial assistance

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 140.

⁶ Peter Jackson, *The Delhi Sultanate: A Political and Military History*, Cambridge 1999, pp. 281-82.

to military service.⁷ The noted historian Barani deserves to be quoted here:

The Malikis and the Khans and the nobles of those days were constantly in debt, owing to their excessive generosity, extravagance and largesse. Except in their public halls no gold or silver could be found, and they could make no savings on account of their excessive liberality. The wealth and riches of the Multani merchants and the old Malikis and nobles of Delhi, who borrowed money from them to the maximum limit and repaid their iqtas, were quite fabulous. Whenever a Malik or a Khan held a banquet and invited nobles, his agents would rush to the Multanis and Shahs, sign documents, and borrow with interest.⁸

Not only money-lenders such as the Multani Hindus but also the businessmen, traders and land-holding peasants or small-scale *Zamindars* partook of the general affluence. The villages even enjoyed a sort of autonomy insofar as they were allowed, in accordance with the Islamic tradition, to manage their religious, even social affairs, according to their age-old customs. The Muslims showed no particular interest in trade, commerce or industry and left these vital economic sectors in the hands of their Hindu subjects. Nor did they change the land system, especially in the countryside, as a result of which rural life remained as good or bad as it was before the Muslim conquest. A modern historian, Panikkar writes:

The land system in fact did not change and, therefore, the Hindus in the countryside led much the same way of life as they had led before. Nor is it to be understood that commerce and trade changed hands to any considerable extent. The Muslim invaders were military adventurers who looked down upon trade and to whom the elaborate system of Hundi and credit on which Indian business was based was a complete mystery. The commercial classes were no doubt milched heavily both by the imperial government and by its local officials, but the Hindu *banya* remained, then as now, a necessary element in the structure of the society.⁹

It is difficult to believe that the Muslim rule, as Panikkar says, was a sort of imperialism. Even in its worst form, the Muslim rule was similar to the Hindu kingdom. It is also difficult to believe that the Banyas were oppressed and exploited by the Muslims for, as we have already noted, it was these people and the money-lenders to whom the Muslim nobles turned in their hours of need. The true conclusion that we may draw is that in normal conditions, when no war was waging, the Muslims and the Hindus lived a life of economic interdependence or at least such a process had started during the Sultanate period to be further strengthened during the Mughal era. In fact, the Mughal

⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 279-80.

⁸ M. H. Syed, *History of Muslims in India*, p. 177.

⁹ K. M. Panikkar, *A Survey of Indian History*, New Delhi 1957, p. 127.

Empire benefited not only from the experiences of the Sultans of Delhi but also from the Suri interregnum, specially from the administrative and financial reforms of Sher Shah.

The Mughal Empire began in much the same way as the Ghaznavi and Ghauri Empires. Mahmud Ghaznavi and his father had subjugated some Muslim principalities before attacking “Hindu” India. In fact, in the case of Mahmud’s father, Subuktigin, it was a Hindu Raja who attacked him in order to check his rising power. As far as Shahabuddin Ghauri is concerned, we know that he founded his empire on the ruins of the Ghaznavi Empire before turning to “Hindu” India. The Mughal Empire started in much the same fashion. Babur, the founder of the Mughal Empire, defeated Ibrahim Lodhi, the 16th century ruler of Delhi, before attacking any of the Hindu kingdoms. In fact, he was invited by Rana Sangha and other Hindu chiefs to attack Delhi. They expected that he would come and occupy and plunder Delhi and return to Kabul to pursue his pleasures there. They might have known that Babur was more interested in Central Asia than India, which perhaps encouraged them to think that he would not remain there. Their strategy was therefore simple. Whether Babur succeeded in defeating Ibrahim Lodhi or not, the warfare between the two would weaken both of them and thus pave the way for them to occupy Delhi.

