



Glimpses of Pluralist Society in Medieval Times: Some References of composite culture from Medieval Gujarat

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Abstract: Indian history is widely known for its pluralist nature. It has a glimpse of a Hindu king ruling Muslim subjects and vice versa, it has also explored the interaction of Hindus with non-Hindus and vice versa. This means that Indian society has experienced pluralism in all ways since ancient times.

This paper celebrates some of the evidence from the medieval time of the region of Gujarat, to explore interactions of different religions in a fruitful manner for the betterment of society. The paper has two sections. First, it will explore Gujarat as a religious marketplace as the base of the paper. The second section explores the text and literature produced during the Gujarat sultanate, where the sultan was constantly depicted as supreme despite his religion. It will also unravel the ethos of the court of Gujarat, by focusing on the culture of the society.

So, the paper centre on the composite culture of the time, when the region was home to all, coming from the north, south, east, and of course from the maritime routes as well. The context and contemporary reasons produce such a region which is termed a "Religious marketplace". That was the vivid culture, would be explored in the paper via some examples.

Keywords: Composite Culture, Gujarat, Jains, Sultanate, Medieval, Genres.

Introducing the Theme

Composite culture is always a centre of Indian society. This co-existence and interaction of diverse religious groups could be view in vivid genre in diverse language; the monument spread over the continent, the inscriptions sheds varieties of socio-cultural aspects etc. to interpret the past.

This paper is just a fragmented attempt to unravel some evidence from a region, to show how the Indian society was. It is just a representative regional case study only, though Indian society has vibrant and vivid history of composite culture.

Looking into region, looking into composite culture

Medieval land of Gujarat was an arena of interactions of different communities, and culture. The region due to its location and ecology always attracted migrants including peasants, pastoralist, traders, skill men in military and politics, and other adventures. The maritime connection result into home for foreign migrants. The pastoralist coming from north and North West find the region suitable for them, and later some of them upgraded to higher social status. This higher mobility terrain given the opportunities to all the skill men to attain higher degree of success, through their ability and skill they acquired or inherited from the region of their origin.

In this duration, the religion had varied layers. All major religious organizational streams that proved to be subsequently significant were in place. This time, marks as the beginning of a new and more complex religious marketplace in Gujarat that ensued from the pacification of the region. The religious marketplace in Gujarat was characterized by a mix of the formal and informal organization. It was the economic prosperity of the region that shaped the religious context of the Gujarat, which developed a discourse of mutual existence that is noticeable in the bhakti poetry or Sufi doctrine.

As sultan ensured the trade routes pacified, it result into new economic vistas, and ensured peace and prosperity, this ever burgeoning religious marketplace would remain peaceful, reflecting a political consensus between social groups that made up the sultanate.

Cultural Milieu of Gujarat Sultanate and Literature

This section explore, how the literary genre produced in regional arena, could be use to understand the contemporary exchanges and imaginations of idioms for supreme of the land.

When the Gujarat sultanate established, the sultan was constantly in process to conquer peripheral arena. “This struggle between the chieftains and sultans in the dominant historiography of Gujarat and in the popular imagination is often narrowly viewed in terms of clashes two religious groups: the Hindu Rajputs and the Muslim sultans.¹ But that was not the case.

¹ Kapadiya, Aparna. 2018. p.7.

Gujarat Sultanate, under the leadership of Sultan Muhammad Shah II and Mahmud Begada, become centre of new patronage for the poet, writers and others skill men coming from all the direction. This was also due to chaos at Imperial Delhi, that forced many poets and writers to move southward, and Gujarat sultanate was at centre. That resulted into new vibrant cultural milieu at the Ahmedabad court.²

Despite the concentration of Muslim scholars (some were invited) at Gujarat court, the Sanskrit and bilingual inscriptions continues by officials as well in Persians, Arabic, Gujarati, Sanskrit and Jains scholarly works also flourished under the Gujarat sultanas in Sanskrit and Apabhramsa.

As Aparna Kapadiya argues that the Narratives of society and polity from Gujarat courts offer us a perspective vibrant and evolving warrior ethos, though these are only representation of elite traditions. But important here is, how they fashioned their political claims via the works of their poet panegyrists.³

Using Sanskrit text named Rajavinod of Udayraja, she explore the significant that how the text based on classical kavya tradition of Sanskrit poetry and markers of Indic paramount king, could be used to allow the Sultan Begada (reigned c. 1459- 1511), a Muslim ruler, to draw on the eclectic ideological resources available to him.⁴ The text suggests that Sanskrit was also patronized by the Sultan, though the Persian and Gujarati were on the height as literary genre in the region.

Here, we will go further some of examples from the text Rajavinod (pleasure of the king) composed in mid 15th century, to discussion the various idiom used by the poet for the supreme of the sultanate, Mahmud Begada, who ruled over the most prosperous and powerful sultanate of the time.

