

Hindu Muslim Relations and Destruction of Hindu Temples: History and Rhetoric

العلاقات بين الهندوس والمسلمين وتدمير المعابد الهندوسية: التاريخ والخطاب

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☆ *Dr. Munazza Batool*

Abstract

This paper revisits the complex history of Hindu-Muslim relations in the Indian subcontinent, focusing particularly on the historical narratives surrounding the destruction of Hindu temples. While historians have often emphasized episodes of temple desecration, this study argues that such an approach provides only a partial view of the broader historical reality. The paper highlights that numerous authentic and documented instances exist where Muslim rulers, including the Delhi Sultans and Mughal emperors, endowed, patronized, and even commissioned the construction or reconstruction of Hindu temples. By systematically examining both destruction and construction records, this research aims to offer a more balanced understanding of the political, cultural, and religious dynamics that shaped Hindu-Muslim interactions over several centuries. The paper further explores the varied motives behind temple desecrations—ranging from political strategy to expressions of power—while emphasizing that these actions cannot be generalized as religiously motivated. A comprehensive survey of primary historical sources reveals that records of endowment, patronage, and construction significantly outnumber those of destruction, challenging monolithic narratives of conflict. This nuanced reassessment encourages a rethinking of Hindu-Muslim relations during the Muslim rule in India, viewing them not solely through the lens of confrontation but also through cooperation, coexistence, and shared cultural synthesis that characterized much of the subcontinent's history.

Keywords: Hindu-Muslim Relations, Temple Destruction, Temple Construction, Delhi Sultans, Mughal Rulers, Historical Narratives, Religious Coexistence

Introduction

As a researcher of the historiography of Hindu Muslim relations one can realize that the narratives of destruction of Hindu temples have been mentioned very frequently. The historians have highlighted the multiple records of the destruction of temples by Muslim rulers during the wars without explaining the context. These accounts also do not refer to the instances of the destruction of temples by the local Hindu rulers themselves. Likewise scarcely one comes across the references to the repairs, reconstruction and endowments to the temples by Muslim rulers that was undertaken after reconciliation and during the long periods of peace. Despite the availability of such records these are either ignored or their impact on Hindu Muslim Relations has not been fully gauged. Recently some scholars have provided insightful discussion on the issue.¹

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¹ An insightful edited work on the subject Demolishing Myths or Mosques and Temples? Sunil Kumar (ed.), discusses the issue at length. It includes four essays Davis, Richard, "Indian Art Objects as Loot", Thapar, Romila." Somnath: The Many Voices of History" Eaton, Richard, "Temple Desecration and Indo- Muslim States, and Flood, B. Finnbar Islam, Iconoclasm and Early Indian Mosque.

Section One: Narratives of Temple Destruction

The paper is a historical review of the narratives of temple destruction and construction by the Muslim rulers. It deals with this multilayered theme in three folded way. Firstly it sets to highlight the narratives of temple destructions by Hindu rulers themselves as a symbol of their occupation or subduing of another ruler and his territory. Secondly it sets to mention the records of destruction of Hindu temples by Muslim rulers and thirdly to explore the instances of temple repair and endowments by Muslim rulers and finally it refers to the nature of Hindu Muslim relations during the peace.

1.1. Destruction of Temples by Hindu Rulers

Long before the destruction of temples by Muslim rulers we find the instances of destruction of temples by Hindu rulers themselves as a gesture of subduing the other rulers and establishing the legitimacy of their power. The temples were seen as symbols of kings' authority and legitimacy to rule. Thus, new ruler destroyed the symbolic temples as a sign of his victory and after assuming his regime used to rebuilt or reconstruct the temple to mark his authority and sovereignty. The temples were also plundered during the war and the images of the deities were purged to mark the victory of the ruler. In what follows an attempt is made to highlight such instances of the destruction of Hindu temples by the local rulers themselves. These historical evidences support us to assume that the destruction and plunder of the temples denoted the authority of the conqueror.

