

Religious Conditions in the 14th Century A. D. Deccan

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Abstract: History is important as its study can influence a better society for the future generations. The lessons learnt from the past should be utilized so as to form a harmonious civilization. The significance of the religious conditions in the 14th century Deccan is that it led to a peaceful existence among the various sects of religions without any problematic issues related to religion. It is essential for us to learn from our history so as to build a better tomorrow for the future generation.

This article briefly studies some select sects of Muslim and Hindu religions that were progressive and prevalent in the 14th century Deccan. The objective of the article is to bring to light that though there were various sects of Hindu and Muslim religions, the basic tenets of these sects seem to be based on similar principles. The article examines the Vaishnava, Virasaiva, Madhwa, Mahanubhava and Nathpanth sects in Hinduism and Sufism in Islam religion to show that all these sects had similar ideals to work towards the betterment of society. Both the religions clearly gave importance to humanity irrespective of class and creed. These sects were against idolatry and encouraged self-discipline and selflessness. This article is a modest attempt in trying to understand the social system in the period of study.

Keywords: Religious conditions in the Deccan, Influence of Islam, Societal conditions in the 14th Century

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It is well known that the traditional Hindu society was guided by the sacred literature like the Vedas, Upanishads and Dharmasastras and it functioned within the framework of these guidelines and continued as such for centuries without practically undergoing any major change. Not that the Hindu society was static, it did receive several new currents and to that extent adopted itself to the new situation, but the foundation and the basic factors remained the same.

On the Indian soil itself arose two new schools of thought in the form of Jaina and Buddha religions which developed a different outlook and approach to religions, philosophy, society and in fact to life itself. The Vedic society did imbibe and absorb in itself certain changes, but not as to shake the foundation itself. The principle of Ahimsa, the futility of rituals, work towards the common goal – all these influenced the existing system so much so that they became a part of Hindu life and culture. The Buddha was given a niche in the stream of Avatars. Several foreigners like Greeks, the Kushanas and the like entered India and dominated in the political field, but just like Hindu society they also adopted themselves to the system which was new to them and almost became one with the current. Nevertheless, they did have their own impact on the existing conditions. The Hindu social system is like an ocean taking into itself water from different rivers, yet remaining unchanged.

In course of time more powerful influences started coming in and more seriously influenced the system. The advent of Muslims is one such influence. The Political dominance over the vast area of the country had a single effect on every aspect of Hindu life including religion and social life. People belonging to both the religions continued living together but slowly brought about several changes in both religions as political supremacy also forced certain changes. It is in the light of this that we try to understand the social system in the period of study.

Hinduism:

The traditional Hinduism was represented by Saiva and Vaishnava sects and both were zealously patronaged by the Vijayanagar rulers. The same religions continued to function in the Muslim Kingdoms of the Deccan also. Two of the most prevalent sects are Vaishnava and Madhwa, the first one owing its origin to Ramanujacharya and the other to Madhwacharya. Moreover, Islam infiltrated in the neighbouring Vijayanagar kingdom also where it received the generous patronage of the Vijayanagar rulers apart from the Muslim kingdoms like those of the Bahmanis, AdilShahis, Qutb Shahis etc., where Islam was its state religion.

Virasaiva Sect:

There was one more sect of the Hindu religion, Virasaiva which originated earlier in the latter half of the 12th Century A. D., the greatest exponent of which was Basaveswara. Though established as early as this, it took quite some time to become popular. There was almost a sort of revival of this religion in the Vijayanagar period. The main features of this religion were that it discarded the Varna system and declared that all the devotees of Siva are equal and it totally denounced untouchability. It is said that Basava even arranged a marriage between a Brahmana boy and a Sudra girl. Kayaka ("Calling") or work was the most important aspect of this sect and Basaveswara declared that one can achieve salvation through doing one's own work honestly and diligently. Construction of temples and idol worship was not given importance, all types of rituals like the Yajnas were disapproved, stress was laid on compassion (Daya), Non-violence (Ahimsa) and the worship of the God in the form of Ista linga as against the Stavara linga i.e. linga installed in the temple. In the contemporary period in Vijayanagar, Virasaiva received royal support particularly by Devaraya II when large number of saints and poets propagating this religion flourished in this period.

