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Islam in Mithilā: Early Encounters, Social Context and Initial Perceptions

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Abstract

The advent of Islam in Mithilā was no sudden or isolated political occurrence, nor was it merely a confrontation between two sharply defined religious philosophies. It was, rather, a process that took place within a pre-defined social structure, which was marked by extreme degrees of hierarchy, inner contradictions, and cultural complexities. Prior to the advent of Islam, Mithilā was a society arranged along sharply defined lines of caste, which was further reinforced by Brahmanical ideology, thereby denying a large segment of society access to knowledge, ritual, and social mobility. The denial of access and the proliferation of various sectarian philosophies led to a sense of ambiguity and discontent. In this context, the advent of Islam was merely a process that was linked with pre-defined social contradictions, thereby accentuating some contradictions and developing newer possibilities. The meeting between Hindus and Muslims was, in the beginning, more a result of perceptions rather than theological debates. The sharply defined religious philosophies, rituals, and ways of living served to accentuate contradictions, which sometimes led to hostility. Thus this paper will focused on primarily on the preliminary exchanges between the two cultures that eventually resulted in new social patterns and spiritual practices such as pan-religious tendencies such as syncretism, local religious customs.

Keywords: Mithilā, Brahmanical ideology, religious philosophies, social contradictions

Introduction

The historical status of Islam in eastern India, namely in Mithilā, regarding its socio-religious and cultural impact has to be determined. Our understanding of this subject throughout the early medieval era is insufficient, inconsistent, and mostly incomplete. Contemporary documented material is limited, and the accidental details derived from Persian chronicles are too few and inadequate to aid in recreating historical narratives. The Persian chronicles primarily focused on warfare and political affairs, chronicling relentless conflicts, conquests, and the growing influence of the Islamic world, rather than on the peaceful infiltration of India. The indigenous literature, like the digest authors of Mithilā, similarly addressed the existence of animosity between Hindus and Muslims. With the emergence of Islam, the two predominant social factions consisted of the subjugated populace, who generally perceived the world, including human existence, as illusory, and the foreign ruling elite, who espoused an egalitarian society and regarded socially autonomous structures such as the caste system and untouchability with disdain. The dissemination of Islam and its impact on the inhabitants of Mithilā must be examined to illuminate community relations in medieval Mithilā (Askari, 1998 & (Sastri, n.d.).

Mithilā Society Prior To Muslim Incursion

As the Islamic monotheistic impulse rooted in democratic principles threatened to disrupt the established social structure of Hindus, the advocates of traditional Hinduism attempted to counter this shift by producing customized new comments on Smṛti. The endeavors of Maithilī Smṛti authors revolved on the feudal rulers of Mithilā, who occupied themselves with religious discourse. Despite the ongoing political breakdown, they adhered to the concept of Varṇāśramadharma. They composed the content exclusively for the Brāhmaṇas. The Śūdras were regarded as nonentities. The conservative perspective of the Maithila Brāhmaṇas necessitated the creation of several texts addressing the mandatory duties of the principal castes (Chaudhary, 1976). They warned society against Prakāśa-taskaras, individuals such as merchants, manufacturers, doctors, druggists, fraudulent arbitrators, witnesses, māntrikas, and Tāntrikas, who infiltrated society masquerading as reputable people. In his Śrādhaviveka, Rudradhara identifies vitiated Brāhmaṇas (Niṣiddha Brāhmaṇas) as black marketers, profiteers, rebels, and malevolent individuals, recommending that they be socially penalized and excluded from the Śrāddha rite. Jyotiriśvara enumerates several individuals from the manda jāti or lower castes, including telī (oil pressers), tāti (weavers), goāra (cowherds), dhānuk (agricultural laborers), camāra (cobblers), śuṇdi (wine merchants), hādi, among others. Their socioeconomic standing did not enhance throughout the Turko-Afghan period. They lived in isolation and communicated in languages distinct from those of the general populace. The prominent six languages-Sanskrit, Avahaṭṭha, Paiśāci, Saurasenī, and Māgadhī-were not used by the

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Abhīras, Cāṇḍālas, Savaras, and Utakalas. Consequently, these marginalized strata were segregated from the broader populace (Chatterji & Mishra, 1998). Dharmaswāmin, the Tibetan wanderer, recounts an episode in his life when he was unable to get assistance from an untouchable. In addition to the prevailing crisis, another crisis emerged from the activity of several religious groups, each asserting its own authenticity and legitimacy. Vidyāpati meticulously examined this scenario and chronicled it in his work Puruṣa Parīkṣā. Grierson translated this text into English, and it was published as The Test of a Man by The Royal Asiatic Society in London in 1937. The relevant portion of this book is cited here from The Test of a Man (Roerich, 1959).

