

Religio-Political Environment of the England and India during Sixteenth Century

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Lecture

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1. Introduction:

The sixteenth century is marked by a transformation of relation between religion and politics¹. During this century, institutions began to revise the patterns of their influence and by following the contemporary intellectual currents, sought to re-define the relation in accordance with their own preferences seeking emancipation from the traditional barriers of religion². Traditional slant towards religion seemed to be unwanted and was compensated by prevalent attitudes of the time. The contemporary approaches also contrasted from each other under different circumstances. The description of political and religious environment of the two different parts of the world is necessary at this point. Religion and politics are mostly affected by the multi-dimensional currents that are present in a specific society. The most important variables that affect the inner structures of political and religious institutions are the intellectual growth and cultural mobilization. The shape and even the nature and capacity of the religious and political institution vary with the variation of intellectual trends and cultural transformations. During sixteenth century the intellectual and cultural trends were transforming their orientations in the wake of the strong idea of rebirth and revival in Europe and, in India, new trends of thought in the intellectual and cultural spheres that were posing direct and indirect threat to the traditional views about religion and politics. It was a period of revival both in India and Europe but its shape is recorded to be different in each of the cases and it is observed that this difference of shape is due to the different nature of the ideas behind the struggle for revival.

2. England during sixteenth century:

Sixteenth century, as described above, is marked by a great transformation in the nature and construction of religious and political institutions. It was facing the outcome of a revivalist movement, *Renaissance*, that was initiated in the domain of art and scientific expressions, expanded its effects on nearly all the spheres of life in Europe.³ The new trend of revival that took its birth in Italy soon spread to the whole continent. It bestowed the domains of art and culture with the human justifications of the expression.⁴ At first instance, it was supposed that this intellectual current was opposing the status of religion in the European life but it was not so. The trend of revival was not against the presence of religion but, in its effort to liberate the human expressions and skill, it challenged the prevalent structure of the religious institutions.⁵ Religion, in the shape of church and Pope, was the part and parcel of the European civilization. It was supposed to be intermediary link between the God and humanity. This movement of revival challenged the status of the church and different religious practices that were clasping the humanity in the name of salvation. It supported the human tools of investigation instead of the prescribed structure of belief and practices. This revivalist movement justified itself on the basis of position of man and its relationship with different institutions of state and society in the primitive times.⁶ So basically it was the exploration of history that led the Europeans to mark a great transformation in history.

Renaissance conferred upon the Europeans human tools of understanding in all spheres of life.⁷ They used this new spirit to revise the understanding patterns that resulted in different status of the cultural, social, religious, political and economic institutions. The subsequent orientations demanded a different way of adherence to these institutions. As the application of these tools was made by different intellectual groups so naturally the results were different and it gave birth to variety of solutions sponsored by different groups. This phenomenon is evident in the phase of *Reformation* that resulted in revival. People differed in the viewpoints so far as the future shape of the institutions was concerned. Let us try to understand the

position of religious and political institutions of the England that are the main dimensions of this study.

2.1 Political Institutions of England in Sixteenth Century:

Medieval ages in Europe are marked with the stronghold of absolute monarchies that were aided by the church. The nature of rule was mostly absolute and only check on the powers of monarchs was the dominant position of the Pope in the whole European world. The state business was being run according to the will of the king and the primitive institutions of power sharing had become extinct practically.⁸ It was held by the monarchs that their rule was basically entrusted to them by God. This divine justification was presented to maximize the submission on the part of the people. The dominant position of the religion in all spheres of life and its hegemony on the minds and thoughts was strengthening the political positions of the monarchs. The revivalist movement whose ideal was found to be in the primitive civilizations transformed the basis of power and government by the replacement of divine justifications of rule by the human and natural justifications. The political institutions went through a transformation that not only enhanced the status of the monarchs but at the same time it also activated the passive institutions of the states. The impacts of the theories of nature changed the orientation of political institutions. Hobbes, Lock and Rousseau found that government was an institution that took its birth by the agreement of the people to regulate their affairs. So its origin was found to be purely human rather than divine. As according to these theories, there was no divine favour behind the establishment of rule as it was, traditionally justified in the name of God. It was purely a human institution that was the representative of the people. This theory significantly affected the minds of people and as a result they began to think as citizens rather than subjects. So it was a great political upheaval that challenged the existing position of the political institutions.