Babur came and defeated Ibrahim Lodhi but, contrary to Rana Sabgha’s expectations, decided to stay in India. With the defeat of Lodhi, Delhi and Agra became parts of his kingdom. Soon he occupied Gwalior, Kannauj and Jaunpur. The turn of events displeased the Rajputs led by Rana Sangha and they decided to challenge Babur. The two armies met at Kanwaha (modern Fatehpur Sikri) and despite their numerical superiority the Rajput forces led by Rana Sangha were routed. Babur’s last battle was against the Afghans in Bihar whom he defeated in May 1529. The next year he fell ill and died, leaving a will stating that he should be buried in Kabul rather than in India.

Humaun was a true prince, educated and cultured, inclined more to literary pursuits than military adventure and warfare. He was neither a great general nor a great statesman. As a result, he was defeated time and again by the rising star, the Afghan chief, Sher Shah Suri and ultimately fled to Iran. However, he had his chance when Sher Shah Suri died and regained his kingdom but, before he could consolidate his power, he too breathed his last, leaving behind a vulnerable empire. Akbar was just over 13 years old when he ascended the throne. He was fortunate in that he had the services of some of the most loyal companions of his father, especially Bairam Khan. In fact, it was Bairam Khan who ruled India in Akbar’s initial years. Akbar, however, soon became wiser

and brought the country under his full control. He first consolidated himself in Delhi and Agra, and then launched an ambitious program of expansion. He followed the known trade routes and defeated both the Muslim and Hindu rulers. His Empire was a really great one that included major portions of present-day Bangladesh, India, Pakistan and parts of Afghanistan.

Akbar is known not only for his great conquests but also for his administrative reforms. In this he surely benefited from past experience and retained or improved upon the reforms carried out by Sher Shah Suri just a few years before he ascended the throne. Intelligent as he was, he soon realized that the India he had to rule over was different from the one ruled by the slave kings in the 13th century. In the last 350 years or so, the Hindus and Muslims had come to understand one another well and were often eager to cooperate, even to share power. Now the Hindus, and certainly a large number of the Hindu princes, had changed some of their views or at least their bitter hostility towards the Muslims. Mahmud Ghaznavi's plundering attacks in the 11th century had generated a general aversion among the Hindus, and the Brahmans especially regarded them as untouchable. Ghauri's exploits in the 12th century may have compelled the Hindus to revive old memories, but gradually they must have realized that the new dispensation was different in many respects. As Ghauri's purpose was to rule over India, he did not allow his forces to indulge in widespread looting and pillage. Next, he appointed able governors to manage the affairs of the conquered territories. It was, however, his slave, Aibak who established the first independent Muslim dynasty in India.

Aibak and his successors were slave-Turks, and this reality must have impressed the low caste Hindus who had long been oppressed by the upper caste Hindus. Moreover, the Muslim rulers did not introduce radical changes in the administration and retained the services of a large number of Hindus. Dynasties followed one after another but this practice continued intact. In fact, over the years, arrangements were even made for training the Hindu officials. Firoz Shah Tughlaq in particular set up schools (Madaris or civil academies) whose doors were also open to non-Muslim students. A large number of Hindus benefited from such opportunities and many of them rose to high positions. Such interactions slowly but surely gave rise to greater Hindu-Muslim collaboration in the socio-economic fields.

When Aibak established the Delhi Sultanate there were four militarily and politically important Muslim groups. Ghauri's followers and officials, including the slave Turks, formed the most prominent and most dominant group. There were also some Tajik officials, but they ceased to play an important role after the demise of Iltutmish, who had been their supreme leader. The Khaljis, who

came to power after dislodging the slave dynasty, were originally Turks who had migrated from Central Asia long before, settled in northern India and were thus erroneously regarded as being non-Turks. The Turks who set up the slave dynasty also looked down upon them and did not consider them pure Turks. The Tughlaqs who succeeded the Khaljis were also Turks because the father of Ghiyasuddin Tughlaq, the founder of the Tughlaq Dynasty, was a Turkish slave of Balban who had married a Jat woman. Perhaps, being of mixed stock the Tughlaqs became well-disposed towards the Hindus. In fact, by this time the realization had dawned on the Muslim rulers as well as the Hindus that their destiny was one of interdependence, hence they felt the need for better cooperation and mutual understanding. Another important group was that of the Afghans who had played a very important role in the establishment of Muslim rule in India. They began as warrior-soldiers but gradually benefited from higher education and produced some very able officers who contributed greatly to the establishment of Muslim rule in India. After the downfall of the Tughlaqs, it was the Afghan Pathans who captured the Delhi throne. By the time Babur came to India the Turks had become insignificant and the scene was dominated by the Afghans. In fact, they were now ubiquitous.

