State Building under the Mughals: Religion, Culture and Politics

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This paper is concerned with the issues that had a bearing on the relationship between religion and Mughal politics. It forms part of a larger work on the process of state formation under the Mughals. Earlier in a similar paper I suggested that the Mughal state rather than being a structure perfected at a given point of time, could be seen as a process, which incorporated and adjusted to the traditions and customs of the peoples as well as to the regions that were integrated into the empire over the years. The Mughal system, which looked so compact at first instance in the imperial Persian chronicles, was not uniform throughout the empire; its systemised zabt (measurement of land and revenue demand in cash) system extended little beyond the core provinces and there were obvious regional variations within the all embracing pax Mughalica1. It is from this perspective that I will attempt here to examine the norms and the principles which governed, or at least were intended to govern, the coordination of the interests of the Mughal rulers and their Hindu subjects, including the land holders, the merchants and the other magnates. I have thus considered in some detail the question of shari’a and the complexities of its relevance in medieval Indian politics.

Before the Mughals, the “Muslim” sultans in India attempted in their own limited ways to resolve the problems related to the compatibility of the shari’a with their political actions. But the ambivalence
continued and even the regional sultans during the fifteenth century had to turn to the shari'a to legitimate their political acts. For a politically amenable interpretation of the shari'a in 1579 even Akbar, the Great Mughal, sought the approval of the ulama (mahżar). Toward the last phase of Akbar’s reign, however, and in the seventeenth and the eighteenth centuries under the Mughal regime, the centrality of the shari’a in the political discourse waned. Is this change in stance related to the fact that the Muslim state builders in India had become wiser by then? Or can we discern any radical change in the position of the political theorists of the period? It appears that the “law of Chingiz Khan”, tura-ye Chengizi, contributed to this shift when it emerged as the reference point for discussions on governance under the Mughals. But more importantly we need to explain whether this seventeenth century trend also indicated the emergence of a new understanding of Islam and shari’a. Further, we have to examine if the Sufi tradition or the Persian literary culture which emphasised accommodation and compromise were now becoming increasingly central to state building. While evaluating the context of this shift, the paper also indicates how a Timurid Central Asian tradition, encapsulated not in tura-ye Chengizi but in some politico-ethical writings compiled in fifteenth century Herat, influenced and inspired this development.

I.

By the time the Mughal empire was established, the power in the countryside was mostly in the hands of the large and small “Hindu” family and kin groups. The groups had emerged as a consolidated great Rajput caste, spread over a very large part of northern India, incorporating the various erstwhile ruling elements and the newly brahmanized tribal/pastoral chiefs. They enjoyed claims over the surplus produced by the peasants and were masters of their respective territories. The Mughals referred to them as zamindâr, a generic term the first reference to which comes from the fourteenth century. Caste-cohesion and caste affinity among them had encouraged conditions in which members of a sub-caste lived close to each other in a cluster of villages, known in Mughal India as pargana. Caste, zamindâri and pargana boundary often coexisted. That these “Hindu” countryside lords were an important constituent of the Mughal state was not an ordinary achievement, but was not unprecedented.
The policy of their absorption into the Muslim state power was not begun by the Mughals. Since Toghloq time (14th century) Hindus began to figure in state service. Sekandar (Eskandar) Lodi, generally remembered for his bigotry, encouraged the Hindus to learn Persian to take up high positions in the state; and the Sur sultan Sher Khan’s rise to power depended considerably on his ability to integrate the Rajputs into his army. By the time of the early Mughals (Babur and Homayun) Hindu presence in the Muslim state was so pronounced that it began to threaten some sections of the Muslim notables (shorafâ’). Further, much of the strength of the regional sultanates seems to have depended on the sultans’ ability to coordinate their relations with the territorial Hindu magnates.

Under the Mughals this coordination was evidently reinforced. But what is of greater significance for our purpose is the fact that besides the enormous increase in the scale of this coordination, many of the local Hindu elites began to identify themselves, to a certain degree, not simply with the Mughal state system but also with the Mughal Persian culture. Among them emerged some of the principal exponents of the Mughal Persian learning.

From the middle of the seventeenth century, the departments of accountancy (seyâq), draftsmanship (enshâ’) and the offices of revenue minister (divan) were mostly filled by the Kayastha and Khatri scribes (monshi, moharrir). Harkaran Das Kambuh of Multan is the first known Hindu monshi whose writings were taken as models by later monshis. Chandra Bhan Brahman was another important monshi, rated second only to Abu’l-Fazl. Chandra Bhan also wrote poetry of high merit. And then followed a large number of Kayastha and Khatri writers, including the well-known Mahdo Ram, Sojan Rai, Malekzada, Anand Ram Mokhleṣ and Bendranab Khwoshgu, who made splendid contributions to Persian language and literature and whose writings formed part of the syllabi of Persian studies at the madrasa. Certain fields in Persian learning hitherto unexplored or neglected found skilled investigators, chiefly among the Hindus. On the philological sciences Hindus produced excellent works in the eighteenth century. The Mer’ât al-esfâlâh by Anand Ram, the Bahâr-e ‘ajam by Tek Chand Bahar and the Mo’stalahat al-sho’arâ by Seyalkoti Mal Vârasta are among the most exhaustive lexicons compiled in Mughal India. Persian grammars and commentaries on idioms also were compiled by the Hindus; phrases
and poetical proverbs used by them show their keen interest in Persian learning, admirable research and enviable accomplishments in the language. Persian classics found an increasingly appreciative audience even among the village based Hindu revenue officials and the other hereditary functionaries and intermediaries.

