



THE BREAKDOWN OF TRADITIONAL MUSLIM SOCIETY IN MUGHAL INDIA

Dr. Samar Bahadur Singh
Head, Department of History
D.A.V. College Kanpur

By the beginning of the eighteenth century, Muslim society in India was composed of descendants of Turkic, Afghan, Persian and Arab immigrants, and of Indian Muslims who had embraced Islam in different regions and circumstances, and under varied pressures. The immigrants, who themselves belonged to distinct culture groups, brought with them the characteristic features of their ethnic and non-Islamic religious backgrounds. In the course of time, the interaction of their various ideas and values contributed to the rise of cultural traditions which were radically different from those of their birthplaces; Muslims, while retaining the broad basic framework of their religion, evolved healthy traditions of toleration, and of peaceful coexistence with the indigenous population. A great deal of similarity developed in the dress and ornaments of Hindus and Muslims. Though the eating habits of the members of the two religious groups differed in important respects, especially in the eating of meat, these difficulties did not undermine their social relations. They appreciated each other's religions and social taboos and adjusted their lives in an atmosphere of social amity and mutual understanding. Hindu and Muslim peasants, artisans, craftsmen and merchants worked in close co-operation with each other. Hindu bankers, merchants and money-lenders controlled trade and commerce and exercised considerable influence over the finances of the government. They were the backbone of society.

The use of Persian served as a strong unifying bond between the Hindu and Muslim upper classes. Translations of some Hindu religious works into Persian widened the outlook of those Hindus who were linked with the Mughal administrative machinery; and an atmosphere of sympathetic understanding of the spiritual problems of the two major religions of India was thus created. The verses of Sa'di, Rumi and Ijafi regulated the patterns of social behaviour of Hindus and Muslims alike. The educational policy and the translation scheme undermined Brahmanical superiority in the interpretation of Hinduism. The obscurantism and bigotry of Awrangzeb disturbed the Hindu and Muslim nobility alike. The control of the Hindus over the revenue and the financial policies and administration of the Mughals had made even the Muslim theologians and other religious functionaries dependent upon them for the verification of their land grants. The occasional outbursts of the theologians and the Sufis against the Hindu administrative officers of the Mughals should be ascribed to their failure to make the administrative machinery subservient to their demands.

The system of state employment evolved by Akbar, known as the *mansabdri* system, absorbed all types of landed interests such as Raj puts, Bundelas, hill rajas, Jats, Marathas, and the Muslim tribes and ethnic groups, into the same graded hierarchy, with definite salaries either in the form of a *jagir* (assignment of land) or partly in

cash and partly *inj4gir*, for each *inansab* (rank) and for the number of horsemen maintained. They constituted the upper crust of society. Their tribal, racial, or ethnic interests conditioned their alliances and enmities; religion played hardly any significant role in political and official dealings. The secular laws of the government exercised an overriding control over the administration.

The *zamindars* were those who held various types of hereditary land rights. From the highest Raj put chieftains down to the petty 'intermediaries' at village level, all were known as *zamindars*. They were ambitious, restless and given to intrigue. Akbar assimilated them to the Mughal administrative machinery by offering them *mancabs* commensurate with their status and ability. The emperor's paramount authority to appoint, depose, or reduce rank kept them under proper control and various other restrictions ensured their loyalty to the emperor. They collected the revenue from the cultivators and credited the state's share to the imperial treasury through the official revenue collectors. They maintained law and order in their jurisdiction, protected the roads and other means of communication and were required to promote cultivation. Their rights and privileges were superior to those of the other cultivators in the village. The dispossessed Afghan nobles among the Muslims enjoyed large and compact *zamindari* interests. Under them, a considerable number of other Afghans and their retainers controlled many villages. The *zamindirs* of other caste groups also held compact areas under their control. This enabled them to rebel without much inconvenience and on the slightest provocation. Religious and racial questions added to the confusion. The system itself was responsible for the frequent Jat, Sikh and Afghan revolts in the north and those of the MarathAs and the Deccan Muslims in the south. Grants were also made for religious and charitable purposes to scholars, theologians, and members of respectable families who had no other means of livelihood. The descendants of the Muslim saints, and of the Prophet, were the greatest beneficiaries under this system. Subsequently they also came to hold compact *amindari* interests in different villages. These grants were liable to be resumed at the death of the assignee, though some grants were hereditary. The conditions under which grants were made were not always complied with by grantees; and any interference on the part of the administrators to curtail the privileges of the beneficiaries met with strong resistance.

