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Hindu Muslims: Shared Religiosity and Mixed Identities in Mughal India

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Abstract:

A great deal of history on religion in South Asia tends to dwell on harsh divisions between sects, particularly Islamic and Hindu in defining the relationship between peoples. Even the newer approaches, which reject the Turkish invasion narrative in favor of cooperation and transformation, still view these different faiths as starkly different identities, only tentatively bridged by a Muslim, Sufi mediator. In the *Dabestan-e Mazaheb* though, a guide to religions written during the age of Akbar, the author tries to define every religion encountered in his life in Mughal India, but he struggles with placing some Hindu and Islamic sects, instead preferring to call them Sufi-Hindus, and categorizing them under a tentative Hindu label despite these groups self-identity as Muslims. Looking at the different Hindu-Muslim sects discussed, it is possible to present a religious climate, especially among the lower classes that esteemed mutually significant religious acts over any specific identity. In a space where Hindu sects became Sufi sects and vice-versa, a ripe ground is presented for the retention and diffusion of various forms of pious performance, and how religious identity carried different values to differences in religion and class.

Keywords:

Mughal, Islam, Theology, Syncreticism, South Asia, Hinduism, India

Hindu Muslims: Mixed Religiosity in Mughal Era India

What does it mean to belong to a religion? In the modern day this perception is based on a word, a specific sect or identity which defines one as belonging to a specific set of practices and beliefs, contrary to and often in opposition to others. The impact of religious differences in history need not be stated, but one of the most prominent examples is that of the Indian Subcontinent, where difference in confession saw the creation of nations, and all the horrors of Partition, the results of which are still keenly felt to this day. This strict view of religion has its practical origins in British colonial policy, and the study of religion in the Middle East and the Indian Subcontinent is still deeply marked by this policy, which strove to rationalize foreign cultures through a historiography rooted deeply in a Protestant, upper class English perspective. This carried with it English ideas of identity politics, and this, further inflamed by nationalist rhetoric in the subcontinent today only serve to impair history of the region's past. The question then persists, what is the real history between Islamic and Hindu traditions and confessions in the subcontinent? An undervalued yet powerful lens to a different time in inter-religious relations is the *Dabistan-e Mazaheb*, usually shortened to the Dabistan. The *Dabistan-e Mazaheb*, or the School of Religions is a guide, written by an unclear author on the various religions encountered in India during his time. Making good on promises of neutrality and understanding, this author does an unparalleled job of painting the picture of the intense diversity of thought and identity in India at this time. Using his guide, supplemented with other sources, it is possible then to critique and analyze conceptions of Islam and Hinduism that is so often marred by a modern, monidentity politics, with particular emphasis on the well documented Madárian sect, which the author labels as Hindu-Sufi. Then, when this is established, it is possible to look at how the author's background and strata makes this text which hopes to classify and categorize religions

an ideal document for their fluidity. With this then, an argument can be put forth that India at this time was undergoing a period of great plurality but also transition, as movements began to organize themselves and compete for rural and public spaces, all under the shadow of Akbar's own ambitious attempts at piety, sufi sainthood.

When approaching Chapter II of the *Dabistan*, the chapter on Hinduism, a number of takeaways can be made regarding the criteria made. He includes in this list, Búdah, which is actually Jainism, and a sect he calls Nanak-Panthi, an early form of Sikhism. His groupings for these two are less problematic, as the issue of Hindu-Sikh and Hindu-Jain dual identity is far more common and documented through the history of these religions.¹ What draws attention are the Madárian, Jelalían, and Kakan sects, which, according to his own words are “a class among the Hindus who give themselves the term of Muslim-Sufis, and really agree in several tenants and opinions with the Sufis.”² These groups, according to the author, revere the Prophet Mohammad (SAW), Ali, the Imam Hussein, and Hassan. The sons of Ali as the great four sages, and derive their spiritual authority and family ties to various branches of Alids (descendants of Ali and Fatima). Even among the different sects, some identify as Sunni, and others Shi'ite. The first of the sects listed are the Madárian, more accurately known as the Madariyya, is a sect that survives in the modern day. This Sufi sect was founded by Sayyid Badiuddin Zinda Shah Madar, a venerated saint more commonly just referred to as Madar, who allegedly lived 383 years credited to the power of keeping his breath.³ Encountering them at their zenith, the Madárians at this time had achieved a reputation for violence, unruliness, but also potency and magical

¹ Rose, H. A., Denzil Ibbetson Sir, and Edward Douglas Maclagan Sir. *A Glossary of the Tribes and Castes of the Punjab and North-West Frontier Province: Based on the Census Report for the Punjab, 1883*. Patiala: Languages Dept., Punjab, 1970.

