

The Appearance of Islam in India in Social and Religious Perspective

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Abstract - All these religions or rather sects derived their authority from the Vedas and consequently all were dissoluble bound up with the existing caste system, for at that period it was practically, universally, though wrongly, believed that such hereditary caste was sanctioned by the Vedas. Also all of them were remarkably tolerant towards each other except on occasions of heat and controversy. Buddhism and Hinduism flourished side by side and Jainism too. In the same kingdom, in the same city, in the same family even, Hindus Jain and Buddhists lived peaceably, amicably holding discussion without embitterment on the most abstruse questions of man and god. If the father was devotee of Shiva, the son was devotee of Buddha and the same man in his own life might change his religion without causing disturbance either in the family or the society. When this struggle between Buddhism and Brahmanism was going on Islam made its appearance in India. Like the other religions with historical beginning. It arose essentially as a spiritual movement meant to raise the believers morally and socially. But again, as in the case of the other religions it becomes unavoidably connected with politics; and this very much obscured its real nature and aspirations. It knew nothing of great religious dogmas and complicated system of transcendental philosophy at first.

Keywords - Society, God, Preaching, Khalifas, Empire, Religion, Religious Sects, Civilization, Vedic, Hindu, Buddhism, Jainism, Islam, Christian, Caste, Shudras

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TEXT AND CONTEXT

In this paper we will confine ourselves to the consideration of the social problem with which India was faced at the time of the advent of Islam in this country and we will try to indicate the nature of the contribution of Islam towards the solutions of that problem. During the last year of the prophet Muhammad and the reigns of the first three Khalifas, king Harsha built up a great empire in the north of India over the ruins of the Gupta Empire, which had its seat at Patliputra. His ambition was to conquer the whole of India, but he was checked by Pulakeshin II who made himself sovereign of the southern half of the country. King Harsha gave to his great dominion a spell of peace and prosperity. He was equally tolerant to vaidika Hinduism and Buddhism, and impartially helped both, with his death in 647 A.D. Buddhism began to decline and an age of religious anarchy set in when various old and new religions began to fight for mastery. In Eighth Century the numerous sects sprang into existence and inculcated the worship of all kinds of gods from the noblest and highest to the most repulsive deities, taking delight in drunken orgies and

grotesque rites. The leaders of rival sects cited the authority of the Vedas in support of their doctrines and practices, and wished to overpower one another. Some worshipped Shiva, while others worshipped the fire, Ganesh, the sun, Bhairava and Matri, Kartika, the god of love, Yama the god of death, Varuna, sky, water, snakes Ghosts etc and acted according to their own inclinations.

All these religions or rather sects derived their authority from the Vedas and consequently all were dissoluble bound up with the existing caste system, for at that period it was practically, universally, though wrongly, believed that such hereditary caste was sanctioned by the Vedas. Also all of them were remarkably tolerant towards each other except on occasions of heat and controversy.

Buddhism and Hinduism flourished side by side and Jainism too. In the same kingdom, in the same city, in the same family even, Hindus Jain and Buddhists lived peaceably, amicably holding discussion without embitterment on the most abstruse questions of man and god. If the father was devotee of Shiva, the son

was devotee of Buddha and the same man in his own life might change his religion without causing disturbance either in the family or the society.

Besides, as in the case of Islam, they were tolerant and at time even indulgent to other religions. But while so tolerant to each other and also to outside religions, they were very intolerant in their treatment of the Shudras and other lower castes. The Shudras were shut out from all religious knowledge and practices. The current recession of the code of Manu contains many penal provisions against them which seem unbelievable to modern minds. Along with the higher knowledge, the Shudras were shut out from the political life of their country also. No wonder the large sections of the children of the soil were discontented with their lot and considered their lives miserable. When we descend to still lower strata of Indian society we find a population almost as numerous as the Shudras themselves, existing altogether outside the pale of Hindu civilization and society. The Shudras were only debarred from all near participation in the political and religious life, but these classes were rigorously excluded from even all social intercourse and contact at any point with the higher castes. In some cases even their shadows had become contaminating to the Brahmins and some of these unfortunates had to shriek from a distance to give notice of their presence when they saw a human being approaching.

