RELIGIOUS RESTORATION OF SULTAN ZAIN-UL-ABIDIN (1420-1470 A.D.)

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Abstract: Sultan Ghiyas-ud-din Zain-ul-Abidin (1420-1470) was a sultan of Kashmir in the present day Jammu and Kashmir state, who was named Badshah (the great King) by his subjects.

Shahi Khan, the son of Sultan Sikandar was left with the charge of the kingdom by his elder brother Sultan Ali Shah, when he went for pilgrimage to Mecca. But Ali Shah's father-in-law, the king of Jammu induced him to return from Thatta to Kashmir with a contingent of the army of Jammu. Shahi Khan became angry and went to Jasrath, the chief of the Khokkars after handing over the kingdom to Ali Shah and refused to come back. Ali Shah led an expedition against Jasrath and was defeated. According to late accounts, Ali Shah was captured by Khokkars and died at Chadura. Shahi Khan ascended the throne under the title of Zain-ul-Abidin. Zain-ul-Abidin is also known for his great rule and thus called as the greatest of the kings (Badshah).

Keywords: Badshah, Khokkars, Jizya, infidels, Yavanas, imperceptibly, liquidate, repugnance, discrimination, profanity, apostatized.

Religious Restoration:

Kashmir at the time of Zain-ul-Abidin’s accession presented a spectacle of sorrow on the domestic front. The whole socio-religious set up of the Hindus was in a state of turmoil. Demoralized and terror-stricken by the excesses committed during the last two reigns, they had found safety in a variety of ways- in self-immolation, in flight beyond the borders, in remaining disguise and pretending to be Muslim, in hiding, or in embracing Islam. They were forbidden to perform their religious ceremonies and customs. Forsaken by man and god alike, they lived in a state of servitude and terror. All those who withstood the heavy odds and decided to stay in Kashmir saved the purity of their caste by remitting heavy amounts of capitation tax called Jizya. This was the situation which Zain-ul-Abidin was called upon to face. And uppermost in his mind was the anxiety to restore the shattered confidence of his non-Muslim subjects. The early influences on him, enforced by the exhortations of Shirya Bhatta, inspired the sultan to undertake the task of religious restoration with a conviction and a resolve rarely equaled in history.

Sultan Zain-ul-Abidin caused complete religious freedom to be publicly announced and “each individual worshipped his god agreeably to the faith in which he was educated.” He took the momentous decision of extending a general invitation to all those Brahmanas who had been banished, or had fled in panic from Kashmir to return. The assurance that none would suffer any religious disability caused a general influx of people back to the valley. A large number of them returned from Jammu and Kishtawar. The govt. formulated schemes for their relief and rehabilitation. Arrangements were made for providing them residence in temples. Organized efforts were made to provide them with means of livelihood. The more meritorious of them received assignments according to ability, while others were granted stipends and rent-free lands.

Zain-ul-Abidin displayed an extraordinary gesture of good will by allowing all those Hindu converts who had accepted Islam under duress to return to their original faith if they so wished. Doubt has been expressed that “owing to their rigid system of ceremonial purity and the notions of defilement, many, Hindus could not have profited by the opportunity of coming back to their original fold.” No doubt, both Jinaraja and Srivara are conspicuously silent on this point. But the number of people who exercised this option was fairly large, for we learn from Nizamuddin that “most of the Brahmanas, who had become Musalmans in the reign of sultan Sikandar, apostatized again, and none of the (Musalmans) learned men had any power or hold over them.” We find its corroboration in the pages of a Persian Chronicle which speaks of Kashmir, where infidelity and idolatry were once wiped out in the reign of Sikandar, as a land humming with the activities of the “crowds of infidels and tribes of polytheists” under the patronage of sultan Zain-ul-Abidin. This was obviously the result of both the recall of Hindus and the reconversions of Hindu converts in large numbers. True, the hindu- socio-religious set-up has been a highly rigid one. But it does not follow from it that the Hindus never permitted people of other religious to come back to their fold. There have been several instances of conversions to Hinduism throughout ancient and medieval times. The main deterrent during medieval period was the Islamic law under which the conversion of a Muslim to other faiths was a capital offence. Despite this, “an almost continuous stream of conversions and reconversions seems to have been running all through the first ten centuries of Muslim rule in India.” Once the deterrent was removed in Kashmir by Zain-ul-Abidin, the truncated Hindu society got a new lease of life and its depleted numbers swelling with lightening rapidity. It was no ordinary measures. Perhaps no Muslim king had even taken such a bold step which not only lacked the sanction of Islamic law but was positively repugnant to its usage.