Richard M Eaton has highlighted such instances of temple destruction by local rulers.² He notes that the local traditions have it that in 642 AD the Pallava king Narasimhavarman I took the image of Ganesha from Vapati the Chalukyan capital which was brought back by the Chalukya king Vinayaditya some fifty years later. Likewise, the Rashtrakuta king Govinda III in the 9th century was presented by several images by the Sri Lankan king on the event of his occupation of Kanchipuram and Govinda installed these images in his Shiva temple³. Another king Pandyan Srimara Srivallabha invaded the Sinhala kingdom around the same time brought a golden image of Buddha from the Sinhalese Jewel Palace. During the 11th century the activities of King Harsadeva provided another pattern of demolishing and looting the temples as he intended to overcome the fiscal crisis by these riches which led Kalhana a contemporary historian, to call him a *turuska*.⁴ Likewise the destruction and desecration of temples of the defeated capitals by Chola king Rajadhiraja and Harsha of Kashmir are well recorded events of Indian history.

After looking into the details of these accounts of temple destruction one can easily infer that the local rulers destructed and looted the temples during war as well as to gain the political patronage from another ruler. And they also purged the precious icons and materials for economical gains. In light of above it is safe to infer then that the destruction of the temples of the opponents and particularly those patronized by the defeated king was common practice among the local Hindu kings. Besides these we find multiple records of the destruction and desecration of the Jain and Buddhist temples during the early medieval period. It seems that above and beyond the religious animosity and hostility the destruction of royal temples was carried by the invading kings to mark their victory and authority.

² Richard Maxwell Eaton, *Essays on Islam and Indian History* (Oxford University Press, 2000), 106.

³ Sunil Kumar, *Demolishing Myths Or Mosques and Temples?: Readings on History and Temple Desecration in Medieval India* (Three Essays Collective, 2008), 34.

⁴ Kalhana. *Rajatarangini*, (Eng,trans) vol. 7, p.1095, 1149, vol 8, p.3346

1.2. Temple Destruction by Muslim Rulers

A thorough analysis of the destruction of temples instances by Muslim rulers as well as the consideration of construction and repair of the Hindu temples by them is helpful and much needed to appreciate the nature of Hindu Muslim relations that expanded our more than a millennia.

As far as the earliest instances of temple destruction by the Muslims are concerned the first such occurrence is recorded from the time of Muhammad bin Qasim in case of Sindh which was followed by a repair and construction record. So after the consolidation of his power in Sindh he wrote to Hajjaj about the demand of Brahmans to restore and rebuild their temple on which he was replied with the following:

“..... That we do not have any other right on them except *Jizyahh* and when they have become *dhimmi* we cannot interfere in their lives and properties. They are allowed to worship their God and you may not check any of them in their ways (of their worship and religion).”⁵

The next most significant and popular instance of destruction is recorded from the time of Mahmud Ghaznavi. Interestingly all of the historians of India have studied and discussed the 17 attacks of Mahmud Ghaznavi and his plunder and loot. There is a kind of consensus among the historians that Mahmud has unduly attacked and sacked the Hindu Temples and cities and that he plundered the most famous temple of Somnatha. But scarcely any historian has recorded or discussed the reasons that led to such rapid attacks of Mahmud on the various small kingdoms of Indian subcontinent. It is worth considering historical question that these expensive and hazardous attacks of Mahmud were only motivated by his desire to plunder and destruction of Hindu temples alone? To answer this we find that the account of Farishta of the Ghanavid raids very helpful. He narrates that Mahmud’s father Supuktagin and Hindu Shahi king Jaipal had fought many wars and that Jaipal after entering in a treaty for peace later on after the death of Supuktagin repudiated from the conditions of peace that resulted in war between Mahmud the newly enthroned young prince. Jaipal was defeated and enslaved by Mahmud and after he was released by Muslim prepared a pyre for himself and burnt himself alive according to Frishta it was because the Hindus believed that if any Hindu ruler was defeated and enslaved by Muslims was not able to rule them, and this sin was atoned only by fire so.⁶

