SEVENTEEN

# Cultural and Religious Developments

There was an outburst of many-sided cultural activity in India under the Mughal rule. The traditions in the field of architecture, painting, literature and music created during this period set a norm and deeply influenced the succeeding generations. In this sense, the Mughal period can be called a second classical age following the Gupta age in northern India. In this cultural development, Indian traditions were amalgamated with the Turko-Iranian culture brought to the country by the Mughals. The Timurid court at Samarqand had developed as the cultural centre of West and Central Asia. Babur was conscious of this cultural heritage. He was critical of many of the cultural forms existing in India and was determined to set proper standards. The development of art and culture in various regions of India during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries had led to a rich and varied development from which it was possible to draw upon. But for this, the cultural efflorescence of the Mughal age would hardly have been possible. Peoples from different areas of India, as well as peoples belonging to different faiths and races contributed to this cultural development in various ways. In this sense, the culture developed during the period was tending towards a composite national culture.

## ARCHITECTURE

The Mughals built magnificent forts, palaces, gates, public buildings, mosques, *baolis* (water tank or well), etc. They also laid out many formal gardens with running water. In fact use of running water even in their palaces and pleasure resorts was a special feature of the Mughals. Babur was very fond of gardens and laid out a few in the neighbourhood of Agra and Lahore. Some of the Mughal gardens, such as the Nishat Bagh in Kashmir, the Shalimar at Lahore, the Pinjore garden in the Punjab foothills, etc., have survived to this day.

A new impetus to architecture was given by Sher Shah. His famous mausoleum at Sasaram (Bihar) and his mosque in the old fort at Delhi are considered architectural marvels. They form the climax of the pre-Mughal style of architecture, and the starting point for the new.

Akbar was the first Mughal ruler who had the time and means to undertake construction on a large scale. He built a series of forts, the most famous of which is the fort at Agra. Built in red sandstone, this massive fort had many magnificent gates. For their forts, the Mughals drew on the developed Indian tradition of fort-building, such as the ones at Gwaliyar, Jodhpur, etc. The climax of fort-building was reached at Delhi where Shah Jahan built his famous Red Fort.

In 1572, Akbar commenced a palace-cum-fort complex at Fatehpur Sikri, 36 kilometres from Agra, which he completed in eight years. Built atop a hill, along with a large artificial lake, it included many buildings in the style of Gujarat and Bengal. These included deep eaves, balconies, and fanciful kiosks. In the Panch Mahal built for taking the air, all the types of pillars used in various temples were employed to support flat roofs. The Gujarat style of architecture is used most widely in the palace built probably for his Rajput wife or wives. Buildings of a similar type were also built in the fort at Agra, though only a few of them have survived. Akbar took a close personal interest in the work of construction both at Agra and Fatehpur Sikri. Persian or Central Asian influence can be seen in the glazed blue tiles used for decoration in the walls or for tiling the roofs. But the most magnificent building was the mosque and the gateway to it called the Buland Darwaza (the lofty gate) built to commemorate Akbar's victory in Gujarat. The gate is in the style of what is called a half-dome portal. What was done was to slice a dome into half. The sliced portion provided the massive outward facade of the gate, while smaller doors could be made in the rear wall where the dome and the floor meet. This devise, borrowed from Iran, became a feature in Mughal buildings later.

With the consolidation of the empire, the Mughal architecture reached its climax. Towards the end of Jahangir's reign began the practice of putting up buildings entirely of marble and decorating the walls with floral designs made of semi-precious stones. This method

of decoration, called pietra dura, became even more popular under Shah Jahan who used it on a large scale in the Taj Mahal, justly regarded as a jewel of the builder's art. The Taj Mahal brought together in a pleasing manner all the architectural forms developed by the Mughals. Humayun's tomb built at Delhi towards the beginning of Akbar's reign, and which had a massive dome of marble, may be considered a precursor of the Taj. The double dome was another feature of this building. This devise enabled a bigger dome to be built with a smaller one inside. The chief glory of the Taj is the massive dome and the four slender minarets linking the platform to the main building. The decorations are kept to a minimum, delicate marble screens, pietra dura inlay work and kiosks (*chhatris*) adding to the effect. The building gains by being placed in the midst of a formal garden.

