

Mughal empire culture and religion

[History](#), [Empires](#)



After the decline of Hindu kingdom around 1000 AD, a number of Islamic invaders and merchants came and went but could not cast any significant impact on the cultural life of people. Most of the invaders were tribal kings from the clan Hun and Pathan whose main motive was to plunder the country, loot the property as much as they could. They had no ambition to establish an empire and that is why their cultural impact is insignificant. This could not remain for a long period. The Muslim empire was established with the first battle of Panipat in 1526 AD. Thereafter we find a continuous interaction between these two major distinct communities Hindus and Muslims. Muslims were the rulers and Hindus became the ruled. Hindus were employed in a number of jobs under their Muslim rulers. Continuous intermingling takes place between these two communities in the coming several centuries.

Trade and Commerce: The middle Classes – Nature and Standard of Living

The middle classes in medieval India consisted in the main, merchants, professional classes such as vaidyas and hakims and officials. There was high degree of professionalism among the Indian merchants. Some specialized in wholesale trade and others in retail trade, the former being called seth or bohra and the latter beoparis or banik. In south India the chettis formed the trading community. There was a special class banjaras who specialized in carrying trade. The banjaras used to move from place to place, sometimes with thousands of oxen, laden with food grains, salt, ghee etc. The sarrafs (shroff) specialized in changing money, keeping money in deposit or lending it, or transmitting it from one part of the country to the

other by means of hundi. The hundi was letter of credit payable after a certain period. The use of hundies made it easier to move goods or to transmit money from one part of the country to another. The hundies were cashed at a discount which sometimes included insurance so that the cost of goods lost or destroyed in transit could be recovered. By these means the Indian merchants could easily ship goods to countries of west Asia as well as where there were Indian banking houses. English and Dutch traders who came to Gujarat during the 17th century found the Indian financial system to be highly developed and the Indian merchants to be active and alert. There was keen competition for inside information and whenever there was a shortage of some goods in some parts of the country it was made good quickly by the merchants. But this applied to goods of high quality. Food grains and bulk articles were costly to move overland but not so costly if moved by rivers. Hence the major rivers carried much more goods in medieval times than now. However the total trade was limited since the villages, while not completely self sufficient, bought only a limited number of things from outside such as salt, iron and few consumer goods. Long distance trade generally catered to needs of the affluent sections in the cities.

The trading community in India was fairly large in number and included some of the richest merchants in the world. The names of virji or vohra who dominated the Surat trade for several decades and who had a large fleet of ships, Malaya Chetti on the Coromandal coasts, and Abdul Ghaffoor Bohra who left 85 lacks of rupees in cash and goods at the time of his death in 1718 are some of the noteworthy cases. There were many wealthy

merchants in Agra, Delhi, Orissa and Bengal. The wealthy merchants in the coastal ports of Gujarat lived in an ostentatious manner and aped the manners of the nobles. They lived in lofty houses with coloured tiles, wore fine clothes, rode well caparisoned horses and had people carrying flags and banners before them when they moved out in public. European travellers mentioned the commodious and well built houses in which the wealthy merchants of Agra and Delhi lived. But the ordinary sorts lived in houses above their shops. The French traveller Bernier, says that that the merchants tried to look poor because they were afraid they would be used like filled sponges that is squeezed of their wealth. But Sher Shah passed many laws for protecting the property of the merchants. The laws of Sher Shah are well known. Jahangir's ordinances included a provision that " if any one, whether unbeliever or Musalman should die, his property and effects should be left for his heirs, and no one should interfere with them. If he should have no heirs, they should appoint inspectors and separate guardians to guard the property, so that it value might be expended in a lawful expenditure, such as the building mosques and sarais, repair of broken bridged and digging of tanks and wells". Thus the concept of protection of private property, including the property of merchants clearly emerged.

Organization of Trade and Commerce – Role of European Trading Companies

Trade and commerce expanded in India during the first half of the 17th century due to a number of factors. Perhaps the most important factor was the political integration of the country under Mughal rule and establishment of conditions of law and order extensive areas. The Mughals paid attention to

roads and sarais which made communication easier. Uniform tax was levied on goods at the points of their entry into the empire. Road cesses or rahdari was declared illegal though it was continued to be collected by some of the local rajas. The Mughals minted silver rupees of high purities which became a standard coin in India and abroad and thus helped India's trade.