Later on Sukhpal known as Nawasa Shah, who was grandson of Jaipal and had revolted and repudiated from conditions of peace. Anandpal son of Jaipal also made an alliance with seventeen other Indian states and waged a war against Mahmud Ghaznavi but was defeated and subdued.⁷ It is interesting to note that the much popularized seventeen attacks of Mahmud and his destruction of Somnatha were his response to these seventeen Hindu rajas that had made an alliance against him. So it was due to the repudiation of Hindu Shahi rulers from their treaty with Ghazni and the alliance of Hindu Rajas with Anand Pal to attack Mahmud that made him plan for next seventeen attacks. Such a trajectory of historiography has furthered the motif of destruction of Hindu temples by Muslim rulers.

Besides these very early and well recorded instances of destruction of Hindu temples we have some more records of destruction of Hindu temples during the early periods of war and consolidation of power of the sultanate period. But all instances of destruction are of the war

⁵ Al kufi, Muhammad Ali. Chachnama. ed., Nabi Bakhsh Baloach(.Sindh: Sindhi Adabi Board,dnm) , p.299

⁶ Frishta, Muhammad Qasim Hindu Shah, *Gulshan-i-Ibrahimi*, also known as *Tarikh i Frishta*.Lucknow: Nawal Kishore Press, 1865), P .91

⁷ Frishta, *Gulshan-i-Ibrahimi*, p. 91.

period we do not find destruction of temples a state policy of the Muslim rulers instead we have the records of repair and reconstruction and endowments to the Hindu temples during the long periods of peace and prosperity. A contemporary historian of Hindu Muslim relations Richard M It is pertinent to mention that among contemporary Indian historians Romila Thapar has dealt with the destruction of Somnath temple and has claimed otherwise regarding the Somnath temple that it was a relatively insignificant temple of medieval times. She mentions that local Indian accounts vary in their response to the destruction of Somnath. Jaina sources for instance take the incident as a victory of Jainism over Shavism and the supremacy of Mahavir over other Hindu deities. She further highlights that most of Sanskrit sources have ignored it and have not mentioned the Somnath plunder. Likewise, she highlights that Jain and Sanskrit sources are silent about Mahmud Ghaznavi's invasion. And the so-called memory of pain and devastation that is claimed today is political bias. She is of the view that indigenous sources did not consider this destruction as a major or noteworthy event. This can also be explained that since the temple destruction was commonplace during the wars and was part of political theory and practice the Somnath was no exception in such occurrences. Interestingly the local narratives however reveal the renovation and repair of Somnath and other temples that were undertaken by the muslim nobles and kings once these regions were annexed to Muslim capitals.⁸

Eaton believes that temple destruction by Muslim rulers throughout India was motivated by political and imperial concerns and was in no manner based on religious considerations. Usually, the temple destruction took place during the process of war and unrest. The pattern hitherto available in the claiming the victory of the king in India was to demolish the symbols of power. As per the Hindu political thought and practice that royal temple or those patronized by the king symbolized the power of King, destroying it was a sign of the humiliation and defeat of the king. It is in context of this Indian theory and practice that one needs to understand and interpret the instances of temple destruction and not that the Muslims being the iconoclasts were driven to destroy idols and temples as this approach can further not explain the instances of construction and repair of Hindu temples.⁹

Section Two: Narratives of Reconstruction of Hindu Temples

Such records of temple repair and reconstruction can be found in various sources, including contemporary chronicles, inscriptions, and historical accounts. Historical works that were compiled during the sultanate and Mughal period bear testimony to both destruction and construction of temples. Historians like Ziauddin Barani have recorded the details of endowments of Sultan Firoz Shah Tughlaq to Hindu Temples in his work "Tarikh-i-Firoz Shahi". Likewise detailed administrative documents of the Mughal period as well as historical works provide testimony of the temples and endowments made by Mughals. It is also interesting to note that the inscriptions on various temples also mention the endowment and construction record and provide details about the patronage of Hindu temples by various Muslim rulers. Likewise, we find that modern historians and researchers on the history of India have highlighted the instances of temple endowments and construction. It is important to note and understand the motifs of temple destruction and repair and construction in not considering the destruction was by Muslim or Hindu rulers themselves.