Persian could, up to a certain point, even be considered as their first language. They appropriated and used the Perso-Islamic expressions like Bismillâh (with the name of Allah), lab be-gur (at the door of the grave) and be-jahannâm rasîd (damned in jahannam – hell) as their Iranian and non-Iranian Muslim counterparts did. They increasingly appreciated the Persian renderings of their texts, religious scriptures and traditions, which were translated in full into Persian by individual Hindu authors to avoid them being forgotten.

The Khatis of Panjab, in particular the traders among them, often saw the Mughals as their allies. The vast overland trade of the Panjab and the unprecedented share in it of the Khatis owed a good deal to the general climate of peace and stability the Mughals had ensured in the late sixteenth century. In the early eighteenth century, when rural uprisings in the Panjab shook the Mughal state, the Khatri traders lent significant support to the Mughals.

The aid assumes special importance in view of the fact that, like the rebel peasants, very many of these Khatis were also Sikhs. The Khatis, we saw above had been associated with Mughal administration. They now started making attempts to acquire high positions in the various key departments, in an apparent bid to reinforce the Mughal state which had helped create conditions for their trade to flourish. I could locate twenty-six Khatis in Mughal state service at different levels. Four of them held very high ranks, one as high as 700 zat. Two others are referred to as “nobles” (amirs), which obviously meant high ranking. The remaining twenty are all mentioned as notables (a’yan) with some of them close to high Mughal nobles both at court and in the provinces, others being local officials in the Panjab and Delhi şubas and still others holding financial and fiscal offices in the capital. In addition, there were large numbers of Khatis who worked as petty functionaries and minor officials (pishkârs, motaşaddis) in revenue and finance departments or in the establishments (sarkârs) of the big nobles.

Indeed, the nature and scale of political participation of non-Muslim groups in Mughal India was unprecedented in the entire history of
Islam. One can find an immediate explanation of this in the initiatives of one or the other king but more than the individual policies, it is the religious and cultural traditions as they matured and grew in medieval times which generated the atmosphere and encouraged the institutional structure to buttress and legitimated such co-ordination.

II.

The Muslim rulers in pre-Mughal India were conscious of the conflict between religion and demands of governance. It is generally held that theoretically there was no scope within the framework of Islam for differentiating between religious matters and worldly affairs. Yet, in the religious law there was little to meet the challenges of the society in thirteenth and fourteenth-century India. The door of ejtehād had long been closed to allow any scope for significant innovation and interpretation. The society was also multi-religious. A situation thus developed in which the supremacy of the religious law was acknowledged, but temporal matters were decided on the basis of expediency. This resulted in the concept of de facto toleration — notwithstanding occasional steps to the contrary. But it also meant maintaining a theory of the Islamic state and the position of the ulama who provided a semblance of legality to every action of the ruler.

The pre-Mughal sultans thus inherited a political theory which suffered from some obvious limitations. The theorists remained obsessed with the injunctions of shari’a, using the term in its narrow juridical sense. Take, for example, the well known Fatávà-ye jahândâri, of the noted fourteenth century historian and political analyst, Zeya al-Din Barani, throughout which an unmistakable uneasiness prevails. Barani is uncomfortable over the intrusion into the Muslim world of the non-Islamic Sassanid state system qualified as a sin. Thus the ruler who practices the ancient Iranian pattern of governance of pâdshâhi, legitimated up to a point earlier, is a sinner. True religion, according to Barani, consists only in following the footsteps of the Prophet Mohammad. However, Barani concedes that the ruler who desires to govern effectively has to follow the policies of the ancient Iranian kings. But since “between the traditions of the Prophet and his mode of life and living, and the customs of the Iranian emperors, and their mode of life and living, there is a complete contradiction and total opposition”¹¹, appropriation of the latter by a Muslim ruler is an offence to the law. The sultan must keep per-
forming religious duties in an exaggerated manner in order to atone the
offence and as a mean for his own salvation.

This attitude of Barani created more problems than it solved. It
defined more rigidly the schism between the political and the religious
and by plugging the ambiguities reduced the scope for political manoeu-
vrability. Barani thus sketched a rather impracticable framework for
governance. The ruler who did not follow the path of Prophet
Mohammad (sonna) did not deserve to be called a Muslim12. Barani is
aware of the implication for his own times of what he is formulating since
he suggests specific measures for Hindustan. The Muslim king he pleads
should not be contented with merely levying the jeziya and kharâj
from the Hindus. He should establish the supremacy of Islam by over-
throwing infidelity and by slaughtering its leaders (emâms) who in
India are the Brahmans13. In Barani’s world there could thus be only
two diametrically opposed life patterns, one in conformity with the
shari’a as theologians and jurists took the term and another against it.
Even the normal, universal, human qualities are slotted by him in binary
terms Islamic and anti-Islamic, or shar‘i and gheyr-e shar‘i14.

The pre-Mughal discussion of principles of governance revolves
around shari’a, kafr, jehâd and jeziya, where all that is good originates
from Islam. On grounds of necessity, however, some theorists, includ-
ing Barani did advise integration, to a certain degree, of the non-
Muslims in Muslim state service. The logic of necessity extends also to
Barani’s argument about the žavâbeṭ or the secular state regulation
framed by the ruler. He makes it very clear that žavâbeṭ can only be justi-
fied on the grounds of political necessity which emanates out of the
inability of Muslim rulers in the prevailing circumstances to fully imple-
ment shari’a. The žavâbeṭ were designed to reinforce shar‘i, to recu-
perate and complement it, not to work separately or contrary to it15.