² *Dabistan*. England: L.B. Tetens, 1901: 221

³ Garcin de Tassy, M. (Joseph-Héliodore-Sagesse-Vertu), 1794-1878. *Mémoire Sur Les Particularités De La Religion Musulmane Dans l'Inde d'Après Les Ouvrages Hindoustanis*, 1869: 54.

healing.⁴ Especially interesting is the Madárians maintain that Prophet (SAW) could not enter heaven until recognized he Madar's supremacy, uttering *dam madar* (the breath of Madar). Another Hindu-Sufi sect are the Jelalians, who consider themselves Shi'te, and look towards the Safavid monarchs for religious precedent.⁵ As part of their religious observances they eat snakes, which they call a fish of the Holy Ali, and scorpions, which are prawns of Holy Ali.⁶ This is part of a practice of extreme asceticism as well and have particular junctures about wearing turbans to protect their eyes from the terrible visage of Azrail. The final sect listed in the Dabistan are the Kakan, founded in Kashmir by Ibrahim Kakak. His tradition is perhaps the most clearly syncretic, and it appears Kakan simply served as a preacher to both religions, simply preaching one or the other depending on his audience.⁷ He expounded heavy asceticism, such as not sleeping and also, like the others, heavily encouraged the drinking of bang to reach enlightenment. All of these sects, throughout their history self-identify as Muslim, but are considered by the author, other sects, and on certain occasions like with Ibrahim Kakak himself as having a label less strict. Perhaps muslim without the capital m.

This all being said, how are these sects considered by the author to be Hindu, and to what extent are levels and perspectives of authority blending the lines between these faiths themselves. The baraqa, or spiritual charisma, of Sayyid Badiuddin Zinda Shah Madar was allegedly so potent that Emperor Akbar visited his tomb, and the Chishti saint Shaikh 'Abdur Rahman Chishti refers to him as a spiritual equal in his *Mir'at al-asrar* (The Mirror of Secrets). So respected is Shah Madar that other Chishti saints as well claimed connection to this apparently Hindu

⁴ Suvorova, A. A. *Muslim Saints of South Asia: The Eleventh to Fifteenth Centuries*. London; Routledge Curzon, 2004: 147.

⁵ *Dabistan*, 228.

⁶ *Ibid*, 227.

⁷ *Ibid*, 229.

spiritual leader, at least in the mind of the author and the Mughal elite.⁸ The importance of this lay in that the Chishti order is a far more “orthodox” Islamic sufi sect with a major history in the spreading and legitimacy of Islam in the subcontinent. Despite these sects very avid association of themselves with Islam, the question is raised of what the author saw in these groups to include them as Hindu. The nuance of this is recorded by the author himself, who when telling the story of the resurrection of Jamen, whose assault and cannibalism was spurred on by Yogis who supposed him for a Muslim demonstrates that confusion regarding the precise placing of these groups was something widespread.⁹ It is important that the killing of Jamen for being Muslim was considered a misidentification, and the implications of this early example of Hindu-Muslim violence will be discussed later, and this story is actually a sign of Hindu influence in the Madariyya. The story of Jamen being devoured by the Yogis then resurrected parallels the fate of Kacha in the Mahabharat, who is cut to pieces and devoured, only to be remade and reborn yet again like Jamen.¹⁰ The tradition for both Madárians and Jelalians to often go naked in feats of ascetic piety also likely reminds him of similar traditions he describes among the Yogis and Búdahs (Jains). Beyond even this even the famous Madárian place of healing is regarded to be largely inspired by Hindu erotic practices rather than the spiritual example of Ghazi Miyan. The author of the *Dabistan* also points out that one subgroup of Madárians reveres the Yogic deity Narayana as the true master of the faith. The author makes it known that the followers of Jelalianism “know of neither prayers nor fasts, nor any other practices of piety with which the Sufis are occupied.”¹¹ As seen, there are certain practices that the author considers coded with

⁸ Ernst, Carl W. and Bruce B. Lawrence. *Sufi Martyrs of Love: The Chishti Order in South Asia and Beyond*. 1st ed. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002: 79.