So far as its impacts in the sixteenth century are concerned, it resulted in the rebirth of ancient consultative or power sharing institutions.⁹ These kinds of institutions were existing even

during the medieval ages but, politically, they were inactive. It was during *renaissance* that they re-emerged. This institutional transformation also affected the English political environment. It happened in the first half of the sixteenth century that Tudors disconnected themselves from the Roman Church.¹⁰ This disconnection, that was supposed to be of a religious nature, was politically motivated. The step that was supposed to be caused by the dissolution of marriage of Henry VIII and Catherine of Aragon was taken in search of male heir for the throne of England and to strengthen the Tudors role in the future politics of England.¹¹ Hereafter, king became both the temporal and spiritual, head of the state without the intervention of extra-territorial agencies like Pope or Church. The king of England became the political and religious head of the state.¹² More strange and interesting step was taken in the reign of Elizabeth I. She was the first woman who became the leader of the subjects in both political and religious affairs of the state. Her claim to be the supreme religious head of the state was criticised but, with some alterations, she became the supreme governor of both religious and political affairs.¹³

The same situation prevailed among political institutions of England. Parliament was there as a consultative and legislative body but it was nearly inactive because the absolute monarchs mostly decided the major issues themselves and felt no need of consultation with a representative institution. In the sixteenth century it became active with its significant participation in the major policy making and legislative issues. The involvement and active participation became possible owing to two main reasons. It established the ideals of *Renaissance* that focused on the primitive institutions. The idea of social and human nature of the government also compelled the king to rely upon the representative institutions to accommodate the feeling of the people. Secondly the breach with the Rome might have posed a lot of challenges to the solidarity of the state that could only have been united by strengthening the internal institutions of the state and by ensuring the participation of the people in constituting the representative institutions.¹⁴ So in the sixteenth century, parliament in England had secured a remarkable

character by its potential involvement in policy matters and legislation in all spheres of state including religion.

2.2 Religious condition of England in Sixteenth Century:

Same was the spirit of transformation in religious paradigm as it has been described in the case of political institutions. Religion that had been the dominant part of the affairs of the European life was going to be criticised on the basis of the ideals of Renaissance. The hegemony of church, as described above, in the name of human salvation¹⁵, was challenged by the trends of *Reformation*. It was analysed by the enlightened religious scholars of the age that *salvation* had more dependence on faith rather than observance of church sponsored practices.¹⁶ Works of Martin Luther and Calvin emphasized the direct consultation of Bible by the people instead of relying upon the clergy.¹⁷ They argued that the church practices had no concern with the human salvation and most of these practices were designed to enslave the people and strengthen the involvement of church in the individual's life. The practices like *indulgences and confessions* were criticised by the reformists and were labelled as source of corruption on the part of church.¹⁸ They aspired for the whole scale reformation of the concepts of church domination and its practices. According to the division of the tools of understanding religion, the Christian world got divided into two main sects, Catholicism and Protestantism. Catholics were the adherents of the old faith while Protestants were the followers of the new approach. As the period of reformation had just started so the reformatory ideals that were designed by many intellectual differed in their scheme and further gave birth to sub-sects. Reformation gave birth to Puritans, Calvinists and Presbyterians. Counter-reformation gave birth to the Jesuits and Anabaptists.

All the traces of these new concepts were found in the English society. Most of the population was still following the old faith. The Protestants were still in a minority but they were more active than the Catholics. Religious atmosphere of England during sixteenth century was further affected by the segregation

of English church from the Rome. The Anglican Church, at first, remained catholic in its orientation but with the passage of time its character began to incline towards protestant ideas. The breach of English church from the Rome encouraged the reformatory ideas and soon the catholic character of the Anglican Church went thorough transformation and it acquired more a character of the Protestantism¹⁹.