The peculiar features of the Mughal administrative system produced three types of villages. There were villages consisting exclusively of a Hindu or Muslim population, and there were others with a mixed population. The exclusively or predominantly Muslim villages had their mosques with *imams*, *mullas* and other religious functionaries, who played a vital role in directing village life into healthy channels, and exhibited restraint, understanding and sympathy in the celebration of religious festivals and other communal functions. The tomb of a genuine or legendary saint or a martyr was an object of veneration to Hindus and Muslims alike. Revivalistic and puritanical movements could not eradicate all syncretic tendencies.

The pressure on the supply of jagirs, the demand for which increased at the end of the seventeenth century because of the costly military campaigns of Awrangzeb ('Alamgir I) in the impoverished Deccan, and the need to reconcile Deccani nobles,

unbalanced the Mughal administrative machinery. Awrangzeb's policy of breaking the *zamindar* cliques by encouraging them to embrace Islam, and thus driving a wedge into their ranks, strengthened their parochial and separatist tendencies. Those *zamindars* who did not pay revenue unless military force was applied against them, were a perpetual source of trouble to the Mughal administration. At the end of the seventeenth century, in combination with other recalcitrants, such people rose in rebellion in several places. Some of them used religious slogans to rally support for their cause, and ambitious religious leaders lent a willing ear to them. In the eighteenth century these *zamindars* assumed the role of autonomous chiefs.

The war of succession after the death of Awrangzeb dealt a heavy blow to the straitened resources of the empire; and the prodigality of Shah 'Adam Bahadur Shah (1119-24/1707-12) shattered the basis of the *jagir dari* system. Subsequently, to the detriment of the interests of the central government, encroachments were made on crown land which began to be assigned as *jagirs*. An attempt to replenish the treasury by introducing a revenue-farming system aggravated the crisis. The powerful factions at the court began to bid for the profitable and most easily manageable jagirs, and the leading aspirants for power embarked upon a scramble for the key positions of the empire. Gradually some mansabdar also acquired permanent zamindari rights.

Formerly the Mughal nobles had intrigued to gain the favour of their masters; now they assumed the position of king-makers. The leading Muslim factions unhesitatingly set out to seek the protection of the Marathas, the Rajputs and the Jats whenever it suited their purpose. Zu'l-Faqar Khan, the all-powerful *wazir*, obtained the abolition of the *jizya* through Jahandar Shah, whom he raised to the throne in 1124/1712.. Even the reversal of the policy of Awrangzeb did not save the Mughal empire from dissolution. Failure to keep pace with technological developments in other parts of the world and to introduce much-needed administrative reforms precipitated its downfall. Nadir Shah's invasion of 1152/1739 left the imperial capital, Delhi, bleeding and prostrate. The surrender of Sind, Kabul and the western parts of the Panjab to the invader made the Mughal frontiers vulnerable to successive invasions by the Afghan chief, Ahmad Shah Durrani (1160-87/1747-73). His rise contributed to the encouragement of the Indian Afghans, who began to make a fresh bid for supremacy over the ruins of the Mughal empire. The Afghan chief Najib al-Dawla assumed the role of a fifth columnist. A headlong collision between the rising Maratha power and the ambitious Afghans, both of whom were making a bid for political supremacy in northern India, became inevitable. On 14 January 1761, a fierce battle was fought between Ahmad Shah Durrani and the Marathas at Panipat in which the Maratha power was worsted. The Durrani invasion drained the impoverished Mughal empire of its entire resources; Najib al-Dawla suppressed the Jat incursions, but the Sikhs, who had gradually consolidated their power, obtained supreme control of the whole of the Panjab. In less than ten years the Marathas reappeared before Delhi; but neither they nor the Mughals could withstand the gradual penetration of the British into India. The battle of Panipat exposed the weakness of the Indian powers.