⁹ *Dabistan*, 225.

¹⁰ Prakash, Priyadarshi. *Mahabharat Diamond Books*, 1900: 76

¹¹ *Dabistan* 227.

proper Sufism, and with that Islam. One prominent code for Hinduism by the author is the drinking of bhang as a sign of Hindu practice, and likely considered the claim that the Prophet Mohammad was instructed to drink bhang by the angel Jibrail un-Islamic.

While the author is concerned with such issues it is not apparent that these divisions concerned the common people of this time. From his perspective, as a high ranked and important leader of a Parsi sect, from a family distinguished to its sanctified place in the religion, raised in the atmosphere of Akbar and his court, religion means something different. It is identity, wrapped with education and set expectations of behavior, carefully detailed and studied in the revealed scriptures available to these elites. To the common classes though, piety and devotion was less tied to these grander ideas of theology and orthodoxy but in displays of religiosity. While yes, the sheer breadth of sects is hard proof that ideas of sect and religion still mattered to individuals, the often intercommunication, cooperation, and competition detailed between these sects in the Dabistan. The author describes the Yogis as attacking Jamen in a religious motivated attack, but Madar was a yogi himself. At no point in the story of Jamen is the Yogis authority as something illegitimate or unworthy of respect, only that it is subordinate to that of Madar. This is because there are various models of presenting piety that are broadly accepted as being coded 'proper' for religions. Some of these include reverence of the Prophet Mohammad and Ali's descendants, extreme ascetic practices, allusion to early Indian epics, vegetarianism, and the saintdom that follows those who exemplify these traits. Once a corpus of broad traditions is established in a pluralistic society, other sects, especially at lower strata of society can pull from them. Similar to this is the sort of syncretism found in Syria during the early third and second centuries, when parts of Jewish scripture, Christian messianism, and pagan votive inscriptions

are all held as valid spiritual weights by diverse communities.¹² This time period also is home to many sects, like the Ebionites and the Valentinians who use extreme practices and hidden knowledge that shares an origin with the assortment of accepted forms of religious performance in the area. These practices have universal recognition as pious acts, then are valid ground for the religious devotionism of sects on either side of this liminal Muslim-Hindu divide, a phenomenon demonstrated by the example given of early Syrian pluralism as well,

It is these diversities of identity that help to elaborate on the age of transition in India during this time. For one example, the impact of the Bhakti movement is prevalent throughout the text, as movements previously associated with atheism and now acquiring elements of theistic and devotional worship, one of the most prominent being the Mimansakas and Samkhyas.¹³ While this time does mark a trend of assimilation and combination under the great unifying influence of spiritual leaders like Vijnānabhikṣu, to say this was a time purely defined by this consolidation ignores the constant theme of competition that defines inter-Hindu and inter-religious interaction of this time that equally took place in this crowded landscape.¹⁴ First turning back to the Madārīan sect, numerous examples of Madārīan conflict is presented through the triumphing of them over other religious figures and movements. The beforementioned conflict between Madar and the Yogis reveals Madar to be wiser and gifted with greater spiritual power than that of the Yogis, a sect of which Madar allegedly built his reputation as a member of. Later in their historiography the noble lady Chistápá challenges all of the “Muslim and Indian dervishes and saints” to remove her bracelet without demonstrating lust. Only Jamen is able to

¹² Montgomery, James A. 1918. "A Syriac Incantation Bowl with Christian Formula." *The American Journal of Semitic Languages and Literatures* 34: 34

¹³ Mishra, Manisha. "Some Facets of Change and Transition in Indian Philosophical Systems in the "Dabistan"." *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress* 64, (2003): 519.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 520.