So, during sixteenth century England faced a significant religious turmoil. The forces that were involved in the struggle for dominance were the adherents of the old faith, reformist radicals and the government. Catholics were struggling for the survival of the old faith. Puritans were trying to, radically; transform the Anglican Church on protestant basis and the state was trying to act in a moderate and mediatory way with its leaning towards Protestant ideas but not according to the wishes of the radicals.

3. India during the Sixteenth Century:

India was also passing through a transitional period as for as the religious, political and social transformation was concerned. This transformation was not much organised as the one that took place in Europe and specifically in England. The tone of the change was moderate and it was taking place without any serious turmoil. The conditions were different and totally different variables were working in the Indian atmosphere. There was no direct potential threat to the position of the traditional religious and political structures. Indian society was a plural society and social division was on the basis of religion and ethnic affiliations.²⁰ The process of change was taking place in the individual spheres of different religious and ethnic groups. As far as the first half of the sixteenth century is concerned there was no generalized and collective effort on the part of Indian society to transform its religious and political orientations.

Society was divided into Muslim, Hindu, Buddh and Jain factions. Each faction was further divided into sub-sects. The division of a faction into sub-groups involved different factors. Muslim segment of society was divided on sectarian basis

while Hindus were divided into different castes on the basis of specific profession. So the matter of collective transformation was very complex. Multidimensional character of Indian society made it very difficult to blend all religious and ethnic colours in a single scheme.

3.1 Political Institutions of India in the Sixteenth Century:

India was being ruled by the Muslim monarchs since 1206. Sixteenth century is marked with the downfall of the *Sultanate* period, the period that started with the establishment of the rule of slave dynasty and ended with the downfall of the Lodhi dynasty.²¹ It was a period when Muslim rulers established and consolidated their political dominance over India. The political behaviour of the sultanate period was based on the basis of superior religious and ethnic claims.²² Most of the *Salatin* justified their rule on the basis of superior race and the will of the caliph of Baghdad. Theoretically, they were politically connected with the Muslim caliph of Baghdad. Another aspect of rule in sultanate period was the theory of Divine Right of kingship.²³ So these were the two major, ideologically, political basis of rule that prevailed during the sultanate period. Practically kingship was absolute with some exceptions. The institution that was supporting the kingship in the political matters was the Nobility. Sultan's most of the cabinet members were abstracted from the nobility. As the government was established on the basis of superior ethnic claims, mostly a single ethnic group was dominant in the nobility and the government.

So at the start of the sixteenth century the ideological basis of rule was narrow as far as its implementation in a plural society was concerned. Monarchs were not only the rulers but at the same time they were also entitled as the *defender of faith* and *sipah salar*.²⁴ They also owned their ethnic identity and were acting as a representative of a specific ethnic group.

The latter half of the sixteenth century exhibits a turning point in the political history of India. It is marked with a great transformation in the basis of the nature of political structure.

The narrow basis of rule was broadened and the new political theory, which was designed by Abul Fazl, liberated the king from religious and ethnic biases.²⁵ In this part of the century the political orientation of the kingship was broadened, not by the rejection of the role of religion but with the liberal and profound interpretation of the religion. Ethnic factor was rejected altogether in the new model. Hereafter the nobility and the cabinet positions were not opened just to a specific race or creed but its doors were open for all and sundry without the consideration of caste, religion and creed. Only merit in the professional expertise was given weightage for the allocation of positions in the nobility and the cabinet.

3.2 Religious condition of India during Sixteenth Century:

As it has been described above that Indian society was a plural society and it was divided into many segments. The major division in the society was on the basis of religion. Majority of the population belonged to Hinduism. Muslims were also present in the considerable numerical strength in India. Other religions like Buddhism and Jainism also existed in the Indian society but their numerical strength was very low in comparison with the Hindus and Muslims. No doubt the strength of the Buddhism and Jainism was very low but they had a significant impact on the spiritual tradition of the Indian society.

