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Islam From The Beginning To 1300  
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The Coming Of Islam To South Asia

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*May peace and  
blessings of Allah  
be on thee*

The pattern of political fragmentation that had left the much-reduced Abbasid caliphate vulnerable to nomadic invasions was also found in the regions of South Asia to which Islam spread during the centuries of Abbasid decline. As in the Islamic heartland, internal political rivalries left openings for nomadic warrior bands to raid the towns and villages on the outer frontiers of the subcontinent. When the indigenous Indian lords failed to patch up their differences in order to effectively repel these incursions, more powerful foreign rulers and ever larger armies descended upon the subcontinent, first to raid and pillage but soon with the intention of conquering and settling. As they had been since ancient times, the fertile and heavily populated river valleys and irrigated plains of west and central India were tempting targets for nomadic chiefs in search of booty or displaced lords in search of a strong base on which to anchor their kingdoms.

All through the millennia when a succession of civilizations from Harappa to the Brahmanic Empire of the Guptas developed in the subcontinent, foreigners had entered India in waves of nomadic invaders or as small bands of displaced peoples seeking refuge. Invariably, those who chose to remain were assimilated into the civilizations they encountered in the lowland areas. They converted to the Hindu or Buddhist religion, found a place in the caste hierarchy, and adopted the dress, foods, and life-styles of the farming and city-dwelling peoples of the subcontinent. This capacity to absorb peoples moving into the area owed much to both the strength and flexibility of India's civilizations and the fact that they usually enjoyed a higher level of material culture than peoples entering the subcontinent. As a result, the persistent failure of Indian rulers to unite in the face of aggression on the part of outsiders meant periodic disruptions and localized destruction, but not fundamental challenges to the existing order. All of this changed with the arrival of the Muslims in the last years of the 7th century A.D.

With the coming of the Muslims, the peoples of India encountered for the first time a large-scale influx of bearers of a civilization as sophisticated, if not as ancient, as their own. They were also confronted by a religious system that was in many ways the very opposite of their own. Hinduism (the predominant Indian religion at that time) was open, tolerant, and inclusive of widely varying forms of religious devotion - from idol worship to meditation - in search of union with the supernatural source of all creation. Islam was doctrinaire, proselytizing, and committed to the exclusive worship of a single, transcendent God.

In contrast to the egalitarianism of Islam, which proclaimed all believers equal in the sight of God, Hindu beliefs did much to validate the caste hierarchy, which rested on the acceptance of inborn differences between individuals and groups and the widely varying levels of material wealth, status, and religious purity these differences produced. Thus, where the faith of the invading Muslims was religiously more rigid than that of the absorptive and adaptive Hindus, the caste-based social system of the great majority of the indigenous peoples was much more compartmentalized and closed than those of the Muslim invaders, with their emphasis on mobility and the community of believers.

Because growing numbers of Muslim warriors, traders, holy men, and ordinary farmers and herders were able to enter and settle in the subcontinent, extensive interaction between invaders and the indigenous peoples was inevitable. In the early centuries of the Muslim influx, conflict, often involving violent clashes between the two, predominated. But there was also a good deal of trade and even religious interchange between them. As time passed, peaceful (if wary) interaction became the norm. Muslim rulers employed large numbers of Hindus to govern the largely non-Muslim populations they ruled; mosques and temples dominated different quarters within Indian cities; and Hindu and Muslim holy men strove to find areas of agreement between their two faiths. Tensions remained, and periodically they erupted into communal rioting or sustained warfare between Hindu and Muslim lords. From the 11th century, however, Islam became a major force in Indian history. Islam added further layers of richness and complexity to Indian civilization and some of its most enduring channels to the peoples and cultures of neighboring lands.