On the decline of the central authority at Delhi, there arose along with the Hindu states a number of Muslim principalities which pretended to *owe* nominal allegiance to the Mughal emperors, but to all intents and purposes were independent. Of these the most important in the north were Bengal, Oudh (Awadh) and the trans-Gangetic powers, and in the south, the Aaf Jahi state of Haydarabad (Deccan). They tried to reorganize their administrations on traditional lines, and their courts became the rendezvous of unemployed artists, craftsmen, musicians and poets, mainly Muslims.

RELIGIOUS CHALLENGES

Except for the Mujaddidi Naqshbandis, all the mystic orders in India followed the principles of *wa(dat al-wujud*. At the end of the eleventh/ seventeenth century, Shah Kalim Allah Jahanibadl (d 1142/1729) revived the past glories of the Chishtis at Delhi. He tactfully but firmly opposed the religious outlook of Awrangzeb, denounced him as presumptuous, and sought to stimulate the interest of all sections of Indians in his own preachings. His disciple, Shaykh Nizam al-Din Awrangabadi (d. **1142/1730**), preached the humanitarian teachings of the Chishtis in the Deccan, His activities in Awrangzeb's camp in the Deccan stifled the Naqshbandi influence. About **1160/1747**, his son, Shah Fakhr al-Din, moved to Delhi, and plunged himself into the teaching of Hadith and Sufism. The Mughal emperor, a large number of important nobles, princes and princesses vied with one another in exhibiting their devotion to him. Till his death in **1199/1785**, his teachings inspired many of the Sunnis of Delhi, and were acceptable to Shi'is, as well as to many Hindus. The influence of his disciples extended from Delhi to the Panjab in the west and to Ruhilkhand in the east.

The most eminent Stiff and the theologian of the twelfth/eighteenth century was Shah Wall Allah of Delhi. He was born on 4 Shawwal **1114/3 March I 703**, and received his early education from his father, whom he succeeded in **1131/1719** as the head of the *madrasa* which he had founded in Delhi. In 1143/1731 he visited Mecca on Pilgrimage, and studied Hadith under some eminent scholars at Medina; he came back to Delhi on **14 Rajab 1145/31 December 1732**. His studies in Arabia and contacts with other scholars of the Islamic world sharpened his intellectual faculties and extended his outlook. He began to feel a mystical confidence which enabled him to discard taqlid (acceptance of religious authority) without compromising his belief in the innate perfection of the *Sbari'a* he asserted that the pursuit of Islamic ordinances conferred far-reaching social and individual benefits upon Muslims. His *magnum opus*, *Hujjat Allab al-baligha*, draws extensively upon the works of Ibn Miskawayh, al-Farabi and al-Gbazali; it reflects a deep understanding of the importance of the process of historical change and socio-economic challenges. His *Sbari'a-state*, which he sought to reorganize on the model of the government of the first four caliphs, was the *sine qua non* of a peaceful and prosperous life for all ages and times. '*Adi* (justice) was the golden mean which preserved the framework of all political and social organizations. *Tawazun* (equilibrium) in economic life ensured the proper development of a healthy society. An excessive burden of taxation on the revenue-producing classes-peasants, merchants and artisans-undermined the health of the body politic.

In a letter addressed to the Mughal emperor, the *wazir* and the nobles, he gave practical suggestions for the remedying of the defects in society and the administration. His letter to Abmad Shah Durrani details the chaotic condition of the imperial court, and includes a brief account of non-Muslim powers such as the Jäts, the Marathas and the Sikhs. It was written mainly to seek the goodwill of the conqueror; and it would not be realistic to interpret it as an invitation to that adventurer to invade the country and restore the glory of Islam. Abmad Shah Durrani, who had already invaded India on four earlier occasions, hardly needed any invitation for the invasion of 1174/1761, or briefing about the state of affairs of the non-Muslim powers. Mirza Mazhar Jan-i Janan, another eminent saint of the times, had no respect for the Durrani army and for him it was a scourge of God.