It has been held by a section of scholars that the tenets of Virasaiva religion were the direct outcome of the influence of the Islamic religion. For example P. N. Chopra et al in their History of South India holds:

"The impact of Islam was most discernable in the Lingayat movement which was started in Karnataka by Basava in the 12th Century A. D."¹ Likewise Tarachand also holds that Lingayatism was a result of influence which these Muslims exerted in these parts of India. His contention is that even as early as in the 12th Century there were large number of Muslim colonies 'from Cambay to Quilon' and that Basaveswara came under their direct influence².

None of these contentions has any historical or logical basis. Firstly, the difficulty of chronology, Basaveswara lived in the latter half of the 12th Century A. D. and during his own days he propagated these ideas of equality of human beings, devotion to one God, discarding of rituals, flouting caste system and not encouraging idol worship. Islamic religion came to be propagated in large scale in the Deccan only after the political power taking roots in the Deccan which happened after the 14th Century A. D. It would be incongruous to hold that Basaveswara would be influenced by the principles propagated two centuries after his period. Indeed, there could be some groups of Muslim traders here and there during his period or even earlier, but there is no evidence of the spread of Islamic religion as such in that period thus to say that Virasaivism was the direct outcome of the Islamic religion or it was influenced by the latter is unhistorical. There are seeming similarities between some of the Islamic principles and the Virasaiva tenets but they are only superficial and undeniably one could not have influenced the other.

Mahanubhava Sect:

Another religious sect popular in this period was what is known as the Mahanubhava sect. The followers of this sect were the worshippers of Lord Krishna. The peculiarity of this sect is that they would not permit worship of another form of Vishnu except Krishna. According to the tenets of this sect an individual would get moksha by acquiring jñāna through the Guru. They believed in Sanyasa and they gave very much importance to Guru. They did not believe in caste distinctions and they admitted both men and women in their fold. Traditionally, the origin of this sect is ascribed to Dattatreya, but historically it appears to have come into existence in the late 13th Century and Chakradhara is said to have been its first propagator³.

Here again we see that these basic ideas like no distinction between different classes of people, worship of exclusively one God and importance given to the Guru do have a resemblance with similar principles of the Islamic religion, particularly the Sufi sect. But again it is difficult to state that the Mahanubhava sect was the outcome of the influence of the Sufi sect. Though some impact either way cannot be ruled out due to the periods in which both these religions flourished in Deccan.

Nath Panth:

In the Bahmani territories, there existed a wide gulf between the lower and the higher classes. The Nath panth was a reforming sect which made an attempt to eradicate discrimination among these Hindu classes⁴. This shows that Nathapanthis tried to remove the class distinctions receiving encouragement from the incoming Muslims.

Sometimes the Sufi saints even seemed to have attracted and influenced some of the Hindu yogis and admitted them into their cults and practices. The Hindu yogis so influenced, admired, and preached the Sufi tenets to the people at large, without any caste distinctions. One Sufi legend claims that Kanif-nath, one of the Hindu yogis of Nath Sampradaya 'was humbled' by Nizamud-din, a Sufi saint of Paithan. The Hindu Yogi appears to have become the disciple of Nizamud-din and in the annual celebrations at Miri, Ahmadnagar district organized in memory of this Hindu yogi, both Hindu and Muslim devotees jointly participated⁵.

Saints of Muslim and Hindu religions:

During the period under study Sufis, Shaikhs, Ulemas and Hindu yogis formed a separate group and acquired a good social status. They were revered by people for their piety and wisdom. All these saints appear

to have spent their time among the common and lower class people, unlike the nobles who lived in pomp and pleasure. Moreover, they received generous encouragement from the kings⁶. Both the Hindu and Muslim saints most of the times lived together and conversed with each other⁷. These cordial relations between these saints might have also led to influence each other's thoughts. In this process the Hindu yogis must have adopted some of the practices followed by the Muslim saints. As stated by P. M. Joshi:

“The deity (Dattatreya)⁸ became known to the Muslims as “Shah Faqir” and gathered round it a number of followers. Dattatreya is said to have assumed the guise of a malang for these devotees. Also known as Shah-datta Alam Prabhu in various centres in the Deccan, the deity was instrumental in bringing about a synthesis of devotional thought among various communities of the people of the Deccan like the Lingayats, the Muslim, the Ananda Sampradayis and Giri-gosais.”⁹

The sect had bent itself so much towards the Muslim religion in order to attract followers from the Muslim sects that they started following the Islamic principles. Only after this change, Lord Dattatreya came to be known as Shah-Datta, Alam Prabhu, etc. P. M. Joshi is also of the opinion that Nrsimha Saraswati was the main cause behind this transformation of the sect by his following most of the Islamic code of conduct¹⁰.

