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Eve of First Hijri Millennial and Epochal Change: Millenarian Movements and Religious Syncretism in the Indian Subcontinent

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ABSTRACT

The first Hijra millennial that coincided with the sixteenth century of the Christian era was marked by many religious movements in the Indian Subcontinent as well as other parts of the Islamic world. These movements were based on the idea of epochal change. This paper is an attempt to underline the various thought currents based on such a millennial approach. It highlights the key features of these movements i.e., the leading figures, the ideas about an epochal shift and their teachings. The paper also analyzes the tenets of these various movements and traces the origin of some of their beliefs. It further highlights that these teachings were not only influenced by the ideas of other religions but also had a syncretistic tendency and combined the ideas from various religions into their tenets. Finally, it concludes that due to the cultural and religious interaction between various religions and the epochal concerned these movements presented an outlook that was essentially a shift from traditional Islamic thought but also syncretistic in one way or the other. The research is mainly based on historical analysis of contemporary sources as well as modern historical works on the subject.

Keywords: *Millenarianism, syncretism, Hurufism, Nuqtawi, Zikrism, Din e Ilahi*

Introduction

The eve of the first Hijri millennial that coincided with the sixteenth century of the Christian era witnessed the growth of some religious movements charged with Alfi or the millennial currents. Their ideas were marked by an epochal concern as this coincided with

the completion of almost a thousand years after the Prophet Muhammad upon him be peace. All the segments and groups of the Muslim society shared a belief or concern that a reviver or Mahdi will come to revive the religion which resulted in the emergence of many different movements and groups.

These millennial movements combined the ideas of different religious groups and different Syncretistic tendencies along with their millennial claims and thus introduced new teachings.

There emerged in the subcontinent some distinctive groups like the Nur Bakhshi and the Raushani during the period that even survive till very recently while some others also emerged during the same period that withered away very soon like the *Fin e Ilahi* of Emperor Akbar. It is very interesting to observe this millennialist matrix of religious thought of the Indian subcontinent where some trends reached from Persia while others developed here.

Imported Millennialist and Syncretistic trends:

There were some of the Millennialist and syncretistic trends that were not Indian in origin but their teachings and ideas were brought in here in the subcontinent by their followers and preachers. The contemporary Persian sources and historians refer to three groups that shared the millennial currents and were not originated here: the Hurufism, the Nuqtawists and the Nurbakhshists. These movements have their roots in Persia but due to persecution they poured out from their original headquarters to the Indian subcontinent and this diaspora included their leaders and followers alike. One of the remarkable aspects of these groups was that their teachings included some ideas from Indian religions; surprisingly they shared the belief in Tanakh or metempsychosis and transmigration. In what follows a cursory view of these groups is provided:

1-Hurufis:

Hurufism had emerged in Persia and from there it had spread to Anatolia and Azerbaijan before it reached the Indian subcontinent. Its teachings were rooted in and inspired by the Kabala or the Jewish mysticism. Fadlullah Astarabadi also known as Naimi (1340-1394) was the advocate of these teachings. According to his biographies, he was inspired from a very early age by the mystical poetry of Rumi and had turned into a recluse by severing all of his worldly relations and set for hajj on foot. It was during his life as a recluse that he started to claim or experience a series of dreams and mystical experiences

that resulted in the development of his new teaching known as Hurufism (Shahzad, 2006, p.142).

The teachings of Fadlullah included the idea of divinization of man and that God must be sought in man himself as the heart of man is the very Throne of God, further, he preached that he was the manifestation of God. The most unique aspect of Fadlullah's teaching was his esoteric interpretation of the Quran which was based upon the sciences of Huruf. He had incorporated the teachings of Kabala-based numerical symbolism of letters or Huruf and hence his teachings were termed Hurufism. According to him, all the letters have an essential unity with the universe and all that is again unified and represented through a *single only* manifested as *insane e Kamil i.e., the perfect man*. The sum of Fadlullah's doctrines and his most intricate science of letters *Ilm Al Huruf* was the most important secret of his teaching; that man is the Divine. This anthropomorphic tendency of his teaching had a deeper influence on the mystic outlook of his followers.