The later weak Tughlaqs not only allowed the Afghans to emerge victorious but they also failed in containing the rise of the Rajputs who were nursing the idea of putting an end to Muslim rule when they encouraged Babur to attack India. We have already noted how the Mughal Empire began in India. By the time Akbar ascended the throne, there were two important groups, the Afghans and the Rajputs, with whom he had to deal. After subduing both of them in battle, he realized that the best elements of both groups might be included in the administration. In fact, he seemed to be following the policies of Mahmud Ghaznavi who used his Hindu and Turkish officials as counterweights against one another so that no one could ever nurture the idea of overthrowing him. Akbar also felt that the great energies of the Afghans and Rajputs might be subtly utilized to strengthen his rule. He knew that the mistrust that had existed between the Muslims and Hindus in the 13th century no longer survived. Instead, it was political ambition that motivated the Afghans and the Rajputs above all else. Realizing the changed attitude, Sher Shah Suri had earlier successfully sought and received help from politically ambitious and qualified Hindus and given them prominent duties in his administration. Toder Mal, who later excelled during the reign of Akbar the Great, was originally employed by Sher Shah Suri. Suri's army had many prominent Hindu generals like Brahmjit Gaur, who was instrumental in driving Humaun out of India into Iran. Raja Singh of Gwalior also held a high position in his administration. Suri's army always

had a contingent of Rajput warriors. All this shows that it was no longer Hindu versus Muslim but that a sense of understanding, coexistence and cooperation was fast developing which a clever and intelligent ruler like Akbar was destined to exploit in giving medieval India its best ever administration. Prof. Mujeeb writes as follows:

Akbar had a better opportunity than any of the Indian Muslim rulers before him to concentrate on strengthening the administration, improving its procedure and introducing changes that would reinforce the whole structure of the state. Sher Shah, who was a master-builder, had just preceded him, and his own character and personality were entirely suited to the task. He was extremely conscientious, devoting about twenty hours daily to the performance of his duties. He was strict in judging the work of his subordinates, and while not inclined to punish them for their mistakes and even anxious not to hurt them, he seldom failed to make changes when and where they appeared to be necessary. His reforms make it obvious that he was fully aware of the problems facing the administration, and was both determined and patient in his search for solutions.¹⁰

Akbar realized that the best way of establishing an effective administration was to gather around him the best and most able men. Naturally, he put his greatest trust in the Mughal officials, especially those who had been with his father through thick and thin. He also gave important positions to the Iranians who had arrived in large numbers after Humaun's re-conquest of India. But he acted as a far-sighted statesman when he decided to accommodate and include the Rajputs as well as the Pathans in his administration. He had driven both these groups from Rajasthan to Bihar and Bengal. But he knew full well that any slackness on his part would be fully exploited, especially by the Afghan Pathans, in an attempt to depose him. He also learnt from the experiences of the slave kings in their utilization of the great energies of the Khaljis and the Afghans to their own advantage. He therefore decided to accommodate both the Rajputs and the Afghans. However, he still suspected the Afghans and therefore kept most of them away from Delhi, in Bihar, Bengal and in the Deccan. He also deemed it fit to include more Rajput officials and give them positions in and around Delhi. He felt they would act as counterweights to the ambitious Afghans who might think of regaining power from the Mughals. He further strengthened his rule through marriages with Rajput women of noble birth. To further win Hindu hearts and minds he abolished the *Jizya*, which was anyway in disuse. This policy, initiated by Akbar, continued well into the reign of Aurangzeb, who partially reversed the Mughals' anti-Pathan attitude and reduced their dependence on the Rajputs.

¹⁰ M. Mujeeb, *The Indian Muslims*, p. 255.