Islam:

As for the Islamic religion it is needless to say that it became one of the prominent religions in the Deccan especially with the establishment of the Muslim kingdoms. Indeed there are evidences of infiltration of the Muslim population in this region much earlier than the foundation of the Muslim kingdoms. An Arab writer by name Tabri, speaks of correspondence between the Persian king Khusrau II and Pulakesin II and also of the visit of Pulakesin's ambassador to the court of Khusrau in the 7th Century A. D.¹¹

The Chinchini plates of Rastrakuta state that a person from Arab, called Madumati Sugatipa held the governorship of the Samyana region (around modern Tana, near Bombay) under Krishna II and Indra III. He is stated to have provided free crossing facilities through ferry on the river Samyana i.e. modern Sanjan. He is also known to have established a feeding house at Samyana. He was also associated with construction of a Hindu Temple.

In the days of Muhammad Tughluq one of his officers by name Mallike Kamadina effected repairs to a Saiva temple at Kalyana in Bidar district of present day Karnataka state¹³. There is again a reference to making a grant to a mosque in 1298 A. D. during the period of Sevana Ramachandra¹⁴. It is also said that two Sufi teachers Mumin Arif and Jalal-ud-din Ganjrawan lived in the Sevana kingdom earlier than the invasion of Alau-ud-din¹⁵.

These sporadic references, however, do not help us to come to the conclusion that the religion of Islam had spread in the Deccan widely before the establishment of the Muslim kingdoms like the Bahmanis. It is therefore, reasonable to think that the real spread of Islam took place in the Deccan from the beginning of the 14th century. It is worthwhile noting here the spread and the influence of this religion in the Deccan during this period.

Sufism:

Islam has been divided into many sects like Sufis, Shias, Sunnis etc. Among all these different sects Sufis occupied the highest place in becoming popular among the Indians. Their ways were such that they could attract people of almost all the classes, including the lowest masses and persuade them into their faith¹⁶.

One of the major aims of the Sufi saints of medieval India was to obliterate the caste distinctions and to remove inequalities from contemporary society. They believed in the equality of all human beings and distained all artificial distinctions. They looked upon all men – rich and poor, Hindus and Muslims, freeborn and slaves – with an equal regard. Release of slaves from bondage was considered a noble act and sympathy with the downtrodden was claimed to be the main ideal of the Sufi movement¹⁷. This proves that the Sufi saints directed all their efforts, in order to become the most popular sect among the Indian people. Hence many people from the Hindu religion got converted into this Islamic sect. The main reason behind this mass conversion was that the Sufis treated all people alike, from Aristocrats to humble peasants without showing any distinction. Thus the people of the lower classes found more consolation in this new religion into which they got converted. From the beginning of 13th century the Sufi missionaries, who gained popularity all over India, appealed, directly to the lower caste people of the Hindu society for whom conversion to Islam was considered to be a rise in their social status¹⁸.

Conclusion:

History is important because it is the basis to building a better society. The lessons learnt from history should not be forgotten. These lessons should be utilized in building up a better society for the future generations. It is evident that some sects of both Hinduism and Islam religions flourished only because the sects were adaptable and approachable by the commoners. Any religion or sect can only survive if it takes the

common man into consideration. The aim of any religion, be it Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism or Christianity, should be to serve the people and encourage them towards building a better society. But unfortunately, many people, either for ulterior motives or for reasons best known to themselves, forget the basic tenets of religions and promote discord among people. These types of unhealthy practices should be strongly condemned and the knowledgeable should take an active part in building up a secular and strong country. The significance of the religious conditions in the 14th century Deccan is that it lead to a peaceful existence among the various sects of religions without any problematic issues related to religion. It is essential for us to learn from our history so as to build a better tomorrow for the future generation.

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