



ROLE OF PERSIANS IN THE RELIGIOUS LIFE OF MUGHAL INDIA

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Abstract: *The present study of the Research renders the Role of Persians in the Religious Life of Mughal India. That was really their enormous contribution which provided Mughal Emperor an additional glory, ecstasy and magnificence in its enterprise. The Research unfolds the religious role of Persians in separate epochs during the Mughal Empire, in view of the establishment of Safawid Dynasty in Persia and its Safawid Religious Propoganda. The main objective of the study is an effort to divulge the role of these Persian immigrants who performed as an indispensable fraction in influencing the religious life of Mughal India.*

Key words: *Persian, Religion, Mughal, Akbar*

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INTRODUCTION

This research paper covers the religious role of Persians in Mughal India, which has been itemized from Babur to Aurangzeb in four phases. Mughals were normally lenient Sunnis except Aurangzeb Alamgir who is supposed as a stout Sunni, at the other hand majority of the immigrated Persians were Ithna Asharis. The leniency of Mughals towards Ithna Asharis was a sharp contrast to the other Sunni powers of contemporary era. To narrate this relevant subtopic the important event like the establishment of Safawid Dynasty in Persia along with the Safawid Order and its propaganda has been highlighted to show the basic difference and pandemonium contrast of religious ideology among the Ithna Ashari Persians and Sunni Muslims nobility at the Mughal Court. Moreover, a brief description of the role of some Mystical or Sufi Orders in Mughal India has also been analyzed as these Orders were arrived Indian Sub-continent via Persia. Thus, an obvious explanation could be found in the peculiar Mughal Indian religious culture that also affected the political scenario of Mughal jurisdiction.

Persians' Role in Religion during 1526-1556 A.D. As being a founder of Mughal dynasty, Babur was a liberal monarch, and adopted almost lenient policy in religious matters throughout his diminutive regime in India. He had a very few Persian nobility in his administration while the majority of his nobility were consist over *Turani* or Central Asians, who were by sect stout Sunnis. Hence, neither Babur faced any sort of Ithna Ashariyah-Sunni controversy in India, nor there was any pondering role of Persians in the religious life of the relevant regime. As far as Emperor Humayun is concerned, he spent nearly twelve years in exile in Persia and was heavily exposed to Ithna Ashariyah-ism and the Safawid Court. In addition the five Islamic kingdoms of the Deccan had all been Ithna Ashariyah from before the time of Akbar and had maintained close diplomatic and cultural ties with Persia through the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries A.D. Their conquest by the Mughals in the early seventeenth century A.D. increased the Persian, Ithna Ashariyah influence at their Court. After his return from Persia, Humayun reverted to his Sunni Faith, as is evident from his coins. The Shah still pretended to accept him as an Ithna Ashari, for in a letter he emphasized their mutual identity of faith. In any case Humayun adhered to a liberal sectarian policy. Many Ithna Ashari Persians joined his service; some came at his invitation while others joined of their own accord, in some case even without the Shah's permission.