Some historians have expressed the opinion that Akbar was the first Muslim ruler who employed large numbers of Hindu officials in his administration but the practice had actually started earlier, as we have noted in the case of Sher Shah Suri. The door to the employment of Hindus in high positions was, in fact, opened during the Tughlaq period. It was the early Turks who, being slightly race-conscious and finding themselves in a newly-conquered and therefore hostile area, trusted and relied only on the Turks in the holding of official positions, but the Khaljis who followed them also opened up high positions to converted Muslims while the Tughlaqs began giving some high offices to the Hindus. Muhammad Tughlaq had appointed a Hindu as governor of Sind and Sher Shah Suri's grandson had appointed Himu, a Hindu, as his prime minister and commander-in-chief. We may, therefore, conclude that by the time Akbar ascended the throne the climate had changed, intellectually as well as linguistically. During the early Muslim rule in India, few Hindus knew Persian, the official language, and could not, therefore, stake their claim to high offices, but from the Tughlaq period onwards more and more Hindus abandoned their aversion to the Persian language and began learning it, thus making themselves eligible for high offices in the administration.

We have already noted that Muhammad ibn Qasim was not averse to employing Hindus in his administration. Likewise Mahmud Ghaznavi had a large number of Hindu soldiers commanded by Hindu officers. We may say that perhaps these were the Hindus who had been oppressed and denied their rights during the previous Hindu kingdoms or were elements whose aspirations and ambitions were ruthlessly oppressed by the caste hierarchy. In the case of Akbar, however, the whole situation was different. He had established his authority over all sections through military victories and conquests, which later encouraged him to indulge in the folly of creating a new religion, *Deen-e-Ilahi*, by the order of the emperor. His accommodation of Hindus by giving them high offices or by marrying their daughters was a conscious effort to share power with them for the consolidation of his empire and for warding off the danger of the Afghans who were subdued in Bihar and Bengal but not fully crushed and subjugated.

Jahangir, who succeeded Akbar, reversed his religious policies and sought to curb the new religion, *Deen-e-Ilahi*. However, in other matters he followed his great father, specially his policy of religious tolerance. Shahjahan and Aurangzeb followed more or less the same policy, as both of them were liberal in giving grants (*Jagirs*) to famous temples. Aurangzeb has been greatly criticized for his orthodoxy but a critical scrutiny reveals that he was not anti-Hindu but only against those who opposed his accession to the throne. In reality he,

too, shared power with the Hindus as he also entrusted them with many high offices.

Aurangzeb died in the early 18th century and the great Mughal Empire soon began to disintegrate, giving way to regional principalities all over the country. These principalities followed the policies of the Mughals as far as the Hindu-Muslim relationship was concerned and the composite culture that had started developing during the reign of Akbar appeared to have matured in the later Mughal period. A new dialect, which later on evolved into Urdu, was widely spoken in all of Northern India, which brought people even closer together. The Hindu-Muslim relationship now no longer survived at official level but had become a part of the social life of the common people. In cities, towns and villages Hindus and Muslims had become neighbors and lived happily together, sharing their joys and sorrows. Their socio-economic life was, as it is even today, one of interdependence, and their cultural life reflected the true spirit of a composite culture. This harmonious social fabric became strained in some areas only when the British introduced their infamous divide and rule policy.

We have discussed how the Muslim rulers had benefited from the services of a large number of highly competent Hindus. It would be appropriate here to point out that the Hindu Rajas, who had become 'independent' during the later period of the Mughal Empire, also employed competent Muslims to shore up their sagging economies. One such example was a certain Faid Ali Khan whose story M. Mujeeb also mentions. Khan, who was originally from Bulandshahar in UP, managed his estate so skillfully that it earned him fame and prestige far and wide. To benefit from his abilities the Maharaja of Jaipur invited him to join his administration. Faid Khan remained in his service from 1853 to 1867 and served him with great distinction. By the time he left Jaipur, the Maharaja's formerly mismanaged kingdom had become reasonably prosperous. Khan was later appointed by the British as Prime Minister of the Kota state where he also served with great distinction.