Mosque-building also reached its climax under Shah Jahan, the two most noteworthy ones being the Moti Masjid in the Agra fort, built like the Taj entirely in marble, and the other the Jama Masjid at Delhi built in red sandstone. A lofty gate, tall, slender minarets, and a series of domes are a feature of the Jama Masjid at Delhi.

Although not many buildings were put up by Aurangzeb who was economy-minded, the Mughal architectural traditions based on a combination of Hindu and Turko-Iranian forms and decorative designs, continued without a break into the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Thus, Mughal traditions influenced the palaces and forts of many provincial and local kingdoms. Even the *Harmandir* of the Sikhs, called the Golden Temple at Amritsar which was rebuilt several times during the period was built on the arch and dome principle and incorporated many features of the Mughal traditions of architecture.

## Painting

The Mughals made distinctive contribution in the field of painting. They introduced new themes depicting the court, battle scenes and the chase, and added new colours and new forms. They created a living tradition of painting which continued to work in different parts of the country long after the glory of the Mughals had disappeared.

The richness of the style, again, was due to the fact that India had an old tradition of painting. The wall-paintings of Ajanta are an eloquent indication of its vigour. After the eighth century, the tradition seems to have decayed, but palm-leaf manuscripts and illustrated Jain texts from the thirteenth century onwards show that the tradition had not died.

Apart from the Jains, some of the provincial kingdoms, such as Malwa and Gujarat extended their patronage to painting during the fifteenth century. But a vigorous revival began only under Akbar. While at the court of the shah of Iran, Humayun had taken into his service two master painters who accompanied him to India. Under their leadership, during the reign of Akbar, a painting workshop was set up in one of the imperial establishments (*kārkhānas*). A large number of painters, many of them from the lower castes, were drawn from different parts of the country. From the beginning, both Hindus and Muslims joined in the work. Thus, Daswant and Basawan were two of the famous painters of Akbar's court. The school developed rapidly, and soon became a celebrated centre of production. Apart from illustrating Persian books of fables, the painters were soon assigned the task of illustrating the Persian text of the *Mahabharata*, the historical work *Akbar Nama*, and others. Indian themes and Indian scenes and landscapes, thus, came in vogue and helped to free the school from Persian influence. Indian colours, such as peacock blue, the Indian red, etc., began to be used. Above all, the somewhat flat effect of the Persian style began to be replaced by the roundedness of the Indian brush, giving the pictures a three-dimensional effect.

Mughal painting reached a climax under Jahangir who had a very discriminating eye. It was a fashion in the Mughal school for the faces, bodies and feet of the people in a single picture to be painted by different artists. Jahangir claims that he could distinguish the work of each artist in a picture.

Apart from painting hunting, battle and court scenes, under Jahangir special progress was made in portrait painting and paintings of animals. Mansur was the great name in this field. Portrait painting also became fashionable.

Under Akbar, European painting was introduced at the court by the Portuguese priests. Under their influence, the principles of

foreshortening, whereby near and distant people and things could be placed in perspective was quietly adopted.

While the tradition continued under Shah Jahan, Aurangzeb's lack of interest in painting led to a dispersal of the artists to different places of the country. This helped in the development of painting in the states of Rajasthan and the Punjab hills. The Mughal tradition of painting was, however, revived during the eighteenth century under the patronage of the successors of Aurangzeb.

The Rajasthan style of painting combined the themes and earlier traditions of western India or Jain school of painting with Mughal forms and styles. Thus, in addition to hunting and court scenes, it had paintings on mythological themes, such as the dalliance of Krishna with Radha, the *barah-masa* (seasons) or the *ragas* (melodies). The Pahari school continued these traditions.

