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BRITISH AUTHORITIES AND THE MUSLIMS OF INDIA : A STUDY OF EARLY ATTITUDES

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Abstract

Relations between the British and the Muslims in India are to be studied against the psychological and historical background and in the light of the inherent, mutually antagonistic attitudes of the two. In considering the interaction of the civilizations of India and the West, especially on the religious side, it should be borne in mind that the Indian Muslims stand on a somewhat different footing from their Hindu fellow citizens. The differences are due partly to historical causes, partly to the sociological structure of the Muslim community, and partly to a difference in the nature of their religious ideals. Islam is a world religion, and the historical causes as they affect Islam generally are, therefore, of worldwide significance. British Authorities in India has adopted the strategy against the Muslims of India keeping the above background of their faith and their political importance in pre-British Indian polity. The present study is an humble attempt to analyse the British strategy for dealing with the one of the major community in the Indian subcontinent.

Key Words: *Muslim attitudes, westernization, materialism, traditionalism, antagonism, progressive.*

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From its origin it has been in intimate contact with Christianity and Judaism ... in politics, in commerce, in navigation, and in war-like enterprises of the crusades, there were intercourse and interactions, conflicts and borrowings, which left their marks deep on the history both of Islam and of Europe ... Even on the soil of India itself the Muslims were not as isolated as the Hindus from the rest of the world.¹

The Muslim have been particularly susceptible to outside influence on account of their social structure. However great the pull exerted by local factors, they have, on the whole, resisted the tendency to racialism. The absence of the feeling of racialism prepared the Muslim mind freely to receive impressions and influences from, "Seek knowledge, said the Prophet, "even though [it may have to be caught] as far as China."² This principle has gone a long way towards promotion of the religious ideals of Islam, which have *always* tended towards cosmopolitanism. It was With this spirit that the Mughal rulers adopted a secular policy and welcomed the Europeans. But the Europeans had different plans in mind from the very beginning.

In 1661 the English East India Company received a new charter which authorized it "to wage war or make peace with non-Christian powers, and to send warships, men, and arms" to protect its factories in India.³

There is no doubt that the Europeans entered India basically with commercial motives

in mind. The Mughal rulers welcomed them as they felt that commercial relationship would be advantageous to both parties. When, however, they settled down in India and found political conditions in a chaotic state, the Europeans soon revised their aims and began to aspire at first to replace the Muslim power and then to remove the main obstacle, viz., Islam and its culture, from the way of progress of Western civilization. However, we may freely admit that as compared with the other European nations, the English adopted a policy of restraint and patience. What they aimed at was gradual and systematic extinction of the Muslim power and culture. Hence, according to S.R.Sharma, "the history of the English in India is the story of the transformation of a company of traders into rulers of this paradise of commerce."⁴ In fact, it is more than that: it is a history of a part of the great struggle of the Christians to eliminate Islam and its culture from less Islamized India. The Muslim rulers of India belonged to such countries as Afghanistan, Iran, Turkey, etc.; they had embraced Islam but without giving up their cultures. They continued with their un-Islamic traditions. The British knew this well. The tolerant Mughal rulers allowed the Christians even to carry on missionary activity. S.R.Sharma observes: "The extent of patronage shown to the missionaries under the Emperors of the house of Babar was extraordinary. They were the honoured guests of the Emperors; they enjoyed privileges which were the cause of envy of the Mughal nobility."⁵ Bernier, a French traveller who toured India from 1659 to 1667, held a salaried post as a physician at the court of the Emperor Aurangzeb."⁶ Christian effigies and religious symbols were received within the Imperial places, princes of the Imperial house were allowed to be baptized; churches were built at Agra and Lahore and in other Imperial cities; preaching and proselytizing were freely permitted; and the gospel was translated into Persian under Imperial auspices. Jesuit fathers like Maurique and Xavier even served as tutors to the princes. The careers of Mirza Zilqarnain and Donna Juliana show the extent the Christian influence. Even instances of reconversion of Christian fugitives from Islam are not wanting. Of course, Shah Jahan and Aurangzeb did take some

steps to check the rebelliousness manifested by some Europeans. Sir Thomas Roe warned the English East India Company against diverting energies into wasteful channels as the Portuguese had done. On the other hand Englishmen like Sir Josiah Child believed in the possibilities of establishing fasting English dominion in India. Though the attempts of that generation failed on account of the competence of the Mughal rulers, the ultimate achievement of the English testify. of the essential soundness of that dream.⁷ The symptoms of weakness were already manifest by the end of Aurangzeb's reign. Indeed, as Munucci observed, "some 30,000 Europeans could easily destroy the authority of the Mughal".⁸

That the English cherished political aims in the early eighteenth century is proved from the observation of Bolt. They had fully realized the political weakness of the Muslim rulers:

