

The Role of Islam in Interreligious Rapport in Odisha

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In view of the rich religio-cultural heritage of India, there is a growing interest among the scholars to understand the contributions of major religious faith to bring about a social harmony and enquire into their relevance in maintaining unity and integrity. Keeping this fact in view the objective of this paper is to explore the role of Islam, one of the major religious trends, in effecting an intrereligious rapport in Odisha. India in general and Odisha in particular does not have a crude stereotype culture and has not been exclusively linked to core Hindu religion. On the contrary, it is highly assimilating in nature. This is quite evident in the natural fusion of some rituals, practices and ways of life of some alien faiths and cults in the culture of Odisha.

The advent of Islam heralded in the Eastern Indian State of Odisha in the 16th Century after the invasion of Kalachand Roy known as Kala Pahad, a Hindu converted to Islam, a vassal of Suleiman Karrani, the Sultan of Bengal, after the defeat and death of Raja Mukunda Dev of Cuttack, in 1568 AD¹. However, the number of Muslims, almost all converts from Hinduism, was quite significant. Though they were Muslims by faith, they continued subscribing to local custom, traditions and retain Odia as their native tongue, as opposed to Persian or Hindustani, the then lingua franca of most Indian Muslims. The

descendants of these Muslims are still found in the districts of Puri and Khurda. But it was only after the invasion of the Mughal Emperor Akbar and the establishment of proper revenue collection and judiciary system by him, Muslims first became a visible community in Odisha. A large number of these migrants were soldiers from Bengal and Bihar who settled down in Odisha permanently. Many of them were Mughals and Afghans who came with Mughals' army. Gradually they adopted local mode of dressing, cuisine, culture and shifted to agriculture for livelihood. They, however, continued to use Urdu as their mother tongue. Today, they constitute the overwhelming majority of the Odia Muslim community. Later migration continued under Mughal as well as the Nawab of Bengal's rule. The majority of those were traders or clergy, sent to preside over the courts both Secular and Islamic².

Before the advent of Islam in Odisha, there was prevailing a perfect fusion of the traditional Vedic and Brahminical version of Hinduism with Buddhism, Jainism and animism or totem worship of the Adivasis³. What made possible this fusion was that apart from the formal distinction that separated these religions and philosophical trends in practical matters there was a growing similarity among them. Whereas the early Buddhism and the Nyaya School within

Hinduism had laid considerable stress on rationalism and scientific investigations of nature, the later Buddhism and Saivism school both emphasized philosophical variant of concepts first developed in the Upanisads along with mysticism⁴. At the same time the Buddhists' ethos has created an environment where compromise was preferred to confrontation. This, in fact, made the masses more open to other religious belief.

Besides, unlike some other parts of India Odia Society had not yet been deeply differentiated by caste system and egalitarian values remained well-ingrained among peasant masses. Hence, any ideology that championed the hierarchical division of society would have been unacceptable. All these factors immensely contributed to the introduction of alien religions and philosophical trends like Islam and its way of life leading to a mutual co-existence and the development of a new socioreligious ethos. It opened up a possibility of upward mobility through the acquisition of knowledge, skill and energetic personal endeavour.

As a matter of fact, any religion has its own system of beliefs about the relation among people, super natural power and nature. Islam is no exception. The general contour of Islamic beliefs in contemporary India may be classified as modern and orthodox⁵. Modern Islamists strive to give a rational interpretation of the Holy Koran and Hadith. It seeks to differentiate between the fundamental aspects of Islam which were dictated by the time and place of its birth. It urges the adoption of the essential and rejection of the accidental of Islam. They emphasize the dynamic, scientific and progressive nature of Islam and do not reject rituals enjoined as compulsory in it. However, they argue for imbibing the spirit behind the performances of these rituals. Modern Islamists envisage a narrowly personal and specific

role of religion on life and put stress on self-determination rather than the divine will in the affairs of men.

The orthodox, puritan and literal Islam enjoin total and literal acceptance of the Holy Koran and Hadith. It stands for rigid adherence to the canonical laws of Islam and strict observance of compulsory religious injunctions. While the modern Islamists would emphasize rationalism and individual Judgment in interpreting the Holy Koran and Hadith, the orthodox Islamists rely heavily on the scholastic literature and commentaries developed by literal theologians of the middle ages in Arab, Persia for the interpretations of all religious questions. Unlike the modern Islamists the Orthodox one would accept Islam as a complete code of life and believe in the determination of all events by the will of God.