There be several kinds of heretics… such as Buddhists, materialists (Cārvāka, etc.) and the like, and many sectarian teachers – Logicians, Philosophers, Ritualists (Mīmāṁsikās, Kumārila Bhaṭṭa, Prabhākara, et. al.), and others – who preach varying creeds with mutually opposing dogmas, and who are skilful each in finding arguments on his side… there be many eloquent teachers, each affirming the truth of his own creed, and owing to the opposition of their dogmas there ariseth confusion as to righteousness (dharma). …Heretics are ever intent upon refuting the arguments of other teachers, while each insisteth of the truth of his own belief. Enemies are they of the Vedas, while men versed in the Vedas are enemies of their beliefs. Thus as they mutually argue, in the uproar of the words of war (vagyuddha kolahale), the intellects even of the clear headed go astray...among sectarian teachers (tīrṭhikas) also there are many diversities of belief. Some prefer to worship Śiva, others Viṣṇu.

Vidyāpati, as his above mentioned description indicates, found the religious space of his society quite agitated by the pressure of a number of religious ideas and forces, all competing with one another and simultaneously creating a crisis for common men for whom it was practically impossible to decide which one was most desirable of all. Thus the socio-religious life of the people in the fifteenth century was afflicted with crisis at two levels. At one level, there was crisis of social stratification of castes and sub-caste, and at the other, the authenticity and genuineness of Vedic tradition was at stake due to the challenges of several sects and religions all of which were integral parts of Indian tradition (Vidyapati, 1935).

Advent of Islam and Initial Reaction

The Muslim immigrants who established themselves in Mithilā have certain distinguishing characteristics. Their fundamental belief was the oneness of God. They adhered to communal worship and prayer. Their societal perspective was democratic and egalitarian, contrasting with the prevailing social order in India. They have divergent values and perceptions of social existence. They might be differentiated by their nomenclature, religious practices and rituals, celebrations, cuisine, attire, matrimonial customs, and their laws of inheritance and divorce. Consequently, they established a wholly separate entity and a tightly-knit community apart from the broader population. Consequently, the emergence of a new extraterrestrial authority with a distinct lifestyle was destined to influence the circumstances of Indian existence. The newcomers were met with hostility and were not let to acclimate without opposition. Hindus and Muslims diverged in their religious beliefs, modes of worship, and social restrictions. The Hindu perspective towards Muslims was characterized by resentful animosity. Alberuni, considered the first Indologist of the 11th century, asserted that Hindus fundamentally differed from Muslims in many aspects (Grierson, 1937). Following an examination of language distinctions, he has posed inquiries about theological discrepancies, as well as variations in etiquette, manners, and traditions. The Hindus' profound prejudice toward Muslims led them to see all foreigners as mlechchas and unclean, rendering marriage or other ties with them prohibited. Alberuni has also attributed the extremism of Muslims to the separation of the two populations. Similar observation can be gleaned from Vidyāpati's Kīrttilatā. He has narrated the life and conduct is given the transliterated Hindi version of the relevant portion of this description from V.S. Agrawal's edition of Kīrttilatā (Alberuni, 1910).

Kahīn par tarah-tarah ke guptacar the kahīn phariyādī… aur kahīn gulām… kahīn turk log hinduoṅ ko genda kī tarah mārakar dūr bhagā rahe the… turk bāzaār meṃ ghūmkar… herā namak [salt] kara wasūl karatā hai… hindu aur turk hile-mile basate haiṅ… eka kā dharma anya ke upahāsa kā kāraṇ ban jātā hai… kahīn turk balapūrvaka raste jāte hūe… ko begār men pakaṛh letā hai. brāhmaṇ ke larke ko ghar se pakaṛh le ātā hai… 'hindu kahakar' dutakāratā aur nikāl detā hai… turkoṅ ko chalate hue dekhkar aisā pratīta hotā hai mānoṅ ve hindūoṅ ke samūha ko nigal jānā chahtā hai.

[…there were spies of different kinds…; at one place there was complainant, at another, there was slave… at one place, Turks were beating Hindus and throwing them away as a ball. Turks collect hera tax from the market… Hindu and Turks reside side by side. The religion of one becomes the object of ridicule for the other… At one place, Turks force those going on road to work as their begārs (drudgery). The son of a Brāhmaṇ is forcibly brought out from his house… (Turks) insult one calling him Hindu and then forcibly turn him out… the way Turks move indicates that they want to terminate the existence of Hindus.

The extracts clearly indicate that the fanaticism of Muslims and the religious superstitions of Hindu Brāhmaṇas were impediments to the establishment of cordial ties between the two groups during the early era of Muslim administration in Mithilā. One wonders if a similar trend persisted in succeeding times or whether there were changes in individuals' behaviors and attitudes towards one another. Prior to reaching a definitive judgment regarding this inquiry, it is essential to examine the dissemination of Islam in India and the manner in which several individuals got to be recognized as Muslims (Vidyapati, 1935).

