WAS THE TURKISH ADVENT REALLY 'ISLAMIC CONQUEST' IN NATURE? THE REPRESENTATION OF 'INDIAN' AND 'FOREIGN' SOCIAL IDENTITIES IN THE MEDIEVAL SOURCES IN THE EARLY MEDIEVAL PERIOD

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ABSTRACT: Medieval sources have been a rich source of information when it comes to giving us an idea about how Indian and foreign social identities were represented in each other's writings. While the Turkish invasions were primarily seen as the victory of Islam over the Indian subcontinent by some sources, a comprehensive and critical analysis of various other sources suggests that these were not merely religious in nature, rather had political and economic dimensions to it. This paper tries to examine how the medieval sources represented the identities of the indigenous and foreign political players while also examining whether the Turkish campaigns into the Indian subcontinent were religiously motivated.

INDEX TERMS: Medieval writings, Literary sources, Turkish invasion, Temple desecration, Conversions

➢ INTRODUCTION

Sources in history have been vital in communicating the perceived notions of the time and the best of historians have been able to build a compelling narrative based on an analytical approach of the evidence, which form a fundamental part in understanding history. These tools of reconstruction have been instrumental in mirroring the images of the past but utmost caution needs to be exercised in examining them, or else they can be very misleading. The medieval sources, specifically the writings in the medieval period have been critical in giving us an outline of the perceived notions of different communities about each other. In this paper we shall discuss how the medieval sources 'represented and 'counter-represented' the 'Indian' and 'foreign' social identities. Also what will be looked into is the nature of the Turkish conquest and whether they are 'Islamic' in character.

The Turkish campaigns into India were spread over a century and happened in two phases, first under the Ghaznavids under Mahmud of Ghazni, and second under the Ghorids under Muizzuddin Muhammad Ghori and his successors. These frequent campaigns conducted in the 11th and 12th century culminated in the establishment of the Delhi Sultanate in 1206 A.D. These invasions that spanned over a long period of time not only led to the interaction between the two distinct communities, that of indigenous people of the Indian subcontinent and the alien Turks, but it also led to the mention of these two groups in each other's contemporaneous literature and other sources like inscriptions.

➢ THE MEDIEVAL SOURCES

Scholars like Aziz Ahmed identified two corresponding genres of literature characteristic of the medieval period. One was the Islamic "epics of conquests" written mainly in Persian and addressed primarily to the Muslim population, and the other was the Hindu "epics of resistance", which he calls the "counter-epics", written mainly in Hindi and other Indian vernacular languages and addressed to the Hindu audience. The former was called the "epics of conquests" because it primarily dealt with the military gains and the victories of the Turks while the latter was called "counter-epics" as they spoke of the stiff resistance offered by the Rajputs and extolled the bravery, chivalry and the heroism exhibited by them against these barbarian invaders in this struggle.

- **Depiction in Persian Literary Sources**
One of the most important examples of the Persian literature of the medieval period is the *Adal-ul-Harb* by Fakhr-i-Muddabir. This etiquette literature dedicated to Iltutmish primarily dealt with military aspects and discussed warfare, army organisation, battle formation of Rajputs, Mongols, counter-tactics to defeat them, weaponry, etc. It predominantly focused on the non-Muslim environment and spoke of conflicts between Muslims and non-Muslims and mentioned *jaziya, jihad* (holy war), etc. However, the text does not look at these as religious wars and the success of the Turks is attributed to their military superiority.

Nonetheless, Persian texts like *Miftah-ul-Futuh* and *Khazain-ul-Futuh*, both written by Amir Khusrau deal with the victories of Alauddin Khilji and describe them as triumph of Islam. Other Persian court chronicles which are important are Minaj-us-Siraj Juzjani's *Tabaqat-i-Nasiri* and Utbi's *Tarikh-i-Yamini*. These texts that saw history from a larger Islamic context tended to celebrate and exaggerate the victories of the Turks as the achievements of Islam. The campaigns at times was called *'jihad'* (holy war), the Muslims killed in these wars were called *'shahid'* and those who survived were called *'ghazi'* (holy warrior). However, this description needs to be seen in the light of the background of the writers who essentially came from the ˙*ulema'* (Islamic scholar) class. Such exaggerated accounts definitely had a propaganda value, as these texts were primarily written for the audience in Central Asia. Their primary motive may have been to bolster the legitimacy of the Turkish rulers and may have acted as a mode of facilitating recruitment back in Central Asia.