Another factor which helped India's was the arrival of the Dutch and English traders towards the beginning of the 17th century. Ralph Fitch during Akbar's reign, said Agra and Fatehpur Sikri were each larger than London. Montserrat says Lahore was second to none of the cities in Europe or Asia. The growth of town and town life is one of the significant features of 17th century India. The Indian traders welcomed the Dutch and the English because these traders helped them to break the Portuguese monopoly of sea trade, and in course of time, helped to establish a direct link between India and European markets.

The Portuguese power have begun to decline during the second half of the 16th century, as was demonstrated by the defeat by the Spanish armada by England in 1588. The Portuguese remained at Goa and also at Daman and Diu. But their shares in overseas trade declined continuously and were insignificant by the end of the century. The British could not succeed in India as long as the Mughal empire was strong but it was not long in coming as soon as the weakness of the empire became manifest.

Architecture

There was an outburst of many sided cultural activities in India under the Mughal rule. The tradition in the field of architecture, painting, literature and

music created during this period set a norm and deeply influenced the succeeding generations. In this sense, the Mughal period can be called a second classical age following the Gupta age in northern India. In this cultural development Indian traditions were amalgamated with the Turko - Iranian culture brought to the country by the Mughals. The Timurid court at Samarkand had developed as the cultural centre of west and central Asia. Babur was conscious of this cultural heritage. He was determined to set proper standards. The development of art and culture in various regions of India during the 14th and 15th centuries had held to rich and varied development from which it was possible to draw upon.

The Mughals built magnificent forts, palaces, public buildings, mosques and baolis etc. They also laid out many formal gardens with running water in fact use of running water in their palaces, resorts was the special feature of the Mughals. Babur was very fond of gardens and laid out few gardens in the neighbourhood of Agra and Lahore. Some of the Mughals gardens such as the Nishant Bagh in Kashmir. The Shalimar at Lahore and Pinjore etc have survived even to this day. We do not find the tradition of developing gardens in prior Hindu Kingdoms. It began with the Mughals and today is very much the part of Indian culture.

Akbar was the first Mughal ruler who had the time to undertake construction on a large scale. He built a series of forts. The most famous of which is the fort of Agra. In 1572 he commenced a palace - cum fort complex at Fatehpur Sikri. Built atop a hill, along with a large artificial lake; it included many buildings in the style of Gujarat and Bengal. The Gujarat style of architecture

is used most widely in the palace built probably for his Rajput wife or wives. Akbar took a personal interest in the work of construction at both Agra and Fatehpur Sikri. Persian or central influence can be seen in the glazed blue tiles used for decorations in the walls or for tiling the roofs. The period of Shahjahan needs no mention. His period is the best period of architectural development.

Mughal architectural traditions were based on a combination of Hindu and Turko - Iranian forms and decorative designs continued without a break into the 18th and early 19th centuries. Thus Mughals traditions influence the palace and forts of many provincial and local kingdoms. Even the golden temple of the Sikhs at Amritsar which was rebuilt several times during this period was built on the arch and dome principle and incorporated many features of the Mughals traditions of architecture.

Painting

The Mughals made a distinctive contribution in the field of painting. They introduced new themes depicting the court, battle scenes and the chase, added new colours and forms. They created a living tradition of painting which continued to work in different parts of the country long after the glory of the Mughals disappeared. The richness of the style again, was due to the fact that India had an old tradition of paintings. While no palm leaves older than the 12th century have survived to indicate the style of painting, the wall painting of Ajanta are an eloquent indication of its vigour. After the 8th century, the tradition seems to have decayed, but palm leaf manuscripts and illustrated Jain text from the 13th century onwards so the tradition had not

died. Apart from the Janis some of the provincial kingdoms, such as Malwa and Gujarat extended their patronage to painting during the 15th century.