## Language, Literature and Music

The important role of Persian and Sanskrit as vehicles of thought and government at the all-India level, and the development of regional languages, largely as a result of the growth of the Bhakti Movement, have already been mentioned. Regional languages also developed due to the patronage extended to them by local and regional rulers.

These trends continued during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. By the time of Akbar, knowledge of Persian had become so widespread in north India that he dispensed with the tradition of keeping revenue records in the local language (*Hindawi*) in addition to Persian. However, the tradition of keeping revenue records in the local language continued in the Deccani states till their extinction in the last quarter of the seventeenth century.

Persian prose and poetry reached a climax under Akbar's reign. Abul Fazl who was a great scholar and a stylist, as well as the leading historian of the age, set a style of prose-writing which was emulated for many generations. The leading poet of the age was his brother, Faizi, who also helped in Akbar's translation department. The translation of the *Mahabharata* was carried out under his supervision. Utbi and Naziri were the two other leading Persian poets. Though born in Persia, they were among the many poets and scholars who

migrated from Iran to India during the period and made the Mughal court one of the cultural centres of the Islamic world. Hindus also contributed to the growth of Persian literature. Apart from literary and historical works a number of famous dictionaries of the Persian language were also compiled during the period.

The number of Sanskrit works produced during the period is quite impressive. As before, most of the works were produced in south and east India under the patronage of local rulers, but the main centre was Banaras where scholars from different parts of the country used to congregate. A few works were produced by Brahmans employed in the translation department of the Mughal emperors.

Regional languages acquired stability and maturity and some of the finest lyrical poetry was produced during this period. The dalliance of Krishna with Radha and the milkmaids, pranks of the child Krishna and stories from the *Bhagawat Puran* figure largely in lyrical poetry in Bengali, Oriya, Hindi, Rajasthani and Gujarati during this period. Many devotional hymns to Rama were also composed, and the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* were translated into the regional languages, especially if they had not been translated earlier. A few translations and adaptations from Persian were also made. Both Hindus and Muslims contributed in this. Thus, Alaol composed in Bengali and also translated from Persian. In Hindi, the *Padmavat*, the story written by the Sufi saint, Malik Muhammad Jaisi, used the attack of Alauddin Khalji on Chittor as an allegory to expound Sufi ideas on the relations of soul with God, along with Hindu ideas about *maya*.

Medieval Hindi in the Brij form, that is the dialect spoken in the neighbourhood of Agra, was also patronised by the Mughal emperor and Hindu rulers. From the time of Akbar, Hindi poets began to be attached to the Mughal court. A leading Mughal noble, Abdur Rahim Khan-i-Khanan, produced a fine blend of Bhakti poetry with Persian ideas of life and human relations. Thus, the Persian and the Hindi literary traditions began to influence each other. But the most influential Hindi poet was Tulsidas who venerated Rama as a god and hero, and he used a dialect of Hindi spoken in the eastern parts of Uttar Pradesh. Pleading for a modified caste system based not on birth but on individual qualities, Tulsidas was essentially a humanistic

poet who upheld family ideals and complete devotion to Rama as a way of salvation open to all, irrespective of caste.

In south India, Malayalam started its literary career as a separate language in its own right. Marathi reached its apogee at the hands of Eknath and Tukaram. Asserting the importance of Marathi, Eknath exclaims: 'If Sanskrit was made by God, was Prakrit born of thieves and knaves? Let these errings be of vanity alone. God is no partisan of tongues. To Him Prakrit and Sanskrit are alike. My language Marathi is worthy of expressing the highest sentiments and is rich, laden with the fruits of divine knowledge.'

This undoubtedly expresses the sentiments of all those writing in local languages. It also shows the confidence and the status acquired by these languages. Due to the writings of the Sikh gurus, Punjabi received a new life.