North India On The Eve Of The Muslim Invasions

In the years after the collapse of the Gupta Empire at the end of the 5th century, the heads of numerous regional dynasties aspired to restore imperial unity in North India. But until Harsha in the early 7th century, all imperial ambitions were frustrated by timely alliances of rival lords that checked the rise of a single and unifying power center. Harsha was the second son of one of these rival kings, who through a series of wars had carved out a modest domain in the Panjab region to the southeast of the Indus River system. Upon his father's death in 604, Harsha's elder brother ascended the throne. He was soon killed - some accounts say treacherously murdered by the agents of a rival confederation of kings centered in Bengal. Although still a youth,

Harsha agreed to accept the imperiled throne and was soon at war with the kingdoms of Bengal. The young king proved skillful at forging alliances with other rulers who were the enemies of those in the Bengali confederation; he also was a talented military commander. Soon after ascending the throne, he won a series of battles that both revenged the murder of his brother and led to a great increase in the territories under his control. Within a matter of years he had pieced together the largest empire India had seen since the fall of the Gupta dynasty over a century earlier.

### Harsha's Empire

At the height of his power Harsha ruled much of the central and eastern Gangetic plain, but his "empire" was a good deal smaller than that of the Guptas. He beat the Bengali lords in battle but was unable to control their lands on a sustained basis, and his attempts to expand into southern India were unsuccessful. Harsha also never conquered most of the Indus valley to the northwest of his original kingdom or the region to the south, called Rajputana, which was divided into a patchwork of tiny kingdoms, dominated by a proud and fierce warrior elite. Thus, though he was one of the most powerful rulers India was to know from the time of the Guptas until the establishment of the Delhi sultanate in the 13th century, Harsha's conquests fell far short of uniting even the northern regions of the Indian subcontinent.

The wars that dominated the early years of Harsha's reign gave way to a long period of peace and prosperity for his empire. Content with his early conquests and too greatly feared by rival rulers to be attacked, Harsha turned his considerable energies to promoting the welfare of his subjects. Like Ashoka, he built roads and numerous rest houses for weary travelers, established hospitals, and endowed temples and Buddhist monasteries. In many cases, Harsha personally supervised the building of these public works projects, and he frequently toured the provinces of his empire to inquire about the condition and needs of his subjects. A Chinese pilgrim named Xuan Zang, who visited the Buddhist shrines of India during Harsha's reign, wrote that as the king toured the provinces he would hold audiences for the common people in a special pavilion that was set up alongside the main roads. Judging from Xuan Zang's account, the prosperity of the Gupta age had been largely restored during Harsha's reign. This was particularly the case in large towns such as the capital, Kanauj, which had formidable walls, palatial homes, and beautiful gardens with man-made tanks or pools. Some of the artistic creativity of the Gupta age was also revived during Harsha's long reign. The ruler was an author of some talent who wrote at least three Sanskrit plays, and he befriended and generously patronized philosophers, poets, artists, and historians.

Though he was probably a Hindu devotee of the god Shiva in his early years, Harsha was tolerant of all faiths and increasingly attracted to Buddhism. His generous patronage of Buddhist monasteries and the Buddhist monkhood attracted pilgrims like Xuan Zang. If Xuan Zang's account can be trusted, Harsha came close to converting to Buddhism in the last years of his life. He sponsored great religious assemblies, which were dominated by Buddhist monks and religious rituals, and prohibited eating meat and putting an end to human life. His lavish patronage of the Buddhists led on one occasion to a Brahmin-inspired assassination attempt, which appears only to have strengthened his preference for Buddhist ceremonies and beliefs. Despite his favoritism, however, Buddhism was clearly in decline. Monasteries were large and wealthy, but monastic discipline was lax and most monks had little contact with the populace at large. Much like a Hindu god, the Buddha was the object of cult veneration, and a variety of corrupt practices had crept into popular worship. Buddhist centers would prove vulnerable targets for Muslim raiders, and in some areas a substantial portion of the dwindling numbers of Buddhist lay believers would soon convert to Islam.

### Political Divisions And The First Muslim Invasions

Harsha died without a successor in 646, and his kingdom was quickly pulled apart by ambitious ministers seeking to found a new dynasty of their own. Though Hindu culture flourished in both north and south India in the centuries after Harsha's death - as evidenced by the great temples that were constructed and the works of sculpture, literature, and music that were produced - no paramount kingdom emerged. Political divisions in the north and west-central regions of the subcontinent proved the most significant because they left openings for a succession of invasions by different Muslim peoples.

