

The Delhi Sultanate's Treatment of Hindus

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The Middle Path: Analyzing Why the Delhi Sultanate's Treatment of Hindus Was One of Moderation

The Republic of India stands as one of the most pluralistic nations in the modern world, with many people of varying faiths co-existing under one national identity. Part of the origin of this pluralism can be traced back to when Muhammad bin Qasim established a Muslim presence in the subcontinent of India by conquering the Sindh province in modern Pakistan in 713.^[1] About three centuries later, Muslim rule would be established in Northern India under Qutb-ud-din Aibak, who founded the Delhi Sultanate in 1206 under the Mamluk dynasty. The Delhi Sultanate, which would last until 1526, is known as a period of cultural intermixing. A Muslim minority ruled a variety of subjects, the majority of which were of Hindu faith. The nature of the subjugation of Hindus under the Delhi Sultanate is difficult to judge, as one must look at a variety of aspects of the Sultanate's rule to assess their attitude towards the Hindus. Differing political environments along with religious attitudes, artistic exchanges and the fact that Hindus were an integral part of the Sultanate's economies all influenced how the Sultanate treated their Hindu subjects; which ultimately best characterizes the Sultanate's subjugation of the Hindus as neither liberal nor oppressive, but moderately tolerant.

Though there was a general angst towards the Hindus over the period of the Sultanate, it seems that differing political environments of each dynasty allowed for an intermediate level of religious tolerance from Muslim officials towards the Hindu populace. This moderation is well reflected in the fact that the Islamic rulers of India, even before the Sultanate began, gave their Hindu subjects the status of *dhimmis*. This title protected the rights of non-Muslim citizens in an Islamic state, albeit with certain restrictions, such as the *jizya* tax.^[2] The Hindus maintained this status throughout the whole period of the Sultanate, which reflects how the Muslim Sultans did not actually oppress their Hindu subjects but at the same time were never overly liberal towards them. The first two dynasties of the Sultanate, the Mamluk and the Khalji, are generally known to have been intolerant towards their Hindu subjects, destroying many Hindu temples during their reign. However, the third ruler of the Sultanate, Shams-ud-din Iltutmish of the Mamluk dynasty was generally able to keep religion free from his politics, unlike the rulers that would succeed him.^[3] This reflects how politics affected the Sultanate's tolerance of Hindus. Iltutmish began his rule in 1210, only four years after the Sultanate was established. As such, he would have probably had to establish some form of stability in his Hindu subjects in order to avoid internal and even external conflict from surrounding Hindu kingdoms. Obviously this stability could not have been achieved if Iltutmish took a hardline stance against Hinduism. Thus, he had to be relatively moderate and keep religion free from his politics due to the political environment at the time. Once Iltutmish did establish stability, however, the political environment changed and allowed succeeding rulers from the Mamluk and Khalji dynasties to engage in less tolerant behaviour towards the Hindus, evidenced by the destruction of temples and heavier taxation.^[4] The reign of the third dynasty of the Sultanate, the Tughlaqs, also reflect how the political environment characterized the Sultanate's religious tolerance as moderate.

Sultan Muhammad bin Tughluq is best known for being the most tolerant Sultan during the period of the Delhi Sultanate, which affected the political environment in which he and his successor ruled, which created an environment of moderate tolerance. Muhammad Tughluq expanded and even encouraged Hindu religious freedoms, even going as far to participate in the Hindu festival of Holi.^[5] Sources from the time confirm this, as historian Ziauddin Barani, much to his disapproval, reveals that Hindus were indeed able to practice their religion freely and openly under Muhammad Tughluq: "In the cities of the Musalmans [Muslims] the customs of infidelity are openly practiced,

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idols are publically worshipped and the traditions of infidelity are adhered to with greater insistence than before.”^[6] Ibn Battuta also reveals that Hindus had many religious freedoms at the time, as he writes on how Hindus were able to freely make holy pilgrimages to the Ganges.^[7] Unfortunately, Muhammad Tughluq's policies of openness would create a political environment that alienated his Muslim allies, such as Ziauddin Barani judging from the tone of the *Fatawa-i Jahandari*. This in turn probably created an environment where some Muslim rulers embraced Hindus whilst others only further denounced them, creating a moderate mode of religious tolerance. The political environment Muhammad Tughluq left behind also spawned a relatively moderate attitude towards Hindus under his successor, Firuz Shah Tughluq.