Fadlullah further taught the idea of epochal progression and that though the time was linear it is divided into three epochs; first is that of *Nabuwwah* from Adam to Muhammad upon him be peace followed by *wilayah* from Ali through Hasan Askari to Fadlullah and the third or the final one that of *uluhiyyah* beginning with Fazlallah (Bashir, 2003, p. 168-187). His teachings were influenced by the Jewish Kabbalistic (an esoteric mystical sect of Judaism known for its reliance on the mysteries and the mystical powers of the Hebrew alphabet) concepts heavily based on the *ilm huruf* or the science of letters. His teachings were anthropomorphic and pantheistic and presented a syncretism of different ideas and currents from various religious interpretations, cosmogonies, mythological currents and hermeneutics of the various traditions of the medieval milieu.

During the reign of Miran Shah, Son of Timur the teachings of Fadlullah were declared heresy and he was executed in 1394. He had a great following in Shirvan and Baku where some of his eminent followers were executed while others moved to exile as instructed by

him in his last will (Bashir, 2003, p. 39-40). This persecution resulted in making this sect develop as a more secret teaching and added to its syncretistic tendencies and the followers of Hurufism started to spread their teachings as a kind of mysticism. These teachings of Fadlullah bear an unmistakable impact on the messianic trends of the Jewish and Christian communities and their early apocalyptic traditions. Later on, hurufism reached the Indian subcontinent as a syncretistic millennialist teaching and influenced the religious and mystical circles of the elites at the court of Emperor Akbar where the *Din e Ilahi* or the millennial syncretistic teaching of Akbar himself derived heavily from Hurufism.

2- Nuqtawis:

Nuqtawis were another such trend that did not originate in India but shared the same matrix of thought i.e., millennialism and syncretism. Like Hurufism the Nuqtawism also started in Persia and later their leaders reached the Indian subcontinent due to persecution. Mahmud of Pasikhawn the founder of the Nuqtawism presented himself as a re-appearance or an appearance per se of Prophet Muhammad upon him be peace and considered that he is the personification of all the purity and power of the Prophets and the Saints. He styled himself as Nuqta or Shakhs e Wahid who has accumulated in his person all those who preceded him hence the title Nuqtawi (Ardistani, n.d., p.300).

Another unique aspect of his teachings was that he taught the veneration of the sun and fire. He affirmed the *Tanakh* or the metempsychosis and believed in the cyclical notion of time reference to his belief in rebirth is provided by the *Dabistan al Madhahib* for instance he thought that anyone who wears the sewn dress while performing Hajj will be reborn as a squall. According to his epochal understanding of time that the current Aeon of time till the next starts is of sixteen thousand years and that the prophecy of the Arab will be for the first eight thousand years and after that, the prophecy of the Ajam or the non-Arabs will follow and that it is he with whom the Ajam cycle starts. (Ardistani, n.d., p.300).

This millennialist syncretistic outlook of the Nuqtawis faced severe persecution in Persia

where it had originated and many of its followers migrated to the Indian subcontinent where they found not only a safe place but also found a direct audience in the court of the emperor whose own millennialism was in turn much influenced by the Nuqtawis who was always present in his close circles (Kabir-ud-din and Lees, n.d., vol.2, p. 211).

3 Nurbakhshiya:

Another key millennial group that flourished in the subcontinent was the Nurbakhshiyya. The founder of this group was Nurbakhsh Sayyad Muhammad bin Abdullah, (795-869/1393-1465) a disciple of Khawaja Ishaq Kuttalani. He had declared himself Al Mahdi the Guided one who is awaited to come at the end of time. It is interesting to note that this hope was commonly shared by all the groups of Muslim society at that time but among the Shi'a, this hope was much in vogue during the period. This idea of Mahdi was closely associated with the essentials of Shi'a beliefs and particularly with their idea of the *Imam*. Like Nuqtawis and Hururfis this movement also started in Persia but later on, it reached the Indian subcontinent during the sixteenth century where it found a strong base (Durazai, 1956, p.11).

