

The Making of a Modern Myth

Qutb Minar: Religion and Power in 13th-Century India

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I. Introduction

India is the world's largest democracy, and has the world's second largest population of Muslims. Over the last few decades, deep religious divisions have appeared between the Hindu majority and the Muslim minority, who comprise 12–15 percent of the population. Extremists in either community have stoked violent religious conflict in ways that will be discussed shortly. Most of the violence in recent history has occurred in the form of pogroms. Most of the victims are Muslims.

There are at least two critical threads that link contemporary anti-Muslim violence: first, a rising tide of Hindu nationalism. Second, much of the violence has been continuously stoked by rhetoricians' use of an exaggerated and distorted history of endless conflict between these two groups—especially during the period when Muslim political authorities dominated northern India (c. 1200–1750).

According to Hindu nationalists, the experience under the Muslims was oppressive, the Muslim rulers tyrannical, Hindu temples were destroyed, and so on. So the current anti-Muslim pogroms are payback, as the more extreme elements among the Hindu nationalists openly assert: attacking Muslims today is thus justified for what happened 500, 600, or 700 years ago.

Like many groups elsewhere in the world, Hindu nationalists invoke history. Irish Republicanism invokes battles that happened in 1690 and so on. Groups in the Balkans are another example: Serbs, Croats, and Bosniacs have their own histories, and the 1389 battle of Kosovo becomes a central rallying cry for Serbian nationalism. Payback is often the goal invoked.

Academics try to contest these narratives; in India this happens in pockets. But the fight is an unfair one, as the narrative starts with comic books, then continues in elementary schools, then in the universities. Exams are taught according to the books: even if the teachers are savvy and know better, they must teach according to the books. This history is configured around political, religious, and military sites invested with a holy status. The sites get associated with the worst acts of one's enemy or with the bravest of oneself.

The Qutb complex is such a site. As a map of the medieval Hindu kingdoms of the late 900s shows, South Asia—India, Pakistan, Bangladesh—was divided among dozens of kingdoms. The one based in the city of Delhi was not the most important, powerful, or wealthy. However, Delhi had some advantages: strategically located almost in the heart of India. Also, it was close to major agricultural regions which sweep eastwards from Delhi along the Ganges River, and sweep thenceforth south where they empty in the Bay of Bengal.

During this period, the processes of state formation in contemporary Afghanistan in the north and west are also visible, namely with the Ghaznavid Empire occupying Afghanistan, northern Iran, and parts of Pakistan. In about 1000 AD we can see the rise of this single Muslim kingdom through the conquest of dozens of smaller Muslim kingdoms. Originally, the Ghaznavids were Turks from central Asia who moved to Afghanistan in the 900s and consolidated themselves into the Ghaznavid state, which was ruled by the Ghaznavid dynasty.

As today, Afghanistan was relatively backward, falling between several more advanced powers. China was to the northeast, first under the Tangs and then under the Five Dynasties. To the south was South Asia. To the west was the Middle East, ruled by the Abbasid Caliphate. Afghanistan was backward, poor, yet still thriving. State formation in a place like that involves taking what one can from other people, poaching their resources and their men to build oneself up. Momentum builds over time in the same manner as investments that feed into other investments.

The Ghaznavids attacked India for three reasons: 1) it was internally divided; 2) it was rich; and 3) it was geographically close—separated from the Ghaznavid empire by a single mountain range.

India's kingdoms, rich and culturally vibrant, were at the center of the spice trade. A unified cultural or national consciousness didn't exist among the Indian kingdoms, and would not exist for some 700 years. Thus, India at that time was an attractive target. Attacking it was not about jihad or religious zeal; it was about resources. The Ghaznavids attacked South Asia to try to get its riches: South Asia was a honeypot. From about 1000 until 1192, various Muslim kings attacked India but never tried to create a system in which they asserted a stable dominance. This was not because they were unable to do this, but because they chose not to; rather, the system involved raids, then waiting a generation so that India's population would regenerate its resources, then more raids, and so on repetitively.

The main theater of military operations for the kingdom of Afghanistan was to the west: the Middle East. This is what they wanted to conquer and rule, not South Asia. The Middle East was the source of prestige as well: Damascus and Baghdad were in that direction. Status would be gained by controlling Iran, Iraq, and Turkey: these were the regions that counted. Ghaznavids would take resources from India and use the resources to fight other Muslims in the Middle East. Most of their battles were waged westwards, not eastwards. India was only a sideshow until the 1190s.

For complex reasons, the Ghaznavid dynasty collapsed in 1186, and the Ghurids took over. They broke into India and took Delhi and established Muslim rule from Delhi. Muslim rule continued there until the nineteenth century.