Shah Wali Allah was wholly sincere in his devotion to the cause of Islam, and had a firm faith in its power. 'If it so happens', he wrote, 'that the Hindus are able to obtain complete domination over India, the Divine Mystery would force their leaders to embrace Islam in the same manner as the Turks formerly did.'⁶⁵ Though his ancestors had migrated to India in the seventh/thirteenth century, he considered himself an alien, and exhorted his followers to abandon 'the customs of 'Ajam and the habits of the Hindus'.⁶⁶ His Arabic works subsequently found considerable popularity in Egypt and other Arabic-speaking countries which were experiencing an increasing tension because of the conflicts between eclecticism and revivalistic movements. His disciple, Sayyid Murtada of Bilgram (near Lucknow), achieved immense celebrity in Egypt. He wrote commentaries on al-Ghazali's *Ibya 'ulum al-din* and other works on *Habitb and fiqb*. Shah Wali Allah died in 1176/1762.

His son, Shah 'Abd al-'Aziz (1159-1239/1746-1824), vigorously followed the traditions of his father. He wrote a detailed refutation of the beliefs of the Twelver Shi'a, which aroused considerable sectarian bickering. Mawlanā Sayyid Dildar 'All, the contemporary Shi'i *mujtahid* of Lucknow, and his disciples, published several polemical works in refutation. His younger brothers, Shah Rafi' al-Din, Shah 'Abd al-Qadir and Shah 'Abd al-Ghani, co-operated with him in strengthening the cause of Sunni orthodoxy. The first two translated the Qur'an into Urdu. Students from Western Islamic countries also attended their seminaries.

The fatwa which he wrote after the Emperor Shah 'Alam was taken under the protection of the East India Company (1803) is regarded as a very revolutionary document, but it hardly solved any of the problems of the contemporary Muslims. In the *fatwa* he addressed the puppet Mughal emperor as the *Irnim* of the Muslims, and accused the British of wantonly demolishing the mosques and restricting the freedom of *dbimmis* and Muslims alike. Their non-interference with practices such as the Friday and 'Id prayers, the call to prayer, and cow-slaughter, did not according to him merit any respect, because they felt no obligation to show such tolerance. He therefore declared that India was now *datal-hat-b* (the abode of war, i.e. outside the Islamic oecumene). The fact that he did not take the same view of the domination of the Marathas, who had previously exercised supreme control over the emperor, cannot be

⁶⁵. Wali Allah, *Tafbimat-i Ilabiyya* (Delhi, 1936), I, 215-16.

⁶⁶. Wali Allah, *Wasiyat Nama* (Lucknow, n.d.), 7.

defended on theological grounds. It seems that he examined the situation historically. Instances of Hindus exercising absolute control over the Muslim powers were not wanting in Indian history; but the supremacy of a foreign power was unprecedented. Neither Shah Wali Allah nor Shah 'Abd al-'Aziz realized the strength of the challenge of the West, and they left Muslim society in a backward condition, torn with sectarian strife and groping in the dark.

Shah 'Abd al-'Aziz's nephew, Isma'il Shahid, and his disciple Sayyid Ahmad Barelwi (1201-46/1786-1831) made further contributions to the practical and theoretical aspects of the *jihad*. Sayyid Ahmad was born at Rae Bareli, in the Shi'i state of the nawabs of Oudh. He was not interested in literary education. In about 1804, he travelled to Delhi, and studied there under Shah 'Abd al-Qadir, one of the sons of Shah Wali Allah. After approximately two years' stay he left for his native land. In 1810 he joined the Pathan chief, Amir Khan, and obtained considerable training and experience in guerrilla warfare. When Amir Khan surrendered and was recognized as the ruler of Tank (November 1817), Sayyid Ahmad came back to Delhi. His experience as a soldier and his achievements as a mystic elicited the immeasurable admiration of Shah 'Abd al-'Aziz. Shah Isma'il, son of Shah 'Abd al-Ghani, and Shah 'Abd al-'Aziz's son-in-law, 'Abd al-Hayy, both became Sayyid Ahmad's disciples. Like a roving missionary, accompanied by his disciples, he visited a number of towns in modern Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and Bengal, where they militantly sought to suppress popular religious practices, and combated the prejudice against the re-marriage of widows.