The nurbakhshiya teachings were brought to the subcontinent by Shams al-Din who had migrated to Kashmir from a place Talish in Iraq (Ahmad, 1972, vol.2., p.12) According to Frishtah his preaching was a combination of Shi'ism and tassawuf. (Abdul Hai, 1974, vol.2., p.671) He found a good number of followers among the Chak tribe in Kashmir. Later on, his teaching was further carried to Ladakh and Baltistan by his followers were a good number of people joined them. According to contemporary sources like Tarikh Rashidi, the sect was heterodox and their teachings were not conventionally Sunnis or the Shias. (Dughlat, 435-437) the author of Tarikh Rashidi further informs that on seeking the *fatwa* of *ulama* regarding the Nurbakhshiya the *ulama* renounced their claims particularly the belief that Nurbakhsh was commanded by God to remove all the differences among the people, regarding the matters of laws i.e., *ahkam* and the fundamentals *al usul* among all the religions.

Regional Millennial Movements:

The millennial concerns were not foreign to the land rather there developed some local and regional expressions of millennialism in the Indian subcontinent. These movements have been studied and discussed by all the historians of the period. Here the purpose is to explore and highlight the two common traits of all these groups namely millenarianism and syncretism.

Raushaniya:

Raushaniya is also one such group that embedded millennial syncretistic concepts. Contemporary sources like Abu alfazal's *Akbar Nama* the *Muntakhab al Tawarikh* by Abdul Qadir Badauni and *Tabaqat e Akbari* discuss the Raushaniya movement. These works focus on the political aspects of this movement particularly the uprisings of the Raushaniya and the unrest that they caused. By reading these official accounts it can be discerned that there existed and continued a state of warfare between the Mughals and the Raushaniya (Nizami, 1989, p.145). Besides these official or political histories, we have a religious criticism of the movement. These are the works of Akhund Derwiza an Afghan leader and a contemporary of bayazid who regarded the teachings of Bayazid a heresy and compiled a rebuttal of their doctrines in his works like *Makhzan ul Islam*, *Tazkirat al Abrar was al Ashrar* and *Irshad al Taliban*. Akhund Derweza's critique of Raushaniya was very severe but at the same time, his works offer a contemporary religious perspective about a movement that mainly impacted the Afghans. Likewise, *Dabistan al Madhahib* has also reproduced the ideas of Bayazid without providing any appraisal from a political and religious point of view like other sources of the period. Commonly known as Pir e Roushan Mian Bayazid Ansari (932-980/1525-1572) (Ardistani, p.304) born in a learned and elite family during the Afghan rule in Jalandhar but later on moved to Kanigaram after the Mughal Emperor Baber took the control of Delhi that implies that perhaps his family was closely associated with the Afghan rulers. *Dabistan al Madhahib* has provided some biographical details about Yazid Ansari he mentions that both his father Abdullah and his mother Banin had no good relations that influenced him from an early age and it had transformed him into a

reflective child. Thus, he was reported to speculate about certain questions like; 'these are the heavens and earth but where is God?' and so on. It was due to his contemplative nature that he was inspired by one of his saintly relatives Khawaja Ismail and wanted to become his disciple but his father stopped him that it is not commendable for him to be a disciple of someone inferior to them in social status. His father had advised him to follow the descendants of Baha al-din Zakaria of Multan (Ardistani, p.304). His father himself was a learned scholar who taught him religious subjects. What we learn about him further from the historical sources is that soon Bayazid started instructing his own beliefs and claimed that his teachings were based on his visions, revelations and mystical experiences and that he had received these teachings from God (Ardistani, p.304).