Yet northern India became a sideshow for the Ghurids as well, who, like the Ghaznavids, were more interested in attacking fellow Muslim regions to the west. The Ghurid king

Mohammed subcontracted field operations to a series of generals, all of whom were Turkish slaves. In this slave system, boys were purchased in small numbers, trained for twenty years to become soldiers, poets, and so on, and were married to the king's nieces, daughters, etc. The Ghurid king Mohammed ordered his slaves to take Northern India, divide it up, and rule it. However, this slave system was only stable for one generation. After one's master died, one had no allegiance to the master's son despite the latter's attempts to assert control over these slave Turkish commanders and their wealthy little kingdoms. The result of this system: by the 1220s there is a patchwork of Muslim kingdoms, at least half a dozen. One was based in Delhi.

II. The Qutb Complex The Qutb temple complex (*figure 1*) has two important features: the remains of a mosque, presently in ruins; and the massive minaret, 238 feet tall, about 370 steps (*figure 2*). The mosque was built in three stages, the first in the 1190s, immediately after the conquest of Delhi, and established by the Ghurid slave-general Qutb al-Din, who died 1206. He was a slave of Mohammed the Ghurid king, and he was the first to establish a congregational mosque on this site. The small, original, main mosque is still in existence. The crux of many of the issues surrounding this complex is the presence of reused building materials which were taken from Hindu temples in the form of column shafts, bases, and so on. Floral patterns and little animals are visible in the stonework (*figure 3*). Seemingly there was either a Hindu temple on this site destroyed by Qutb, or else various Hindu temples lay in ruins all over Delhi, and portions of these and were collected and reused. The mosque is built from spoilage, and built in a hurry.



Figure 1



Figure 2



Figure 3

The first mosque was only 249 by 149 feet—rather small. Contemporaneously, a three-storey minaret was built from sandstone; the rest was added later. The minaret's significance lay in two things: it was used for calls to prayer, and it was also used to celebrate Qutb's victory over Delhi. Was it a monument against the Hindus? Perhaps;

perhaps not. It was certainly designed to herald Qutb's rule, and perhaps, but not necessarily, Muslim rule.

The second phase of the mosque was constructed by Iltutmish, who died in 1236. He was a slave of Qutb al-Din, who, of course, was also a slave. Iltutmish expanded the complex in the 1220s. He quadrupled the size of his master's mosque and added height to the minaret/minar: he took it from three storeys to its present height of 238 feet. The third and final phase occurred in the 1310s. The person responsible for that addition made the mosque seven to eight times larger.

III: Studying the Qutb

The first detailed studies of the Qutb complex occurred under the British, who conquered Delhi in 1803, and had their archaeologists study it. Naturally, the use of Hindu and Jain materials in the mosque interested the British scholars. Was this material plundered, inverted, and defaced to make a statement about the Muslim conquest?

This is indeed the account that emerged in the nineteenth century in British history-writing: that Islam's victory over the Hindus had needed to be celebrated, and that this was the meaning of this mosque. The Muslims and Saracens were thought of as tyrannical and despotic by the British. An image of Islam as violent, savage, and destructive was part of the "master narrative."

However, I would argue that this has more to do with Britain's idea of dividing and ruling than with the historical reality of Muslim-Hindu contact. The British were new in the area in the nineteenth century and their message was, "Be grateful we are here: we keep the peace." This conflict-driven narrative is alive and well today, and it is fed by these iconic figures. A new name and identity/identification nicely served the goal of British control over the region. The new name for the temple complex now, in the nineteenth century, becomes Quwwat al-Islam, "the might of Islam." This name change feeds into the "master narrative." This mosque complex had never been called "the might of Islam" before this moment.

There have been three academic approaches to studying this:

- 1) The "Left-Secular approach"—watery, non-conflict-based, characterized as follows: "This re-appropriation of Hindu architecture is nothing significant."
- 2) The Marxist approach—Qutb is a sign of a rapacious estate that does not seem to distinguish between Hindu and Muslim motifs: the monument isn't about Hinduism or Islam, but about class domination, and the monument itself is a fig leaf covering the domination.
- 3) The Anthropological/Semiotic approach—the "native" idea that the dominant aesthetic of this complex is Muslim. This is then a Muslim conquest representing Muslim uniqueness. This approach is quite popular in the West.

These approaches are all problematic. A different analysis is required.

IV. The Qutb's Meaning: the 1190s

The political and historical context of the complex produces better explanations than the three approaches above. Two main periods are involved: the 1190s and the 1220s.

Delhi was not the most important city in northern India during Qutb's lifetime. At that time, there were six major garrison towns. Qutb al-Din was one of six generals, and he was not the most important of them. In the 1100s, each Muslim ruler, Turk, and slave declared his own superiority over the other Muslim rulers. Qutb's authority needed to be expressed not against Hindus but against the other slave Turk generals, for this was an intensely competitive environment, politically and militarily: the generals fought a great deal and killed each other: Delhi emerged at the end of the period as the dominant city largely because Qutb killed everyone else. The second way he won was through propaganda wars. Propaganda is conducted through texts and through monuments. Qutb built a mosque to proclaim his piety and virtue against other slave Turk generals. His piety deserves allegiance: this is the message. The inscriptions do not say that Qutb slew the Hindus; rather, they proclaim his piety. Most are in Arabic. His primary target in the inscriptions was other Muslims. He felt the need to make these statements and he had a deep desire to appear as a good Muslim, in India and outside India.