How much did the practice under the Delhi sultans conform to or
deviate from such ideas is an altogether different question. We know that
these ideas could barely influence the policies of the powerful early
Turkish rulers. Shams al-Din Iltotmesh (r. 1210-1236) pleaded that the
Muslims, in terms of strength, were still like salt in a dish and were thus
unable to wage an all out war either to force the infidels to accept Islam
or to exterminate them all in case of their refusal. Ghiyas al-Din Balban
who dominated the Delhi politics as a powerful faction leader and then
as sultan between 1246 and 1287 kept theologians and theorists like
Barani at a distance by dismissing them as mere seekers of narrow mundane gains (‘olamā-ye donya). ‘Ala al-Din Khalji (r. 1296-1316) did have a discussion with his qâżî, but in practice followed the rule which in his calculation best served the interest of his power and people. Mohammad b. Toghloq (r. 1324-1351), far from degrading them, accorded high positions to Hindus, while his successor, Firuz Toghloq (r. 1351-1388) showed interest in Hindu traditions and monuments, his orthodox religious leanings apart. Mohammadb. Toghloq (r. 1324-1351), far from degrading them, accorded high positions to Hindus, while his successor, Firuz Toghloq (r. 1351-1388) showed interest in Hindu traditions and monuments, his orthodox religious leanings apart. Sekandar Lodi (r. 1489-1517) although sometimes remembered as a bigot, encouraged Hindus to learn Persian for fuller participation in state management.

III.

Sunni Muslim political theorists allowed and also in varying degrees integrated the un-Islamic Sassanid institution of kingship into the political body of Islam. But in religious matters they tolerated little deviance from the orthodox traditions. They used the term shari’a in its conventional juristic sense. We know however that there were simultaneous movements of dissent in religion also in the world of Islam, and since the proponents of these movements considered the existing dominant power structures a tyranny they developed alternative norms and principles. Their theories were more prominently based on the Hellenic tradition. In the beginning these trends found favour with the extreme groups of the deviantists, they nevertheless soon became part of the general Muslim theory of state. For an evolution of this process, Khwaja Nasir al-Din Tusi’s Akhlāqe:āṣeri deserves special notice. Throughout the book, especially in the section on state and politics, much of the ideas of the erstwhile dissenters are integrated into the general fabric of Sunni political Islam. And yet the shari’a continued to be the reference point.

We know that Tusi published the Akhlāqe:āṣeri in Persian, first in 1235 at the instance of the Esma’ili prince Nasir al-Din ‘Abd al-Rahim b. Abi Mansur, the vâli of Qohestan during the reign of ‘Ala’ al-Din Mohammad (1221-1225) of Alamut, who had commissioned the author to translate from the Arabic Ibn Meskawayh’s Tahzib al-akhlāq or Ketāb al-ṭahārat. But the book was more than a mere translation. Besides the first discourse, which was a summary arranged anew of Ibn Meskawayh’s Tahzib, Tusi added two new discourses on household and family management (tadbir-e manzel) and politics (seyêṣat-e modon) as parts of practical wisdom (ḥekmat-e ’amali), based on the writings.
of the celebrated philosophers, Farabi and Ibn Sina. The result was a skillful blending of the Greek philosophical and scientific tradition with the author’s “Islamic” view of man and society. The synthesis represented “a subtle transcending of both”\textsuperscript{20}. The king, for Tusi, was the sustainer of the existing things and the one who completes that which is incomplete. Since men (ensân) by their nature (ons-e tab’i) were social beings and needed other men, it was necessary that arrangements should be made for the right working of their relationship. An individual, who had attained perfection through equipoise (e’tedâl) and a perception of union with the Supreme Being, was thus selected for kingship. The ideal king was the philosopher king, with the noble aim to help his subjects “reach potential wisdom by the use of their mental powers”. Tusi followed Farabi’s classification of civil society (tamaddon) into the ideal city or state (al-madinat al-fâżelat) and the bad and unrighteous city\textsuperscript{21}. Like Farabi Tusi considered that it was possible for the ideal city to be composed of men of different sects and social groups\textsuperscript{22}. The leader of the ideal city should ideally be the king under whose supervision each person would keep his appropriate place and engage himself in achieving perfection\textsuperscript{23}.

Tusi’s book is normative in character. It is difficult to relate the text to the actual circumstances. Still, one is tempted to point to the fact that the book was composed at a time when the kings’ religious views differed from those of a large number of their subjects. In 1235 Tusi dedicated the book to an Esma’ili prince of a region which in Nezam al-Molk’s Seyâsat-nâma had been noted as an especially disturbed and misguided one\textsuperscript{24}. Later when the edifice of Islamic culture was shaken by the Mongols, Tusi wrote a new preface without changing its contents and dedicated it to the non-Muslim Mongol ruler. It was in such a situation that Tusi envisaged an ideal ruler to ensure uniformity, harmony and co-ordination of the conflicting interests of the diverse groups in the state. The crisis the Muslim world faced in the wake of the Mongol disaster created conditions for the acceptability of Tusi’s idea. This is not to suggest that in the state which Tusi, or for that matter the later authors who followed him, envisaged religion or shari’a occupied no important place. At least once, Tusi indicates that the divine institute (nâmus-e Elâhi) which occupied the premier position among the three essential things for the maintenance of a civic society is expressed in shari’a\textsuperscript{25}. 
But the connotations of the *shari’a* were not the same as the ones when the term was used by a jurist. The ideal ruler in this literature was the one who ensured the well-being of the people of diverse religious groups and not of Muslims alone. The influence of Tusi’s *Akhlâq* is unmistakable on Mughal political ideology. Tusi’s tradition also shaped the Muslim religious culture of Mughal India.

IV.