The first and the least lasting Muslim intrusion, which came in 711, resulted indirectly from the peaceful trading contacts that had initially brought Muslims into contact with Indian civilization. Since ancient times, Arab seafarers and traders had been major carriers in the vast trading network that stretched from Italy in the Mediterranean to the South China Sea. After converting to Islam, these traders continued to frequent the ports of India, particularly those on the western coast. An attack by pirates sailing from Debul (in Sind in western India) on ships owned by some of these Arab traders prompted Hajjaj, the viceroy of the eastern provinces of the Umayyad Empire, to launch a punitive expedition against the king of Sind. An able Arab general, Muhammad ibn Qasim, who was only 17 years old when the campaign began, led over 10,000 horse- and camel-mounted warriors into Sind to avenge

the assault on Arab shipping.

After victories in several fiercely fought battles and successful sieges of the great stone fortresses that stood guard over various parts of the arid and thinly peopled Sind interior, Muhammad ibn Qasim declared the region, as well as the Indus valley to the northeast, provinces of the Umayyad Empire. Soon after the territories had been annexed to the Umayyad Empire, a new caliph, who was a bitter enemy of Hajjaj, came to power in Damascus. He purged Hajjaj and recalled and executed his son-in-law, Muhammad ibn Qasim. Though the personnel of the ruling Arab elite shifted as a result, the basic policies established by Muhammad ibn Qasim were followed by his Umayyad and Abbasid successors for several centuries.

In these early centuries, the coming of Islam brought little change for most of the inhabitants of the Indian subcontinent. In fact, in many areas local leaders and the mass of the populace had surrendered towns and districts willingly to the conquerors, who offered the promise of lighter taxation and greater religious tolerance. The Arab overlords decided to treat both Hindus and Buddhists as protected "people of the book," despite the fact that their faiths had no connection to the Bible, the book in question. This meant that though they were obliged to pay special taxes, non-Muslims enjoyed the freedom to worship as they pleased and to maintain their temples and monasteries.

As in other areas conquered by the Arabs, most of the indigenous officials and functionaries retained their positions, which did much to reconcile them to Muslim rule. The status and privileges of the Brahmin castes were also respected. Virtually all the Arabs, who made up only a tiny minority of the population, lived in the cities or special garrison towns. Because little effort was expended in converting the peoples of the conquered areas, they remained overwhelmingly Hindu or Buddhist and, initially at least, displayed scant interest in the beliefs or culture of their new overlords.

#### Indian Influences On Islamic Civilization

Though the impact of Islam on the Indian subcontinent in this period was limited, the Arab foothold in Sind provided contacts by which Indian learning could be transmitted to the Muslim heartlands in the Middle East. As a result, Islamic civilization was enriched by the skills and discoveries of yet another great civilization. Of particular importance was Indian scientific learning, which rivaled that of the Greeks as the most advanced of the ancient world. Hindu mathematicians and astronomers traveled to Baghdad after the Abbasids came to power in the mid-8th century. Their works on algebra and geometry were translated into Arabic, and their instruments for celestial observation were copied and improved upon by Arab astronomers. Most critically, Arab thinkers in all fields began to use the numerals that Hindu scholars had devised centuries earlier. Because these numbers were passed on to the Europeans through contacts with the Arabs in the early Middle Ages, we call them Arabic numerals today, but they originated in India. Because of the linkages between civilized centers established by the spread of Islam, this system of numerical notation has proved central to two scientific revolutions: the first in the Middle East, which was discussed previously, and a second, more sustained and fundamental transformation first in Europe and subsequently in much of the rest of the world from the 16th century onward.

In addition to science and mathematics, Indian treatises on subjects ranging from medicine to music were translated and studied by Arab scholars. Indian physicians were brought to Baghdad to run the well-endowed hospitals that the Christian Crusaders found a source of wonderment and a cause for envy. On a number of occasions, Indian doctors were able to cure Arab rulers and high officials whom Greek physicians had pronounced beyond help. Indian works on statecraft, alchemy, and palmistry were also translated into Arabic, and it is believed that some of the tales in the Arabian Nights were based on ancient Indian stories. Indian musical instruments and melodies made their way into the repertoires of Arab performers, and the Indian game of chess became a favorite of both princes and ordinary townspeople. Arabs who emigrated to Sind and other Muslim-ruled areas often adopted Indian dress and hairstyles, ate Indian foods, and rode on elephants as the Hindu rajas (kings) did. In this era additional Arab colonies were established in coastal areas, such as Malabar to the south and Bengal in the east. These trading enclaves would later provide the staging areas from which Islam was transmitted to island and mainland Southeast Asia.