A vigorous revival of the painting culture began only under Akbar. During the reign of Akbar paintings were organized in one of the imperial establishments. From the beginning of both Hindus and Muslims joined in the work. Thus, Jaswant and Dasawan were two of the famous painters of the Akbar's court. Apart from illustrating Persian books of fables, the painters were soon assigned the task of illustrating the Persian text of the Mahabharata, Akbar Nama and others. Indian themes and Indian scenes thus came in vogue and helped to free the school from Persian influence. Indian colours such as peacock blue, Indian red etc began to be used. Above all the somewhat flat effect of the Persian style began to be replaced by the roundedness of the Indian brush giving the pictures three dimensional effect. The Mughals reached the climax under Jahangir who had a very discriminating eye. While the tradition continued under Shahjahan, Aurangzeb's lack of interest in painting led to a dispersal of the artist to different places. This helped in the development of painting in the state's of Rajasthan and the Punjab hills.

The Rajasthan style of painting combined the themes and earlier traditions of western India or Jain school of painting with Mughal forms and styles. Thus, in addition to hunting and court scenes it had paintings on mythological themes, such as the dalliance of Krishna and Radha, or the Barah - masa, that is, the seasons or the Ragas (melodies). The Pahari School continued these traditions.

Language, Literature and Music

By the time of Akbar knowledge of Persian had become so wide spread in North India that he dispensed with the tradition of keeping revenue records in local language Hindavi in addition to Persian. Persian prose and poetry reached a climax under the Akbar's reign. Abul Fazal was a great scholar and a stylist as well as the leading historian of the age, set a style of prose writing which was emulated for many generations. The leading poet of the age was his brother Faizi who also helped in the translation of the Mahabharata. Utbi and Naziri were the leading Persian poets. Though born in Persia they were among the many poets among the scholars who migrated from Iran to India during the period and made the Mughal court one of the cultural centres of the Islamic world.

All though not much significant work was done in Sanskrit but number of Sanskrit works produced during this period is quite impressive. The dalliance of Krishna with Radha and the milk maids, pranks of the child Krishna and stories from Bhagawat figure largely lyrical poetry in Bengali, Oriya, Hindi, Rajasthani and Guajarati during this period. Both Muslims and Hindus contributed in this. A leading Mughal novel Abdur Rahim Khan - I - Khanan, produced a fine blend of bhakti poetry with Persian Ideas of life and human relations. But the most influential Hindi poet was Tulsidas who created Ramchritmanas in dialect of eastern u. p.

During the Muslim reign Akbar patronised Tansen of Gwalior who is credited with composing new melodies (ragas). Jahangir and Shah Jahan as well as many Mughal nobles followed this example. There are many apocrvohal

stories about the burial of music by the orthodox Aurangzeb. Recent studies show that Aurangzeb banished singing from his court, but not performance of musical instrument. In fact, Aurangzeb himself was an accomplished veena player. Music in all forms continued to be patronised by the Aurangzeb's queens in the harem and by the nobles.

That is why the largest number of books on classical Indian music was written during Aurangzeb's reign. But some of the most important developments in the field of music took place later on in the eighteenth century during the reign of Muhammad Shah (1720-48).

Religious Ideas and Beliefs

The bhakti movement continued apace during the 16th and 17th centuries. The Sikh movement had its origin with the preaching of Nanak. But its development is closely linked with the institution of Guru ship. Akbar had been deeply impressed with the Sikh guru's, and it is said, visited them at Amritsar. However, a clash began with the imprisonment and death of Guru Arjun by Jahangir. Dara the eldest son of Shahjahan, was by temperament scholar and a Sufi who loved to discourse with religious divines with the help of Brahmins of Kasi he got the Gita translated into Persian. But his most significant work was an anthology of the Vedas in the introduction to which Dara declared the Vedas to be " heavenly books in point of time" and " in conformity with holy Quran" thus underlining the belief that there were no fundamental difference between Hinduism and Islam.

Dadu a Gujarati poet preached a non – sectarian path. He refused to identify either with Muslim or with Hindus. Among the Muslims too, while the trained

of tauhid continued apace as were supported by many leading Sufi saints, a small group of orthodox Ulama reacted against it. But the influence of the orthodox thinkers and preachers was limited. Their chief hope was that their ideas would receive the support and the backing of those who held position of wealth and power in society and the state. On other hand the liberal thinkers made their appeal to the broad masses.

The recurrent cycles of liberalism and orthodoxy in the Indian History should be seen against the situation which was rooted in the structure of the Indian society. It was one aspect of the struggle between and entrenched privilege and power on the one hand and the egalitarian and humanistic aspirations of the mass of the people on the other.