Both the modern and orthodox Islamists, however, do not make any compromise on the core-ideal of Islam i.e. Monotheism. Each of them take literally the Islamic confession of faith. There is no God but God The Allah and Mohammad is his prophet. Both follow the cardinal principle of Islam such as prayer five times a day, fasting for one month in a year, annual alms giving to the poor and pilgrimage to Mecca.

However, the number of the orthodox Islamists in Odisha is very limited and are unassertive. This is evident in the fact that it was never felt the need of forming an Islamic counter culture to resist it. In fact, the prevailing trend of spiritualism, tolerance, catholicity and the spirit of accommodation have made it congenial for the gradual spread of Islam in Odisha.

Most Islamists in Odisha owing to their rearing in indigenous culture did not hesitate to come closer to their non-Islamic brethren without making major deviation in their core religious

beliefs and convictions. Gradually they get themselves involved in contributing their mite in their own way in enriching the religio-cultural trends of Odisha. History of Odisha⁶ shows that intermingling of religious experience is very much there. Hindu disciples and devotees have been attracted to Muslim Sufis. In the same way Muslims are attracted towards the Hindu cultural activities. Places like Cuttack, Dhenkanal, Bhadrak, Sambalpur etc. have witnessed religious mingling at folk and popular level.

Muslims in most of the places of Odisha see no incongruity in participating in different Hindu religious and cultural festivals. This is glaringly evident in Laxmi Puja of Dhenkanal, Dushahara of Cuttack, Kalipuja of Bhadrak and Nuakhai of Sambalpur. Here many Muslims are the members and office bearers of different Puja committees and work with all sincerity and dedication to make the Puja a great success. This, indeed, exhibits the sense of tolerance and catholicity among the people of the State.

Satyanarayan Pala, a very popular religious congregation is extensively arranged in most of the families of the Hindu community in the State of Odisha. This congregation is organised to commemorate the birth of a child in honour of *Satya Pir*, a Muslim Saint. It is believed that the *Pir* an embodiment of truth and very close to Lord Narayan, the prominent Hindu deity would remove all hurdles and impediments that may come in the life of the child and help him walk on the path of truth.

In Odisha, one may come across a large number of *Darghas* or tombs of Muslim saints which are visited by people without any distinction of caste or creed. People go there to get rid of their problems and get their desires fulfilled. The most notable *Dargha* of Odisha is *Kaipadar Sarif*. It is an eighteenth century shrine of the Sufi

saint Syed Abdulla Jalal popularly known as Bukhari Pir Sahib, who originally belonged to Bukhara, Uzbekistan. He came to Khurda in 1731 AD via Mecca after performing Haj. The then Odia king of Cuttack Ram Chandra Dev II, being highly impressed by his Sufi thoughts and action, donated 223 acre of land to him in 1733 AD to establish his mosque and *Hujra* which is known as *Kaipadar*⁷. It is famous for its annual Urs celebration when thousands of devotees across different religion throng the shrine with religious fervour from all over India. It is one of the biggest Sufi shrine in India almost next to the *Dargha* of Ajmeer Sarif founded by *Khawaja Moiuddin Chistis* at Ajmer, Rajasthan.

Baba Bukhari, the founder of *Kaipadar Sarif* did not harbour a hostile or sectarian attitude towards other faiths. He asserted that the real Being is Allaha and the entire universe including human beings are his creations and any distinction between the two would be artificial⁸. Here Baba Bukhari seems to have been inspired by *Wahadat aiwujud* the unity of all beings⁹. The advocates of the doctrine state that our heart is a mosque, a temple, a church and a synagogue. God is love. Our heart is the seat of love. We are so absorbed in loving Allaha that we have no time to hate Satan.