We have little evidence to show the exact time and place of the first entry of Tusi’s *Akhlâq* into the subcontinent. The book was, however, widely read in Mughal India, where it apparently came as a legacy of the Timurids of Herat and, after their extirpation at the hands of the Sheybanids, of Babur. Soltan-Hoseyn Bayqara (r. 1470-1506), the last great Timurid in Herat, even though a Sunni, seems to have disapproved of his government being run exclusively on narrow Sunni Islamic norms. It matched his policies that at least two versions of Tusi’s work were prepared at his behest. Of these two, the *Dastur al-vezârat* by Qazi Ekhtiyar al-Din al-Hoseyni in particular helps us to figure out some of the reasons for Tusi’s special status in the Mughal Persian reading list.

Ekhtiyar al-Din Hasan b. Ghiyas al-Hoseyni, the chief qâżi of Herat and a *vazîr* in the time of the Timurid Soltan-Hoseyn Bayqara, came from an eminent ulama family of Torbat-e Jam who held high positions in Timurid Central Asia. He compiled the *Dastur al-vezârat*, apparently in the time of Soltan-Abu Sa’id Mirza (r. 1459-1469), for the young prince Hoseyn Mirza, better known as Soltan-Hoseyn Bayqara, who was then the chief support of the *salṭanat* and acted virtually like the *vazîr*. Later, after the collapse of Timurid power in Herat, Ekhtiyar al-Hoseyni, lucky to escape the fate (“imprisonment and execution”) of many of his contemporaries, chose a life of retirement in his home-town Torbat. Then a day came when he heard that “the lamp of the illustrious Timurid house” was again ablaze in Kabul held up by Zahir al-Din Mohammad Babur. Subsequently he arrived at the court of Babur, accompanied by several “princes and great men of Herat”. Babur impressed him with his unusual accomplishments, support for learning and active interest in learned discourses. Ekhtiyar himself had long discussions with Babur on diverse sciences and on the laws and norms (*qavânin-o-ādâb*) of government. The result, as he claims in
the preface of the book, was a treatise the title of which was suggested by Babur, possibly after his favourite son Homayun, as Akhlāq-e Homāyuni.²⁹

In the Akhlāq-e Homāyuni the author claims he has described and summed up in an “elegant” and “eloquent” Persian “the subtle, abstruse, complex and convoluted” discourses on the themes which he had read in numerous books including, and in particular, the ones by Ibn Meskawayh and Nasir al-Din Tusi. The book is divided into three parts, the first one on ethics or correction of disposition (tahzib-e akhlāq va farhang), the second on the regulation on properties (tadbire amvāl). Part three, especially significant for our purpose, discusses the principles of rulership (taqvim-e re’āyā va mamlakat-dārī). It has one section on king’s servants with discourses on the nobles and the army in two separate chapters; section two of this part concerns the king’s subjects, with a discussion on the accomplished ones (khavāss) in chapter one and on ordinary re’āyā in chapter two. The book is very likely a version of the Dastur al-vezārat the author had earlier compiled for Prince Hoseyn Mirza. At any rate, Hoseyni is very conscious of the value of his work, he takes it to be a guide for Babur as well as later for his illustrious descendants (owlād-e amjad).³⁰

Babur’s “illustrious descendants”, however, did not relish much Ekhtiyar al-Hoseyni’s simplified recension of the works of Ibn Meskawayh and Tusi. Introduced as they were now through the Akhlāq-e Homāyuni, they preferred to read and understand by themselves the fuller, even if “convoluted”, original texts. Tusi’s Akhlāq was among the favorite readings of Mughal political elites. It was among the five most important books which Abu’l-Fazl wanted the Emperor Akbar to listen to regularly. The Emperor himself issued instruction to his officials to read Tusi and Rumi in particular.³¹ Further, in the discourses on justice, e’tedāl, harmony, seyāsat, reason and religion, and in general on norms or governance in the Ā’in-e Akbari, Mow’ezaye Jahāngiri and in a large number of Mughal edicts imprints of akhlāq literature are unmistakable.

The Mughals thus partially inherited the Nasirean norms of governance from a branch of Central Asian Timurids. These norms not only contested the ones we noticed above, they also facilitated a stable and enduring Mughal rule in the specific multi-religio-cultural conditions of India. By appropriating the Nasirean norms as a base of their poli-
tics the Mughals also emphatically demonstrated their dissociation from the ambience of yet another Central Asian political code which, encouraged by the Uzbeks, their erstwhile avowed enemies in the region, was developed in the early sixteenth century by Fazlallah b. Ruzbehan Esfahani in his Soluk al-moluk.

The Soluk-al moluk was intended to be a guide for the sultan in matters relating to the high offices of the Islamic state such as the qâżi, moḥtaseb, sheykh al-eslām and others, to the payment of ṣadaqat, zakât, 'oshr, khoms, kharâj, jeziya, to the observance of the rites of Islam, to the questions of punishment and chastisement etc — all strictly according to Sunni Islam within the limits of the Shafi‘i and Hanafi schools of jurisprudence. The book is in effect on Islamic jurisprudence, its ambit in political terms narrow, in fact, narrower than the one in the works of Nezam al-Molk, Ghazzali or Barani. The author, Ibn Ruzbehan, is obsessed with his own Hanafi/Shafi‘i brand of Sunni Islam; he views Shi‘ites as apostates and regards an all out war (jehâd) against the Safavid Shi‘ites of Iran as obligatory. The Safavid ruler and his Qezelbash followers, according to him, had deviated from the path of Islam (refz), were outright heretics (elḥâd), having raised the fetna of apostacy (ertydâd) in the same way as some of the tribes in the time of the first Pious Caliph Abu Bakr. Cut off from Islam, they turned the mosques of Transoxiana into places of heresy and centres of propagation of obscene and shameful abuse and hatred against the holy companions of the Prophet.