In 1821 Sayyid Ahmad came to Calcutta, and set off for Mecca. A study of the Wahhabi movement there seems to have strengthened his zeal for militant Muslim revivalism; and in 1824 he returned to India with his mind full of ideas of jihad. A large number of disbanded sepoy soldiers of the East India Company, unemployed Pathan followers of Amir Khan, Ruhillias and the supporters of the rulers of Sind warmly responded to his declaration of jihad against the Sikhs, whom he imagined he would be able to overthrow easily. In 1826 he left for the North West Frontier; patched up alliances with some tribal chiefs; and obtained considerable success in early skirmishes against the Sikhs. On 11 January 1827 he assumed the title of imam; he then wrote to the rulers of Bukhara and Herat, explaining the differences between an imam and a sultan, and urging them to help him without any fear for their own thrones. Shah Isma'il also wrote a treatise on the subject. Their arguments did not convince the Central Asian rulers, and their activities aroused considerable suspicion among the neighbouring Islamic powers and tribal chiefs. Yar Muhammad Khan, the chief of Peshawar, strongly opposed Sayyid Ahmad, whose followers defeated him heavily in 1830. The Sayyid formed a government in accordance with his ideas of a pious Islamic state. His attempts to stamp out the practice of giving daughters to the highest bidders, the enforcement of Islamic taxes on the poor tribes who had joined him in the lust for gold, and other rigorist judicial and economic laws, estranged the tribes from his followers, who were known as the mujabida or 'fighters in the jihad'. His decree permitting his Indian disciples to take the young girls of the tribes as wives, provoked a violent storm of hostility against the mujabids, and the tribes began to desert them. In the beginning of 1831 the Sayyid made a dash as far as

Muzaffarabad in Kashmir, was defeated, and returned to Balakot, where he fell fighting against a strong force of Sikhs in May 1831. The claims of Sayyid Ahmad to the imamate, his assumption of a status akin to that of the Rightly-guided Caliphs, his schemes for puritanical reforms, and the indiscreet interference of his followers with the lives of the tribes, brought rapid disaster to his plans of conquest and of founding an ideal Islamic empire extending from Peshawar to Calcutta. His schemes were too narrowly based to fit into the framework of contemporary Islamic society. The British authorities actively welcomed unrest on the frontiers with the Sikhs, and connived at the flow of arms, money and men from their Indian possessions to the Sayyid. The movement of Sayyid Ahmad, though known as a Wahhabi movement, had no organic connexion with Muhammad b. ‘Abd al-Wahhab’s movement, and was called by its followers the *Tariqa i-Muhammadiyah*. His followers were divided into several branches; some even went to the extent of calling him a messiah. Political disintegration and social degeneration after the death of Shah ‘Alam Bahadur Shah I brought little economic dislocation, and was not a corollary of intellectual or moral decay. The traditional seminaries of Delhi, and the *dars i-nizami*, or the curriculum of the oriental learning evolved at Lucknow in the eleventh/seventeenth century, produced some eminent scholars in several branches of the traditional learning, and regional literatures were also greatly enriched. The development of Urdu was a singular contribution of the period. Scholars like Tafaççlul usayn Kashmiri who flourished in the reign of Aaf al-Dawla (1188-1212/1775-97) in Oudh, learnt English and Latin, and compiled some valuable mathematical works. Mirza Abu Talib Khan, also called Abu Talib Landani (‘the Londoner’), who was born at Lucknow in 1166/1752-3, served the court of Oudh and the East India Company in various capacities. In the years 1798-1803 he travelled to Europe and wrote a detailed account of his experiences in the *Masir-i talibi fi bilad-i Afranji*, which he completed in 1804. He took a keen interest in British social, political and economic institutions, and assessed them in his work with a remarkable degree of comprehension.

The Rajputs, Jats, Marithas and Sikhs who carved out independent principalities followed the broad pattern of the Mughal administration and welcomed the presence of talented Muslims at their courts; thus the general economic equilibrium of the Muslims remained undisturbed. The battles of Plassey (Palasi) in 1757 and Buxar (Baksar) in 1764 put an end to the independence of Bengal. The series of revenue legislative measures passed between 1772 and 1790 culminating in the permanent settlement (1793) of Lord Cornwallis replaced the old class of Zamindars, mainly Muslims, with speculators comprising Calcutta *banians* (bankers), moneylenders and subordinate employees of the East India Company. The Muslim aristocracy, which took pride in its extravagance, had not the ready cash to profit by the new regulations as did the Hindus. The high-handedness of the Company’s agents undermined the monopoly of the Muslim weavers, who possessed hereditary looms and adhered to the traditional system of manufacture. Subsequently the unfair competition of the manufacturers in England and the unwillingness of the Company either to protect the Bengal cotton industry from the repercussions of the Industrial Revolution, or to share with the Indians the widened horizon of their industrial experience, reduced the region to a plantation for the production of raw materials and a dumping-ground for cheap manufactured goods from the West.