According to Badauni, "Humayun's army at Kabul had a large proportion of Shi'ahs." When Humayun returned from Persia, the influence of Ithna Ashari officials accelerated in Mughal Empire and they got more religious independence. Consequently, a large number of Persian scholars and theologians arrived in India. In Southern India, some Ithna Ashariyah states established in Golconda and Bijapur, similarly, the rulers of the province of Oudh also came under the Ithna Ashariyah influence. Consequently, for the education of their children and for performing Ithna Ashari religious traditions, a number of *Imam-Bargahain* (Ithna Ashariyah Mosques) and schools established there. Moreover, in the educational institutions, the similar syllabus was adopted with that of Persia which resulted with the promulgation of the same specific religious thoughts, traditions and customs of Persian Ithna Asharis in the Indian Ithna Ashariyah community. Humayun appears to have been, like his illustrious father, always free from strong sectarian prejudices. He and Bairam Khan, an Ithna Ashari Persian, were lifelong friends. The famous Persian historian, Khwandamir who was also an Ithna Ashariyah, remained in Humayun's service till his death in 1536 A.D. Firishta observes that Humayun, from his princely days, patronized Persians of Ithna Ashari persuasion, and that after his accession many Persians came and joined his service. Humayun had a weakness for innovations and new ideas, sometimes with a touch of fantasy, and this tendency seems to have found its way in religious matters also. All this shows him to be free from rigid orthodoxy. It is also said that some of Humayun's own commanders deserted him after he was defeated by Sher Shah, on the specific ground of his favoring the Ithna Ashariyahs. Bairam Khan as a trustworthy friend of Humayun, had refused to wear the Persian Ithna Ashariyah cap during the exile in Persia, because, he pointed out that he was the servant of another monarch. He was first a servant of the Mughal dynasty and then Ithna Ashari. While, at the other hand probably Humayun had become suspicious of his fidelity because "Bairam Khan was a Shi'ah and by birth a subject of Persia and consequently was in the Shah's favor." Riaz-ul-Islam says; "Bairam Khan's distinguished Persian ancestry, his Shi'ah-ism, his remarkable gifts as a diplomat and a negotiator and his urbanity and broad culture, enabled him to play a great role in Persia." It was only Bairam Khan who as a mediator remained extremely successful to remove the ill-humor of bigoted Shah Tahmasp to salvage the life of Humayun and his hundreds of retainers in Persia.



PERSIAN'S ROLE IN RELIGION DURING 1556-1605 A.D.

Akbar's reign appear to have favored the emergence of a community of Ithna Ashariyah Muslims in Mughal India in the sixteenth century A.D. When the Persian Shah Ismail-II adopted Sunni-ism in 1576 A.D. a large number of Persians came from Persia. During this temporary period of Sunni promulgation, most of the Ithna Ashari scholars and theologians had to face forced persecution; therefore, the arrival of Ithna Ashariyah immigrants in India accelerated. The Ithna Asharis had an advantage in Hindustan, because the Muslims were fewer and the Ithna Ashariyah-Sunni bitterness less keen in their new home. The regency of Persian Ithna Ashari Bairam Khan in a Sunni Sultanate indicates a high water-mark of the Ithna Ashariyah influence at the Mughal Court. But this influence was not at the beginning aggressive and intolerable to the Sunnis, because in a Sunni country, the Ithna Ashari could accommodate himself by outward conformity with the Sunni practice without incurring any sin if his mental reservation for Ithna Ashariyah-ism was genuine if not open. Under the Mughal Empire, the Ithna Asharis could be trusted in any position except in fighting against Persia. When the situation improved for the Mughals after their victory in the War of Panipat-II in 1556 A.D. the real power was indeed exercised by Akbar's guardian, Bairam Khan, who was suspected of entertaining Ithna Ashari beliefs. The first few years of Akbar's kingship under the custody of Bairam Khan were also influenced by his Ithna Ashari teacher Shaikh Abdul Latif. Soon Bairam Khan appointed Shaikh Gadai, who was also accused of Ithna Ashariyah leanings as the *sadr-us-sudur*, the highest religious dignitary in the state.

However, the forms of orthodoxy were maintained and neither Bairam Khan nor Shaikh Gadai openly professed the Ithna Ashari doctrine. Later on, the Ithna Ashariyah tendencies were effaced by the influence of his staunch Sunni, *Sadrus- Sudur* Abdun Nabi. As Akbar grew up under the guardianship of Bairam Khan and Mir Abdul Latif, the Ithna Ashari nobles, such antecedents made Akbar open to views that came from sources outside the orthodox Sunni tradition to which his family subscribed. Moreover, during the Akbar's regime, some important socio-religious Persian traditions like the festival of *Nouroz* and act of prostration to the king penetrated into the Mughal Court. The celebration of *Nouroz* by the Persians is not Islamic holiday but was rather an ancient Persian cultural festival. It was celebrated as New Year's Day on the spring equinox, the 21st of March. The conservatism of the Persians can readily be seen in the repetitive character of their history. The conservatism of the



Persians in preserving ancient beliefs and customs can be seen in many facets of their culture. The fair of *Nouroz* which also called *Noroz-i-Jalali*, was celebrated with great éclat on the coronation day as a mark of connection with the social life of Persia as Akbar felt that the feeling of Persian residents in the Court had been wounded after the recital of the *Khutbah* and the issue of the *Mahdar* (1580-81 A.D.). "Akbar with his pronounced Persian attitude towards kingship, even demanded from his courtiers the act of prostration (*Sijda*) performed at the courts of the ancient kings of Iran, a practice resented as blasphemous by the proud Afghans and the Turks from Central Asia, and which Shah Jahan abolished."