- **Depiction in Traditional Indian Literary sources**
Rajput bardic literature such as *Prithvirajraso* by Chand Bardoi, an important court poet of Prithviraj Chauhan, and *Prithviraja Vijaya* by Janaka gives us a glimpse of how the Turks were viewed by the Rajputs. It is very important to note that there is an absence of religious terminology and the Turks were seen fundamentally as political and military rivals. One sees that they are addressed as *Mleccha* or *Turushka*, which are cultural and ethnic descriptions and not religious. It is also interesting to note how the victories of the Turks in these texts were attributed to their cunning and deceit while the Rajput rulers were epitome of chivalry and heroism.
Scholars like Romila Thapar have studied the Sanskrit sources widely to look at how the Turks were presented in the Indian sources. She suggests that the term 'Muslim' does not occur anywhere rather the terms used for them include *Turushka, Yavana, Saka, mleccha,* etc. She describes how the inscriptions of 8th century AD refer to Arab incursions from Sind and Gujarat into the Narmada delta where they are referred to as *'Tajikas'*, which suggest some complex link to an Arab identity in addition to their being maritime traders. She then goes on to say that the Turks and Afghans were referred to as *'Yavanas'* in multiple inscriptions which is an indication of them being from the west and therefore alien. Furthermore, she points to a Sanskritic inscription found outside the Delhi region which refers to the rulers of Delhi as Tomars, Chauhanas and Sakas, the earlier two having been recognised as Rajput dynasties and the last being a reference to the Sultans. She then goes on to mention the use of *Turushkas* in the 12th century text, the 'Rajatarangini' by Kalhana to describe the Kusanas. Another most contentious word used is '*mleccha'* which she says was originally used in a Vedic text and applied for those who could not speak Sanskrit correctly and gradually came to be used for those outside the varna system and became primarily "a signal of social and cultural differences".

- **Andhra Inscriptions**
A look at the Andhra inscriptions whose extensive study has been done by Cynthia Talbot from 1323 to 1650 AD suggests that most of these inscriptions depict the Turks in negative light and present them as demonic. Various proofs of their negative character are described by mentioning how temples were destroyed, Brahmans being forced to abandon their sacrificial rites, Brahman villages (agrahara) being confiscated, etc. Talbot says that these descriptions tend to closely resemble the Kali-age mentioned in the *puranas*, whose main symptoms included the growing strength of foreign dynasties. She then points out that it is only initially that the Turks are so represented, primarily in the aftermath of dramatic military conflict and severe military strife, and these representations may have been used by the new elements in polity to legitimize their position and gain allegiance by depicting themselves as upholders of *dharma*. Talbot goes on to say that such initial hostility was obvious considering that the Turks were conquerors, but the later inscriptions portray a sense of their acceptance especially as political rivals. She then mentions how the term "Hindu" figures in the Andhra inscription from 1352 AD onward in the title "Sultan among Hindu kings" (*Hindu-raya-Suratrana*). However, she states that this can't be seen in an ideological context as reference to "Hindu" during the 11th century was used to describe 'inhabitants of India' or those who lived across the river Indus. Correspondingly she states that the Vilasa grant of Prolaya Nayaka in Andhra uses ethnic labels like *Turushka, Yavana, Parasika* for Muslims.

So from the above arguments one can derive that religion was not the central feature of a budding Hindu and Muslim self-identity rather it was more political and geographical in nature. No medieval sources have tended to depict the other community in ideological or religious term, rather the "other" was seen as a distinct group which was "largely unassimilating" because of their cultural differences. Nonetheless over a period of time, it was seen that the groups integrated into the society which exhibited plurality.
However, the issue of identity arose again during the compilation of Indian history under the Colonial historians, who sought to demarcate the history of the subcontinent into three periods namely, Ancient, Medieval and Modern. Of these, the medieval period symbolized the period of the Muslim rule and was depicted as dark, decadent and a backward phase. The Turks who invaded India were seen to be primarily motivated by their zeal to spread Islam which was later on criticized by many modern historians who feel that the colonial and the Orientalist scholars were confining their understanding to a certain ideological perspective and were not looking at and interpreting the sources from all possible aspects. The discussions and debates that followed largely centered on whether these campaigns were religiously motivated, or whether they had political or economic considerations.

