



By AMITA KANEKAR

Good Muslim, Bad Muslim

In the furor that followed the renaming of New Delhi's Aurangzeb Road, the long dead emperor has been enjoying some of the best press he has had for the past 100 years. While there were some critics who still clung to his standard demonical image, saying that the renaming has just given an evil man unnecessary publicity, or that there are even worse characters gracing Delhi roads, quite a few appear to have realised that he was not as bad as all that.

So, we are told, Aurangzeb did not actually destroy as many temples as he is supposed to have, did not slaughter Hindus as he is supposed to have, and did not forcibly convert millions. Scholars of Mughal history from all over the world have been petitioned, and they declare that Aurangzeb in fact supported more temples than he broke, broke only those belonging to political opponents, patronised the founding of some, and granted tax-free lands to other. Also that he employed a greater number of Hindu officers than any other Mughal ruler till then; plus that he did not remove the ban on cow-slaughter that his great-great-great-grandfather Babur had announced soon after conquering Delhi.

Aurangzeb thus turns out to be almost as 'great' as Akbar, a poster-boy of Indian secularism. For what more does today's India expect from its ancient rulers than protection of temple and cow? To be considered 'great' or 'good' or 'secular' in post-'47 India, one has to be pro-savarna. Cow and brahmin are of course pre-eminent savarna issues, while all big temples were always savarna establishments.

But somehow Aurangzeb still does not qualify. He was, according to some historians, the most law-abiding, hard-working and compassionate of all the Mughals; he also expanded the empire to its greatest limits. And yet, leave aside the BJP, even many anti-BJPites and admirers of Akbar would hesitate to credit Aurangzeb with greatness. Why this discrimination? No, it is not because of his rebellion against his father and his murder of his brothers; that was the norm those days. It's because of his 'fanaticism'. Aurangzeb was a religious fanatic, says almost every shade of Indian opinion today. But what they mean by this is simply that he was a devout Muslim.



Akbar was not, which is a big reason for his popularity. Akbar is less admired for his many military victories over the Rajputs than for his cultural alliance with them, adopting their attitudes to women (strict purdah and the banning of marriage for royal women) and of various Rajput kingly traditions like jharoka-darshan and publicly weighing himself in gold, besides cancelling the jizya tax, launching the translation of Sanskrit texts, condemning of education for 'low' people, and referring to sati as the ultimate test of love. Who benefited from all these savarna traditions? As a discussion on the Ambedkarite portal Round Table India (roundtableindia.org) once pointed out, the time of the 'secular' Akbar is also the time of brahmin saints like Tulsidas, while the time of the 'intolerant' Delhi Sultans is the time of the socially radical and non-savarna Kabir, Ravidas and Tukaram.

Like Akbar, Aurangzeb also gave up eating meat, but unlike him he is not admired or even remembered for this. But he is remembered, and condemned, for giving up wine and music—it is even declared, wrongly, that he declared a public ban on these. These personal austerities, like his condemnation of the glittering court and grand architectural works of his father Shah Jahan, and his decision to be buried in a commoner's tomb himself, are all, according to popular history, proof of his 'fanaticism', on par with his rejection of Rajput rituals and re-imposition of the jizya tax.

Yes, his taxes discriminated between Muslims and non-Muslims. But his jizya was not to be collected indiscriminately: the indigent, peasants suffering crop failures, and widows were all exempt—though brahmins as well—while poorer people were taxed less. Besides, he also cancelled about 80 other taxes because he found them improper according to Islamic law. It is another matter that, with the Mughal administration famously corrupt by then, many of his strictures were ignored. He also banned sati outright, unlike Akbar's wishy-washy rule that sati was fine as long as it was voluntary. Aurangzeb's was of course not the first ban of sati in South Asia; our very own Albuquerque had banned it in Goa a good 150 years earlier. But it is still something, anybody would say. Except our history textbooks.

Aurangzeb was a devout Muslim for whom brahmanical norms were of secondary importance. But devotion to Islam is considered fanaticism in post-'47 India, while devotion to brahmanical Hinduism, as was found among most of the Rajputs, is considered admirable,

even though this meant upholding caste and patriarchy, including practises like untouchability, sati, johar, and child marriage, many of which are crimes in today's world. API Good Muslim, Bad Muslim
Abul Kalam is considered a good Muslim by today's BJP, and Akbar by yesterday's Congress, for the same reason: their respect for brahmanical practises. While Aurangzeb remains a bad Muslim because, although he did fund some temples and mathas like most other South Asian kings, he made it obvious that he was personally unimpressed by Hinduism.

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