With such an approach to Islam the Mughals could not have adjusted. On the contrary, the Mughal ruler Jahangir (r. 1605-1626) was proud of the fact that in his domain followers of diverse religions lived in peace — at least this was the ideal he sought to achieve. What was particularly abhorring for the Mughals in Ibn Ruzbehan’s text was the way Babur, their ancestor and the founder of their power in India, was portrayed. In spreading heresy to the north of the Amu-Darya Babur’s role, according to Ibn Ruzbehan, was no less detestable since he accepted the help of the Qezelbash in recovering Samarqand and Bokhara from the Uzbeks. And, but for the Uzbek ruler ‘Obeydallah Khan’s gallant jehâd the rites of the true Faith would have been totally routed out from the region.

A politico-religious code like the one laid down in Ibn Ruzbehan’s Soluk failed to find favour even with the Mughal elites, while, on the
other hand, Tusi’s Akhlâq along with some other Persian texts of this mould had become part of the Mughal madrasa syllabi by the time of Shah Jahan (r. 1626-1656). Chandra Bhan Brahman, the noted monshi and poet of Shah Jahan’s court, whom we mentioned above, advised his son Khwaja Tej Bhan to make it a habit to study regularly Tusi’s Akhlâq-e Nâseri, Jalal al-Din Davvani’s Akhlâq-e Jalâli and Khwaja Moslehal Din Sa’di’s Golestân and Bustân. It was by imbibing the code of life enshrined in these texts that the learned in Mughal culture were expected to earn their capital (dast-e mâyâ-ye khwod) and be blessed with the fortunes of knowledge and good moral conduct (sa’âdat-e ‘elm bâ ‘amal)\(^{35}\). We will see below, even though very briefly, how Nasirean code influenced the Mughal political culture, but before we do this, we will assess the contents of this code.

The main part of akhlâq texts generally begins with a discussion on human disposition and the necessity of its disciplining and sublimation. The discussion is interspersed with the Koranic verses and the traditions of the Prophet, with a bearing on universal human values. Thus the reference points are unequivocally the man (bashar, ensân, bani âdam), his living (amr-e ma’âsh) and the world (‘âlam, âfâq). The perfection of man, according to the authors of these texts, is to be acquired through admiration and adulation of Divinity, but is impossible to be achieved without a peaceful social organisation where everyone can earn his living by co-operation and helping each other.

The goal in the akhlâq literature’s discourse on political organisation is co-operation (sherkat-o-mo’âvanat) to be achieved through justice (’adl) administered in accordance with a law (dastur), protected and promoted by the king whose principal instrument of control should be affection and favours (râ’fat-o-emtenân), not command and obedience (amr-o-emtesâl). The shari’a is crucial but it here connotes, as one could speculate from its elaboration (shari’a of anbiyâ’ va rosol) not strictly the Islamic law. The reader is reminded of the Koranic verse that there is a single God who has sent prophets to different communities, with shari’as to suit their times and climes\(^{36}\). Justice (’adl) emerges as the cornerstone of the social organisation.

The akhlâq literature recommends the evaluation and treatment of man on the strength and level of his natural goodness or malady (kheyr-o-sharr-e tab’i). The rights of the re’ayâ do not follow their religions. The Muslim and the Infidels (kâfer) both enjoy the divine compassion
(rahmat-e Haqq). The questions of kāfer, kofr, zemmi and discrimination thereby have no place in akhlāq treatises. The true representative and the shadow of God on earth here is the king who can guarantee the undisturbed management of the affairs of his (God’s) “slaves”, so that each can achieve perfection (kamāl) according to his competence and class. This pattern of governance is seyāsat-e fāżela (the ideal politics) which establishes on firm foundation the leadership (emāmat) of the king. There is also seyāsat-e nāqeṣa (the flawed and blemished politics), against which the ruler is warned to guard himself, for faulty and perfunctory politics lead eventually to the ruin of the country and the people.

Discussions on and around the meanings of justice figure prominently in akhlāq texts, but the tenor of these discussions was altogether different from what we noticed in Barani’s Fatāvā. In these texts justice is defined as social harmony, co-ordinated balance of the conflicting claims of the diverse interest groups, which may belong to more than one religion.

V.

Apart from the Nasirean ethics a number of other traditions influenced the politico-religious climate in Mughal India. There were for example, the powerful influence of mysticism and Persian poetic culture. While the bā shar’a orders of the Muslim Sufis emphasised that true mystical experience was not possible outside the framework of the religious law, the shari’a itself was supposed not to occupy a very crucial place in the path of spiritual progress. In the sixteenth century, the followers of vahdat al-vojud were very influential.

The ideology of vahdat al-vojud promoted a belief in the essential unity of all phenomena, howsoever diverse and irreconcilably conflicting they appear at first instance. In northern India, Mohammad Ashraf Semnani, the ancestor of the famous saintly family of Kichhauchha (in the modern district of Faizabad) was for example an eloquent defender of the doctrine. Beside writing a number of treatises to explain it, Semnani popularized the use of the expression (hama u-st) (all is He) thus emphasizing the belief that anything other than God did not exist. Rudauli (in the modern district of Barabanki) was another major Sufi centre where the doctrine received unusual nourishment. The khāngāh of Sheyk Ahmad ‘Abd al-Haqq (d. 1434) has been called the “clearing
house” of the Hindu Yogis and Sanyasis. Sheykh ‘Abd al-Qoddus (1456-1537) was amongst the eminent Sufis associated with this khân-qâh. His Roshd-nâma contains his own verses and those of other Rudauli saints. It includes Sufi beliefs based on vahdat al-vojud, with the philosophy and practices of Gorakhnath inspired by the “syncretistic” religious milieu of Rudauli. Some of these verses with slight variations are included in the Nath poetry as well as in the dohas of Kabir38.