Social Tensions and Early Hindu–Muslim Interactions in Mithila

Mithilā's embrace of Islam was not merely a matter of armies or kings establishing dominion. Rather than viewing it as a confrontation of two false beliefs, imagine it weaving through an existing broken world. Society there had long been divided-top and bottom, layers upon layers straining to hold onto old beliefs and learned elites. The Islamic influences didn't touch down on virgin territory to blank slates; they encountered resistance, openings, shifting balances. Existing fractures widened in some areas, and new ones formed in places where there had been none. Authority sat firmly with learned men, protectors of holy writings, enforcing layers of human hierarchy. When Muslim perspectives entered, balance had long been lost-tipped by generations of tradition and dominance. In this setting, status decided worth, blocking access for vast numbers. Entire communities, marked as lower caste, faced exclusion-not merely placed below others, but cut off from opportunity altogether. Fringes held them back, so

rituals slipped away, knowledge stayed out of reach, advancement paths vanished. Pressure grew under that quiet. Elsewhere, belief systems emerged-one after another-each shaped by separate codes. At the same time, the proliferation of sectarian movements and competing religious doctrines had generated a situation of confusion among the general public, as reflected in the Vidyāpati text (Agrawal, 1962). Early encounter shows rather than shared beliefs, differences in worship practices, rural organization, and everyday routines became noticeable-distance grew gradually, almost without notice. Certain conservative Hindu groups referred to Muslims using ancient labels such as "mlechchas," whereas Muslim settlers guarded their distinctiveness firmly, reinforcing boundaries. Historical accounts from nearby periods suggest initial friction, marked by resistance and episodes leaning toward confrontation. Observers like Alberuni, followed much later by Vidyāpati, described visions focused on division, often laced with mockery directed across the gap. From silence, belief hardened into a boundary that divided communities. Where shared understanding faded, meaningful conversation became rare. Rigid caste structures, fixed through time, widened the distance already there. Notions of purity-however odd today-cut off interaction across lines. Such convictions raised barriers, excluding neighbors without regret (Elliot & Dowson, 1952).

Few realize how wrong it is to see only struggle in those times. Hidden beneath the surface, people found ways to live near one another. One beside the next, they used the same markets, walked familiar streets, relied on similar routines. Not everything flowed smoothly-tension hummed quietly-but small connections formed anyway. Slowly, without grand plans, these moments built paths others later followed. One thing stands out when looking at the findings-reactions in Mithilā to Islam varied widely. Depending on where people stood socially, what they needed economically, or how they saw culture, responses shifted. The higher ranks, especially priestly groups, often pushed back, drawing clearer lines around tradition. Meanwhile, others might have sensed shifts beneath the surface, less obvious but still real. New ideas about shared life and fairness arrived with this change, though their full weight took time to settle. Just as diverse were those who brought Islam-far from being one single group. Some who arrived first came from many places, each carrying distinct reasons, histories, leaving behind familiar customs to different extents. Shaped more by daily needs-where to live, how work would happen, rules to follow-than just faith alone, contact between newcomers and residents took form. Not everything split cleanly into us versus them, since both sides held wide internal differences that blurred clear lines. So the opening chapter of Hindu-Muslim connections in Mithilā looks less like conflict, more like an ongoing back-and-forth exchange. During these years, people began stating who they were, marking where limits lay, shaping views about one another gradually. Tension showed up regularly during these processes, yet conditions for future shifts emerged anyway. Close presence sparked friction, still forced engagement at the same time-within that mix, early signs of what came next took root. What stands out just as much? How seeing shaped lived history. Each group's view of the other deeply colored how things unfolded between them (Vidyapati, 1935). Those views didn't stay fixed-they shifted slowly, nudged by new situations and ongoing encounters. At first, trust was missing, knowledge thin-just one step in a story still unfolding. To grasp what came next means looking past that first meeting, watching how ties shifted over time (Elliot & Dowson, 1952). Big doubts appear along the way. Could lasting dislike fade into uneasy peace? When society changed, did old divisions bend or hold firm? Ways of connecting emerged somehow; who shaped them, who used them? What stands out most might be how people and groups shaped who they were amid shifting tides. Answers hide not right after Islam arrived, yet unfold across slow-moving waves that came later. In Mithilā, Islam's reach grew without sudden breaks or one single pattern-instead, it seeped through many paths over long stretches. Such shifts included official conversion, yes-but also quieter exchanges, adjustments, blending ways unseen. So even though early contact showed separation and contrast, those moments planted seeds for deeper, tangled stories down the line. What looked like solid lines between the groups didn't stay fixed. Slowly, through friction and exchange, those divisions began shifting. Some gave way entirely, reshaped by lived experience rather than rules (Alberuni, 1910).

Conclusion

Therefore, Islam's entry in Mithilā needs to be located within the ambit of a society which was already under internal strains and changes. These conditions produced the early interactions between Hindus and Muslims should be seen in light of this and the tensions as well as opportunities in an encounter of cultures. This exchange, while resembling the academic study of classical history, was focused primarily on the preliminary exchanges between the two cultures that eventually resulted in new social patterns and spiritual practices such as pan-religious tendencies such as syncretism, local religious customs.

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