Sultan Zain-ul-Abidin in his zeal to cause a total restoration of Hindu customs and usages allowed the continuation of the inhuman practice of women burning themselves on the funeral pyre of their husbands. This cruel system, called Sati, was banned...
earlier in the time of Sikandar, though much of the credit due to him is marred by the fact that it was motivated by his zeal to destroy hindu- culture. One would have expected an enlightened king of Zain-ul-Abidin’s caliber to have done away with this monstrosity. He could have effected it without much difficulty partly because of his immense popularity among the hindus and partly because this custom did not seem to find much favour with the hindus in Kashmir, as is echoed from Srivara’s words: “Here (in Kashmir) according to the custom of the distant countries, females immolated themselves in the pyre of the beloved and were not forbidden by the king (Zain-ul-Abidin).” Its final discontinuance would have constituted a signal service to humanity and would have perhaps given a higher pedestal to him as formers. But his failure in going so in no way brings his images under shadow, for what he did was the outcome of his sincere desire to promote the religious revival of the Hindus, taking no chance whatsoever which might hurt their sentiments even in the smallest excited an sure. While he adopted a policy of complete non-interference in religious affairs of others, he took pains to remove those irritants which were likely to jeopardize the execution of his scheme of communal harmony and common citizenship. The cow has from ancient times occupied a sacred place in Hindu society, and its slaughter by Muslims has invariably an element of bitterness in their relations with Hindus. Anxious as he was to provide a meaningful base to his ideal of liberalism, the sultan was quick in putting a ban on cow slaughter which had great significance then, as it has now, for an average Hindu.

Not only did the sultan revive in every town and villages the observance of socio-religious practices of the Hindus in accordance with their ancient custom, but also he did much to restore their sacred places of worship. A Persian chronicles writes: “All those temples and idol- houses of the infidels which were broken and razed to the ground during the reign of Sikandar were repaired and rebuilt by the sultan (Zain-ul-Abidin).” It finds corroboration in a number of references in the works of other Persian and Sanskrit chronicles. Jonaraja mentions the appointment of Rupabhanda, a proficient sculptor; under whose supervision were carried out the repairs of dilapidated buildings and the construction of new ones under the express orders of Zain-ul-Abidin obviously, these included temples as well. At another pace of Jonaraja’s chronicles, we have an obvious reference to the construction of temples by the Sultan in the newly- built cities of Zainagiri and Siddhapuri for those worshipping the sun and Siva. The sultan is recorded to build mathhas, viharas and monasteries for his non-Muslim subjects. His trusted minister Shirya Bhatta was also responsible for the construction of large mathhas in various sub- divisions of the kingdom.

Much of the cruel work of the previous reigns was thus undone. During Zain-ul-Abidin’s reign the desecration of images and the acts of profanity were never again permitted in Kashmir for half a century. The sultan went even to the extent of saving from spoliation a golden image of the Buddha in the foreign land of Ladakh from the hands of Muslim soldiers of a foreign army of Kashghar. Jonaraja has summed up the impact of Zain-ul-Abidin’s measures of religious restoration thus: “He (Zain-ul-Abidin) was the destroyer of evils, and he preserved by various means the good usages of Kashmir, even as a physician helps our digestive functions by medicines. As if to purify the earth polluted by the touch of Suhabhatta, the king kindled the fire of his prowess which lighted up the great firmament. He pursued his policy in five different ways, and his enemies, as if to defeat his purpose, dissolved themselves into the five elements (died).”

Recognition of Equality:

The sultan on the one hand restored religion and culture and healed the wounds of his non-muslim subjects, while on the other, he directed his efforts to winning their confidence by established the rule of law based on the principles of equality and justice. It was so thoroughly established that he never deviated from these principles. The Ulama who had once exercised considerable influence in the time of Sikandar and Ali Shah were now deprived of their privilege of harassing the Brahmanas. The sultan was always eager to make due enquiries after the welfare of all his subjects. He occasionally distributed free food to his subjects without any sort of discrimination. Referring to this practice of the sultan, Srivara observes: “There was no man in Kashmir, who was not fed with the King’s rice, be he learned or dunce, wicked or good, a Yavana or a twice- born.”

Sultan Zain-ul-Abidin recognized merit. He cultivated in his kingdom the society of all classes of people without distinction and “in his assemblies men of intellect, both hindu and Musalmans, were always present” the sultan had in his court among the Hindu luminaries, Jonaraja and Srivara, who were celebrated as much for their literacy eminence as for the historical merit of their works. Their works in Sanskrit constitute the most important historical source for the account of their patron. Other Hindu scholars of note who flourished under the royal patronage were Pandit Notthasoma Yodha Bhatta and Avatara Bhatta.

Patronage of Brahman and Hindu Saints:

In Kashmir, as elsewhere in India, the Brahmans in those days enjoyed a special social status and prestige among the Hindus for their learning and religious leadership, a state which is almost inconceivable at the present time. He a man of learning, Zain-ul-Abidin appreciated learning and patronized learned men. The Brahmans naturally became recipients of the sultan’s generosity and special favours. He provided them with comfortable living. The Sanskrit chroniclers frequently refer to the grants of rent-free lads and villages to Brahmans in new towns and cities where they lived in dignity and prosperity. They held important assignments as ministers, judges, physicians, treasurers, astrologers, architecture, court-chroniclers and poets as noted earlier. They also served as diplomats for negotiating terms of peace and war. On one occasion Zain-ul-Abidin deputed a Brahma to resume diplomatic overtures with his rebellions son, Haji Khan, for peace. The envoy was ill- treated. His insult at the hands of
Haji Khan’s officers infuriated the sultan who marched with his army and chastised the prince for his recalcitrance. Zain-ul-Abidin never allowed the status of the Brahmans to be undermined.