Hindu-Muslim Unity in Modern India

Two examples should explain the subject in question. First, we witness the exemplary Hindu-Muslim unity achieved during the first war of independence in 1857. It was a war in which Hindus and Muslims, as well as Hindu and Muslim soldiers, joined together to free themselves from their servitude under imperialist Britain. The British were taken by surprise but their military power, coupled with the lack of a far-sighted military and political leadership among

the freedom fighters, succeeded in suppressing the rebellion. No doubt the Muslims were more prominent in this first war of independence but there were also large sections of Hindu society who whole-heartedly supported it and accepted the leadership of the last Mughal Emperor, Bahadur Shah Zafar.

The second example is that of Gandhi's participation in the Khilafat Movement. It was a purely Muslim agitation launched by them for a purely Muslim cause: preservation of the Ottoman Caliphate which, they believed, was under threat of abolition by the British Government. Gandhi and his supporters joined the Khilafat Movement in order to show solidarity. Gandhi earned the eternal admiration of a section of the Muslim population who preferred to remain with him even when the country was partitioned and a large number of Muslims fled to Pakistan.

The partition of the country in 1947 was no ordinary event. It poisoned the atmosphere with communal hatred and prejudiced the minds of many a Hindu leader. The Muslims who remained in India suffered immeasurable loss as a result of the Partition and now stand utterly marginalized, economically, politically and educationally. The only good thing that resulted from the Partition was the framing and adoption of a secular constitution although there is no denying the fact that the provisions of the constitution have not been enforced in their true spirit, resulting in the all-round Muslim decline to be seen everywhere and in every sphere of life. But this noble document we call the Constitution of India contains some mechanisms through which the Muslims can seek the amelioration of their plight.

In independent India, the Muslims are as much citizens of the country as the Hindus and others and as citizens of the country they enjoy all the rights that other citizens have been granted. In view of the extraordinary circumstances that obtained in India in the wake of the Partition, the makers of our constitution, sensitive to the vulnerability of the minorities, have sought to reassure them by including in it provisions for minority rights, but it must be admitted that in actual practice many provisions of the constitution are violated day in and day out. Such a scenario exists because the communal elements have infiltrated the bureaucracy as well as the political class that claims to be secular. On the other hand, the Muslims have usually been unable to become aware their rights, mainly on account of their illiteracy. Although still not very obviously, things are changing, and one can only hope that the future of Indian Muslims will be brighter.

Conclusion

History, as interpreted and presented in the preceding pages, bears testimony to the fact that most Muslim societies have been pluralistic in character. One may agree or disagree with the solutions adopted by the Muslims in tackling the issues arising from religious pluralism or multi-culturalism. It is, however, irrefutable that Islam and Muslims have always existed in a religiously and culturally pluralistic atmosphere. Even today most Muslim societies are tolerant, and their tolerance is proved by the fact that the old Christian communities that existed at the time of the Muslim conquest. Christians now make up 11% of the population in Syria and nearly 10% in Egypt. These are the Christians who have lived peacefully among the Muslims for centuries, which proves beyond a shadow of doubt that Islam and Muslims are not intolerant, and believe in cultural and religious pluralism.

True, there are problems in Lebanon, and tensions may sometimes arise in Egypt, but a deeper analysis reveals the fact that most of the time untoward incidents occur either because of foreign intervention, open or covert, or due to socio-economic conditions obtaining in the countries concerned. Many members of the Christian communities today hold high positions in their respective countries, and enjoy the same privileges they enjoyed in the past. Moreover, they contribute their share to the cultural and intellectual life in the countries of their birth and residence. Historically speaking, the Arab-Islamic intellectual heritage has always been enriched by men who came from varied cultural and religious backgrounds. In fact, Islamic scholarship, as well as the Muslim political administration, have never been averse to contributions from the followers of other faiths and traditions; on the contrary, their motto has always been to get hold of wisdom from wherever it may come.

The common misperception about the so-called Islamic intolerance of other faiths, traditions and cultures, whether it is found among the non-Muslims or in a section of the Muslims, is misplaced, to say the least. Both the noble teachings of Islam and its historical experience, whether in India or elsewhere, have been one of religious pluralism and multiculturalism. And by having lived in peace and harmony with others in most parts of the country in post independence India, today's Muslims have founded their firm faith in the philosophy of pluralism as enshrined in our great Constitution.