The political environment of tolerance created by Muhammad Tughluq influenced the incredibly intolerant policies of Firuz Shah, as he had to appease the Muslims that his predecessor alienated, which in turn created yet another rule of moderate tolerance. Firuz Shah essentially reversed the policies of his predecessor, as he was incredibly intolerant towards the Hindus. He forced many conversions on the threat of death and often looked to the Muslim body the *Ulema* for guidance in matters of the state.^[8] Though the Hindus were treated poorly under Firuz Shah, the environment Muhammad Tughluq created had a lasting positive impact among many Hindus that helped to balance out the oppressive rule of Firuz Shah. The subsequent dynasties, the Sayyid and the Lodi, would soften Firuz Shah's policies back to a more generally moderate level of toleration.^[9] Again, however, politics played a part in this as the Sultanate by those times lost most of its holding in Southern India, and probably could not afford to alienate Hindus for fear of revolt against an already weak state. One can evidently see how politics played a part in establishing varying policies of toleration towards Hindus throughout the period of the Delhi Sultanate. Generally the Hindus enjoyed a moderate level of toleration throughout the period of the Sultanate, as they could practice their religion freely but had certain restrictions placed on them that varied from ruler to ruler depending on the differing political climates. Just looking at politics and prominent figures will not paint a full picture of the nature of the position of Hindus in the Sultanate. Interactions among the commoners of the Sultanate must also be taken into account.

The Hindu and Muslim commoners of the Delhi Sultanate seemed to have tolerated each other fairly well, which again reflects the intermediate level of acceptance of Hindus in the Sultanate. Ziauddin Barani obviously had a bigoted attitude towards the Hindus, even calling for all-out war against the “disgracing infidels, polytheists, and men of bad dogmas and bad religions.” Barani, however, also reveals that the Muslim attitude towards Hindus may have been different among the common people, as he observes: “infidels [Hindus]...build houses like palaces, wear clothes of brocade...they take Musalmans into their service and make them run before their horses.”^[10] Barani reveals that Hindus even employed some Muslims under their direction, which paints a rather positive picture of Hindus under the Sultanate. Unfortunately, the Hindus who were able to do this were few in numbers and it was generally the Muslims who employed the Hindus. Nonetheless, the fact that Hindu citizens, albeit few, had the opportunity to employ Muslims does indeed reflect the balanced attitude of the Sultanate towards some Hindu citizens. Many Hindu commoners superficially embraced Islam only to get out of the rigid caste system that Indian society laid out.^[11] In this way, many people who remained spiritually Hindu found acceptance among the common people of Delhi. However, many foreign Muslims who came to India were appalled by Indian Muslims because many of them came from such low castes.^[12] Once again, a moderate level of tolerance from the Sultanate is seen here, as many Muslims living in the city of Delhi learned to accept Hindus but many Muslims who were not originally from India detested them. Artistic reciprocity between the Hindus and Muslims also seems to have influenced the Delhi Sultanate's policy of moderate acceptance of Hindu culture.

Indo-Muslim culture was refined during the period of the Delhi-Sultanate, and such cultural and artistic exchanges affected the Sultanate's treatment of the Hindus. As Muslims were the minority in the Delhi Sultanate, they often had Hindu labourers build mosques among other things. However, the Hindus were not familiar with the architectural style of Muslim culture, such as rounded domes and archways.^[13] It is probable that many Muslims took issue with this at first, but as time went on many Muslims eventually had to become content with Hindu architecture as Hindus were the driving force behind the building labour. In fact, during the 14th century and onward, many Muslims began embracing Hindu symbolism in their architecture. Sidi Sayyid's mosque, which was built around 1500, conveys the geometric patterns characteristic of Muslim art, but a tree design is also prominent, which is a common Hindu motif.^[14] It seems that the artistic influences of the Hindus on the Muslims created a kind of respect or even admiration between the two groups, which was no doubt beneficial to many Hindu subjects under the Sultanate. At the same

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time, however, the sultans would often engage in the destruction of many Hindu temples, which obviously burdened the relationship between the Hindus and Muslims. All in all, one can see how the Sultanate's treatment of Hindus can be deemed as moderate, given their embracement of Hindu architecture that paradoxically came along with the constant destruction of Hindu temples. Like architecture, music exhibited a similar effect on the Sultanate's treatment of Hindus.