A large section of the Muslim artisan class fell back upon the land for its livelihood. The Company's increasing interest in commercial crops such as jute, indigo, tea and opium, and the rapid development of a money economy undermined, especially in Bengal, the basis of Indian cultivation. A considerable number of Muslim agriculturists disposed of their land to Hindu bankers, and were soon reduced to the position of landless labourers. Suspicion of the British, their indifference towards the lot of the Muslims, and the high-handedness of the newly emerged landed aristocracy, prepared a breeding ground for several militant Muslim revivalist movements, which were regarded as offshoots of the Wahhabi movement.

The movement which Hajji Shari 'at Allah (1781-1840) started in East Bengal after his return from Mecca in 1818 was popularly known as the Fara'izi movement, because of the emphasis which the adherents of the movement laid on the observance of fara'iz or obligatory religious duties. Shari'at Allah's long stay in the Hijaz (1799-1818) had imbued him with the spirit of the Wahhabi reforms, and driven him away from the mainstream of Bengali life. He set himself the task of restoring the puritanical customs of early Islam in rural Bengal. His followers emphasized that India under British rule was dar al-barb, and therefore it was not lawful to perform Friday prayers or those of the two 'Ids. A section of the Muslim peasantry became hostile to their uncompromising and fanatical attitude, and Hindu landlords helped the recalcitrants. In 1831 a major clash between the parties dealt a severe blow to the plans of Eiajji Shari'at Allah and he retired into seclusion. His son Hajji Muhsin, alias Dudu Mian (1819-62), who after 1838 led the movement started by his father, divided most of East Bengal into districts and appointed a *kbalifa* (agent) to each. He took a determined stand against the levying of illegal cesses by landlords and indigo planters. Copying the Arabs, who ate locusts, he insisted that his disciples should eat grasshoppers. The cultivators and the village artisans responded enthusiastically to his preaching. The Hindu *zamindars* and his Muslim opponents, whom he forcibly tried to convert to his mission, implicated him in a number of criminal suits; he served several terms of imprisonment and died on 24 September 1862.

A similar revivalist movement based on socio-economic grievances was started in West Bengal by Mir Nithar 'All, popularly known as Titu Mir, a well-known Calcutta wrestler who in 1821 had come under the influence of Sayyid Ahmad of Rae Bareli. His followers wore a distinctive dress and would only eat with members of their own brotherhood. The landlords imposed a tax which was quite heavy for a poor peasant on each of them, which came to be known as the Beard Tax, for all of them wore beards. This gave rise to a number of minor riots and ultimately Titu Mir fell fighting against a military contingent sent to crush his uprising on 19 November 1831. The revivalists had little success in eradicating superstitions and backwardness in rural Bengal, and made themselves a target of attack by British officials and Hindu *zamindars*. Their zeal for reforms was praiseworthy, but they were antiquated and short-sighted.

The changes introduced into the revenue and judicial administration by Hastings and Cornwallis between 1772 and 1793 deprived the Muslims of all the higher posts that they had so far retained. By the end of the 1820s, the anglicization of Indian



institutions, and the increased opportunities for the British to obtain home comforts, including the presence of their families in India, tended to set British administrators apart from Indian life. They became increasingly authoritarian and race-conscious, and the need to read and understand Persian or Hindustani was hardly felt. They regarded the use of native languages as a necessary aid to administration; few, indeed, took any cultivated interest in them.

Muslim scholars in India, who during the previous centuries had depended entirely on state patronage, suffered from its disappearance. Until the end of the eighteenth century, the Muslims took a considerable interest in the service of the East India Company. Some of them wrote historical works of singular importance under the patronage of their English masters. Between 1800 and 1804, the encouragement of John Gilchrist of the Fort William College, Calcutta, contributed to the publication of works of outstanding value. Scholars from all over northern India applied to the authorities of the College for appointment. Even Mit Taqi Mir, the distinguished Urdu poet, applied for a position, but did not succeed because of his advanced age.