remove the bracelet and is declared victorious over all the Muslims and Hindus, and the author assures that there are many more stories of similar competitions and tests.¹⁵ In both of these examples the debate and discussion of faith occurs in public areas and royal courts, and Muslims are competing among Hindus yes, but the victory of Jamen is described as a victory over Muslims and Hindus. It is not a dichotomy of Hindi vs. Muslim, but sect vs. sect, as among these rural, syncretic, devotionalistic sect the divide between different religion is not as strong as the author sees it as. Despite the author's claim that these groups, despite their heavy emphasis on Islamic belief, are Hindu, it is possible that this is untrue. The Yogis in the story consider Jamen a Muslim, and it has been shown that many definitively Islamic Sufi saints look upon Madar with religious respect, but within the same stories they come to acknowledge Madar as a figure of high Hindu prestige. Division between Islamic and Hindu traditions both existed, but these religions could still exist and compete in a shared religious environment, one that did not fully reject the piety of the other, only the higher charisma and piety of their own movement. Ibrahim Kakan as well is described as receiving the praise of both Muslims and Hindus as well. These divisions are also played out within the religious traditions themselves. The author records a conversation between Ibrahim Kakan and a student. The argument takes places as they sit outside as the adhan, the Islamic call to prayer, is being announced, and the story is intricately symbolized to denote relations between the figures. The student takes the voice of the ulema, the learned Islamic scholarship, and represents a more orthodox view of religion, but despite his knowledge of orthodoxy, he is a student, coded as a boy who has not finished his education. The teacher is the spiritual master, playing towards the charisma of Ibrahim Kakan. The student first complains that one of Kakan's companions, the language of which could also be an attempt to

¹⁵ *Dabistan*, 226.

place those who follow Kakan as following in the footsteps of the companions of the Prophet himself (SAW), breaks-wind during the adhan, but is congratulated rather than punished by Kakan for his impiety. Kakan claims that the sound of the companion's flatulence is as much the voice of God as is the man performing the adhan, a clear challenge to orthodox religiosity and value. The conversation continues till the student chastises Kakan's drinking of bhang, where he responds that "Great is the number of bhang-drinkers; let us, on this side of the bridge, build a town and call it Bhangpur, and not think of passing the bridge."¹⁶ The bridge in question is As-Sirāt, the narrow bridge over Hell which according to hadith every human must cross to reach paradise. Here again is a picture of discussion going on regarding the identity of religion. Much as Akbar cultivated his own heterodox approach to Islam, so is Ibrahim Kakan, who makes use of the diversity of Kashmir of this time, which is equally rife with countless and competing sects of Parsis as well. It should be noted that this concept of using the profane to challenge the established for failing to understand the true omnipresence of the divine is popular among many Sufi sects in Central Asia, of special note being the Bektashis of Turkey and Albania.¹⁷ A final example of the sort of competitions going on is a story related by an "army of naked Jelalis and Madaris" to kill a cow, which is consistently bought and saved by the Sanyasis, a more firmly Hindu form of ascetics.¹⁸ (though the practice of nudity is in itself a prominent Jain-Hindu form of extreme asceticism) The Sanyasis eventually come to blows with the Hindu-Sufi sects and in an important line:

¹⁶ Ibid, 230.

¹⁷ Muhammed Seyfeddin Ibn Zulfikari Derviş Ali, *Bektaşî İkrar Ayini*, 2007.

¹⁸ *Dabistan*, 231.

“The Sanyasis at last obtained the victory, and killed seven hundred of the naked Jelalis and Madaris; they educated the boys of these fanatics, whom they made prisoners on this occasion, in their own religion, as the Sanyasis were frequently seen in war.”

Now it would be simple to see this as a Hindu-Muslim conflict regarding the sanctity of the cow that is often replayed in the modern day areas of Pakistan, India, and Bangladesh. What is of note here is that despite the conflict between the two, the reason the Jelalis and Madaris had come to this place is because it was, according to the author, a sacred place of pilgrimage revered by the Hindus. The conflict between the two groups can be less seen as Hindu vs. Muslim, but as a competition by two groups challenging each other for supremacy for a shared religious space. What more, despite being described as hateful enemies in other texts, the Madaris and the Jelalis are considered partners in this event, with no record of their animosity. This passage, rather than being a wholly sectarian conflict, is a telling sign of the shifting relations between the various religions in transition in India and the spaces they occupy. Groups increasingly syncretized and united are now competing for universal religious markers of piety against many other groups, with shifting animosities and alliances forming, connections that eventually lead to the unification of many of these groups that occurs near the end of the Mughal Era.