PERSIANS' ROLE IN RELIGION DURING 1605-1627 A.D.

Jahangir's reign is rightly considered as the rule of Nur Jahan, his Queen Consort, and an overwhelmingly occupied epoch by the Ithna Ashariyah Persian nobility. While Nur Jahan almost certainly exercised some influence on the development of Jahangir's religious policy, her own position at Court as the beloved of her husband and the wife of this particular king may themselves have been the result of religious ideals intimately persuasive to Jahangir and to the people he ruled. In fact, Mughals had a pluralistic Court and a tolerant government policy would have ensured the greatest opportunities and the least hindrances for Nur Jahan's Ithna Ashariyah family and colleagues. It was in her interest, then, to promote ecumenism at the highest levels in orders, so as to guarantee good fortune for Ithna Ashariyah nobles throughout the Empire. Findly says that, "Nur Jahan's general tendency in politics and religion was pro-Shi'ah and anti-Sunni." The Ithna Asharis had become a permanent fixture in the Muslim society of India. The Persian influence was fast spreading in Hindustan during the ascendancy of Nur Jahan. "The Mujaddid regarded Shi'ah-ism as the worst form of heresy and condemned its followers bitterly. He devoted his full energy to checkmate the expansion of Shi'ah doctrines." He induced Muslims to forget the quarrels among the companions of the Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W.) which had accounted for schism in Islam. The Mujaddid wrote a pamphlet *Radd-i- Rawafiz* or refutation of Ithna Ashariyah-ism, which received a wide circulation both in India and abroad. He has also discussed these problems in his own *Maktubat* in great detail. The Mujaddid even participated in open discussions with Ithna Ashari divines and tried to prove the unsoundness of their doctrines. The Mujaddid preached dynamic hatred against non-Sunnis in general and against non-Muslims in particular. He had no sympathy for anyone outside



the fold of Orthodox Islam and regarded toleration as a tacit compliment. As a pious Sunni the Shaikh Mujaddid Sarhindi believed in strict compliance with the Shari'at. To him the love of the world and the attainment of ultimate *nijat* (bliss) were two contradictory things. Hence in order to attain salvation worldly attachments were to be renounced. The mission of the Mujaddid Sarhindi, which filled a large space in the religious and political history of the Muslim community of the seventeenth century A.D., was undoubtedly a success. He succeeded in undoing the work of Akbar, and winning over his successors to his own views of Orthodox Islam. Thus, M. Yasin says: "Shaikh Ahmad Sarhindi was (supposed as) the father of the Religio-Political Reform Movement of Orthodox (Sunni) Islam in India. He should certainly get credit for effecting a change of outlook of the Muslim Nobility and upper classes in general." Persian-ridden Court of Jahangir entertained an enmity towards Shaikh Ahmad Sirhindi for his anti-Ithna Ashariyah activities. The Ithna Ashari Prime Minister Asaf Khan, the brother of Nur Jahan, warned Jahangir against the rising tides of the orthodox movement which might result in the overthrow of the Empire. The *Wazier* advised that the visits of the soldiers to the disciples of the Shaikh should be stopped and that he should be imprisoned if not executed. The allegations against the Mujaddid failed when he visited the Court. Asaf Khan then pressed the Emperor to demand the *Sijdah* from the Shaikh as a proof of his loyalty and the consequent refusal of the Mujaddid resulted with his imprisonment. It is true that Shaikh Ahmad bitterly condemned Ithna Ashariyahism and regarded Ithna Asharis worse than idolaters. It will not be presumed too much if some allowance is made for this fact. The Mujaddid passed his days in prison with complete forbearance for about one year, then he was set free and was given a robe of honor and Rs.1, 000 for expenses. The Sirhindi incident could also be seen, finally as a result of the political maneuvers of the Ithna Ashariyah faction at court managed, for all intents and purposes, by Nur Jahan. "Although we have no substantive evidence that Nur Jahan was directly involved, many have suggested that both the timing and vehemence of the Sir hindi incident indicate the presence of the empress's heavy hand on Jahangir to respond to the anti-Shi'ah remarks of the Sheikh." Sirhindi earlier in the pre-Sufi period of his life had written a document highly critical of Ithna Ashariyah doctrine and texts. He had called the Ithna Ashariyah heretics and infidels because of their baseless claim that Ali (R.A.T.A.) was the only true successor to the Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W.) and their refusal to