This monument speaks to a deep inferiority complex on the parts of these Turks, for they were recent converts to Islam; they had come to Islam late, only in the ninth and tenth centuries. They were Muslims, but their understanding of what Islam meant was patchy at best. One way that these recent immigrants were insulted was via ridicule of their appearance. Broad stereotypes were bandied about—for instance, that the Turks were smelly and not good Muslims. Qutb and the other slave commanders felt this deeply, this sense of not being good enough, and building such monuments became a way of telling others to look at their piety. They were in competition with the Abbasids, among others.

Not surprisingly, Qutb was not the only person making claims to piety like this. Smaller minars were built all over northern India, and congregational mosques too.

Several considerations help us fine-tune our understanding of this situation:

- 1) Muslims were deeply divided when they came to India. They were not identical automatons like the Borg from Star Trek.
- 2) The reality of incredibly weak power requires attention. Muslim power was restricted to these garrison towns; villages had no Muslims. Taxes were paid this way: military men lived in fortified castles and periodically rode out to engage in physical coercion to take taxes.

3) These messages were not geared toward Hindus but toward Muslims. One of our understandings of Hinduism is that it is different today from what it was 1000 years ago. Since the nineteenth century we see Hinduism as coherent, with central texts and sages. A thousand years ago, aside from a small group of upper-class Brahmins who shared texts and outlooks, the masses did not think of their religion as a single, shared system of beliefs and values.

Where are the Hindus in this “master narrative”?

1) Hindus were artisans in the mosque. We know this from graffiti in its niches and corners: we have their voices coming from the stone itself. There is no evidence of rancor at the use of Hindu temple materials in the mosque. The graffiti instead often praise the employer for giving employment to the artisan. Aside from temple graffiti, Jain and Sanskrit literary sources say very little about the building of the mosque, although they do curse Turks and Yavanas who came in and destroyed other temples.

2) The armies conquering northern India were tiny. Most of these individuals were not Muslims. The foot soldiers were non-Muslims, even if the army was called the Army of Islam. Rewards were given and the soldiers were coopted.

3) Coinage: coinage is a new regime’s most important statement of power. When new conquering regimes arrive, they never leave the old coins in place, but melt them down or restrike them. Yet no attempt was made to alter the weight and purity of these metals. And the inscriptions that were embossed on the new coins are puzzling. They feature the Hindu goddess of wealth, Lakshmi, and also Shiva: this appears to be a religiously schizophrenic coin system sending images of continuity.

The 1220s brought about a second major reconstruction at the temple complex. An event outside India is key to understanding this reconstruction, namely the Mongol conquest of central Asia. The Mongols were a pastoral people who wanted land for their horses and flocks. When they encountered cities, they destroyed them. The Muslims in Central Asia thought of these people as uncouth, dirty barbarians, and killed Mongol ambassadors. In the 1220s the Muslims fled Iran, Central Asia, and Afghanistan. Some moved west to Baghdad; some moved east into India—a massive influx into these new Muslim-controlled states in India. (This was during the second reconstruction of the temple complex.) The central event was the Mongol push.

Infidels have to be killed: this is now the new heightened rhetoric. Have the Hindus risen up? Not at all. No, it is possible that the Mongols were the target of this new rhetoric. Iltutmish (d. 1236) rebuilt the Qutb temple and fought Mongols who tried to invade India every year, from the 1220s to the early 1300s. They destroyed Central Asia and Iran, and were breaking into China. Only one region survived: Delhi. Delhi survived for three reasons: first, Hindu collaboration with Muslims occurred; second, Mongol horses died off in India since they cannot stand the heat; and third, India was rich enough to defend itself.

Anxiety against Mongols is written as anti-infidel rhetoric now, but this was misinterpreted by the nineteenth century British scholars as being anti-Hindu.

Between the 1220s and 1260s when the Mongols invaded about forty times and were repelled each time, the Muslims in north India felt pretty great, for although Samarkand was destroyed, and many other Muslim kingdoms were destroyed, nevertheless Delhi was fine.

Sources increasingly start to refer to Qutb as Qubba al-Islam, the Sanctuary of Islam, rather than Quwwat al-Islam, the Might of Islam. It is a sanctuary against the Mongols. The British bastardize “Quwwat” into “Qubba.”

A new historical narrative slowly began to appear. A unitary homogenous narrative arises: complexity is written out, internal unity is written in. Qutb became a key element in this “master narrative,” which was appropriated by Hindu nationalists.

(A recent tourism promotional clip, with a British narrator, reflects the “master narrative.”)

Summary by Timothy Doran.