The philosophy and sentiment got a fascinating expression in the mid-sixteenth century in the Haqâyeq-e Hindi of Abd al-Vahed Bilgrami (1510-1608) in which Bilgrami sought to reconcile the Vaishnav symbols and the terms and ideas used in Hindu devotional songs with orthodox Muslim beliefs. According to Bilgrami, Krishna and other names used in such verses symbolized Prophet Mohammad, “Man” or still sometimes the reality of human being (haqiqa-e ensân) in relation to the abstract notion of oneness (ahadiyat) of Divine essence. Gopis sometimes stood for angels, sometimes the human race and sometimes its reality in relation to the vâhediyat (relative unity) of the Divine attributes. Braj and Gokul signified the different sufi notions of the world (‘alam) in the different contexts, while the Yamuna and the Ganga stood for the sea of vahdat (unity), the ocean of ma’refat (gnosis) or still the river of hads (origination) and emkân (contingent or potential existence). Murli (Krishna’s flute) in the Haqâyeq-e Hindi represented the appearance of entity out of non-entity and so on and so forth39.

The support for the doctrine of the unity of being and the associated philosophy and practice of generous accommodation to the local social beliefs and customs, continued throughout the seventeenth century. Among the best interpreters and defenders of the doctrine during this century were Sheykh Mohebballah (d. 1648) and Sheykh ‘Abd al-Rahman Cheshiti (c. 1683), a descendant of Sheykh ‘Abd al-Haqq of Rudauli. The reputation of some of the treatises Sheykh Mohebballah wrote to expose and elaborate on the doctrine brought him into close contact with Prince Dara Shekuh. His Resâla-yé tasviya (Treatise on equality) evoked a storm of opposition in the orthodox circle, and later under Aurangzeb, who is reported to have taken strong exception to its contents, it was ordered to be burnt in public. Sheykh Mohebballah also laid emphasis on the acquisition of mystic knowledge from the
Hindu yogis. One of his eminent disciples, Sheykh Mohammadi, after having perfected under him in Islamic Sufism, undertook the study and training of yoga from the Brahmans⁴⁰.

In another case, Sheykh ‘Abd al-Rahman Cheshti translated with explanatory notes a Sanskrit treatise on Hindu cosmogony under the title of Mer‘āt al-makhlugāt (Mirror of the creatures) in the form of a dialogue between Mahadeva and Parvati handed down by Muni Bashesht. ‘Abd al-Rahman sought to explain at some length the Hindu legends and made a plea for them to be adapted to Muslim ideas and beliefs. He also prepared a recension in Persian of the Gita, entitled Mer‘āt al-haqāyeq (Mirror of the realities) presenting it as an ideal exposition of the doctrine of hama u-st⁴¹.

It is also significant that Hindi poetry of the Bhakti school and Persian poetry which was deeply influenced by Sufism (taṣāvvoj), strengthened the feeling that God may be worshipped in numerous ways. The Persian poetry of this period in particular had certain basic but nevertheless important concepts: sheykh or zâhed were supposed to represent hypocrisy, and the truly religious was the Brahman; a symbol of divine reality was the idol and the devotion of the Brahman to the idol was significant. Similarly the master of the wine house was the man who knew true power, and wine represented divine love. This symbolism of Persian poetry influenced the thinking of practically every educated Muslim of the period and we may gather that a large number of other Muslims were also influenced by these ideas.

Further, Persian poetry, which had integrated many things from pre-Islamic Persia and had been an important vehicle of liberalism in medieval Muslim work, helped in no insignificant way to create and support the Mughal attempt to accommodate diverse religious traditions. Akbar must have got support for his policy of non-sectarianism from the verses like the ones of Jalal al-Din Rumi whose Maṣnavi the emperor heard regularly and nearly learnt by heart:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{To barā-ye vašl kardan āmadi} \\
\text{na barā-ye fašl kardan āmadi} \\
\text{Hindiyān-rā esṭelāh-e Hind madḥ} \\
\text{Sindiyān-rā esṭelāh-e Sind madḥ} \\
\text{“Thou hast come to unite / not to separate / For the people of Hind, the idiom of Hindi is praiseworthy / For the people of Sind, their own is to be praised”}^{42}\end{align*}
\]
The echoes of these messages and the general suspicion of mere “formalism” of the faith are unmistakable in Mughal Persian poetry as well. Fayzi had the ambition of building “a new Ka’ba” out of the stones from the Sinai:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Biyá ka ruy be-mehrābgāh-e now be-nehim} \\
\text{banā-ye Ka’ba-ye digar ze sang-e Ţūr nehim}
\end{align*}
\]

“Come, let us turn our face toward a new altar / Let us take stones from the Sinai and build a new Ka’ba”\(^{43}\).

The Mughal poets, like their predecessors, portrayed the pious (zâhed) and the sheykh as hypocrites. It was with the master of the wine house (moghân) and in the temple, instead of the mosque, they believed, that the eternal and Divine secrets were to be sought:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{She’ār-e mellat-e Isalmiyân be-gogār gar khwāhi} \\
\text{ke dar dayr-e moghān āy’i va asrār-e nehân bini}
\end{align*}
\]

“Give up the path of the Muslims, come to the temple, to the master of the wine house so that you may see the Divine secrets”\(^{44}\).

The idol (bot), to them, was the symbol of Divine beauty; idolatry (bot-parasti) represented the love of the Absolute, and significantly they emphasized that the Brahman should be held in high esteem because of his sincerity, devotion and faithfulness to the idol. To Fayzi it is a matter of privilege that his love for the idol led him to embrace the religion of the Brahman:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Shokr-e khodā ke ‘eshq-e botān ast râhbar-am} \\
\text{bar mellat-e brahmān-o bar din-e Ẃezar-am}
\end{align*}
\]

“Thank God, the love of the idols is my guide / I follow the religion of the Brahman and Azar [fire-worshippers]”\(^{45}\).