The Sultanate's varying attitude towards Hindu music would again seem to influence their moderate toleration of their Hindu subjects. Though Islam rigidly discouraged music, several sultans embraced Hindu music in their courts and encouraged it among the populace.^[15] In this way, not only was Hindu music able to flourish under the Sultanate but the position of the Hindus improved. Music especially helped relations between Hindus and the Muslim Sufis of the Sultanate, as many Hindu women began to sing Sufi hymns during their workdays due to their rhythmic quality,^[16] which likely pleased many Muslims. However, it is also likely that the position of Hindus deteriorated in some way under sultans who adamantly opposed music, as the disapproval to Hindu music would probably translate a feeling of animosity towards the Hindus themselves. Evidently artistic exchange played a significant role in influencing how the Sultanate treated their Hindu subjects, as differing aspects of Hindu culture seemed to be able to either help or harm their position under Muslim rule, which again shows the moderately tolerant attitude of the Sultanate. The final component in understanding why the Sultanate took such a moderate stance toward the Hindus lies within their economic system.

The large Hindu presence within the Sultanate's economic system is another factor that helps in characterizing the Sultanate's tolerance toward Hindus as moderate. The sheer population of Hindus made them very employable within the economic system of the Sultanate.^[17] This alone constituted the moderate character of the Sultanate's rule, as they could not do too much to aggravate the Hindu population due to the fact that economic life, in Satish's Chandra's words, "continued to remain in the hands of the Hindus."^[18]

Sources from the time also show that Hindus were indeed integral to the economics of the Sultanate. The act of regrating is buying a commodity from outside, or purchasing it in the market when prices are low and selling it when prices are high. Ziauddin Barani comments on how regrating "is the profession of the Hindus" and that "A man who calls himself a Musalman and yet adopts regrating as his profession...is ignorant of the Muslim Faith."^[19] The fact that theologians opposed regrating to such an extent left many commodities solely in Hindu hands, such as grain. Also, Hindu Sindhis effectively monopolised many parts of trade related to carpentry, blacksmithing and more.^[20] In this way, the Sultanate would have been foolish to severely oppress the Hindus due to the power they had via economic control. At the same, the Sultanate did not wish for the Hindus to become too wealthy, as Ibn Battuta comments on how some Hindus that had monopolised jewelry in Dawlat Abad were incredibly wealthy.^[21] In this case, one can see how and why the Sultanate chose a policy of moderation towards the Hindus. The Hindus were the cornerstone to much of the Sultanate's economy, so rulers could not oppress the Hindus for fear of economic consequence. However, the Sultanate had to keep the growing Hindu wealth in check by levying certain taxes on them that were not too harsh, but able to keep the Hindus content within the economic system. It does indeed seem that there are many dimensions that have to be taken into account in assessing the Sultanate's rule of the Hindus. In the end all these aspects seem to effectively contribute to the notion that the Sultanate's rule of the Hindus was one of moderate tolerance.

The period of the Delhi Sultanate will forever be known as a time of cultural and religious intermixing, where a Muslim minority ruled a Hindu majority for over 300 years. This period helped lay the foundations for a pluralistic India, as the Muslim conquerors entered a relationship with their Hindu subjects in whom they could not afford to be too harsh or too lenient. Hindus ended up being an integral part to the Sultanate's Muslim society, as evidenced by political, artistic, and economic aspects. These factors essentially forced the rulers of the Sultanate to find a balance in administering their rule over the Hindus, as they had to keep the majority of the population in check whilst giving them just enough contentment to ensure that the Sultanate ran smoothly. This policy of moderation reflects the true character of the period of the Delhi Sultanate, as it gave the world its first taste of rich Indo-Muslim culture, and it set the stage for the vast cultural pluralism that defines the modern-day Indian sub-continent.

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[2] John McLeod, *The History of India* (Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 2002), 42.

[3] L.P. Sharma, *The History of Medieval India (1000-1740 A.D.)*, 2nd ed. (New Delhi: Konark Publishers, 1987), 43

[4] *Ibid.*, 77-85.

[5] McLeod, *The History of India*, 42.

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