

Aurangzeb and Muslim Orthodoxy : A Critical Analysis



Prakhar Kumar

M.A in Modern Indian History and NET (2019)
Jamia Millia Islamia University,
New Delhi, India

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ABSTRACT

A careful analysis of the motives and conditions behind the adoption of some of Aurangzeb's more controversial policies establish beyond doubt that religious considerations were not at the forefront of the decisions taken during his reign. On the whole it seems as though Aurangzeb's personal orthodoxy and piety have been exaggerated, especially in so far as they affected his political outlook. Even the austerity in his private life and in the royal household need not be attributed exclusively to his piety: the Mughal state could ill afford unnecessary expenses. The imposition of the jaziya can equally be explained as a fiscal measure to combat the depletion of the treasury. Thus while religious reasons are available at hand to explain these measures, alternative explanations also exist which are supported by the facts known to us of Aurangzeb's reign. A definite statement on the causes behind his policies would require us to study Aurangzeb's own mind and unfortunately there exist no private journals and diaries which could enlighten us in this respect. The argument that the accession of Aurangzeb meant the triumph of Muslim orthodoxy therefore is a simplistic, biased one which caricatures Aurangzeb and fails to take note of detail.

Keywords - Aurangzeb, Muslim, Orthodoxy, A Critical Analysis.

I. INTRODUCTION

The final years of Shah Jahan's reign were marked by a bitter fratricidal struggle for succession amongst his sons. After a civil war which kept the empire distracted for over two years, it became clear that military force alone would be the arbiter

of succession. In 1659, Aurangzeb (formerly Prince Alamgir) seized the throne and began his reign even while his father remained within the confines of the Agra Fort, ailing yet alive. The accession of Aurangzeb has been painted by many historians as the triumph of Muslim orthodoxy over the policies of the state. There is certainly no

doubt that Aurangzeb was by far the most puritanical of the Mughal emperors but to go so far as to attribute all his policies to his religious inclinations as writers such as S.R. Sharma and Jadunath Sarkar have been prone to do is a blatant distortion of historical facts and far too simplistic a reading of the available evidence. More recent scholarship, such as that of Athar Ali and Satish Chandra offers a more nuanced understanding of the political and economic compulsions of the time and provide the historical context for some of the more controversial of Aurangzeb's policies.

The argument for the reign of Aurangzeb as a triumph of the ulama rests on the interpretation of certain specific policies and events: the war of succession, the imposition of the jaziya, the severity and austerity at the Mughal court with the prohibition of musical performances, festivals such as Nauroz, official history writing and the jharokha darshan, the policy of temple destruction, and the rebellions of the Rajput states of Mewar and Marwar. Each of these issues has been dealt with in the traditional accounts of the reign of Aurangzeb in the light of his personal religious orthodoxy. We shall go on to examine each of these issues individually and ascertain the extent to which these interpretations hold.

The War of Succession

The war of succession between Aurangzeb and his brothers has been represented by Sir Jadunath Sarkar as being fundamentally a clash of two different ideological conceptions of the Mughal polity and the role of religion in determining state policy. Athar Ali writes that it is common to view Aurangzeb as standing for Muslim orthodoxy while Dara Shukoh, Shah Jahan's heir apparent is

seen as the champion of religious tolerance. The religious character of the war of succession is an argument that does not hold up to even the most superficial scrutiny. It is quite clear from the sources that Aurangzeb's opposition to Dara was primarily political. As writers like Sarkar himself observe, Aurangzeb was always suspicious of the motives of Dara. In his letters to Jahanara, Aurangzeb communicates his anxieties about Dara's attempts to thwart or kill him. There is no reference whatever to his objections to Dara's religious beliefs. Scholars such as R.P. Tripathi and Athar Ali have argued that it was Aurangzeb's own sense of political insecurity and his rivalry with Dara that provoked the conflict. Aurangzeb appears to have shared a somewhat tumultuous relationship with his father who was often harsh with him and seems to rebuke him in his letters while Alamgir was serving his second viceroyalty in the Deccan. His fear that Shah Jahan, left to himself, would secure the succession of his rival led him to plunge himself into the war for succession. Any religious rhetoric employed by him is dated to after the war and seems to have been used as post-facto rationalization.

Athar Ali adduces the instance of a nishan sent by Alamgir to Rana Raj Singh of Mewar during the war assuring the Rana of his sympathy and denouncing religious intolerance as evidence for his claims. He argues that Aurangzeb never used religious rhetoric during the war, except perhaps to rally his supporters. He goes on to argue that it was only after the battle of Samgarh that Dara was declared a heretic, clearly an attempt to justify the execution of his brother. Athar Ali also provides an extensive list of the nobles of the court and the various high ranking mansabdars and the sides they chose in the war. Contrary to the traditional

narrative, there is no evidence to indicate that the Muslim nobles overwhelmingly took Aurangzeb's part: two nobles, Mahabat Khan and Satar Sal Hada left his side. Nor does it seem that Aurangzeb was unsuccessful in mobilizing 'Hindu' support for his cause. He enjoyed the cooperation of many Rajputs including Jai Singh who actively sabotaged the war efforts of Dara Shukoh.

Clearly therefore, the use of religious terminology is with retrospective reference to the war of succession and was intended to legitimize some of Aurangzeb's more controversial actions including the execution of his brothers and the imprisonment of his father. It is interesting to note that the reaction of the ulama to the victory of Aurangzeb was by no means universally favourable. For instance, the chief Qazi at the time refused to read the khutba in his name on the grounds that Shah Jahan was still alive. Aurangzeb was forced to find another Qazi who would read the khutba and legitimate the succession of Aurangzeb.

II. The Zawabit-i-Alamgiri

The laws promulgated by Aurangzeb or the Zawabit-i-Alamgiri have been used by Sarkar to argue that under Aurangzeb, state policies were directed by the opinions of the ulama. From 1659 the practice of inscribing the Kalma on imperial coins was banned on the grounds that Islam forbids the representation of images. In the same year, Aurangzeb banned the celebration of the festival of Nauroz at the court. Nauroz was a Parsi festival, which it was argued, had no place in an Islamic court. The appointment of a muntaib --- an officer charged with regulating the morals of the Muslim community is also advanced as

evidence of the growing religious orthodoxy of state policy. In his 11th regnal year, he banned music and dancing which is strange since Aurangzeb himself was trained in classical music and could play the rudra veena. The practice of jharokha darshan was held to promote human worship and was put to an end. In the 13th regnal year, official history writing was stopped. The practice of tula dan and the tika ceremony for the Rajputs was also abandoned towards the second half of his reign.

However it is important to view these developments in the reign of Aurangzeb in the context of the dislocation of the finances of the Mughal empire under Aurangzeb. The mansabdari system was no longer capable of generating the amount of revenue that it was expected to produce and state expenses had increased tremendously after a series of campaigns in the Deccan leading to the overextension of the Mughal state apparatus. Extravagances such as the festival of Nauroz, the practice of tula daan, the tika ceremony all involved the giving of expensive gifts which the state could do without. The expense of maintaining court musicians was also a dispensable one. There is no dispute over the puritanical inclinations of Aurangzeb himself: therefore measures such as the ban on court singing and dancing and the appointment of the muntaib seem to fit with his own disposition and need not be explained with reference to any other circumstances. These traits, while they do bring out the orthodoxy and austerity of Aurangzeb's personality, in no way indicate that he was a discriminatory or intolerant ruler. There is abundant evidence to testify that there was no discrimination in imperial appointments. His diwan was a Hindu and many key posts in his

administration were held by Rajputs. Jai Singh, who rose to the position of the governor of Bengal is a classic example.

The ending of the jharokha darshan requires a more sophisticated understanding of its purpose in legitimating the rule of the Mughal emperor. By presenting himself to the public on a daily basis, the Emperor was able to reinforce the impression of personal control over the state. On the other hand, when an Emperor was unable to perform the darshan on account of illness as in the case of Shah Jahan, it led to questions about his ability to rule and resulted in an open struggle for political control. Given the precarious nature of his own rule, this was precisely the sort of predicament that Aurangzeb hoped to avoid.

The Imposition of the Jaziya

One of the central issues to the larger argument concerning the religious character of state policy under Aurangzeb is his decision to impose the jaziya, a discriminatory tax falling on non-Muslims, in 1679. Jadunath Sarkar elevates this decision to the position of a turning point in the history of the Mughal empire as it led to the alienation of the Rajputs, the Marathas and the Hindu nobles and accelerated the disintegration of the empire. For Sarkar the imposition of the jaziya is simply the culmination of Aurangzeb's discriminatory policies and his religious bigotry while for others such as I.H. Qureshi it is seen as a measure designed to counter the growing opposition of the Hindus to the regime manifest in the rebellions of the period by mobilizing the support of the Muslim orthodoxy. A more recent understanding of the imposition of the jaziya is that provided by Satish Chandra who examines the decision in its proper

historical, political and economic context. In the contemporary accounts of the imposition of the jaziya --- those of Ishawar Das, Ali Muhammed Khan and Saqi Mustaid Khan --- the role of the ulama and the influence of orthodox thought in persuading the Emperor to implement the sharia't is given primacy. For Satish Chandra however these are 'official reasons'.