During sixteenth century the religious tradition in India was undergoing certain transformations. The preceding century's spiritual experiences were exhibiting themselves in some abstract shape during this century. So it was a period that was proceeding towards the fruits of the past experiences. As for as Islam was concerned, its traditional aspect was being challenged by the Sufism.²⁶ Most of the Sufi orders in India were strongly opposing the traditional structure of spiritual traditions of Islam on the basis of its limitations in a plural society and its imperialist vision. They substituted the preaching of faith with the preaching of the high moral values and widened the scope of their adherents to the people belonging to the other religions. Their preaching centred on the

unity of being. The main aspiration that was provided to them was the concept of *Wahdat-al-Wajod*.²⁷ They believed in the divine origin of the entire phenomenon in the universe. It was this idea that brought them near the non-Muslims. The approach of the sufis was cohesive in its nature as far as the co-existence in the multi-religious society was concerned. There were nearly fourteen Sufi orders working in India during sixteenth century but the most prominent and popular orders were the Suhrawardia and Chishtia. These orders differed in their social, political, and especially legal orientation of Islam. Chishtia were not the strict followers of the Shariah.²⁸ They were fond of the *sama* and used it also for the propagation of faith.²⁹ Their doors were open for the non-Muslims. They kept themselves at distance from the political elite of India and were not at good terms with the *Salatin-e-Delhi*.³⁰ Suhrawardia were strict followers of shariah.³¹ They were against the use of music for any sacred purpose. They had very cordial relationships with the political elite.³² Chishtia were more popular in public due to their cultural and social liberalism on the other hand Suhrawardia were less popular due to the strictness of their affiliation with the shariah. Their friendly relations with the monarchs attracted a number of people.

Muslim community was also influenced, to some extent, by a movement that was known as *MahdawiTehrik*.³³ This movement was started by Syed Muhammed of Juanpur.³⁴ He claimed to be the *Mehdi*, a divinely guided Imam for the reformation of faith and practices.³⁵ This movement and its followers propagated that the current situation of the Muslim community was miserable due to the absence of the reformation. This idea was critical and complex. It was controversial due to the different definitions of the concept of *Mehdi* in different sects. It was challenging the existent pattern of theology. The orthodox circles of the Muslim community, instead of arguments, used force to curb this movement.³⁶ This assault on the *Mahdavisim* was being led by the leading scholars of the period who were also serving the empire. A large number of people were punished being the suspected followers of *mahdavisim*.

The spirit of revival was so strong in the sixteenth century India that it was a main justification proposed by opposite schools of thought. The concept of revival was also supported by the concept of presence of divinely guided institution or personality who was felt necessary for the interpretative issues or *Ijtehad*. *Mahdavidism* used the concept of Imam Mehdi. Jalal-ud-din Akbar adopted the title of *sultan-e-Adil*, shadow of God on earth. The reaction that came to fore front by the orthodox circle of Muslim community in the last days of Akbar against the reformatory ideas was also not without the concept of divine guidance. Sheikh Ahmed Sirhindi, who was entitled as *Mujadid Alf Thani*, was leading this cult. The term, *mujadid*, mean reviver.³⁷

Hinduism was also being reformed but this reformation in the religion was not being inspired from within but it was being affected by the standards of equality, brotherhood, justice and non-violence that were propounded by the Islam, Buddhism and Jainism. It was during sixteenth century when Sikhism emerged on the religious scene of the Indian society.³⁸ It was basically a cult that was inspired by the ideals of unity of God, universal brotherhood and human equality.³⁹ This order that was mainly emerged from the body of Hinduism and Islam was founded by Baba Guru Nanak.⁴⁰ This order soon got the shape of a religion that propounded the unity of God and stressed the idea of co-existence in a multi-religious society.