[See Tomb At Agra: Built in 1626 at Agra, this exquisite tomb of white marble encrusted with semiprecious stones provides a superb example of the blending of Islamic and Hindu architectural forms and artistic motifs.]

Muslim Invasions: The Second Wave

After the initial conquests by Muhammad ibn Qasim's armies, little territory was added to the Muslim foothold on the subcontinent. In fact, disputes between the Arabs occupying Sind and quarrels with first the Umayyad and later the Abbasid caliphs gradually weakened the Muslim hold on the area and led to the reconquest of parts of the lower Indus valley by Hindu rulers. The slow Muslim retreat was dramatically reversed by a new series of military invasions, this time launched by a Turkish slave dynasty that in 962 had seized power in Afghanistan to the north of the Indus valley. The third ruler of this dynasty, Mahmud of Ghazni, led a series of expeditions that initiated nearly two centuries of Muslim raiding and conquest in northern India. Drawn by the legendary wealth of the subcontinent and a zeal to spread the Muslim faith, Mahmud repeatedly raided northwest India in the first decades of the 11th century. He defeated one confederation of Hindu princes after another and drove deeper and deeper into the subcontinent in the quest of ever richer temples to sack and loot.

Mahmud's raids and those of his successors became a lasting source of enmity between Hindus and Muslims in South Asia. After capturing and looting a rich Hindu temple in 1008, he became obsessed with the promise of treasure and the chance to strike a blow at the infidel Hindu faith, which the great temple complexes provided. His most spectacular raid was directed in 1024 at the massive Somnath temple in Gujarat. The temple was served by more than 1,000 Hindu priests and hundreds of temple dancers and singers, supported by 10,000 villages, and defended by nearly 50,000 warriors. Its capture marked the high point of Mahmud's career as general and religious zealot. After stripping the captured shrine of its legendary jewels and golden decorations, Mahmud ordered his followers to smash its idols and destroy the intricate complex of shrines and passageways that housed them. The main idol of the temple was cut into many pieces, and the parts were placed in the floors and stairways at the entrances to Muslim mosques, where the faithful would regularly trod on them when going to prayer. The persecution of both Hindus and Buddhists by invaders, such as Mahmud, gave the Muslims a reputation among the Indian peoples for intolerance and aggression that would greatly hinder the efforts of later and more tolerant Muslim potentates to reconcile Hindu subjects to their rule.

#### From Booty To Empire

The raids mounted by Mahmud of Ghazni and his successors, which were devoted primarily to pillaging, gave way in the last decades of the 12th century to sustained campaigns aimed at seizing political control in North India. The key figure in this transition was a tenacious military commander of Persian extraction, Muhammad of Ghur. The breakup of the Ghazni Empire as a result of the ceaseless quarrels of Mahmud's successors made it possible for the small mountain kingdom of Ghur, near Herat in western Afghanistan, to emerge as a formidable regional power center. Vendettas to avenge the death of relatives in the protracted struggle with the Ghaznis and the support of his elder brother prepared Muhammad for ambitious military expeditions into India, which began in 1178. After barely surviving several severe defeats at the hands of Hindu rulers, Muhammad put together a string of military victories that brought the Indus valley, Sind, and much of north-central India under his control.

Muhammad's conquests were extended in the following years by several of his most gifted subordinate commanders, who, as was quite common in Muslim kingdoms, were slaves who had risen to positions of power on the basis of their military skills. These commanders established Muslim rule in the Gangetic plain as far as Bengal and throughout Rajputana to the south and west. After Muhammad of Ghur was assassinated in 1206, Qutb-ud-din Aibak, one of his slave lieutenants, formed a separate kingdom in the Indian portions of the Ghuri Empire.