⁸ Thapar, Romila, Somnath: *The Many Voices of History* (New Delhi: Penguin Books, 2004), p. 112.

⁹ Eaton, Richard, (2008). "Temple Desecration and Indo- Muslim States", in *Demolishing Myths or Mosques and Temples*, Sunil Kumar (ed.), 93-95

2.1. Reconstruction and Repair during the Delhi Sultanate

Thus, we find abundant references of Hindu temple reconstruction during the Delhi Sultanate and subsequent Mughal periods in India. We find that Muslim rulers supporting the reconstruction of certain Hindu temples. Besides the political theory and practice the rulings of *Shari 'ah* was part of the practice in general and there are stances when Muslim rulers wanted to adopt some strict policies towards their non-Muslim subjects but the Muslim scholars stopped them from doing so and protected the rights of *ahl al dhimma*. Malik al Ulama Abdullah Ajothani stopped Sikandar Lodhi from destruction of temple and sacred lake in Thanesar because it was against the ruling of *Shai 'ah*¹⁰

The earliest occurrence of temple endowment is the Kavi plate from the Broach district Gujarat; the plate records a grant to lord Asramadeva and refers to Arabs as *tajikas* in the context of Sindh. The Rastrakuta kings of the ninth-tenth centuries had appointed a *tajikas* as governor of the Sanjan area of Thane District on the West coast, whose name is rendered as Madhumati, thought to be the Sanskrit for Mohammed since it was also rendered sometimes as Madhumada. He conquered the chiefs of the neighboring harbors for the Rastrakutas and placed his officers in charge of these areas. As governor, he granted a village to finance the building of a temple and the installation of an icon. Likewise the Muslim rulers of Multan and Mansura and Sindan allowed their non-Muslim subjects to practice their religion freely.¹¹ Muhammad bin Tughluq established contacts with Hindu religious thinkers¹², made gifts of one thousand cows to their cow centres, visited their temples, issued a *farman* for the construction of a new *basti upasraya* or rest house for monks and a *gow-math* cow temple, celebrated Hindu festivals,¹³ established in Awadha a colony known as *Saragdwari*¹⁴. Later on, the Mughal emperors continued the policy of religious freedom of their predecessors. According to the document available in the State Library of Bhopal, Babur left the following will to Humayun:

*"My son take note of the following: Do not harbor religious prejudice in your heart. You should dispense justice while taking note of the people's religious sensitivities, and rites. Avoid slaughtering cows in order that you could gain a place in the heart of natives. This will take you nearer to the people. Do not demolish or damage places of worship of any faith and dispense full justice to all to ensure peace in the country."*¹⁵

2.2 Reconstruction and Repair During the Mughal Period

It is pertinent to note that Mughals had adopted more inclusive policy towards their non-Muslim subjects. The temples of the Vrindavan and Mathura were nearest to Delhi the capital of Muslim rulers have record of continues patronage and support of Mughal rulers. There are dozens of documents that provide ample evidence of the political patronage and endowments of the Mughal rulers for these temples that were situated in the vicinity of their capital. These

¹⁰ Barani, Zia ud din. *Fatawa e Jahandari*. ed., A. Saleem Khan. (Lahore: Research Society of Pakistan, 1972), 216-217

¹¹ Mubarakpuri, Ather. *Hindustan me Arbon ki Hakumaten*. (Sakhar: Fikr o Nazar, 1987)

¹² Isami, 'Abd al-Malik. *Futūḥu's-Salāṭīn*, ed. A. S. Usha (Madras: University of Madras, 1948), p. 515.

¹³ Isami, *Futūḥu's-Salāṭīn*, p. 515.