The Sultan’s Interest in Hindu Religion and Philosophy:

Zain-ul-Abidin was much attracted towards Hindu religion and culture. Srivara speaks of the sultan’s extraordinary interest in the celebrated six schools of Indian philosophy. He came in close contact with the Yogis and received instructions on the philosophy of Yoga We learn from Nizamuddin that the sultan was adept in the occult sciences of the Yogis. The performances of several miracles are attributed to him through the power that he attained. His power is exaggerated even to the extent of enabling him to withdraw the soul from his body. The sultan was venerated as a saint and was regarded as a special servant of god by high and low alike. The works on Hindu religion and philosophy also evinced his interest, and he passed into service all state agencies to procure them, for most of them had earlier been destroyed in his father’s time. Sikandar has caused them to be either consigned to flames or submerged into the water.

The Sultan’s Visit To Hindu Shrines:

It is, indeed, remarkable that Zain-ul-Abidin undertook regular pilgrimages to Hindu shrines and participated in Hindu rituals and worship. Jonaraja records a curious incident connected with one of such pilgrimages when the sultan accompanied a religious party to the shrine of Sarada. It was known for such miraculous manifestations as “the appearance of sweat for face of the image of the goddess, the shaking of the arm, and a sensation of heat on touching the feet” which the sultan was eager to witness. The sultan, after drinking water and taking bath at the Madhumati stream, came to the temple. As he entered the shrine he felt annoyed at the wickedness of the devotees and lost faith in the goddess. The goddess did not manifest herself. Then the sultan, for the purpose of seeing the goddess in his dream, slept in the court-yard of the temple without results on the night of 7th Bhadra (July-August) in the Laukika year (44) 98, which corresponds to 1422 A.D.

Conclusion:

For all that he did for his non-Muslim subjects and the manner in which he did it, one cannot resist the conclusion that it was not to win the goodwill of his Hindu subjects alone but to silence the voice of his inner conscience as well. The impact of his participation in their religious functions, and the study of their scriptures, sharpened by the pressure of events, was imperceptibly bringing about a subtle change in the attitude and mental make-up of Zain-ul-Abidin. His close association with the Yogis did much to promote in him an ascetic outlook. To these influences may be traced the sultan’s orders banning the killing of birds, and of fishes in several tanks. It may be taken partly as a reflection of the king’s mind set against violence and partly to maintain the sanctity of some sacred tanks. Hunting was forbidden in his kingdom, so that unnecessary killing could be avoided. He himself gave up taking meat during the period of Ramzan fasts. He learnt yogic exercise from the yogis and a number of miracles are attributed to him. The king derived consolation from the study of Hindu scriptures in his moments of anxiety.

Spirit Of Understanding Fostered:

The sultan had rightly realized that his study of scriptures and participation in social and religious customs of his non-muslim subject was not enough. He had known them and their culture thoroughly well, and he earnestly desired that his Muslim subjects should also know them well. He was aware of the wide gulf existing between the two communities. It was to bridge that all his efforts were directed. He aimed at bringing about closer ties between them on the plane of socio-religious relationships without subjecting them to the rigours of a former code of moral conduct or new religion, as Asoka or Akbar had done. He was conscious of the lack of proper understanding among Hindus and Muslims of each other’s culture to be the reason which bred intolerance. He tackled the problem as a staunch realist. He launched a three-pronged attack to liquidate the artificial barriers existing between the two communities.

First, the sultan caused the translation of Sanskrit works, important as much for their literary merit as for their religious cultural and philosophical contents, to be made in Kashmiri, and in Persian; he also had the important works in the afore-said languages translated into Kashmir. This was one of the ways how he established cultural rapport between different communities.

Secondly, he emphasized the real spirit which underlay each religion and its observance by all in its true spirit. He took an undertaking from the Brahmans that they would not act in contravention of what their religion required of them. “He directed those,” Srivara writes, “who knew the Shastras preserve in their duties, for they work justly who know the Shastras.”

Thirdly, he harmonized religious antagonisms by emphasizing moral cut look of life. The example of his personal life of piety and nobility did much to inspire his subjects, both Muslims and non-Muslims.

The success of Zain-ul-Abidin’s policy can be judged from a somewhat exaggerated statement of an anonymous Muslim author who wrote thus in despair: “The customs and traditions of the hindus and the unbelievers and their acts of sacrilege attained such a magnitude and popularity that the Ulama, the learned, the Sayyids and the Qazis of this land (Kashmir), instead of showing those repugnance and forbidding then to do so, began to perform those customs themselves.”
References: