



Religion and Power in Medieval India: A Study of State and Faith Relations

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Abstract

The complex relationship between religion and political power in medieval India, focusing on how state authority and religious institutions interacted, influenced each other, and shaped socio-political structures. Medieval India witnessed the coexistence of diverse religious traditions, including Hinduism, Islam, and various regional belief systems, which played a significant role in governance, legitimacy, and cultural life. The study argues that religion was not merely a spiritual domain but a powerful instrument that both supported and challenged political authority. how rulers used religion to legitimize their power, promote social order, and consolidate authority. For instance, the Delhi Sultanate and the Mughal Empire incorporated Islamic principles in governance while also engaging with local traditions to maintain stability. Under rulers such as Akbar, policies of religious tolerance and syncretism were introduced, reflecting an effort to balance political control with cultural diversity. At the same time, religious scholars and institutions often influenced state policies, creating a dynamic interaction between faith and governance.

Keywords Medieval India, Religion and Politics, State and Faith Relations, Delhi Sultanate

Introduction

The relationship between religion and political power in medieval India was complex, dynamic, and deeply intertwined. During this period, religion was not confined to the spiritual realm but played a significant role in shaping governance, legitimizing authority, and influencing social structures. Rulers often relied on religious ideologies and institutions to strengthen their rule, while religious leaders and movements, in turn, interacted with and sometimes challenged state authority. Medieval India witnessed the coexistence of multiple religious traditions, including Hinduism, Islam, Jainism, and various regional belief systems. The establishment of the Delhi Sultanate and later the Mughal Empire brought new political frameworks influenced by Islamic governance, which had to adapt to the diverse cultural and religious landscape of the Indian subcontinent. This interaction resulted in both cooperation and conflict between state power and religious communities. Rulers frequently used religion as a source of political legitimacy. Islamic rulers, for instance, derived authority through religious principles and the support of scholars such as the *ulama*, while also engaging with local customs to ensure administrative stability. The reign of Akbar marked a significant shift, as he adopted policies of religious tolerance and promoted ideas of cultural integration, including initiatives like *Sulh-i-Kul* (universal peace). This approach reflected an attempt to



balance political authority with the realities of a pluralistic society. religious movements such as the Bhakti and Sufi traditions played a transformative role in medieval society. Saints like Kabir and Nizamuddin Auliya emphasized spiritual equality, devotion, and human unity, often challenging rigid social hierarchies and orthodox religious practices. These movements created alternative spaces of influence that existed alongside formal political structures. the interaction between religion and state power in medieval India, analyzing how faith influenced governance and how political authority shaped religious practices. By exploring these dynamics, the study seeks to provide a deeper understanding of the socio-political fabric of medieval Indian society and the enduring impact of these relationships.

Religious Diversity in Medieval India

Medieval India was characterized by remarkable religious diversity, with multiple faiths coexisting, interacting, and influencing one another. This period witnessed the presence of major religious traditions such as Hinduism and Islam, alongside Jainism, Buddhism (in declining form), and various regional and folk belief systems. The arrival and consolidation of Islamic rule, particularly through the Delhi Sultanate and later the Mughal Empire, added new dimensions to India's already pluralistic religious landscape.

Hinduism continued to be the dominant religious tradition among the population, encompassing a wide range of beliefs, practices, and sects. It was not a monolithic system but included diverse philosophical schools, devotional practices, and regional variations. At the same time, Islam, introduced through trade and later established through political expansion, became an influential force in shaping medieval Indian society. The interaction between Hindu and Islamic traditions led to both cultural exchange and occasional tensions.

Religious diversity was further enriched by the presence of devotional and mystical movements. The Bhakti movement, which emerged across different regions, emphasized personal devotion to a deity, rejecting rigid caste hierarchies and ritualistic practices. Saints like Kabir and Mirabai promoted ideas of equality, love, and direct connection with the divine, transcending religious boundaries.

Similarly, Sufi traditions within Islam played a significant role in fostering spiritual and cultural interactions. Sufi saints such as Nizamuddin Auliya emphasized compassion, tolerance, and devotion, attracting followers from different religious backgrounds. Their teachings and practices contributed to the development of a shared cultural space where elements of Hindu and Islamic traditions blended.

In addition to these major traditions, Jainism and regional religious practices continued to influence social and cultural life, particularly in specific regions. Local customs, festivals, and beliefs often coexisted with organized religious systems, creating a layered and complex religious environment.

This diversity had significant implications for governance and social relations. Rulers had to navigate a pluralistic society by adopting policies that balanced religious interests, promoted stability, and ensured political legitimacy. The coexistence of multiple faiths also contributed to the emergence of a composite culture, reflected in art, architecture, language, and everyday



practices. religious diversity in medieval India was not merely a feature of society but a defining characteristic that shaped its cultural and political dynamics. The interaction between different religious traditions fostered both harmony and conflict, ultimately contributing to a rich and multifaceted historical legacy.

State Formation and the Role of Religion in Legitimacy

State formation in medieval India was closely intertwined with religion, which served as a crucial source of political legitimacy. As new dynasties and ruling powers emerged, particularly during the Delhi Sultanate and the Mughal Empire, rulers sought to justify and consolidate their authority by aligning themselves with religious principles, institutions, and symbols. In a diverse and stratified society, religion provided a powerful framework through which rulers could claim moral authority and secure the loyalty of their subjects.

One of the key ways in which religion contributed to legitimacy was through the concept of divine sanction. Rulers often presented themselves as chosen or guided by a higher power, thereby elevating their authority beyond mere political control. In Islamic polities, the ruler was seen as a protector of the faith and was expected to uphold *Sharia* (Islamic law), often with the support of religious scholars or the *ulama*. This association with religious authority strengthened the ruler's position and reinforced the perception of governance as a sacred duty. At the same time, the realities of governing a religiously diverse population required flexibility and adaptation. Many rulers recognized the importance of engaging with local traditions and beliefs to maintain stability. For example, Mughal rulers, especially Akbar, adopted inclusive policies that went beyond strict religious orthodoxy. Akbar's principle of *Sulh-i-Kul* (universal tolerance) aimed to create a harmonious political environment by respecting all religions and reducing sectarian divisions. This approach not only enhanced his legitimacy but also helped integrate different communities into the imperial framework.

Religion also played a role in state rituals, ceremonies, and public representation. Royal patronage of religious institutions, construction of temples and mosques, and support for scholars and saints were ways in which rulers demonstrated their piety and gained public approval. These acts reinforced the connection between political power and religious authority, making governance appear both legitimate and morally grounded.

However, the relationship between religion and state formation was not always harmonious. Tensions could arise when rulers imposed policies perceived as favoring one religious group over others, leading to resistance or conflict. Additionally, religious leaders and movements sometimes challenged state authority by offering alternative sources of legitimacy, as seen in the influence of Bhakti and Sufi traditions. religion was a central element in the process of state formation and the establishment of political legitimacy in medieval India. It provided rulers with a moral and ideological foundation for governance while also shaping their interactions with diverse communities. The ability to balance religious authority with practical governance was a key factor in the stability and success of medieval Indian states.



Religion and Governance in the Delhi Sultanate

The Delhi Sultanate (1206–1526) marked a significant phase in medieval Indian history, where religion and governance were closely interconnected. Established by Turkic and Afghan rulers, the Sultanate introduced Islamic political traditions into the Indian subcontinent while simultaneously adapting to a diverse and predominantly non-Muslim population. The relationship between religion and state during this period was complex, involving both the assertion of Islamic authority and pragmatic adjustments to local conditions.

In principle, the rulers of the Delhi Sultanate derived their legitimacy from Islamic political ideals. The Sultan was regarded as the political head of the state and a protector of Islam, expected to uphold *Sharia* (Islamic law) and support religious institutions. The influence of religious scholars, known as the *ulama*, was significant in shaping policies related to law, education, and public morality. Their endorsement often strengthened the authority of the Sultan and reinforced the religious foundation of governance.

However, the practical realities of ruling a vast and religiously diverse society required flexibility. The majority of the population followed Hindu traditions, and effective governance depended on cooperation with local elites and administrators. As a result, many rulers adopted policies that balanced Islamic principles with administrative pragmatism. While certain taxes such as *jizya* (a tax on non-Muslims) were imposed, local customs and practices were often tolerated to maintain stability.

Different rulers of the Sultanate adopted varying approaches to religion and governance. For instance, Alauddin Khalji emphasized strong centralized control and administrative efficiency, often limiting the influence of religious authorities in political matters. He focused more on economic and military reforms than on enforcing strict religious policies. In contrast, Firoz Shah Tughlaq placed greater emphasis on Islamic orthodoxy, promoting religious laws and supporting institutions such as madrasas and mosques.

Religion also played a role in legal and judicial systems during the Sultanate period. Islamic law was applied in matters concerning Muslims, while non-Muslim communities were often allowed to follow their own customs in personal and social matters. This dual approach reflects the adaptive nature of governance, where religious principles coexisted with practical considerations.