The prestige and influence of the narrow orthodox elements and their reassertion of the narrow ideas and beliefs was a barrier to the growing process of rapprochement and tolerance among the votaries of the two dominant religions, Hinduism and Islam, and Hindrance to the process of cultural integration. The clash between the two trends came to the surface during Aurangzeb's reign.

Conclusion

The thousands years from the beginning of the 18th century to the end of the 17th century saw important changes in the political, economic and cultural life of the country and also, to a smaller extent, in its social life.

In the field of social life, the caste system continued to dominate, despite the challenge posed to it by Islam and loss of political power by the Rajput rulers

who were duty bound to protect dharma which implied, among other things, the upholding the fourfold division of society (varnashrama - dharma).

Although the Nath Panthi Jogis and the Bhakti saints vehemently criticised the caste system, they could hardly make a dent in it. A tacit agreement was arrived at in the course of time. The criticism of the caste system by saints did not, with some notable exceptions, extend to day - to - day or secular life, while the Brahmans acquiesced in the advocacy of the path of devotion as the way for salvation for all castes, specially for the sudras. However, the Brahmans continued to claim a privileged position for themselves, including the exclusive right to preach and educate.

The Bhakti and Sufi saints gradually brought about a better understanding of the fundamental tenets of Hinduism and Islam underlining the fact that they had a great deal of similarity. This resulted in a greater spirit of mutual harmony and toleration, although forces advocating a narrow, intolerant approach continued to be strongly entrenched and sometimes influenced state police. But such occasions were, on the whole, very few.

The Bhakti and Sufi saints also brought about important changes in the approach to religion, laying greater emphasis on true faith than to the formal observances they also contributed to the growth of regional languages and literature. But the excessive concern with religious and spiritual affairs resulted in setback to the growth of rational sciences, especially to the cultivation of science and technology.

While the Portuguese monopoly of some of the oriental trade and their domination of seas had, on the whole a harmful effect on Indian trade and

commerce, the Dutch and English traders who broke the Portuguese monopoly, helped to open the European markets for Indian products such as textiles, indigo, and salt - petre which were not exported to Europe earlier. Thus, India was linked more closely to the rapidly expanding European market. However in the absence of strong navy and a well developed mercantile fleet, the Indian trader and producer could secure only a marginal share of the profits of this new trade. On the other hand, the richness of the oriental trade further whetted the appetite of the European nation and quickened their economic and technological growth.

Under the Mughals, political integration was accompanied by a deliberated effort to create a unified ruling class consisting of Muslims and Hindus. The development in various fields in India during this period should not be lost sight of the growth of political integration. Indian society was one of the few societies in the world which was able to develop a more or less unified culture despite differences in race, religion and language. This unified culture was reflected in an outburst of creative activity which makes the 17th century a second classical age. In the south, the traditions of the Cholas were continued by the Vijayanagra kingdom. The Bahmni kingdom and its successor states also contributed to culture developments in various fields. The rich cultural developments in the various regional kingdoms during the 15th century were, to some extent integrated in the new cultural forms developed by the Mughals. However, this integrated culture came under pressure from the religious dogmatists of the two faiths as well as from the competing and conflicting interests of various sections in the ruling classes. But that it survived, on the whole till the middle of the 19th century is no

mean tribute to all those saints, scholars and enlightened rulers who helped to fashion it.

The period was also marked by economic developments and growth. Trade and manufactures expanded and there was expansion and improvement of cultivation also. However, the growth was uneven in different areas and during different phases. Apart from the Ganga valley where the Mughals spent a substantial part of the revenue resources of the empire the areas which developed rapidly during the 17th century were Gujarat, the Coromandal coast and Bengal. Perhaps, it is no accident that these have been the areas in the forefront of economic developments of India in the modern period, particularly the post independence era.

Would India have continued to progress economically and even attained Industrial Revolution on its own, if the Mughal Empire had continued? The question is too speculative. Perhaps the Mughal Empire had already reached the limit of its development. The feudal aristocratic nature of the state and the neglect of science and technology by the ruling class were already placing limits to the economic developments of the country. But whether India was able to develop faster and in a more harmonious manner under the British rule is a question which will be explained in the subsequent volume on modern India.