Aligning with this doctrine, Baba Bukhari, who was so catholic in his religious outlook that he used to say that there are as many ways of worshipping Allaha as there are particles of sand¹⁰. This view is in perfect consonance with a verse of Koran (2:148) which states “To each is a goal to which God turns him: than strive together towards all that is good”. Baba Bukhari even observed that the Hindus were in fact monotheistic as they believe ultimately in a God without form or attributes (Nirakar and Nirguna). Reflecting the plurality of religious approaches imbibed in

Kaipadar Shrine, Rafique Farid”, one of the followers of Baba Bukhari wrote “at one time I put the sandal paste on my forehead and wore a sacred thread and performed the namaj.” Even some of the followers of Baba Bukhari gave up eating meat to come closer to their Hindu brethren. This kind of liberal approach towards others’ religious faith, developed in Kaipadar Shrine has been instrumental in maintaining a very cordial interreligious rapport in Odisha.

This trend of interreligious rapport is also quite evident in the *Bhajans* of Sala Baig, a Muslim religious poet. All his *Bhajans* written in praise of Lord Jagannath have mesmerised a large number of people in Odisha. It truly inculcates a deep sense of devotion in the heart of the devotees and enriches the spiritual environment of the State. It would not be an exaggeration to hold that the description of the great Jagannath cult would be incomplete without making a reference to the *Bhajans* of Sala Baig. Some of the orthodox Muslims once asked in a religious discussion that should Sala Baig be treated as a *kafir* or a non-believer as he is devoted to an idol. One of the Urdu Professor Sk. Safiulla replied that it was not proper. He explained that Sala Baig saw the glory of the God in the Idol and did not worship the idol itself. On the other hand Panda Mulvi and Nayak Mulvi of Cuttack who are born as Hindus and later taken to Islam have wielded considerable influence and commanded tremendous respect from among the Muslims for guiding them in their religious affairs.

Besides, the *Kohinoor Panji* or a calendar depicting auspicious and unauspicious days and occasions is a household name in the State. It is, infact, introduced and managed by Muslim who have amazing knowledge of astrological influence and importance of different occasions on human lives. People from all

religions particularly the Hindus follow this calendar with all sincerity in conducting their religious and other activities. Again, *Akbar Khan Gudakhu*, a tobacco based dental paste is very popular among the rural people irrespective of caste, religion and creed. This willingness of Hindus to accept and use different things made by the Muslim seems to have refuted the view, as held by some, that cleavage between the two communities is so strong and rigid that the followers of one religion do not accept anything that is made or used by the followers of other.

Mughal Tamasha, a popular folk dance form of Odisha has exposed the myth of this cleavage between the Hindus and Muslims through an exquisite satire. By way of showing the lavish Life Style of some Mughal Kings, it depicts how at the bottom level people of both the communities are actively co-operating one another at the practical fronts and share a common way of life leading to an atmosphere of peaceful co-existence.

From the above discussion, it seems that Islam with its monotheistic pattern of belief has been assimilated and integrated well with the religio-cultural ethos of Odisha. This exhibits the openness of Islam to other religions and cultures. Infact, Islam is not monolithic or homogeneous as it is often projected¹². It resides in fifty three countries of the world and became the culture of the place in which it resides. The land of Odisha has never rejected Islam as a religion.

Thus, in Odisha we find an attitude of respect for all religions (*Sarva dharma sambhava*) among its people. This is reflected in the Islamic notion of *Sulh-i-kul* which means good will towards all. It, however, should not be confused with secularism as secularism merely admits the existence of different religions and denotes mutual exclusiveness. To you your

religion, to me mine. It stands for total indifference though not hostility. On the contrary, the idea of Sarva dharma sambhav and *Sulh-i-Kul* imply that every religion requires the other for no religion is complete in itself, nor does it have monopoly of the truth. It goes beyond tolerance and respect and connotes understanding and experience. Here a religious person will not merely tolerate or respect other's faith but actually discover in them the elements of beliefs and practices that are subdued or missing in his or her own faith. This is more than a simple and sincere desire to experience other's religion. This realisation perhaps led Baba Bukhari and his followers adopting some Hindu rituals in their religious practices¹³. It is indeed, a moral and intellectual position grounded in an acknowledgement of the incompleteness of every single religion. To-day the country truly needs the Sarva dharma Sambhava or *Sulh-i-Kul* more than ever.

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