The temple (dayr, bot-kada), the wine-house (meykhâna), the mosque and Ka’ba were the same to ‘Orfi; according to him the Divine Spirit pervaded everywhere:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Cherâgh-e Somnât ast átesh-e Ţūr} \\
\text{bovâd z-ân har jehat-rān nur dar nur}
\end{align*}
\]

“The lamp of Somnath is [the same as] the fire at the Sinai / its light spreads everywhere”\(^{46}\).

These features of Persian poetry remained unimpaired even when
Aurangzeb (r. 1658-1707) tried to associate the Mughal state with Sunni orthodoxy. Naser ‘Ali Sirhindi (d. 1696), a major poet of his time, echoed ‘Orfi’s message with equal enthusiasm:

Nist gheyr az yak šanam darparda-ye dayr-o-harām
key shavad ātesh do rang az ekhtelāf-e sanghā

“The image is the same behind the veil in the temple and harem / With diverse firestones, there is no change in the colour of the fire”.

In fact, neither the mosque nor the temple were illumined by Divine beauty: it is the heart (del) of the true lover where its abode is. The message was thus to aspire for the high place of the lovers. Taleb Amoli then called to transcend the difference of Sheyk and Brahman:

Na malāmatgar-e kofī-am na ta’assobkash-e din
khāndahā bar jadl-e sheykho-barhamān dāram

“I do not condemn Infidelity, nor am I a bigoted believer / I laugh at both, the Sheyk and the Brahman”.

Persian thus facilitated the Mughal conquest in India even though this conquest as ‘Orfi declared, was intended to be bloodless:

Zakhmhā bardāshtim va fatḥā kardim leyk
hargez az khun-e kasi rangin nashod damān-e mā

“We have received wounds, we have scored victories, but / our skirts have never been stained with the blood of anyone”.

Persian generated and promoted conditions in which the Mughals could create out of heterogeneous social groups a class of their allies and subordinate rulers. Like the emperor and his nobility in general, this class also cherished the universal human values and vision. It is in this background that the Mughal political culture needs to be understood. Significantly, Keshaw Das, the seventeenth century Braj poet proclaimed Jahangir as duhu din ko saheb (master of both the religions); discovered the attributes of Vishnu, the Hindu god, in the person of the Mughal emperor, who, on the other hand, faced no problem in blending a number of “Hindu” rituals with Islam at the court.

In the process of their political alliance with the Rajputs, the Mughals interestingly integrated many of their rituals and symbols as well. These ranged from applying tika (vermilion mark) on the forehead of the
political subordinate, *tuledan* (weighing ceremony), *jharokadarshan* (early morning appearance of the emperor on the palace balcony) to the public worship of the sun by Akbar with prostrations facing the east before a sacrificial fire and recitation of its name in Sanskrit. It was perhaps to highlight the affinity with the Rajputs that Abu’l-Fazl emphasized the mystical and divine origins of the Mughals from “light”\(^51\). The Mughals married the Rajput princesses and allowed them to perform their religious rituals ceremoniously in their palaces. On the other hand, the alliance also received nourishment from the local culture in Rajputana and the developments within the Rajput society. The Rajputs saw the Mughals as a category of their *jati*. The Mughal emperor in their tradition held a high rank and esteem and was often equated with Ram, the preeminent Kshatriya culture hero\(^52\). The Rajputs identified themselves with the Mughal house which, in their perception, was to be defended as much as the Rajput house.

VI.

The Mughal policy, to a certain extent evolved from the earlier Muslim ruler’s adroit *jahândâri* (rulership). The Mughal practice was however backed by a clearly defined political and religious ideology. Gradually even the clerics seem to have taken this as a part of Indian political Islam. Significantly with the exception of some of Akbar’s innovations and experiments, the Hindu features of the Mughal political system seldom aroused the wrath of the Muslim orthodoxy. No Muslim chronicler protested over the performance of Hindu rituals inside the Mughal palace; none viewed a Hindu Rajput princess’ presence and the Hindu ritual and social practices in the imperial harem as an instance of violation of the honour of Islam\(^53\).

Together with liberal traditions of Sufism and Persian poetry, it was no less in the Nasirean political norms that the Mughal rulers, Akbar and Jahangir in particular, found support for their non-sectarian approach to religion. Akbar’s ideologue Abu’l-Fazl prepared a working manual (*dastur al-‘amâl*) for his officials with an advice to them to guard against the dangers of the violation of the principles of justice and equity (*e’tedâl*) and of non interference in matters of faith of the people\(^54\).

It is difficult to know the extent to which this advice was followed at lower levels. However, non-sectarianism and a serious concern for harmony among the elites was something to be particularly noticed
and highlighted. Shayesta Khan, a contemporary writer observer, rose shoulders high compared to his contemporaries because he was totally free from bigotry and was a man of peace with all (Solh-e koll), who viewed his friends and allies, irrespective of their personal faiths and religions. And yet he was a true Muslim monotheist and a true follower of the Prophet (movahhed and taba’-e rasul), a lover of Rumi’s Maṣnavi. Shayesta Khan’s dindāri thus was in total harmony with his liberal and open-ended approach.

