Can a Hindu Utopia be a Moslem Utopia? Examples from 12th Century India and Beyond

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ABSTRACT

The present paper compares two utopian social movements that occurred in medieval India under Moslem rule: the Hindu Kānphatā Panth sect and the Moslem Qalandar sect. While similar in outward behavior, they differ in terms of their conceptual, operational, and historical impact on their respective cultures. It is argued that this difference can be explained by the ways in which each movement addresses the central problems of their respective cultural contexts, the acceptability of their respective cultural contexts, the acceptability of their alternative solutions to established ones, and the historical circumstances in which they developed.

Introduction

The present paper explores two social movements of medieval India under Moslem rule. While very similar in cosmological orientations and social configuration, one movement was Hindu (the Tantric Śiva sect of the Kānphaṭā Panth, also called nāths) and the other Moslem (the Qalandars). Both were ascetic movements of religious virtuosi and carried utopian visions. Both sought to overcome the limited and mutable nature of human existence through an ascesis of world-renunciation. Both movements, moreover, rejected the dominant soteriological doctrines of their respective traditions in favor of an alternative path toward salvation. In both, the vision of an alternative social order, in which man could unite the disharmonies of cosmic existence, was posited.

Despite these similarities, the respective socio-structural place of both movements and their role in the civilizational dynamics of their cultures was markedly different. The Kānphatā Panth played an important role in the evolution of the Hindu tradition, while the Qalandars were a marginal movement whose impingement on Moslem civilization was limited.

Our basic contention is that Hindu renouncers on the whole, of which the Kānphatā Panth are but one instance, played a more central role in Hindu civilization than did the Qalandars in Islam. This was because the former
responded to the major symbolic tensions generated by the institutionalization of the Hindu cultural model and addressed some of the problems engendered thereby; whereas the Qalandars offered only a marginal response to the tension in Islam and raised new ones of their own.

The Axial Assumptions of Hinduism

According to Hindu cosmology, creation began with the Golden Age, a time in which the polarities of differentiation which later appeared, existed as a unity; when mundane reality was not separated from the cosmic, ultimate reality; when life and death were not separated; and social differentiation was not needed because purity and pollution had not yet been distinguished. The mundane world, as we know it, was created at the end of the Golden Age (the Age of Truth) as a process of dismemberment or self-differentiation of the Brahman, the unitary Whole (O'Flaherty, 1975). This creation engendered a tension between the mundane and cosmic orders because it dismembered the absolute Whole, causing a break which could be bridged ultimately only by returning to the original, undifferentiated state.

With this break, human action began, the first “wicked” act occurred, mortality and loss of omniscience appeared, followed by greed, hunger, lust, poverty, theft, and murder, which necessitated civilization and social differentiation. In the succession of ages to follow (the Treta, the Dvapara, and the present, Kaliyuga Age), “evil” increased, bringing the universe closer and closer to a stage when evil, in the form of disorder, would triumph, resulting in the destruction of the universe by divinely sent flood and fire (Saran, 1969; O’Flaherty, 1975, 1976).

The cause of the break between the Golden and subsequent ages is not really made explicit in the Hindu tradition. The dominant theme is to blame nature for the introduction of imperfection into the Golden Age, or even to blame time itself (kala) for bringing about a change in the environment which in turn brings out the corrupted elements of man’s nature. Time, affecting nature, is the evil agent, and the “Fall” is characterized as a passing from “eternity” into “time”, from perfection into imperfection and mortality (O’Flaherty, 1976).

In early Hindu cosmology, the chasm between cosmic and mundane spheres could be bridged by the cosmic cycle itself, in which the Kaliyuga era would be followed by total destruction, after which would come a new Golden Age (O’Flaherty, 1975; Saran, 1969).

Man’s central cosmological role was to ensure the continuity of this cycle through Vedic sacrificial ritual, the function of which was the periodic regeneration of the cosmos (Heesterman, 1964).

The creative value of the Vedic sacrifice... to assure the continuity of the universal order, the regulating function of the cosmos, finds its parallel in the cosmogonic myth of Purusa, the primordial man, who is at the same time the first sacrificer, the dismembered sacrificial