

INCLUSIVE PRACTICES OF ISLAM IN INDIA: CHALLENGING EXCLUSIVE NOTIONS

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Abstract:

Muslims in India have been a heterogeneous community for several centuries. The arrival of Muslim in India has been misunderstood as aggression and invasion on the Indian soil which is not true in any sense. Islam never reached in Indian sub-continent by invasion and force rather it was through trade and commerce by the Arab. The Arab began their journey to travel in different parts of the world. The arrival of Islam in Kerala is seen as the first interaction of Muslims with Indian religious groups mainly Hindus. The significant contribution of inclusive practices in the trade relations can be attributed to be the revolutionary steps. The trade in India had been caste based where not everyone was allowed to engage into whereas a Muslim would buy and sell their goods to any buyers who had capacity to pay without any discrimination and distance. This also broke the notion of pollution and purity amongst the Indian

Keywords: *Muslim, Islam, India, Exclusion, Practices, Homogeneity*

Introduction

Inclusive practices connote those ways of living together in human society when the boundaries based on socially constructed are blurred. These do not match to all the civilizations and cultures rather remain in a few periods or remained in certain periods only. The contemporary society of Arab world during sixth century is not match to at least other civilization of the time but the revolutionary change witnessed in the era aftermath of emergence of Islam. Islam brought principles of human world with equal access and opportunity. However must win situation was challenged over and over again, within the family and tribesman of Prophet Mohammad, the messenger of Allah, and rest of the Arab. History did witness a social order with an egalitarian ideology and practice too. The best moments in human history held when Islamic interaction began with Indian society in the form of trade and later by Sufism in eleventh century. The already established hierarchical social order in Indian society faced strange embarrassment with the newer and equalitarian ideology. The richness of plurality is not due to the extreme form of discrimination rooted in Hindu caste society but the challenges and protest raised against it pushed for the space of plurality. The existence of several religious groups and cults in India, one shall be happy and thankful to the inhuman practices of caste society, which gave rise to such myriad forms of

ideologies and principles, the reason for the contemporary plural society but the at the same most contentious and communally sensitive too.

In a religiously plural society, inter-community interaction at the personal as well as economic level are of utmost importance in preserving communal harmony and peace. Obviously, therefore, the trend towards increasing ghettoisation of Muslims in several places is a disturbing phenomenon that needs to be seriously and urgently addressed.

The main descriptive body of this paper focuses on the narratives of the experience of the researcher during the stay at Dargah and also the indepth interaction with the visitors at Sufi Dargah. The notion of inclusion is reflected through the variant strong believes of the visitors at Dargah. The visitors not only belong to Muslims as such rather not less than half do belong to non Muslim communities. They are largely Hindus and some Sikhs.

Before understanding the inclusive practices of Sufis and Dargah as shrines, let me first put a small anecdote about other aspects of Muslim in India. The prevailing monolithic notion among Indian populations that Muslims are outsiders and they do not belong to nation India is deep rooted. Such perceptions get destroyed when we look into the practices and plural followers of Indian Muslims. The serious question is that Islam as a religion has homogenized the nation India at one point of time. They are at the level of social interaction, cultural milieu and pattern; hegemony in trade and relations, and believes practices. Let's first talk the existence of the social interaction before the interaction of Hindu society with Muslims as Arab initially. Among the first travelers to Indian land from Arab was Mohammad Bin Qasim, as Arab, who happens to be the first visiting Muslim, in the present Kerala, the Calicut region. In fact his idea of sharing trade relationship with India was most welcomed by the ruler of Calicut region. Precisely the trade relations and trade activity in India was primarily a duty of Vaishya castes. None of the other social groups were allowed to engage in trade and commerce as it was of caste hierarchical division of occupation. Alberuni gives a detailed note of caste society existed in the eleventh century India.

The social interaction was too based on the basis of caste association and proper socio-physical distances were maintained to stand as per the Hindu caste wall. We do not have doubt on the nature and scope of existing untouchability for centuries in india, this may sound as idea of unsociability at present but not unreal.

The hegemony of trade and commerce by Baniyas (Vaishya) were first challenged by Muslims. This gave strong shock to the caste society and later Islamic ideas began finding appealing space among the masses of untouchables and today's dalits.

However Muslims did not directly spoke and associated with caste based hierarchical social order neither preached for Islamic principles of social order. The second phase of Islamic influence began with the establishment and standing of Delhi Sultanate in Delhi. The arrival of Arabs continued as Traders for long time and did little harm to the larger social structure of caste India. But of course the baniya economy faced critical challenge and it was remarkable impact. Any individual could buy and sell the goods from Muslims and those goods were never considered as impure. Calling Chandals and Mlecchas to untouchable has its own confusing explanation but mixing Muslims among Mlecchas were deliberate attempt

by the upper caste hegemony. But this helped to increase higher social sympathy between lower castes and Muslims resulting into spread of Muslims impact upon the huge number of outcastes of India.

The deeper focus of the paper is upon the inclusive nature of Islamic practices in India which masquerades the caste society. The historiography of Muslim rulers in India emperor has somewhat thwarted and distorted the understanding of the commoners for to a certain extent. But the increasing numbers of Muslims in India were due to another historical phase of Indian society-it was the beginning of Sufism.