The Mughal Empire is overflowing with gold and silver, it has always been feeble and defenceless. It is a miracle that no European prince with a maritime power has ever attempted the conquest of Bengal. By a single stroke infinite wealth might be acquired, which would counter-balance the mines of Brazil and Peru. The policy of the Mughal is bad; their army is worse; they are without a navy. The Empire is exposed to perpetual revolts. Their ports and rivers and open to foreigners. The country might be conquered, or laid under contribution, as easily as the Spaniards overwhelmed the naked Indians of America."⁹

Appointment of Europeans to the higher military posts became a common practice of the successor States of the Mughal Empire during the period of Mughal decline in the early eighteenth century and on the eve of the beginnings of the territorial empire of the English East India Company. This was an acknowledgement as much of the technical superiority of the Europeans in the manufacture and use of the instruments

of artillery as of the higher sophistication of the European techniques and strategy of war.

Irvine asserts the superiority of the European armies over the Indian, and observes. "In the middle of the 18th century the French and the English had demonstrated the vast superiority of disciplined infantry when compared with the Indian soldier, who was little more than a night-watchman and a guardian over baggage."¹⁰

Hence the use of force against rivals soon turned into use of force for expansion, and this ultimately led to assertion of sovereignty by a trading company which gradually assumed political power. Of Clive's character Horace treachery and injustice than they have taught them of our discipline." Nagendra Singh rightly disputes this statement, and says: "It was quite the reverse since the conqueror is always in a much better position to reach and impart his virtues and vices to the conquered than the latter can ever do to the former."¹¹ It may be asserted without doubt that the company made political use of force in the battles of Plassey and Buxar in order to gain power and influence, not in order to uphold justice or respect recognised rights. Indeed the Company's presence in Bengal was de facto, not de jure, till the Third Mysore War in 1789-93, when the Company decided to annex a portion of the Mysore Kingdom, acquired a piece of territory for the first time in its history purely by right of conquest, and stood forth as the direct liege lord of some Indian subjects. It was the first instances of de jure assertion of political power in India by the Company.¹² Wellesley's Subsidiary Alliances, which obligated the princes to accept the protection of the English away the pay for its expenses, were a kind of modern version of Ashvamedhayajna. After establishing their political hegemony, the English began to destroy the economy of the Muslim. The various measures adopted by the Company from the Permanent Settlement of 1793 under Cornwallis to the resumption of the Land Act under William Bentinck badly hit the economy of the Muslim aristocracy.

Many of the finer and more skilled industrial arts of India were in the hands of the Muslims, and they were ruined by the fiscal policy of the East India Company. The army, the administration, and the learned professions were fields of employment for most of the Muslims. The upper middle classes were reduced to beggary. B.B.Mishra observes: "Those who lost heavily with the establishment of British rule, for example in Bengal, were for the most part Muslims." ¹³

After the award of Divani, for about half a century, the Muslims were scrupulously maintained in their positions. And then silently, secretly, and insidiously, as the Muslims allege, the thunderbolt *was forged which was* to overwhelm them and deprive them of their status, power and privileges.

The English deprived the Muslim Jagirdars of their power to collect Government revenue on the pretext of corruption and appointed their own men-collectors-in their place. This was the first blow dealt at the political position of the Muslims. This was a usurpation of a most serious character. It was in direct conflict with the spirit of the treaty concluded between Shah Alam and Clive. Was it necessary to run the Muslim by taking their lands? Was it necessary to deprive them of their influence and wealth and impoverish them?"¹⁴

It was under William Bentinck that the Muslim suffered most. In 1828 the Company Government called for an examination of the title deeds of the aindars and the lakhirajdars. At the most the rulers were entitled only to claim their revenue, *but they used their power* to oust all those who failed to establish, to the technical conviction of a legal court, their full title under writer grants from the Mughal Emperors. The resumption proceedings, though intended to apply equally to Hindus and Muslims, fell more heavily on the latter.¹⁵ The Friends of India on 10 and 12 August 1837 condemned the measures of the Government which reduced a number of respectable

men to beggary.¹⁶ In 1837 the rulers replaced Persian in the courts with English or the vernaculars. This resulted in the ouster of a considerable body of Muslim subordinate officers who were totally dependent for their subsistence on the remuneration they had been received from the Government. The change of language served as a constant reminder the Muslims of the fact that they were now among the subject races of mankind.

The English started placing reliance on the good will and co-operation of the Hindus rather than of Muslims. This was an obvious course for them to follow.

In spite of these deliberate attempts by the British to disrupt Hindu-Muslim unity, friendship between the two communities remained undisturbed until after 1857.