¹⁴ Barani, *Fatawa*, P.485

¹⁵ Mehta, N. C. (ed. and trans.), *Farmān of Emperor Akbar to His Son* (Bhopal: Hamidia Library Manuscript Collection, first published in The Twentieth Century, 1936).

documents are well studied and discussed by Tarapada Mukerjee and Irfan Habib and there were researches presented by them about these documents.

According to the study of Mukerjee and Habib Akbar increased and consolidated all grants to temples and temple servants in the Mathura region by his *farmaans* (dated August 27, 1598 and September 11, 1598) in Vrindavan, Mathura and their environs. Jahangir not only continued these grants, he substantially added to these. Jahangir added at least two temples to the list of thirty-five already supported by Akbar's grant of 1598. In addition he provided 121 bighas of land for five families of temple *sevaks*. Jahangir also visited the Vrindavan temples in 1620. Similarly, Emperor Aurangzeb, while known for his more conservative policies also permitted the restoration and construction of certain temples under his rule.¹⁶

Beside the political patronage and endowment of the rulers for the welfare of their non-Muslim subjects during the Mughal period one finds positive attitudes of Muslim literati towards Hinduism. The Persian poetry of the period provides very interesting reflections in this regard. The Persian poetry is full of admiration and praise of those who are Hindus. Figures like Amir Khusraw Dihlawi¹⁷ praised Indians and their culture as well as their religious opinions in his *mathnawi*, *Nuh Siphir*¹⁸. According to Amir Khusraw though the Hindus have lost their way they are no exception as many other people have gone astray in the field of religion. He holds that the Hindu believes in the oneness and eternity of God and that he is the creator and all-knowing eternal God. Therefore, Khusrow declares that Hindus are better than those who believe in the eternity of the world *dahriyya*, the dualists or *thanawiyya*, the Christians who attribute to God spirit and progeny, and the star worshippers, who acknowledge seven Gods. Khusrow holds that for the things which the Brahmans worship, such as the sun, stones and various animals, they admit that these objects do not bear a likeness to God, but are rather a part of his creation. They worship them only because this is a part of the tradition transmitted to them from their ancestors.¹⁹

This broadmindedness is peculiar with the Persian poetry of the period and was very influential among the Muslim elites and rulers. Furthermore, Persian poetry has been an important medium of tolerance and coexistence in medieval Muslim literature of the subcontinent. Such a literature bore its impact on the policies of religious freedom and the mutual relations between Muslims and Hindus and other religious traditions. The Persian poetry of the period not only echoed with the ideal's religious freedom and co existence but appreciated the temples and the ways of devotion of the Hindus:

شعار ملت اسلامیه بگزرگر خوابی

که در دیرمغان آئی و اسرار نهان بینی²⁰

¹⁶ This joint venture of both scholars is a unique work that brings into light the nature of Hindu subjects and their temples during the Mughal period.: *Braj Bhūm in Mughal Times: The State, Peasants and Gosā'ins*

¹⁷ Abu al Hasan yamin ud Din Khusrow (1253-1325CE) better known as Amir Khusrow Dehlawi, whose ancestors hailed from Transoxiana A Sufi and a spiritual disciple of Nizamuddin Auliya, Amīr Khusrow was not only a notable poet but also a prolific and seminal musician. He wrote poetry primarily in Persian beside Hindavi for details of his biography see; Waheed Mirza. Ameer Khusru; Swaneh Umri (Book Home,2005)

¹⁸ *Nuh Sipehr* is the Persian Masnavi of Amir Khusrow in which he basically talks about the love, knowledge, beauty and manners of Hindustan and Hindus.

¹⁹ Delhawi, Amir Khusrow, *Nuh Sipehr*, ed. Muhammad Waheed Mirza (Calcutta,1950) p.165

²⁰ Orfī, Shīrāzī, 'Abd al-Rahmān, *Kulliyāt* (Tehran: Javaheri Vajdi Publications, 1980 CE), p. 152.

(Give up the path of Muslims; come to the temple, to the master of the wine house so that you may see the Divine secrets).