> **ISSUE OF TEMPLE DESECRATION AND FORCED CONVERSIONS**

Now to address the issue of whether these conquests were Islamic in character, there is a need to look at the important issue of temple desecration. Medieval texts referred to Mahmud Ghazni as '*budshikan'* or destroyer of idols. This led to many seeing it as fanatical, an act of intolerance, and bigotry. However, recent historians have tried to view it outside the religious

mould. One needs to look at various issues and perspectives to address the nature of temple desecration. These include significant questions like whether the entire temple was demolished, were these temples closed down for worship, were all temples attacked or only a few, whether the chief idol was mutilated and removed from its place, etc.

The predatory nature of these raids is discussed by Richard Eaton and Richard Davis. Eaton argues that these raids were primarily motivated by political and economic consideration rather than religious ones. For the Ghaznavids, it was more a question of material gains. They looted and raided the Indian cities, including the richly endowed temples which were politically vulnerable yet loaded with enormous movable wealth. These enabled Mahmud Ghazni to finance his larger political objectives in Khurasan. These loot and conquests were used to raise Mahmud's prestige back in Central Asia and to fund various activities like erecting splendid buildings, mosques, maintaining the army, regulating trade, etc. The most famous attack on the Somnath temple by Mahmud Ghazni in 1206 AD is investigated by Richard Davies. He points out that Muslim narratives exaggerated this attack by depicting Somnath to be a cultic centre of Hinduism equivalent to the Mecca, and the 14th century poet Isami portrayed *Somnatha* as the last remaining idol in the world. Mahmud destroying it was symbolic of Prophet's destruction of the idols of the Kaba in Mecca.

However, for the Ghurids the attack on the temples was driven more by the political intent. This is evident from the fact that after the Battle of Tarai, Muizzuddin Ghuri left his successor as a caretaker for the conquered province. And in this context, if one looks at the attack on temples, scholars like Davies and Eaton would argue that only specific temples, especially those associated with the ruling dynasty were destroyed. These temples that were pre-eminently political institutions, housed the 'rashtra-devta' which symbolised the shared sovereignty of the ruler and the chief-deity which was a source of power. This rashtra-devta that symbolised authority of the ruler was said to be animate and any change or shift noticed in the idol would suggest a warning or an impending disaster for the ruler. And therefore, Richard Eaton points out that it was these temples that were attacked and not those of the common people, as it suggested that the sitting ruler had lost his legitimacy.

In Islam however, it was the practice of reading 'khutbah' in one's name that symbolised a political change and the mosque in itself was no visible symbol of political authority. However, instances of mosques being attacked during the Mongol invasion are seen. It is important not to overlook the fact that attack on places of worship was an accepted part of medieval warfare, and it was not only common among the Turks, but many instances of Hindu rulers attacking temples are seen throughout history. One such example is King Harsha of the Lohara dynasty of Kashmir who plundered Hindu temples to replenish his treasury. Therefore, what can be inferred from this is that attacks on temple were not ideological but political contestation of power.

Another important issue to consider is to analyze whether these political and military expeditions were followed by forced conversions. The religious text of Islam that is Quran seeks conversion through persuasion, discussion, and acceptance and not through force or compulsion. Furthermore, there isn't any source that suggests that the state undertook forced conversion during this period. Rather what one witnesses is a relationship of mutual interdependence between the Turks and the local rulers as the former required the latter to organise the state and collect revenue in a foreign environment. Even the instance of reproduction of the figure of the goddess in Muizzuddin's gold coins show how much these invaders were willing to compromise with their religious ideas for the demands of the state.

➢ CONCLUSION

Thus, what can be summarized by the arguments put forth in this paper is that the medieval sources did not represent and counter-represent "Indian" and "foreign" identities on ideological or religious grounds, rather they viewed each other in political, cultural and geographical terms. The modern day depiction of Islam as an alien and foreign religion which has no native background in the subcontinent can be seen as the constructs of colonial historians who wanted to create division and segregation in order to exercise active political influence. Although the ideological angle cannot be ignored, what is problematic is not considering any other perspective. So, one can say that Turkish conquests were not merely Islamic in nature. Rather what can be seen is that religion was used as a means of justification while the real factor behind these invasions was politico-economic considerations.

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