Richard M. Eaton does a well documentation in his paper "Sufi Folk Literature and the Expansion of Indian Islam" on Sufi influence on Indian low castes. It would be hard to imagine, for example, how depressed and illiterate Hindu castes such as the cotton cleaners or the barbers could have been attracted to an abstract system of mystical stages and states requiring an immense degree of intellectual and spiritual discipline. Moreover, the Sufis of medieval India, as elsewhere, frequently stressed the elitist nature of their circles and the necessity of keeping their most esoteric knowledge to themselves. Indeed, one distinguished scholar has argued that Sufis in general felt a certain distrust of the common man and that this feeling was evidenced by their separation of the initiated Sufi from the non-initiated laymanⁱ. The secondary literature on medieval Indian society frequently portrays the Sufis as a group that provided a vital link between Hindus and Muslims, to some extent mitigating the harshness of the Muslim military conquest of the subcontinent.ⁱⁱ It would be hard to imagine, for example, how depressed and illiterate Hindu castes such as the cotton cleaners or the barbers could have been attracted to an abstract system of mystical stages and states requiring an immense degree of intellectual and spiritual discipline. Moreover, the Sufis of medieval India, as elsewhere, frequently stressed the elitist nature of their circles and the necessity of keeping their most esoteric knowledge to themselves. Indeed, one distinguished scholar has argued that Sufis in general felt a certain distrust of the common man and that this feeling was evidenced by their separation of the initiated Sufi from the non initiated laymanⁱⁱⁱ. One likely reason for the failure to explain the attraction of Hindu non-elites to Sufis has been the tendency among many scholars of Sufism to concentrate almost exclusively on the mystical literature, as opposed to the folk literature, as representing the sum and substance of the Sufi movement. The mystical literature, which can be said to represent the "high tradition" of the Sufi movement in India and elsewhere, consisted of treatises on the abstract stages and states originally formulated by such mystical thinkers as Ibn al-'Arabi. This literature was written for the edification of fellow Sufis and does not seem to have circulated among the lower elements of Hindu India, nor was it intended to. Moreover in India, as in most of the non-Arab Muslim world, such literature was usually written in Persian, which was certainly not a vernacular language among the non-elite Hindu population. Hence if it is true, as R. A. Nicholson has noted, that "Sufism is at once the religious philosophy and the popular religion of Islam," the link between the two has not been clearly established, at least as far as concerns Indian Islam^{iv}.

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The certain references show the variance about the conversion of large low castes into Islam. Sufis are the one strong reason of conversion. They lived, wrote and practiced entirely different life and portrayed Islam in India in a very different and accessible religion. Moreover even women were allowed to learn the Sufi lives during the Medieval India. Eaton quotes that "there are today several Muslim groups in Bijapur District whose ancestors are claimed to have been converted to Islam by one or another medieval Sufi. But ethnographic evidence indicates that these same groups, far from having suddenly "converted" to Islam at any single point in time, have been and still are undergoing a gradual process of Islamic acculturation-reflected in dress, food, speech, etc.- which is not only gradual but uneven from one group to another.³⁴ While it is true that some Sufis seem to have initiated such a process by attracting non-Muslims to their fold, what they left behind them, namely, their folk literature and their tombs, have deepened and continued an on-going process of Islamic acculturation among non-elite groups in Deccan society. Another ethnographic survey of Bijapur District conducted for the 1884 Bombay Gazetteer illustrates this point. The survey showed twenty-one Muslim "castes" of Hindu origin, all in various stages of Islamic acculturation as measured by variables such as purity of Urdu speech, practice of circumcision, diet, attachment to Hindu deities and festivals, etc. (see Gazetteer of Bombay Presidency: Bijapur District 23 [Bombay, 1884]: 282-305)^v.

If we map out the present Indian territorial sketch, Sufis hardly left any single state with its influence. Extreme north to extreme south finds the footprint of Sufis travelling and preaching the mystic relationship between God and man. The closed caste boundary did not find even smaller radiant wherever Sufism travelled and lived. The equalitarian worldview was most attractive to Hindu low castes.

Why inclusive practices challenged the exclusive practice of the contemporary Indian society? This does not raise fundamental questions of individualism and do not enter into the debate of existentialism. The epistemological understanding of world begins with rationality and a root of scientific path but we cease to control upon this, if we synthesize the caste philosophy as the real and rationalism of human equalitarian as irrational. No doubt Islamic influence has deeply penetrated and perpetuated into the stomach of the creator of caste order and bitten up the caste idealism.

The wonderful face of Islamic philosophy and Muslim practice is overshadowed with wrong historiography and helped into the socialization of newer generation into a different mindset. Experiences of Social Exclusion at times are the outcome of natural process of societal evolution but the larger tyranny lies upon the heads protecting the caste society. The functionalist school would throw the responsibility upon the need of the hour but why the nature of division continued for years and generations to come without any change in the caste hierarchy and its purity.

Challenge to the exclusionary practices is not new to us, Buddhism posed the greater challenge to Hindu caste society and later it appears to be assimilating in Hinduism.

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ⁱⁱ 1 See H. K. Sherwani, "Cultural Synthesis in Medieval India," *Journal of Indian History* 41, no. 1 (April 1963): 256-57; Tara Chand, *Society and State in the Mughal Period* (Delhi, 1965), pp. 96-100; Yusuf Husain Khan, "Sufism in India," *Islamic Culture* 30 (July 1956): 252; M. Yasin, *A Social History of Islamic India (1605-1748)* (Lucknow, 1958), p. 51.

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