## Music

Another branch of cultural life in which Hindus and Muslims cooperated was music. Akbar patronised Tansen of Gwaliyar who is credited with composing many new melodies (*ragas*). Jahangir and Shah Jahan as well as many Mughal nobles followed this example. There are many stories about the burial of music by the orthodox Aurangzeb. Recent research shows that Aurangzeb banished singing from his court, but not playing of musical instruments. In fact, Aurangzeb himself was an accomplished *veena* player. Music in all forms continued to be patronised by Aurangzeb's queens in the *haram* and by the princes and nobles. That is why the largest number of books on classical Indian music in Persian were written during Aurangzeb's reign. But some of the most important developments in the field of music took place later on in the eighteenth century during the reign of Muhammad Shah (1719–48) who was a great patron of music and musicians.

## Religious Ideas and Beliefs, and Problems of Integration

The Bhakti Movement continued apace during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Amongst the new movements was the Sikh

movement in the Punjab, and what is called Maharashtra Dharma in Maharashtra. The Sikh movement had its origin with the preachings of Nanak. But its development is closely linked with the institution of Guruship. The first four gurus continued the tradition of quiet meditation and scholarship. The fifth guru, Arjun Das, completed the compilation of the Sikh scriptures called the *Adi-Granth* or *Granth Sahib*. To emphasize that the guru combined both spiritual and worldly leadership in his person, Guru Arjun began to live in an aristocratic style. He erected lofty buildings at Amritsar, wore fine clothes, kept fine horses procured from Central Asia and maintained retainers in attendance. He also started a system of collecting offerings from the Sikhs at the rate of one-tenth of their income to promote the movement.

Akbar had been deeply impressed with the Sikh gurus and, it is said, visited them at Amritsar. However, a clash began with the imprisonment and death of Guru Arjun by Jahangir on a charge of helping rebel prince, Khusrau, with money and prayers. His successor, Guru Har Govind, was also imprisoned for some time, but he was soon set free and developed good relations with Jahangir, and accompanied him in his journey to Kashmir just before his death.

Guru Har Govind came into clash with Shah Jahan on a hunting incident. While the Emperor was hunting near Amritsar, one of his favourite hawks flew into the guru's camp, and his refusal to give it up led to a series of clashes. However, the matter was hushed up at the intervention of some well-wishers at the court.

A second conflict took place a little later when the guru's attempt to build a new city on the river Beas near Jallandhar was objected to.

A third conflict took place when two horses of 'surpassing beauty and swiftness' being brought to the guru from Central Asia were seized by the royal officials. A follower of the guru, Bidhi Chand, stole these horses and presented them to the guru. By this time the guru had a sizeable following, and in the series of skirmishes the guru acquitted himself well. The guru was supported for some time by a Pathan, Painda Khan. Ultimately, Guru Har Govind retired to the Punjab foot-hills and was not interfered with.

All these conflicts were of an 'inconsequential nature', according to the well-known historian, R.P. Tripathi who ascribes them to

personal and political factors rather than religion. The gurus assuming a rich lifestyle and being called *sachcha padshah* or 'true sovereign' by his followers does not seem to have been a cause of concern to the rulers because some of the Sufi saints led a rich life style, and were given similar titles by their followers to emphasise their spiritual eminence.

There was no atmosphere of confrontation between the Sikhs and the Mughal rulers during this period. Nor was there any systematic persecution of the Hindus, and hence, no occasion for the Sikhs or any group or sect to stand forth as the champion of the Hindus against religious persecution. Despite some display of orthodoxy by Shah Jahan at the beginning of his reign and a few acts of intolerance, such as the demolition of 'new' temples, he was not narrow in his outlook which was further tempered towards the end of his reign by the influence of his liberal son, Dara. Dara, the eldest son of Shah Jahan, was by temperament a scholar and a Sufi who loved to discourse with religious divines. With the help of the Brahmans of Kasi, he got the *Gita* translated into Persian. But his most significant work was an anthology of the *Vedas* in the introduction to which Dara declared the *Vedas* to be 'heavenly books in point of time' and 'in conformity with the holy *Quran*'. Thus, he underlined the belief that there were no fundamental differences between Hinduism and Islam.