The author of *Dabistan al Madhahib* provides a lot of quotations from *Halnama* a book of Bayazid and summarizes the core of the teachings as under:

- i. Bayazid's ideas were based on pantheism according to him all that existed was but His form. No doubt that the Sufia of the period were talking about their mystical experiences in terms of momentary union with God however this was their expression of a trans or a state or feeling but Bayazid's teachings were different from that mystical experience as he talked about it as doctrinal teaching.
- ii. According to Bayazid the Murshid or the guide was a divine authority to the extent that whatever he taught to his disciples was a revelation and that angel Jibrael brought him these revelations.
- iii. Ba Yazid further thought and taught that facing Qiblah was no more a condition for his followers during prayer.
- iv. He also advocated the transmigration of souls.
- v. Hindus were also initiated and were allowed to practice according to their faith. (Ardistani, p.304).

Zikrism:

Another millennial group of the period was Zikrism; the followers of the Mahdi Mullah Muhammad Attock (Ludhhayanwi, 1401H, p.153) Zikris are still a flourishing group in Balochistan they have preserved their teachings in some written copies and usually they avoid publishing their works but very recently they have published some works for the needs of their community. Zikris hold dissenting and even heretical tendencies which are very far from the mainstream of Islamic thought. One of the key departures of the Zikris is that they consider that the authority of the Prophet upon him be peace has been superseded by the Mahdi (Lari, 1973, p. 173) likewise they hold that *salat* i.e., the prayer has been replaced by *zikr* as prescribed by their leader. the zikris also do not observe Ramadan as it has been also lifted from them by their leader. Nonetheless, the main departure of the zikris is regarding the principles of Islam reflected through their belief regarding their founder that it was he who is the seal of the prophets and that he emanated from light. (Shahzada, 1973, p.39)

This Mahdi of the Zikris is sometimes confused with another figure Mahdi Jaunpuri who preceded him a century. But both figures only share the title Mahdi and their teachings are contrasting while the Mahdi Jaunpuri taught to return to *sharī'ah* and to repent the Zikri Mahdi taught complete different teaching contrary to the basics of *Sharī'ah* and combined the ideas of Ismailism regarding Imam and the future hope of Mahdi and end of time. Zikrism denied the core Islamic practices like prayer and fasting while replacing *zakat* with a self-styled tax and *hajj* with a visit to the Koh e Murad. This millennialist further divided its borders with Islam by considering the work of their Mahdi known as Burhan or the *Kanz al Asrar* as their scripture in the place of the Quran.

Even today the mount of *Koh I Murad* situated near Turbat in the central region of Makran is a place of pilgrimage for Zikris and they call it *hajj*. Zikris *Koh Murad* is the *Muqam e Mahmud* and the most sacred place in the world. The zikris have an annual pilgrimage to this place at the end of Ramadan and Zikris from around Balochistan and Karachi congregate at the base of this Mountain some five miles Southeast of

Turbat. The area has a very small settlement of a few Zikri families as the caretakers of their place of worship. The Zikris call the main sacred area *Kaaba* the area is marked by a low wall of loose stones and they do not permit Orthodox Muslims beyond this wall (Ahmed, 1982, p.73).

A deep assessment of their creeds and practices reveals that the teachings of Mullah Attock are based on a syncretistic understanding of the ideas related to Mahdi, prophecy and revelation fused with the millennial concerns. His conceptualization of Mahdi is based on the Ismaili influences and his concept of *nur* or light is analogous to the Zoroastrian concepts of light However the Zoroastrian influences in the sixteenth century Balochistan can be hypothetical speculation.

Din Ilahi; The Royal Millennial Syncretism

It is in this context of millennial currents and the religious ferment that the religious views of Emperor Akbar can be better related to and analyzed. His religious views have been studied, criticized and discussed by multiple sources of his time as well as in the modern period. Among the contemporary sources, we have Abu al Fazal's *Ain e Akbari*, the *Muntakhab al Tawārīkh* and the *Dabistān al Mazāhib* as well as the memoirs of the Portuguese Missionaries who were invited by Emperor Akbar from Goa (among these memoirs are the records of Rodolpho Aquaviva, Antonio de Monserrato, Francisco Enriques are significant). These multiple sources provide us with an ample record of the religious ideas of Emperor Akbar. Akbar and his teachings i.e., *Din e Ilahi* have been a highly contested theme among the national and international historians of Akbar's reign. Many detailed and comprehensive studies have been undertaken by different researchers reflecting on various aspects of this period but the main intent of this discussion is to view his key ideas in the context of millenarianism and Syncretism (Makhan, 1952, p.52).