Significantly the capital of the new kingdom was at Delhi along the Jumna River on the Gangetic plain. Delhi's location in the very center of northern India graphically proclaimed that a Muslim dynasty rooted in the subcontinent itself, not an extension of a central Asian empire, had been founded. For the next 300 years a succession of dynasties would rule much of north and central India. Alternatively of Persian, Afghan, Turkic, and mixed descent, the rulers of these imperial houses, who proclaimed themselves the sultans of Delhi, fought each other, Mongol and Turkic invaders, and the indigenous Hindu princes for control of the Indus and Gangetic heartlands of Indian civilization.

All the dynasties that laid claim to the sultanate based their power on large military machines, which were anchored on massive contingents of cavalry and, increasingly, on corps of war elephants patterned after those that indigenous rulers had used for centuries. The support of their armies and sumptuous court establishments became the main objectives of the extensive

bureaucracies that each of the rulers at Delhi sought to maintain. Though some rulers patronized public works projects, the arts, and charitable relief, most rulers concentrated on maximizing the revenues they could collect from the peasants and townspeople in their domains. Throughout the Delhi sultanate era, however, factional struggles among the ruling Muslims and their dependence on Hindu lords and village notables in administration at the local level greatly limited the actual control exercised by any of the dynasties that emerged. Through the collusion and cheating of lower-level officials, who had no sense of loyalty to the Muslim overlords, much of what the peasants produced was retained by the villagers or appropriated by local and regional elite groups.

### Conversion

Though the Muslims literally fought their way into India, their interaction with the indigenous peoples soon came to be dominated by accommodation and peaceful exchanges. Over the centuries when much of the north was ruled by dynasties centered at Delhi, sizeable Muslim communities developed in different areas of the subcontinent, particularly in Bengal to the east and in the northwestern provinces in the Indus valley that were the points of entry for most of the Muslim peoples who migrated into India. Few of these converts were won by forcible conversion. The main carriers of the new faith were traders, who played a growing role in both coastal and inland trade, and Sufi mystics, whom in both style and message shared much with Indian holy people and wandering ascetics. Belief in their magical and healing powers did much to enhance the stature and increase the following of the Sufis, whose mosques and schools often became centers of regional political power. Sufis organized their devotees in militias to fend off bandits or the depredations of rival princes, oversaw the clearing of forests for farming and settlement, and welcomed low and outcaste Hindu groups into the Muslim brotherhood. After their deaths, the tombs of Sufi holy men became objects of veneration for Hindus and Buddhists as well as for Muslims. They were sites of pilgrimage, where travelers from many regions congregated and from which Islamic teachings were further spread throughout the subcontinent.

Most of the indigenous converts, who came to form a majority of the Muslims living in India, were drawn from specific regions and social groups. Surprisingly small numbers of converts were found in the Indo-Gangetic centers

of Muslim political power, a fact that suggests the very limited importance of forced conversions. Most Indians who converted to Islam were from Buddhist or low-caste groups. In areas such as western India and Bengal, where Buddhism had survived as a popular religion until the era of the Muslim invasions, esoteric rituals and corrupt practices had debased Buddhist teachings and undermined the morale of the monastic orders. This decline was accelerated by Muslim raids on Buddhist temples and monasteries, which provided vulnerable and lucrative targets for the early invaders. Without monastic supervision, local congregations sank further into orgies and experiments with magic, and in some areas into practices, such as human sacrifice, that also disregarded the Buddha's social concerns and religious message. Disorganized and misdirected, Buddhism proved no match for the confident and vigorous new religion the Muslim invaders carried into the subcontinent, particularly when those who sought to spread the new faith possessed the charisma and organizing skills of the Sufi holy men.

Though Buddhist converts probably made up the larger portion of the Indians who converted to Islam, untouchables and low-caste Hindus, as well as animistic tribal peoples, were also attracted to the more egalitarian social arrangements promoted by the new faith. As was the case with the Buddhists, group conversions were essential since those who remained in the Hindu caste system would have little to do with those who converted. Some conversions were

also prompted by the desire of Hindus or Buddhists to escape the hated head tax the Muslim rulers levied on unbelievers and by intermarriage between the indigenous peoples and Muslim migrants, whose communities usually included far

fewer women than men. The migrants themselves also increased the size of the Muslim population in the subcontinent. This was particularly true in periods of crisis in central Asia, as in the 13th and 14th centuries when Turkic, Persian, and Afghan peoples retreated to the comparative sanctuary of India in the face of the Mongol and Timurid conquests.