It was a strange anomaly that such inhuman intolerance and persecution should have existed in the Hindu society which even in those days was pre eminent for its intellectual power, and spiritual and moral fervor. In Buddhism India's soul had risen against this inhuman system and shaken it to its foundations. But the relentless logic and the cold moral severity, the ascetic renunciation of Buddhism and its refusal to take any aid from the mystic and emotional side of human nature, made its scheme of life too high for its age and too dry and unattractive for the emotional culture of India. It in its later form of Mahayana it could not compete with the ancient faiths of the land. The image of Buddha could not evoke the same feeling of awe and reverence which the image of Shiva, Vishnu and other ancient Gods evoked. Besides the New Sacerdotal class which grew up within and imposed itself on Buddhism gradually become very avaricious, superstitious and immoral. Consequently Buddhism lost its hold on the people. It was almost sinking under its own weight when Brahmanism, taking advantage of its weakness, delivered against it its final blows. The Kshatriyas and other higher castes also co-operated because the upheaval in the lower castes which Buddhism had

greatly helped was antagonistic to their interests and under mind their social monopoly and influence. This powerful combination of the most organized and resourceful sections of society wiped Buddhism out of India and, side by side, gradually crushed the rebellion against the established social order which Buddhism had inaugurated.

THE APPEARANCE OF ISLAM

When this struggle between Buddhism and Brahmanism was going on Islam made its appearance in India. Like the other religions with historical beginning. It arose essentially as a spiritual movement meant to raise the believers morally and socially. But again, as in the case of the other religions it become unavoidably connected with politics; and this very much obscured its real nature and aspirations. It knew nothing of great religious dogmas and complicated system of transcendental philosophy at first. Its simple message was:

"God is one; as His humble servants and creatures, we are all brothers. Let us then live like brothers and worship him". This message directly or indirectly is the message of every religions, but the specialty of Islam lay in the fact that its followers somehow or other succeeded in embodying this message in their social system to a greater extent than the followers of other religious. Consequently at the psychological moment when it came into India this peculiarity naturally acted on the mind of the lower classes of India as a very strong recommendation. Their mind were in a state of ferment and the hand of the ancient social tyranny was falling more heavily upon them because of their rebellion. This mostly account for the great success which Islam seems to have met on its arrival in India. It was not spread by sword of the invader by the indigenous caste tyranny. It satisfied the social yearnings of vast sections of India's populations which have struggling to be free from that tyranny. Besides, it could not have met with the opposition which drove Buddhism out of India. The higher castes dreaded the intrusion of their lower sections into their own social preserves. It did not at all matter to them if this class accepted another religion and became a part of another social system. In fact the presence of another system, outside their own social economy, which could absorb these classes, might well have seemed to them to be even an advantage, are it would remove a pressure and a potential danger from their midst.

As we have seen, socially at this period as ever before, India was a collection of castes differentiated from each other by sectarian creeds and customs.

But these smaller and bigger groups had not developed that collective consciousness which is implied in the present day communalism.

Thus free from bitterness and friction and also from those social restrictions to which the lower classes were subject, Islam could carry on its mission unfettered in every stratum of Indian society. Indirectly the proximity of a social system so completely free from all castes barriers and indefensible "Touch me notism" would naturally act as a great warning and stimulus to rouse the Hindu intellect and conscience to the great enormities of their social life Buddhism has already sapped the intellectual and moral foundations of this system. Though Shankara himself did not throw his great weight against it, yet almost all the great reformers who came after him denounced it as being irrational and against the real principles of the Vedic religion. In proportion to their success these preachings indirectly raised the prestige of Islam in the eyes of the common people and added to its success. The tragic immobility of the Hindu system and its failure to respond to the call of its own reformers continued to increase the numbers of converts to Islam. Islam satisfied a crying need of the social system which Hinduism continued to neglect and whose satisfaction was essential in the wider interests of nationalism and humanity and also it is not advancing theories of compulsory conversion but by coolly reflecting on the peculiarity of the two social system and realizing how they supplement each other in the national life.

The Christian ideal of the brotherhood of man is the highest but Islam preaches a practical brotherhood-the social equality of all Moslems. This is the great bride which Islam offers so Islam was essentially a social movement.

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