From a detailed reading of the sources, it can be assumed that the religious ideas of Emperor Akbar were primarily an outcome of his syncretistic understanding of religion. Contemporary historians describe that once

the emperor was successful in consolidating his powers in the capital and had annexed further regions too, he resorted to the discussion of religious issues and took some great measures for the religious debate. Among these efforts was the construction of an *Ibadat khana* a building near a tank called *Anuptalao* a place where Akbar met the Muslim Ulama, the heretics and the experts of other religious traditions. These religious debates ended in a situation that is depicted through the following extract:

“From this day henceforth, 'the road of opposition and difference in opinion' lay open, and remained so till His Majesty was appointed Mujtahid of the empire.” (Kabir-ud-din and Lees, n.d., vol.2, p.200)

Contemporary sources like Badauni and Abu al Fazal inform that the emperor wanted to reach some agreement on matters of religious difference through these discussions. But ironically the emperor who was the moderator of these debates and controversies himself introduced a controversial new law which was based on new mediums of worship and rituals. The most important aspect of this development was the inherent millennial appeal. He and the experts of his new creed not only proclaimed new teaching but they further ridiculed the Islamic values and rituals and declared that it is now a thousand years since the advent of the Prophet upon him be the peace of Arabia and a new era is approaching with a new divines' guide and that the emperor himself is that Guide (The *Ilahi* era was introduced by Akbar at the beginning of the 29th year of his reign 8th Rabi al Awwal 992AH/10 March 1584 29 to 32 days were reckoned for the month and the last two days were called *rozo'shab* as per Ain 1 of Akbar Nama.).

The sources of the contemporaries have recorded the resentment of the Muslim masses and scholars on these dissenting views of Akbar. It can easily be discerned from these contemporary accounts that the eclectic approach of the emperor towards religious beliefs made him invite the experts of various religious traditions and consider even the heretic views of all various groups. He was much influenced by the ideas of some millennial groups whose leaders were

boycotted and persecuted in their homelands and who were declared heretics but they had reached here to find a refuge and a chance to promote their views. (Kabir-ud-din and Lees, n.d., vol.2, p.211)

Among these were the *Nuqtawi* leader Sharif Amuli a self-styled restorer of the Millennium. After that, he was denounced for his views in Persia he along with some of his followers reached India where he was invited by the emperor to his audience and discussed his views with him. Emperor had developed a concern for religious views and most of the time he was surrounded by people of different orientations, it is under the influence of these multiple heretic tendencies that he kept following he realized soon that a new religious dispensation is ahead and that he will be the leader of this new teaching. Due to his overwhelming consideration for various doctrines and philosophies, he was confounded by different religious ideas he took the initiative of a new faith. (Kabir-ud-din and Lees, n.d., vol.2, p.225).

Thus, in an attempt to start a new era with new teaching the court of Akbar was soon filled with the leaders of heretical sects and the masters of other faiths. The courtly chronicles are replete with references to figures like Mulla Muhammad of Yazd known for his open rivalry for *Ṣaḥabah*, Abu al Fazl, Hakim Abu al Fath and other rationalists and philosophers who disregarded the revelation, the miracles and even the prophecy the prophet upon him be peace. And also, the people like Deb Chand Rajah Manjholah thought that because the cow is mentioned in the first chapter of Qur'an cows have great respect. For Bir Bar the sun was the source of everything it should be worshipped and venerated thus Emperor thought it befitting that the east should be the direction for facing in worship instead of the west as the east. (Smith, 1958, p.165). As Baduni viewed the situation as due to the emperor's involvement in the teachings of heretics soon he was moving from one idea to another and lost his real purpose i.e. the search for the truth that perhaps he wanted to reach through these religious discussions (Kabir-ud-din and Lees, n.d., vol.2, p.225).