### Accommodation

Although Islam won large numbers of converts in certain areas and communities, it initially made little impression on the Hindu community as a whole. Despite military reverses and the imposition of Muslim political rule over large areas of the subcontinent, high-caste Hindus in particular persisted in regarding the invaders as the bearers of an upstart religion and as polluting outcasts. Al-Biruni, one of the chief chroniclers of the Muslim conquests, complained openly about the prevailing Indian disdain for the newcomers:

The Hindus believe that there is no country but theirs, no nation like

taeirs, no kings like theirs, no religion like theirs, no science like theirs. They are haughty, foolishly vain, self-conceited and stolid.

Many Hindus were quite willing to take positions as administrators in the bureaucracies of Muslim overlords or as soldiers in their armies and to trade with Muslim merchants, but they remained socially aloof from their conquerors.

Separate living quarters in both cities and rural villages were established everywhere Muslim communities developed; genuine friendships between members

of high-caste groups and Muslims were rare and sexual liaisons between them were severely restricted.

During the early centuries of the Muslim influx, the Hindus were convinced that, like so many of the peoples who had entered the subcontinent in the preceding millennia, the Muslims would soon be absorbed by the superior

religions and more sophisticated cultures of India. Many signs pointed to that outcome. Hindus staffed the bureaucracies and made up a good portion of the armies of Muslim rulers. In addition, Muslim princes adopted regal styles and practices that were Hindu-inspired and contrary to the Quran. Some Hindus proclaimed themselves to be of divine descent, while others minted coins decorated with Hindu images such as Nandi, the bull associated with a major Hindu god, Shiva.

More broadly, Muslim communities became socially divided along caste lines. Recently arrived Muslims were generally on top of the hierarchies that developed, and even they were divided depending on whether they were Arab, Turk, or Persian. High-caste Hindu converts came next, followed by "clean" artisan and merchant groups. Lower caste and untouchable converts remained at

the bottom of the social hierarchy, which may well explain why conversions by these groups were not as numerous as one would expect, given the original egalitarian thrust of Islam. Muslims also adopted Indian foods and styles of dress and took to chewing pan, or betel leaves. Their intrusion had unfortunate consequences for women in both Muslim and Hindu communities.

The invaders increasingly adopted the lower age of women at the time of their marriage and the prohibitions against widow remarriage found especially at the

high-caste levels of Indian society. Some upper "caste" Muslim groups even performed the ritual of sati, the immolation of widows with the bodies of their deceased husbands.

#### Islamic Challenge And Hindu Revival

Despite a significant degree of acculturation to Hindu life-styles and social organization, Muslim migrants to the subcontinent held to their own, quite distinctive religious beliefs and rituals. The Hindus found Islam impossible to absorb and soon realized that they were confronted by an actively proselytizing religion that had great appeal to substantial segments of the Indian population. Partly in response to this challenge, the Hindus placed ever greater emphasis on the devotional cults of gods and goddesses that had earlier proved so effective in neutralizing the challenge of Buddhism and other indigenous religious rivals. Membership in these devotional, or bhaktic, cult groups was open to all, including women and untouchables. In fact, some of the most celebrated writers of religious poetry and songs of worship were women, such as Mira Bai. Saints from low-caste origins were revered by warriors and Brahmins as well as by farmers, merchants, and outcastes. Because many songs and poems were composed in regional languages, such as Bengali, Marathi, and Tamil, they were more accessible to the common people and became prominent expressions of popular culture in many areas.

Bhaktic holy people and gurus stressed the importance of a strong emotional bond between devotee and the god or goddess who was their object of

veneration. Chants, dances, and in some settings drugs were used to reach the state of spiritual intoxication that was the key to individual salvation. Once one had achieved the state of ecstasy that came through intense emotional attachment to a god or goddess, all past sins were removed and caste distinctions rendered meaningless. The divine objects of these devotional cults varied not only by region and social group but also by the holy person followed. The most widely worshipped divine objects, however, were the gods Shiva and Vishnu - particularly in the guise of Krishna the goatherd - and the goddess Kali in any one of several manifestations. By increasing popular involvement in Hindu worship and enriching and extending modes of prayer and

ritual, the bhaktic movement may have done much to stem the flow of converts to Islam, particularly at the level of low-caste groups. Once again, the Hindu tradition demonstrated its remarkable adaptability and tolerance for widely varying modes of divine worship.