acknowledge the consensus of the community (which had included Ali R.A.T.A.) as the authentic heritage of Islam. Similarly, he continued to maintain his position that orthodox Mughal officials should not enter into relationships with any of the Ithna Ashari whom they might meet at the Court. Sirhindi's position, then certainly well known and publicized during Nur Jahan's time, as an anti-Ithna Ashariyah enough to infuriate the Persian faction at the Court. Additionally, as consequence, "communal riots of Shi'ahs and Sunnis, and later on Hindu-Muslim riots became frequent with the tightening grip of reaction and intolerance preached by the Mujaddid." The Mujaddid Sarhindi closed his eyes on the age of sixty-three in the year 1624 A.D. His last words to his sons and disciples were:

"Hold Shari'at tight with your teeth."

TRADITION OF NAZR

Nazr originally described a pre-Islamic promise or vow after making a sacrifice to a god. "The consecration placed the person making the vow in connection with the divine powers; the *nadhr* was an *ahd*, whereby he pledged himself. A neglect of the *nadhr* or *nazr* was a sin against the deity." The procedure of *nazr*, as a symbolic gesture of devotion, is also mentioned in the Holy Quranic scriptures. This tradition prevailed in almost all the ancient civilizations including the neighbor ancient Persia. In presence of so many Persian religious and cultural traditions in India; in the Mughal setting, this gesture manifested itself in gold and silver rupees or other valuable items; the act of presenting a large gift was metaphoric of the donor acknowledging the king as the source of all his wealth and being. As Sir Thomas Roe had observed that the best route to preferment in the Mughal Court was through the giving of 'daily bribes' to the emperor; these 'bribes', in turn resulted in advancement in the administrative structure. Consequently, Roe's statement regarding the European travelers misunderstanding the procedure as bribery or a periodic collection of tribute that "for such is the custom and humor of the King, that he will seize and see all, lest any toy should escape his attention, is a misinformed judgment at the best. Later interpretations of Jahangir's appetite for gifts also look to his memoirs for vindication, yet on many of these accessions they are specifically referred to as *nazr*."

PERSIANS' ROLE IN RELIGION DURING 1628-1707 A.D.

In religion, Shah Jahan was a more orthodox Muslim than Jahangir or Akbar but a less orthodox one than Aurangzeb. He proved relatively a tolerant ruler toward his Hindu