In Manucci's account, the imposition of the jaziya was explained as an attempt to relieve the increasing financial burden on the state as well as promote conversions. Chandra dismisses the notion that Aurangzeb could have been so naïve as to believe that the jaziya would lead to large scale conversions. However he admits the possibility that it may have been a fiscal measure. In his 13th year, Aurangzeb found that state expenses outstripped income and he was forced to economize in the expenses of the royal household. However Satish Chandra argues that the yield from the jaziya, while by no means an insubstantial sum, was directed to a separate department of the treasury, the khazanah-i-jaziya. The proceeds from the tax according to Chandra were earmarked for the payments due to stipend holders and dependents of the state including theologians, recluses, widows, orphans, etc. Satish Chandra attributes the decision to impose the jaziya equally to financial necessity and his own desire to follow the sharia't more closely. The reaction to the jaziya was not a favourable one and there was opposition to it even from members of the Mughal royal family, including Jahanara.

III. Temple Desecration

The issue of temple destruction in the reign of Aurangzeb has received a very simplistic

treatment at the hands of scholars like Jadunath Sarkar. The farman of 1669 which ordered the closure of certain temples in Jhagnagar due to rumours that Brahmins in the area had been teaching heterodox doctrines to Muslims has been interpreted as a general order shutting down temples across the empire. It is important to note that many temples continued to function and flourish through the reign of Aurangzeb and some were actually built during this period with state aid. Bhimsen, a contemporary source mentions the splendour of the temples built in the Deccan under Aurangzeb while there are also references to land grants such as the one extended to one Bhagat Gosain for the construction of temples at Abu.

Temple desecration therefore was a highly specific act, affecting only a few temples. These cases of selective temple desecration are best explained with reference to the theory advanced by scholars like Richard Eaton which understand temples to be vital centres for the sacral legitimation of state authority. The chief deity of the temple was often considered the patron deity or 'rashtra devata' of a state and in some cases was even believed to share power with the monarch. The destruction of such temples was a vital part of conquest or the suppression of revolts. Temple destruction therefore was politically charged act. The destruction of the Keshubnagar temple which was patronized by the Bundela chiefs is a classic case of selective temple desecration. The Bundelas were amongst the political groups that rebelled against state authority in the reign of Aurangzeb. The incidents of temple destruction might also be seen as a reaction to the growing popularity of temples as centres for the dissemination of seditious ideas and subversive doctrines.

While religious injunctions were certainly invoked in farmans ordering the desecration of certain temples, this seems once more to be a case of using the garb of orthodoxy to disguise political motives. It is important to bear in mind that there was no universal order promulgating the shutting down of temples in India under Aurangzeb. At the very outset of his reign, Aurangzeb had reiterated the position of the Hanifi school of Islamic jurisdiction on temples which decreed that the temples of the infidels were to be protected. Any acts of temple desecration in the name of the faith would have been in direct contravention of these injunctions, and Aurangzeb was a pious man.

The Rajput Rebellions

If the policies of Aurangzeb were in fact discriminatory then it is unlikely that they should have met with no resistance whatever, especially given the stakes that Hindu chiefs such as the Rajputs held in the Mughal state. The two major Rajput rebellions of the period --- the revolts in the powerful states of Marwar and Mewar--- have been explained by writers like Edward and Garrett and by Jadunath Sarkar as a protest against Aurangzeb's anti-Hindu policies. Sarkar contends that the imposition of the jaziya was an important reason for the rebellions. Yet it seems that amicable relations between Rana Raj Singh and Aurangzeb continued well after the imposition of the jaziya. The revolt was a later development. It has also been contended that the revolt in Marwar was provoked by Aurangzeb's plans to convert the Rajputana into khalisa land --- a theory that is patently untenable, as we shall go on to see. The versions of the Rajput rebellions provided by these scholars, while not lacking in detail, often fail to

analyze the motives behind the rebellions and their true character.

Robert Hallissey in his account of the rebellions in the Rajputana supplies a more critical analysis of the circumstances that led up to the conflict with the states of Marwar and Mewar. The state of Marwar was ruled by Raja Jaswant Singh, who according to Hallissey was unpopular with his Rathor kinsmen due to the dubious circumstances which surrounded his rise to the gaddi and his attempts to counter the traditional influence of the clan hierarchy over the civilian administration. In 1643, he replaced the Diwan at the time with a non Rathore clansman: a measure that only compounded his unpopularity. Lacking support within his own realm, Jaswant Singh had grown dependent on the Mughal state and his status as an imperial mansabdar, a fact that seems to make Hallissey very critical of him. While he rose to the rank of 7000/7000, enjoying a status inferior only to that of the royal princes, his position rested on the favour of the Mughal emperor. This was demonstrated when in 1659 he was removed from the gaddi for defecting from Aurangzeb's side in the war of succession, only to be reaffirmed as the ruler of Marwar when he returned to his fold. Jaswant Singh was greatly indebted to the Mughal treasury and upon his death owed the state a sum of 70 lakh.