Sufi traditions contributed to shaping the social and cultural environment of the Sultanate. Sufi saints, such as Nizamuddin Auliya, promoted values of tolerance, compassion, and spiritual devotion, attracting followers from different religious backgrounds. Their influence often softened rigid religious boundaries and facilitated cultural interaction between communities. Religion played a significant but not uniform role in the governance of the Delhi Sultanate. While Islamic principles provided a framework for political authority, rulers frequently adapted their policies to address the complexities of a pluralistic society. This interaction between religion and governance highlights the dynamic and pragmatic nature of statecraft during the Sultanate period.



Role of Ulema and Religious Institutions in Politics

In medieval India, particularly during the Delhi Sultanate and the Mughal period, the *ulema* (Islamic scholars) and religious institutions played a significant role in shaping political authority and governance. These scholars were well-versed in Islamic law (*Sharia*) and theology, and they often served as advisors to rulers, helping to legitimize political power through religious endorsement. Their influence extended into legal, educational, and social spheres, making them important intermediaries between the state and religious communities.

The ulema were closely associated with the judicial system, as they interpreted and applied Islamic law in courts. Positions such as *qazi* (judge) and *mufti* (legal expert) were typically held by members of the ulema, giving them direct authority in matters of justice and administration. Through these roles, they influenced policies related to governance, social conduct, and public morality. Their involvement ensured that the state's actions were aligned, at least in principle, with religious norms.

Religious institutions, including mosques, madrasas (educational institutions), and charitable endowments (*waqf*), also played a crucial role in politics. These institutions were often supported and funded by the state, which helped rulers gain religious legitimacy and public support. By patronizing religious scholars and institutions, rulers demonstrated their commitment to faith and reinforced their authority as protectors of religion.

However, the relationship between rulers and the ulema was not always harmonious. While the ulema sought to uphold religious principles, rulers often prioritized political stability and administrative efficiency. This sometimes led to tensions, especially when rulers adopted policies that deviated from orthodox interpretations of Islam. For example, Alauddin Khalji is known for limiting the influence of the ulema in political matters, focusing instead on strengthening state control and implementing economic reforms. In contrast, Firoz Shah Tughlaq relied more heavily on religious scholars and promoted orthodox Islamic practices in governance.

During the Mughal period, the role of the ulema continued to evolve. While they remained influential in religious and legal matters, emperors like Akbar challenged their authority by promoting policies of religious tolerance and reducing their control over state decisions. Akbar's establishment of the *Ibadat Khana* (House of Worship) and his engagement with scholars from different faiths reflected a shift towards a more inclusive approach to governance, which sometimes placed him in opposition to orthodox religious figures.

In addition to formal institutions, Sufi orders also contributed to the religious-political landscape. Although not part of the orthodox ulema, Sufi saints held significant moral authority and often influenced public opinion. Their emphasis on spirituality and inclusivity provided an alternative source of legitimacy that could either complement or challenge state power. The ulema and religious institutions were integral to the political structure of medieval India, providing legitimacy, legal expertise, and social influence. However, their relationship with the state was dynamic and sometimes contested, reflecting the broader tension between religious



authority and political power. This interaction played a key role in shaping governance and societal norms during the medieval period.

Conclusion

The relationship between religion and political power in medieval India was complex, dynamic, and deeply influential in shaping the structure of governance and society. Religion functioned not only as a system of belief but also as a source of legitimacy, authority, and social organization. Rulers of the Delhi Sultanate and the Mughal Empire often relied on religious principles and institutions to strengthen their rule, while also adapting to the diverse and pluralistic nature of Indian society. Religious diversity played a crucial role in shaping state policies, requiring rulers to balance ideological commitments with practical governance. The involvement of the *ulema* and religious institutions in politics provided legal and moral support to the state, while also creating tensions when religious authority conflicted with political objectives. At the same time, movements such as Bhakti and Sufi traditions introduced alternative forms of influence that emphasized inclusivity, spirituality, and social equality. A significant development in this context was the evolution of policies that promoted tolerance and cultural integration, particularly under rulers like Akbar. His approach demonstrated that effective governance in a diverse society required flexibility and openness rather than strict adherence to a single religious framework. However, the balance between religion and power was not always stable, as periods of cooperation were often accompanied by instances of conflict and contestation. Religion and power in medieval India were closely interconnected, shaping each other in multiple ways. The interaction between state authority and faith-based institutions influenced governance, social relations, and cultural development. Understanding this relationship provides valuable insights into the historical foundations of India's pluralistic society and highlights the importance of coexistence, adaptation, and dialogue in managing diversity.

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