Another saint, Dadu, born in Gujarat but who seems to have lived mostly in Rajasthan preached a non-sectarian (*nipakh*) path. He refused to identify himself with either the Hindus or the Muslims, or to bother with the revealed scriptures of the two, asserting the indivisibility of the *Brahma* or the Supreme Reality.

The same liberal trend can be seen in the life and works of Tukaram, the supreme exponent of Bhakti in Maharashtra at Pandharpur, which had become the centre of the Maharashtra Dharma and where worship of Vithoba, a form of Vishnu, had become popular. Tukaram, who states that he was born a shudra used to do *puja* to the god with his own hand.

It was not be expected that such ideas and practices would be easily accepted by the orthodox elements belonging to the two leading faiths, Hinduism or Islam, and thus give up the entrenched positions of power and influence which they had enjoyed for a long time. The

sentiments of the orthodox Hindus were echoed by Raghunandan of Navadwipa (Nadia) in Bengal. Considered to be the most influential writer on the *Dharmashastras* during the medieval period, Raghunandan asserted the privileges of the Brahmans stating that none other except the Brahmans had the right to read the scriptures or to preach. He ends by saying that in the *Kali* age there were only two *varnas*, Brahmans and Shudras, the true Kshatriyas having disappeared long ago and the Vaishyas and others having lost their caste-status due to the non-performance of appropriate duties. Ram Das of Maharashtra, who was later the spiritual guru of Sivaji, and who put forward a philosophy of activism, was equally vehement in assertion of the privileges of the Brahmans.

Among the Muslims, too, while the trend of *tauhid* continued apace, and was supported by many leading Sufi saints, a small group of the orthodox *ulama* denounced it, as also the liberal policies of Akbar. The most renowned figure in the Muslim orthodox and revivalist movement of the time was Shaikh Ahmad Sirhindi. A follower of the orthodox Naqshbandi school of Sufis which had been introduced in India during Akbar's reign, Shaikh Ahmad Sirhindi opposed the concept of pantheistic mysticism (*tauhid*) or unity of God and the created being, denouncing it as un-Islamic. He also opposed all those practices and beliefs which he held were due to the influence of Hinduism, such as the use of music in religious gatherings (*sama*), excessive meditation, visiting tombs of saints, etc. In order to assert the Islamic character of the state, he demanded re-imposition of *jizyah*, a stern attitude towards the Hindus, and the minimum association of Muslims with them. In order to implement this programme, he started centres and also wrote letters to the emperor and to many nobles to win them over to his side.

However, the ideas of Shaikh Ahmad had little impact. Jahangir imprisoned him for claiming a status beyond that of the Prophet and only released him after his retraction. Nor did Aurangzeb pay any special attention to his son and successor.

It will thus be seen that the influence of the orthodox thinkers and preachers was limited, being necessarily confined to narrow circles. Their chief hope was that their ideas would receive the support and backing of those who held positions of wealth and power in society

and the state. On the other hand, the liberal thinkers made their appeal to the broad masses.

The recurrent cycles of liberalism and orthodoxy in Indian history should be seen against the situation which was rooted in the structure of Indian society. One aspect of the struggle was between entrenched privilege and power on the one hand, and the egalitarian and humanistic aspirations of the mass of the people on the other.

The prestige and influence of the narrow, orthodox elements and their re-assertion of narrow ideas and beliefs was a barrier to the growing process of rapproachement and tolerance among the votaries of the two dominant religions, Hinduism and Islam, and a hindrance to the process of cultural integration. The clash between the two trends came to the surface during Aurangzeb's reign. However, the broad, liberal religious policy of Akbar was revived, and became the norm during the eighteenth century.