The process of transformation was not only taking place within the boundaries of the individual religions but there was a school of thought that was trying to blend the religious traditions of all the religions existing on the Indian soil in a common religious code of conduct. This experience was going through in the circles of the Mystics who believed in the truthfulness of all the religions. Same was the idea that attracted Akbar the Great and he wished to implement this idea in the political structure of his state not only to obtain political support from the non-muslim circles of the society but also to universalise the religious approach instead of confining oneself just to the following of a single religion. *Din-e-Ilahi*, a product of the mind of Akbar,

was the result of this ideology that was supported by the idea of Universal Toleration.

4. Conclusion:

So the sixteenth century brought a cohesive trend in a plural society that tried to harmonise the religious environment and spiritual traditions of different religions which, as mentioned above, was a very complex phenomenon. On the other hand the political structures also benefitted from the transitional attitude of the time. Comparative analysis of the religion and politics in England and India reveals that in England religion was going to be reformed while in India religion was being culturally accommodated in the political structures. The comparison is important in the context of the later colonization of India by the British. It will help the audiences of history to comprehend the British political and religious structural modernity and Indian reactions and responses against or in favour of that. It also helps to understand the major trends in the historiography of Indo-Pak subcontinent during the previous century.

References

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- ¹ M, Guizot, *General History of Civilization in Europe*, (New York: Penguin Classics,1883), 249
 - ² Hayes, Baldwin, Cole, *History of Western Civilization*, (London: Macmillan Company, 1967), 27
 - ³ Major, 25
 - ⁴ Guizot, M, p 256
 - ⁵ Major, p 176
 - ⁶ Guizot, M, p 270
 - ⁷ Major p 67
 - ⁸ Ibid
 - ⁹ Major, 101
 - ¹⁰ Ibid
 - ¹¹ Ibid
 - ¹² Ibid
 - ¹³ Keith Feiling, *A History of England from the coming of the English to 1918*, (London: Book Club Associates, 1970), 390
 - ¹⁴ Major, 106
 - ¹⁵ B Smith, *The Elizabethan world*, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1972), 23
 - ¹⁶ Mubarak Ali, *Europe ka Aroj*, (Lahore: Tareekh Publications, 2000), 113-117
 - ¹⁷ B Smith,37
 - ¹⁸ Ali, 110
 - ¹⁹ G R Elton, *England under the Tudors*, (London: Methuen & Co, 1971), 273
 - ²⁰ Shuja Alhaq, 728
 - ²¹ S K Lal, *Twilight of the Sultanate*, (Bombay: Asia Publishing House, 1963) 1
 - ²² Ibid
 - ²³ A L Srivastava, *The Mughal Empire (1526-1803)*, (Agra: Lal Agar wala and Company, 1952), 1
 - ²⁴ Ibid
 - ²⁵ Ibn Hasan, 60
 - ²⁶ Shuja Alhaq, 333
 - ²⁷ Ibid, 334
 - The unity or transcendence implied release from the self and realization or attainment of the all-embracing consciousness of God.
 - ²⁸ Ibid, 338

Chishtis accorded a much greater role to the individual and his spiritual autonomy than to the observance of the externals and apparent belonging to the community of faithful.

²⁹ S.M. Ikram, *Aab-e-Kauthar*, (Lahore: Idara Saqafat e Islamia, 1987), 23

³⁰ Shuja Alhaq, 339

³¹ Ibid, 357

He (Baha-ud-Din Zakariya) was not a man of ecstasy and had no liking for *sam*[^]. He would emphasize more on adherence to the *shar*[^] as the basis of spirituality.

³² Ibid

³³ Ikram, S.M, *Rod-e-Kauthar*, (Lahore: Idara Saqafat e Islamia, 1987), 25

³⁴ Ibid

³⁵ Ibid, 25-26

³⁶ Qureshi, I.H. *Akbar the Architect of the Mughal Empire*, (Karachi: Maaref, 1978), 135

... the emergence of Mahdi for the renaissance of the faith, have incurred the hostility of the ulema in power, and yet the conflict was inevitable because Mahdawism was looked upon as a heresy.

³⁷ Ikram, 267

³⁸ Lal, 301

³⁹ Ibid, 302,

See details, The chief point of Nanak's teaching was unquestionably the unity of God.

⁴⁰ Ibid