With this in mind, it is clear among rural populations that the conceptions of what is Islam and what is Hinduism are not hard and fast. Devotionalistic groups pull from many traditions because the many of the elements of spirituality in Hinduism and Islam carry broad weight to those of lower classes who are constantly face with legitimate political and culture authority from both of these religious traditions. It only makes sense then that new movements would appeal to these traditions where they carried weight, especially areas of religious contact and conversion, as the piety of the one faith would still carry the concept of the holy to many

who convert. This is the underappreciated side of the complex religious time of Akbar and his immediate successors, the religious struggles they took upon themselves were being taken on in smaller, endlessly varying forms throughout the Indian Subcontinent, as the apex of Islamic power coincided with the high tide of the Bhakti inspiration among worshippers of countless traditions. These traditions are elusive, and often easy to lose under the scope of Islam and Hinduism, when one isn't dealing precisely with Islam, or Hinduism, but this beforementioned culture of religious acts. In short, there was no Hindu and Islamic monolith that clashed against each other for domination of the subcontinent, always at the expense of the other.

This also helps to reveal divisions between religion and class in the society we are looking at. All of this discussion against mono-identity religion in this era is rooted in the works of the Dabistan, a book whose precise goal is the placing of all religions into categories and boxes, and which these Sufi-Hindus are an irksome obstacle in this goal. The author's pained efforts to include the ostensibly and self-identifying Muslim, though heavily Hindu influenced groups under the Hindu category betrays differences in religious identity as perceived by different levels in this society. While a full analysis of class and religion in Mughal India is beyond the scope of this essay, it is possible to gain insight through the author of this work. It is debated, based on the knowledge revealed in the first section on the Iranian religions that the author is possibly, Khay-Khosrow Esfendiyar, son of Azar Kayvan, or at the very least a member of the Sipassian religion, of which the author speaks of with the experience of an insider.¹⁹ The author begins the entire book with a detailed explanation of the Sipassian faith and its tenants, a longer and more rigorous coverage so early on that he does not give to other sects. Needless to

¹⁹ Abbas Amanat (2018). "Remembering the Persianate". *The Persianate World: Rethinking a Shared Sphere*. BRILL: 18.

say, this Sipassian faith he traces his background to is on much a similar base as these Hindu-Sufis, with the Sipassian sect being a form of Zoroastrian-Sufism, tracing its origin to the ancient religious traditions of Iran. Much like Akbar and others of the Mughal elite of this time, the author is more focused on the inward contents of a religion than its outward performance, as evidenced by his preoccupation with Sipassian theology versus Madarian practice. The ultimate struggle then in the later history of the Mughal Empire is not a Hindu vs. Muslim struggle, but a struggle between the likes of the Emperor Akbar and his *Dīn-i Ilāhī*, a syncretic tradition which tried to unite all of India's myriad religious beliefs and what is described as a hardline orthodox Islamic reprisal by figures like Aurangzeb, which led eventually to an increasingly strict perception of Islam by later Mughal governments. Islamic leadership was not motivated by the danger or desire to overcome the Hindus, but from *bid'ah*, innovation within Islam. These are conversations regarding the internal theology of the religion, rather than its outward practice. This does not mean the lower strata of society were ignorant or unconcerned with what the meaning of religion was, it is rather that the factors which made up religious identity had differing attributes.

There is much to be said on the fluidity of identity in history, and the dangers of imposing modern divisions and ways of thinking onto the past. Further research could do well to explore the realm of Zoroastrian-Sufism and the internecine conflicts between Hindus and between Muslims that do much more to reveal the history of the Indian Subcontinent than any singular narrative or story of Turkish invasion. The *Dabistan-e Mezaheb* is a veritable treasure trove of information on religious thought in the Mughal Era, and hopefully it, and corroborating documents will find a new place in scholarship in expanding views of the subcontinent's history from the voices and perspectives of its own historians.

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