In the beginning the English adopted apparently a policy of non-intervention. They also mixed freely with the Muslims. Later, as the new century advanced, things grew worse; so much so that at the time of Bentinck in contrast with their attitude to the feasts of Hastings's days, the Muslims tarred feeling that to dine with the Europeans was degrading. In the beginning the Company Government was strict in its avoidance of interference in the social and religious affair of the people. It knew of the bitter experience of the Portuguese. Peace and political stability after 1818, however, enabled Company officials to inaugurate an era of westernization. They gave up the policy of non-interference in social and religious affairs. The English, who used to claim boastfully to be the patron and protector of the religious and cultures of India, now considered them to be utterly backward and deserving to be replaced by those of the West. The first open attack on the policy of non-interference by the Government was the one made by the Christian missionaries in India, Missionary called Pegg came to India in 1821 for missionary work. but was totally wrecked in health. He, therefore, returned to England in 1826 and tried his best to draw the attention of the Government

at home as well as of the English public to the passive religious policy of the Company Government in India. His cry, it would seem, was taken up by other missionary bodies and ultimately by the Christian officers of the Company Government. With this began the final attempt to remove the great obstacle, viz. Islam, from the way of progress of Western civilization. The attack upon the Muslim religion and culture was not as open as the attack upon the Hindu religion and culture; it was indirect. It was, however clear that the idea was to denounce Islam and its impact through the less Islamized sections of the people. Thus, right from 1765 onwards, the English carried out intelligently and imperceptibly their policy of removing the obstacle that was Islam and eliminating its impact on society in order to impose their own "progressive" civilization. This is confirmed by the observation of W.W. Hunter as well.¹⁷

The following excerpts from the *Friends of India* would show how the Christian missionaries and the Company Government engaged in a conspiracy to replace Islam and its culture with Christianity and Western civilization: "India, China, Japan, Central Asia must be evangelized by native teaches. To prepare for such an ought to be, next to the translation of the scripture, the great aim and business of our missionary."¹⁸

In spite of the onslaught of Western culture, the intellectual triumph of Europe, and the deliberate attempt to denounce Islam and its culture and establish the supposed superiority of Christendom, Islam as a religion and culture and as a way of life survived all the vicissitudes. It embraced gradually Western knowledge and at the same time preserved its purity.

For Islam's importance lies partly in the stress it lays on the social dimensions. It has preserved the ideal which the Prophet set before himself of a people united in sensible

and sober brotherhood in which the Quran's law will promote cohesion and justice. His entire dependence on Allah and strict adherence to the scripture have been both a source of weakness and strength in relation to the future of Islam.¹⁹

Lichlenstadter observes: "The concept of change and evolution had been a basic function within Islam itself in its early, formative period." According to him, the concept of Jihad and democracy are very near to Western ideas. He, therefore visualizes the possibility of change and notices among the Muslims a willingness to learn from the West.²⁰ Smart comments: "Though the West was intellectually triumphant, it was passing through a strange crisis in respect of morality and social cohesion. These qualities were what Islam could give."²¹ The attitude of the Company Government offered a remarkable contrast to the attitude of the Muslim rulers towards their Christian guests. The Muslim rulers had not only tolerated the Christians but also allowed them to flourish and disseminate their religious teachings and culture. In contrast, the Christian rulers sought to uproot their Muslim patrons. They were not satisfied merely with establishing their political over India by disguising themselves as vassals of the Mughals. They had a plan to accomplish the total impoverishment of the Muslims. They also wished to establish their religion and their civilization as superior to Islam and Islamic civilization.

Hence, the Muslim, who were less susceptible than the Hindus to change, lagged behind partly because of their own drawbacks but largely because of the antagonistic attitude adopted by the British rulers. The policy of discrimination tended the Muslims to array themselves in a hostile camp against the British. Observes Abu Hayat: "the Muslim mind entertained the deepest distrust of the British and Western culture."²² The Muslims as usual felt back on their religious defences in view of their political failure. They sought to restore the purity of Islamic beliefs and practices, which had drifted towards heresy on account of the policy of religious tolerance of the Mughal

rulers. The time they spent on these efforts widened the gulf.

On the other hand the English, who aimed at demolishing Islamic civilization, chose the less Islamized sections in Indian society as their instruments. They easily won over the noble, the elite, and the Shiah. Subsequently, however, not only the Muslims, but the Hindus also realized that material progress was necessary but not at the cost of their religion and culture. There was no possibility of a one-way traffic as the English believed. There should always be a compromise between materialism and religiousness, between traditionalism and progress.

The above psychological analysis is useful in understanding the contradictions and disparities in the attitudes of the various Muslim classes and sections towards the British rulers and their culture. Thus, both parties i.e. Muslims of India and British Authorities have long run contradictions in mutual relations.

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