It will be a travesty of fact if one asserts that all high Mughal officials believed in and practiced religious tolerance. But some contemporary observations of the existing religious atmosphere for this purpose are revealing. They help us to have some idea of the extent to which the Mughal state followed or disregarded the shari’a in its juristic sense. One of these is a remark of ‘Abd al-Qader Badauni, the noted historian of Akbar’s time about the reception accorded in India to Mir Mohammad Sharif Amoli, the Noqtavi leader, who had to flee Iran for fear of persecution. Badauni, as we know, was a narrow minded bigot Sunni. He detested the non-orthodox ideas of Amoli and disapproved of the prevailing situation in which even men like Amoli were welcome. He writes:

“Hindustan is a wide place (vasi’, ‘arṣa-ye farākh), where there is an open field (meydān) for all licentiousness (ebāhat), and no one interferes with another’s business, so that everyone can do just as he pleases”

While there were changes in several departments in the process of the Mughal state formation, the relationship between religion and secular political matters seems to be significantly undisturbed until about the third quarter of the seventeenth century. Relevant for us are the observations of the French traveller, François Bernier, who visited India decades later in Aurangzeb’s time. After commenting disapprovingly on “strange” Hindu beliefs and rituals regarding the eclipse, he remarks:

“The Great Mogal, though a Mahometan, permits these ancient and superstitious practices, not wishing or not daring to disturb the Gentiles in the free exercise of their religion”

Even in matters like sati, the Mughals intervened only indirectly:

“They [=the Mughals] do not, indeed, forbid it [=sati] by a positive law, because it is part of their policy to leave the idolatrous population, which
is so much more numerous than their own, in the free exercise of its religion; but the practice is checked by indirect means."

All this, however, does not mean that the Mughals were not concerned with the maintenance of shari’a. Consolidation of the bases of the community (tāsis-e mellat) and enforcement of the injunction of shari’a (tarvij-e shari’a) have been enumerated among the significant achievements of Jahangir’s reign. The Mughal norms of governance bore the impact of the tradition of akhlâq literature in which it became possible to use the term not necessarily in its narrow legalistic sense. The Mughals thus found a way out after the closure of the so-called door of ejtehâd. It was not simply that the infidels had freedom of belief in their Islamic regime, they were also not treated as ordinary ẕemmis. In the regime of this shari’a, the infidels, like the Muslims, could build their own places of worship and could even demolish the mosques, although this implied for the theologians and the jurists a weakness of the Islamic rule and a threat to Islam.

And still, the Mughal rulers, prided in calling themselves the majesty and the light of the faith (Jalâl al-Din = Akbar, Nur al-Din = Jahangir). The qâżi and the şadr, like in all other Islamic states, had high politico-religious positions; the Muslim divines, among others, had land or cash grants to pray for the stability of the empire and to maintain and keep aloft the symbols of Islam (sha’ayer-e eslâmi) throughout their territory. The periodic dispatch of rich donations for the holy cities, Mecca and Medina, with the delegates of hâjj continued. What is significant is that some Muslim religious divines, too, saw Jahangir not only as a man of piety and justice, but also as someone who ensured compliance of the ordinances of the shari’a.

For Barani, the rule of Islam meant not only the total dominance of the Muslims but also the humiliation of infidelity and infidels — if not their elimination and annihilation. To the Mughals Islam was synonymous with the norms, the most important task of which was to ensure the balance of conflicting interests of groups and communities, with no interference in their personal beliefs. This does not, however, mean that the forces to contest this view of Islam were no longer active.
NOTES

13. Ibid., p. 165-6, English trans. p. 46.
14. This is also indicated in the chapters in the Fatâvâ on royal determinations (’azm), tyranny and despotism (satihesh-o-esteibdâd) and justice (’adl), ibid., p. 68, English trans. p. 17.
15. Ibid., p. 217, English trans. p. 64.

19. The book was reissued with a second preface wherein Tūsī is severely critical of the religious milieu in which it was originally written. Tūsī alludes to his enforced service with the Ėsmâʿīlīs and his rescue from them by the Mongols. This was, however as G. M. Wickens points out, only to cover a revised preface and dedication.


22. *Akhlâq-e Nāṣerī*, pp. 286-7. “The People of the Virtuous City, however, albeit diversified throughout the world, are in reality agreed, for their hearts are upright one towards another and they are adorned with love for each other. In their close-knit affection they are like one individual”, Wickens (trans.), *The Nasirean Ethics*, p. 215.


29. See preface in his *Akhlâq-e Homâyuni*, BN, Blochet, *Catalogue*, vol. II, No. 767; Khvândamîr (Gheyas al-Dîn Mohammad), *Habib al-seyar*, vol. IV, Khâyâm, Tehran, 1333 Sh./1954 , p. 355-6. However, Khvândamîr says that the Sheybani ruler, Abu’l-Fath Mohammad Khan retained him in the office of qazâ. He was dismissed after his death and then he retired to Torbat. I have discussed Ekhtiyar al-Hoseyni’s text in “Ikhtiyar al-Husaini’s *Akhlâq-e Humayuni* and the Evolution of Indo-Persian norms of Governance”, paper presented at a conference on the *Evolution of Medieval Indian*
30. Ibid., p. 6a.
33. Ibid., fol. 3a, English trans., p. 33-4.
34. Ibid., fol. 3a-4a, English trans., p. 33-4, 37-46.
36. Akhlâq-e Homâyuni, fol.2a-b.
37. Ibid., fol. 28b.
45. Fayzi, Divân, p. 53.
46. ‘Orfi Shirâzi, Divân, Lucknow, 1872, p. 15.
49. ‘Orfi Shirâzi, Divân, p. 3.
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53. On the contrary Sheykh Ṭāhir-Raḥmân Cheshti considers this an achievement, a follow up of an extension of the non-sectarian policies, see ‘Abd al-Raḥmân Cheshti, Mer’âṣ al-asrâr, MS. British Library, London, Or. 216, f. 507. Sheykh Ahmad Sirhindi, of course, is an exception.


57. Ibid., p. 306.


60. Ibid., p. 233 ; Cheshti, Mer’âṣ al-asrâr, fol. 507 a.