Though, there were many text centre on the Begada and his greatness, and documentation of his military campaign and success, but the discussion of such a Sanskrit text is unique, because it represents the king as a paramount rulers with links to prestigious solar dynasty (suryavamsha)- that traditionally claimed by the kshatriya kings. As Udayraja narrates –

“The auspicious solar lineage emerged from the sun. This was revered and considered exemplary by kings. Muzaffar Shah was indeed first of these.”⁵ This is how the poet claims the lineage of sultan by linking with his ancestors and the traditions of thee society.

Furthermore, to give me legitimacy in other regional factions and chiefs, he asserts some political idioms of culture and religion of the land and he states-

“In beauty he represents the god of love,

In generosity Karna

² Scholars coming from North and also from Vijayanagar, attracted towards regional court of Ahmedabad, and some local centre like Patan, Champaner, Somanath, Idar, Junagadh etc.

³ Kapadiya, Aparna. 2018, p.11.

⁴ Ibid. P.19.

⁵ Rajavinod-II, Verse 1.

In compassion he appears as the ideal living king, Rama

In the battlefield equals to Bhima

In eloquence he is greater than the god of speech, his charms are

Like those of the great Lord of Vishnu,

The people are forever devoted to Mahmud Shah”⁶

This is how the poet interlinked the qualities of vivid gods in the continents to the Sultans, to legitimize the ruler in commons of the region.

He continues, citing the representative of religious deity -

“O brave one, you are Indra, Varuna, the wealth – granting Kubera,

Thus the Kashmir lord praises King Mahmud.”⁷

Interestingly, the poet using diverse regional examples try to show his patron supreme, as he show-

“The Pandya king, who bows down before the great Lord in respect,

Offers strings of pearls, resembling a piece of the moon in the oyster shells from which they are gathered.”⁸

“The invincible lord of Kamarupa bows down before his prowess”⁹

“After experiencing this regal pleasure- grove, the king of Magadha, does not return to nor desires royal abode.

He does not praise harbour nor is he desirous of the joy of residing in Puspapuri.”¹⁰

“As this great king Mahmud is everyone’s lord

Prosperity is ever-increasing,

Who can equal the one who holds the lands from the mountains to the Himalayas and from west to East.”¹¹

What does the poet with his imaginaries tries, to centre the sultanate of his patronage at political geographies of the continents, and established his powers as centre, as others kings pay bows to the Gujarat sultan. So the literary skills shown by the poet put the Sultan universal king, the one who sustains prosperity of the landscape.

Though, there are mixing of imaginaries and some realities. Some examples he shows from real life, as there were many locals who bow to sultans in the court of Ahmedabad. We see different juncture in the poetry of

⁶ Ibid. Verse 13 and 26.

⁷ Ibid. Verse 20 of fourth part.

⁸ Ibid. Verse 3.

⁹ Ibid. Verse 23.

¹⁰ Ibid. Verse 14.

¹¹ Ibid. Verse 23.

Udayraja, where “the sultan, in his panegyrist’s representation of him, has thus succeeded in establishing his sovereignty over every sphere: divine, sub-continental, regional and local.”¹²

The discussion suggests that Gujarat sultanate constantly patronized the literary genres – the classical, the local and the popular Persianized domain too, that result into production of literary genres full of idioms and political aspirations that the sultans desires for social and political mobility in the region. This text also suggest that how “a Muslim ruler chose to mobilise pre – existing notion of political power in order to fashion his own rule, gives us striking picture of the diverse ways in which kingship was being articulated and represented in the regional context.”¹³ Of course, it is also example of political utility of Sanskrit even for a king firmly established and represented in other literary traditions popular in the region.

The Merchants community of the region

History writing is critiqued for documenting only great deeds and royal subjects. Sometimes it is seems valid, as others actors in history were more prominent and impactful than the royals only.

Here I would like to unravel some of the life histories of the Jain merchants of the Gujarat. All these characters are well documented by many scholarships, though more has to come, as the aura of these merchants were commendable.

By the way of conclusion

This discussion shows us past of Gujarat region as multi-layered and multi-cultural, where different persons comes from diverse background and origin, settled and interact, and result into vibrant audience of the state.

Example of Udayraja, his poetry work about his patron, shows how the Sultan was viewed and imagined in the masses and non Muslim. This interweaving of specific historical event with pan-Indian metaphors illuminates how power was being rearticulated and reconfigured at the regional level.

The region was so prosper and unique, where the religious identity came together despite multiple group interests that nevertheless functioned with degree of flexibility and unison that allowed the state to survive. The political and cultural power that non-brahmin communities derived from trading wealth allowed multiple voices to be heard simultaneously and yet in dialogue with one another.

Not only as history student (researcher), it is also needed to unravel the ethos of our medieval past, because in recent year medieval history of our shared past become widely contested not only in academia, but at public and political spaces as well. The discussion spaces take for granted the medieval study in the binary of religion

¹² Kapadiya, Aparna, 2018, P.127.

¹³ Ibid. P.105.

assuming contemporary incidents and pre-assumptions. Though, there was constant contestation, negotiation and accommodation, but religious rivalry was not like we imagine today.

We need to answer that how such a profuse and multilayered array of religious options, erupt regularly into sectarian violence.

References

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