#### Attempts To Bridge The Differences Between Hinduism And Islam

The similarities in style and religious message between the Sufis, who sought to spread Islam to the Indian masses, and the gurus, who championed bhaktic devotion to the Hindu gods and goddesses, led to a number of attempts

to find common ground between the two communities. One of these attempts can

be traced in the teachings, recorded in the form of religious poems, of the 15th century mystic Kabir. A man of humble origins who was raised by Muslim weavers in Banaras, one of the most sacred Hindu cities, Kabir played down the importance of ritual differences between Hinduism and Islam. He declared:

O servant, where doest thou seek Me?  
Lo! I am beside thee.  
I am neither in temple nor in mosque:  
Neither am I in rites and ceremonies, nor in Yoga and renunciation.

Though he saw both religions as valid paths to God, Kabir taught that the ultimate truths transcended Hinduism and Islam. Sheer devotion, not prayers or sacrifices, he argued, would lead the devotee to divine bliss:

If you have not drunk of the nectar of that One Love, what does it matter that you purge yourself of all sins?

The Kazi [judge] is searching the words of the Koran [Quran], and instructing others but if his heart is not steeped in that love, what does it avail, though he be a teacher of men? The Yogi dyes his garments with red: but if he knows nothing of the color of love, what does it avail though his garments be tinted?

Kabir says: "Whether I be in the temple or the balcony, in the camp or in the flower garden, I tell you truly that every moment my Lord is taking His delight in me."

The attempts of mystics like Kabir to minimize the differences between Hindu and Islamic beliefs and worship influenced only small numbers of the followers of either faith. They were also strongly repudiated by the guardians of orthodoxy in each religious community. Sensing the long-term threat to Hinduism posed by Muslim political dominance and conversion efforts, the Brahmins denounced the Muslims as infidel destroyers of Hindu temples and polluted meat eaters. Later Hindu mystics, such as the 15th-century holy man Chaitanya, composed songs that focused on love for Hindu deities and set out to convince Indian Muslims to renounce Islam in favor of Hinduism.

For their part, Muslim ulama, or religious experts, grew increasingly aware of the dangers that Hinduism posed for Islam. Attempts to fuse the two faiths, such as that by Kabir, were rejected on the grounds that though Hindus might argue that specific rituals and beliefs were not essential, they were fundamental for Islam. If one played down the teachings of the Quran, prayer, and the pilgrimage, one was no longer a true Muslim. Thus, the ulama and even some Sufi mystics stressed the teachings of Islam that separated it from Hinduism. They worked to promote unity within the Indian Muslim community and to strengthen its contacts with Muslims in neighboring lands and the Middle Eastern centers of the faith.

#### **Stand-off: The Muslim Presence In India At The End Of The Sultanate Period**

After centuries of invasion and migration, a sizeable Muslim community had been established in the Indian subcontinent. Converts had been won, political control had been established throughout much of the area, and strong links had been forged with Muslims in other lands such as Persia and Afghanistan. But non-Muslims, particularly Hindus, remained the overwhelming majority of the population of the vast and diverse lands south of the Himalayas. Unlike the Zoroastrians in Persia or the animistic peoples of the Maghrib and the Sudan, most of the Indians showed little inclination to convert to the religion of the Muslim conquerors. On the contrary, despite their subjugation, they remained convinced that they possessed a superior religion and civilization and that the Muslims would eventually be absorbed into the expansive Hindu fold. The Muslim adoption of Hindu social forms and Indian customs certainly pointed in this direction. The teachings of Hindu and Muslim holy persons threatened to blur the religious boundaries between the two faiths, a process that favored the ascendancy of the more amorphous faith of the Hindu majority. Thus, though Muslim conquests and migration had carried Islam into the heart of one of the most ancient and populous centers of civilization, after centuries of political dominance and missionary activity, India remained one of the least converted and integrated of all the areas to which the message of Muhammad had spread.

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