subjects and remained almost broadminded towards his religious policies, but he strictly prohibited the non-Islamic tradition of prostration to the Emperor which was promulgated by his grandfather Akbar. Ithna Ashariyah fraction also remained powerful during his regime as his Queen- Consort Mumtaz Mahal was an Ithna Ashari Persian and whose father Asaf Khan was Prime Minister. In presence of these important personalities at the Mughal Court, a large number of Persian nobility was also serving at the important government portfolios. In this way, Ithna Ashariyah-ism was similarly stayed as significant as the previous era of his father Jahangir. Shah Jahan's son Aurangzeb is considered as champion of Sunni orthodoxy by his constitutional law. Aurangzeb was the executive head of the dominant creed and the *Khalifa* of the age and so he had to enforce the orthodox creed. Personally Aurangzeb wanted to set an example to his subjects by living up to the ideals of a true Muslim as desired by the Sunni *Ulemah*. Political considerations and previous traditions led him to employ Ithna Asharis, both of Persia and Central Asia but the lot of Ithna Asharis was not very happy and anti-Ithna Ashariyah feeling became very strong. The result was that the Ithna Asharis began to practice hypocrisy to save them. Though Aurangzeb disbelieved them, yet he employed them for their skill in book-keeping and accountancy. Sunnis also hated them and inter-marriages did not heal this Ithna Ashariyah-Sunni conflict. It has been said that "in the War of Succession, Aurangzeb rallied the Sunnis against the Shi'ahs. But the Persians maintained their position partly because of the influx of Persians serving in the Deccan Kingdoms." The fact is that Aurangzeb had much more support among the Persian nobility during the War of Succession as compare with his brothers. Thus, Aurangzeb's victory did not affect the position of the Persians in any way. Bernier says that the 'greater part' of his foreign nobility consisted of Persians, and Tavernier says that the Persians occupied 'the highest posts' in the Mughal Empire. Aurangzeb is also said to have entertained great confidence in officers from Khawaf, a province of Persia, who became recipients of considerable favors during his reign. Nor was the position of the Persians affected by the Sunni orthodoxy of the Emperor. He once refused to make an appointment to the office of *bakhshi* which was suggested to him on the ground that the existing incumbent was an Ithna Ashari.



CONCLUSION

Toleration in the true sense of the term had been the sheet-anchor of Muslim rule in India, and the Indian kings never interfered with the religion of their subjects. At the other hand, the relations between the Sunnis and the Ithna Asharis (Twelvers) have not always been friendly at the popular level or in the matter of politics. Besides, considerably there were religious differences between the Ithna Asharis and the Sunnis, and the traditional rivalry of the Safawid and the Mughal (Chaghatai) Dynasties. The Mughal Empire was certainly much more liberal and pragmatic in religious affairs than the contemporary Ottoman and Uzbek Empires. When Persia and the Ottoman Empire were at loggerheads, the Mughal Empire maintained more affable relations with the Safawids, and their political rivalry was not colored by sectarian ill-feelings. In fact, the Muslims of the Sub-continent have been more tolerant of these differences. It must be underlined that although the Mughal Emperors were Sunnis, but they always welcomed Persian Ithna Ashari immigrants. An interesting explanation of Mughal Emperors was their proclivity towards deputing Ithna Ashari Prime Ministers throughout their mainstream administration. Accordingly, there was a rivalry between Persian (Ithna Ashari) and Central Asian (Sunni) nobility. Persian men of talent who were mostly Ithna Asharis were always well come. The Indian Muslim community also lost its sense of solidarity by the importation of the Ithna Asharis from Persia, because sectarian and group jealousies began to undermine the unity of the Muslims. As consequence, it was natural to growing up a tradition of co-operation between the Ithna Asharis and the Hindus against the major section of the Muslim community. In this way Mughals made it more acute in their Empire by following policies which sought to derive advantages from these differences. Later on, this sectarian difference gradually proved an essential factor against the creation of a common sense of unity in the community among the Indian Muslims because a religion conscious community like that could not remain free from sectarian feelings. Persians had physicians, poets, lawyers, soldiers and other multidimensional professional classes in their ranks. They professed the Ithna Ashariyah form of Islam and were strongly attached to it but being in minority and by virtue of serving the Mughal state which strictly adhered to the Sunni sect, the rival of Ithna Ashariyah-ism, they often played diplomacies to please their masters. It is undeniably a historical fact that Mughals remained normally non-sectarian and unprejudiced towards inducting foreigners in their nobility and



numerous other fields of their Empire. During Mughal regime the Persian religious influence on the growth of a series of Sufi traditions in India is to a great extent of significance. And though the Persians, great or small, serving the Mughal Empire with greatness in skill and faithfulness, always tried for their overweening desire to exalt their nation in view of the difference of faith and nation. At the other hands, the diplomatic relations between Persia and the Deccan kingdoms and the recitation of the Shah's name in the *khutba* in Golconda were highly irritating and frustrating to the Mughals.

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