Besides appreciating the temple devotion, the Persian poetry used the metaphor of idol as the symbol of Eternal beauty and idolatry was used to refer to the love and adoration of the God. To the poets like Fayzi it is a matter of privilege to follow the path of Brahman and to love the idols:

شکر خدا عشق بتاں است ریبیرم
برملت برهمن و بردین آزارم²¹

(Thank God, the love of the idols is my guide, I follow the religion of the Brahman and Azar.)

Thus, in Persian poetry there is a mistaken attempt to relate the places of worship of different religions witheach other. Instead of any reference to the demolishing or destruction of the temples the Persian poets equated all the houses of worship as Orfi says:

چراغ سومنات است از آتش طور
باید زان بر جهت را نور در نور²²

(The lamp of Somnath is the same as the fire at the Sinai, Its light spreads everywhere)

This appreciation of Hindu symbols of worship, of their idols reveals another level of Hindu Muslim cultural relations and mutual interactions. The rhetoric of destruction can not be used to overwrite these historical records and cultural memories. There is a need to review the historical records and memories to understand the long-established contacts between the Muslim rulers and their non-Muslim subjects in the Indian subcontinent. These relations were also guided by Muslim political theory as well as by the rulings of Shariah.

Conclusions

To conclude it is important to accept that there are historical records to confirm that temple destruction took place during the times of war and conflict at the hands of Muslims during the various periods of history. A glance at contemporary historical sources helps us to understand that the temple destruction and plunder was a pattern of establishing the victory of the kings over the subjugated monarchs and their public that already existed in India prior to Muslim invasion. The generalization of temple destruction with the Muslim rulers can be a rhetoric for hate and communalism as we find that not all the Muslim rulers resorted to the pattern of temple destruction however there are multiple evidences of temple repair and construction by the early Arab governors and later on by Sultans and Mughal kings. They're existed multifaceted policies and attitude among the Muslim rulers towards Hindus and their temples. These were shaped by the nature of relationship that changed during the times of peace and war. Muslim rulers never adopted the destruction and demolishing of the temples and idols as a state policy however there are some instances where some rulers decided to take some strict measures towards their non-Muslim subjects but were opposed by their own Ulama as we have seen in the case of Sultan Skaindar Lodhi. Even the figures like Aurangzeb who are criticized for their conservative attitude have made endowments to selective Hindu temples. Finally, it is worth highlighting that integration of Hinduism in the concept of people of *dhimmah* and appreciation and understanding of Indian tradition as some revealed knowledge by Muslim scholars and existence of extensive intellectual materials unwrap the myth and rhetoric of so-called temple destruction and desecration by Muslim rulers.

²¹ Abū al-Fazl, *Ā'īn-i Akbarī*, vol. 1 (Lahore: Al-Faisal Publishers, 1978 CE), p. 499.

²² Abū al-Fazl, *Ā'īn-i Akbarī*, 1:499.

Recommendations and Suggestions

1. **Inclusion of Interfaith Harmony in Curriculum:** Introduce balanced educational content in schools and universities that presents Hindu-Muslim relations objectively and promotes values of tolerance, coexistence, and mutual respect.
2. **Restoration of Shared Cultural Heritage:** Launch joint public-private projects for the preservation and restoration of South Asia's shared heritage — including temples, shrines, and forts — to strengthen interfaith cultural harmony.
3. **Promotion of Positive Historical Narratives in Media:** Encourage media outlets to broadcast programs and documentaries that highlight the shared civilizational history of Hindus and Muslims, discouraging divisive or hate-based narratives.
4. **Establishment of Interfaith Dialogue Forums:** Create permanent interfaith dialogue platforms in collaboration with universities, research centers, and religious institutions to foster trust and correct historical misconceptions.
5. **Research Scholarships and Academic Collaboration:** Provide government-funded scholarships for research on South Asian religious history and Hindu-Muslim relations to promote unbiased, scholarly understanding and cultural empathy.
6. **Legal and Social Protection of Minorities:** Ensure strict implementation of laws safeguarding minority rights in Pakistan to reinforce social equality, religious freedom, and peaceful coexistence among diverse communities.



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