The case of the Sisodias of Mewar is somewhat different. As Hallissey notes, the Sisodias had a strong tradition of independence even under the reign of Jahangir and possessed strong clan loyalties. The ruler, Rana Raj Singh had according to Satish Chandra been gradually marginalized in the internal politics of the Mughal court. By the time of the rebellion in Marwar he had ceased to

present himself at the court and earlier had even attempted to rebuild the fort of Chittor, a step that was in direct violation of the treaty signed with Akbar and was checked at the time by Shah Jahan. Rana Raj Singh seems to have been consistently opposed to the interference of the Mughals in the internal affairs of the Rajput states and this might have been his reason for rebelling against Aurangzeb.

The death of Rana Jaswant Singh created a power vacuum in the state of Marwar for the late Raja left no living male heir. In view of the controversy over succession, the outstanding debts of Jaswant Singh and the crippled finances of the Mughal state, Aurangzeb took the decision to place Marwar under khalisa administration. This was by no means an unprecedented and in fact, appears to be standard procedure when a mansabdar defaulted on his debts or a prince died leaving no heir. Nonetheless the manner of the Mughal takeover of Marwar seems to have ruffled a few feathers. Satish Chandra argues that the Mughals behaved as conquerors in Jodhpur, conducting a thorough search for the treasures of Jaswant Singh and promulgating orders for the demolition of new temples. Much of this stirred resentment amongst the local Rathor clansmen. The Jamrud officials who were very aware of their inferior status amongst the Rathors now tried to secure their positions and supported the cause of two of the younger queens of Jaswant Singh who were pregnant. Hallissey maintains that Aurangzeb was sensitive to the volatility of the situation and initially adopted a cautious policy, granting the Jamrud officials the areas of Soja and Jairatan and negotiating with the Rathors to have the children raised at the Mughal court. He even went so far as to recognize the claims of the infant Ajit Singh to

the gaddi of Marwar. However, Hallissey asserts, the reluctance of the Rathors to comply and the escape of the Jamrud officials from the court with the infant claimant with the support of Durgadas, a prominent Rathor clan leader aroused Aurangzeb's suspicions. Durgadas brought Ajit Singh to Mewar seeking refuge with Rana Raj Singh. Increasingly it began to seem to Aurangzeb as though the infant Ajit Singh was only being used to secure the power of the Rathor clan over the state and defy Mughal authority. He now acknowledged the claims of Inder Singh, the son of Jaswant Singh's elder brother Amar Singh whose claims had been passed over at the time of the former's accession.

It was at this stage that Mewar entered into the picture. Rana Raj Singh who felt increasingly uneasy at the Mughal military occupation of Marwar now dispatched a contingent to the aid of Rani Hadi (the mother of Ajit Singh) and Durgadas. Aurangzeb struck at Udaipur, inaugurating a harassing period of warfare. Meanwhile, the rule of Inder Singh at Jodhpur proved to be unpopular and following an attempt by Prince Akbar, his own son to seize power by joining forces with Durgadas, Aurangzeb was forced to call a hasty end to the war, recognizing the claims of Ajit Singh and removing Inder Singh.

There is no reason whatever to explain Rana Raj Singh's behaviour at the time. While it is known that he was opposed to Mughal intervention, it seems a bit far-fetched that he should have clung to his principles so strongly (and in support of what was after all a rival state) as to risk open war. Hallissey suggests that perhaps he hoped for a general uprising against Mughal suzerainty across the Rajputana. If this was the case then

circumstances seem to have belied his hopes. According to Hallissey, the peculiar parochialism and the clandestine circumstances surrounding the camp of Durgadas effectively alienated any Rajput support that the state of Marwar could have gained against the Mughal state. Nonetheless, what is of primary importance in Hallissey's account is the fact that the rebellions were by no means driven by religious reasons. The fact that the Rathor sardars actually allied with Prince Akbar proves that there was no anti-Muslim sentiment in Rajputana associated with the policies of Aurangzeb.

IV. CONCLUSION

A careful analysis of the motives and conditions behind the adoption of some of Aurangzeb's more controversial policies establish beyond doubt that religious considerations were not at the forefront of the decisions taken during his reign. On the whole it seems as though Aurangzeb's personal orthodoxy and piety have been exaggerated, especially in so far as they affected his political outlook. Even the austerity in his private life and in the royal household need not be attributed exclusively to his piety: the Mughal state could ill afford unnecessary expenses. The imposition of the jaziya can equally be explained as a fiscal measure to combat the depletion of the treasury. Thus while religious reasons are available at hand to explain these measures, alternative explanations also exist which are supported by the facts known to us of Aurangzeb's reign. A definite statement on the causes behind his policies would require us to study Aurangzeb's own mind and unfortunately there exist no private journals and diaries which could enlighten us in this respect. The argument that the accession of Aurangzeb meant the

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