Emperor soon delved into a kind of eclecticism and accepted the views of

different orientations and the opinions of everyone whatever he appreciated from among these many views he accommodated that in his system. In his attempt to introduce new teaching as a millennial monarch and guide he retained few ideas from here and rejected few. (Kabir-ud-din and Lees, n.d., vol.2, p.256). This millennial teaching of Emperor Akbar was a deliberate attempt to introduce a common royal faith acceptable to all the reason that made him incorporate the views and beliefs of all systems. His fantasy with this attempt was so strong that he also ordered the compilation of such texts that can provide the base for a composite religious system. Given the state of affairs, some eccentric texts like *Allahupanisad* also emerged. (Lunia, 1970, p.13) The text dealt with some terms to explore and associate a new meaning to them the most interesting part was the connotation of the word Akbar the proper name of the emperor and the word was used as a reference to Allah. There are some other references too that suggests that the emperor and masters of his new teaching utilized the ambiguity of such terms. The most particular was the practice of greeting among the followers of this new system which was to greet each other by saying “Allāhu Akbar” instead of an Islamic greeting. Likewise, in the text referred to above the *Allahupanisad* included phrases like: “Muhammad Akbar is Allah’s messenger.” This and many other practices and attempts by Emperor that are recorded by historians are ample to conclude that Emperor Akbar influenced by the currents of other millennial teachings and given to his eclectic approach had claimed himself to be the Mahdi or the Guide of a new era and that his message is to replace the message of Prophet upon him be peace (Akbar often ordered Persian authors to eschew the praise of Muhammad and is even reported to have unsuccessfully attempted to amend the Kalima in 1580 to read; there is no God but God and Akbar are his representatives).

Though the influence and the scale of this millennial movement were limited to the audience and court of the emperor nonetheless what is important here for our study is that similar trends prevailed during the period. The *Din e Ilahi* of Emperor was

one among other such movements that focused on the need for new teaching or Guide at the turn of the first Hijri millennial. Like all other movements pointed out above the new teaching of the emperor also incorporated various beliefs and practices from other religions, and the most important of these were the metamorphosis or the transmigration, veneration of the sun and fire besides many other rituals. (Kabir ud din and Lees, n.d., vol.2, p.256)

Like other millennial doctrines of the first millennial Hijri, the teachings of Akbar were far from Islam. Even though he claimed himself to be the Guide but his religious views essentially expressed his dissent with the Islamic beliefs and practices rather than his ridicule of Islamic teachings clearly showing his departure from Islam. His teaching for a new millennial was as syncretistic as those of the Hurufis, Nuqtawis and the Zikris. He taught a combination of the Hurufi and Nuqtawis views regarding a new epoch and incorporated the veneration of the Sun and fire from his Indian informants

Conclusion:

The eve of the first Hijri millennial witnessed a mushroom growth of the millennial movements and groups. The Indian subcontinent was no exception as from here also emerged many such movements and also few others reached here from other lands where their heretical thesis of replacement of the revelation and Prophecy of the prophet Muhammad upon him be peace was strongly rejected. The severe persecution of such leaders under some Muslim rulers and reception of these groups by the Mughal emperor soon resulted in an imperial millennial cult i.e., *Din e ilahi*. A state-sponsored millennial cult which resulted in openly declaring the *sharī‘ah* of Islam to be irrelevant for the new millennial. Ironically all these sects sought their legitimacy from the Quran and Sunnah and the mainstream Islamic thought but their tenets were mainly syncretistic and included non-Islamic beliefs and practices like veneration of the sun and fire, anthropomorphism and belief in the cycle of rebirth. Not only they introduced new concepts but also demanded to leave the *sharī‘ah* of Islam as these millennialist

leaders claimed themselves to be either the prophets or the manifestation of God.

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