

Religion and Statecraft in Eighteenth Century Jaipur

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Abstract: This paper delves into the rich religious landscape of Jaipur, founded by Sawai Jai Singh in 1727 CE. It highlights the revival of Vaishnavism during this period under the head of Sawai Jai Singh thereby impacting the religious and cultural identity of both Sawai Jai Singh and Jaipur City i.e. a Hindu ruler and a Hindu city. The paper also discusses his influence on the Mughal emperor Mohammad Shah leading to the abolition of pilgrimage and bathing taxes on non-Muslims. The paper also explores the multiple vistas of the Jaipur city as it very neatly intertwines religion and governance, a facet very meticulously explored and incorporated by Sawai Jai Singh in his statecraft.

Jaipur city was founded by Sawai Jai Singh in 1727 CE. From the day of its inception till this day, the city has been widely studied with themes running into political, social, economic and even cultural domains. Though all aforementioned aspects have generated multitude of historical interpretations, it is the religious profile of Jaipur

City which is a subject of exclusive study. In this paper efforts have been made to look into the understanding of the religious setup of 18th century Jaipur.

Since the 18th century Jaipur city saw the revival of Vaishnavism, an aspect which is associated with the contributions made by Sawai Jai Singh, many scholars visualize him as a Hindu king and represent Jaipur city as a Hindu city. Jadunath Sarkar in his analysis of Sawai Jai Singh and his rule, postulates that the ruler played a very significant role in influencing Mughal emperor Mohammad Shah, to abolish Jaziya or Poll-tax on non-muslims. Similarly, the onus of imperial abolition of certain other taxes like pilgrim tax and tax levied on Hindus for bathing at certain holy places lies with Sawai Jai Singh. Jadunath Sarkar also provides references of numerous lands and properties being purchased by Sawai Jai Singh, in many religious places like Mathura, Vrindavan, Banaras, Ayodhya and others for building of serais (rest houses) with free kitchen for the comfort of travellers. He performed the Vajapeya and the Ashwamedh sacrifice.

Due to many such efforts, Sawai Jai Singh has been portrayed as a defender of Hindu faith. But V.S. Bhatnagar remarks that, 'in his religious ideas Sawai Jai Singh though a devout Vaishnavite was a liberal in true spirit of a Hindu and showed reverence for other religions also.' However, V.S. Bhatnagar also articulates that even though Sawai Jai Singh wanted to establish parity among different religions through his religious reforms, the ruler, 'throughout his long reign, made an unceasing effort to encourage the vedic learning and to revive the vedic sacrifices.'

Monika Horstmann, through her study of religious reforms and vedic rituals undertaken by Sawai Jai Singh, portrays him as 'the perfect Hindu king and the saviour of

the cosmic order.’ Her study of vedic rituals undertaken by the ruler, led her to coin a new term i.e vedic vaishnavism. Monika Horstmann states that Sawai Jai Singh manifested a close association between vedic practices and the newly framed ideology of reformed Vaishnavism. Several documentary references from the Kapad Dwara corroborate that Sawai Jai Singh did indeed make it binding upon the followers of Vaishnavism to ascribe to Vedic principles in totality. Due to these reforms, practitioners of different bhakti sects, across India thronged the capital city of Jaipur. Horstmann regards ‘the construction of the temple of Govinddevji (Lord Krishna) in the precinct of the royal palace as an important element in the articulation of Hindu kingship by Sawai Jai Singh.’

In comparison to the previous historical portrayals of Sawai Jai Singh and related notion of Hindu Kingship, R.P Bahuguna presents a different hypothesis. He asserts that during the high time of Mughal period (16th-17th century), many Rajput rulers were appointed in different parts of Mughal empire’s territorial space and therefore they used to celebrate festivals and religious ceremonies, away from home, in their camps and other temporary abodes, but in the 18th century, as the Mughal empire weakened, many of these rajput rulers and other chieftains, shifted back to their native lands and evolved various new and alternate forms of legitimization. Some of the prime endeavours being the construction of temples, engaging in distribution of land grants and introducing rituals based on shashtric and vedic notions. R.P. Bahuguna asserts that though ‘Sawai Jai Singh tried to impose the norms of vedic-shashtric religion on the religious groups that were regarded as deviants and also tried to enforce the rules of varna and Jati as sanctioned in Brahmanical legal literature, there is no reason to believe

that such attempts were always successful.' However, in regards to the 18th century Rajput states, R.P. Bahuguna states that, 'the eighteenth century Rajput states may at best be regarded as experimenting with different forms of 'Hindu kingship', in which the brahmans played a crucial role both as ritual specialists as well as political actors.'

As we try to understand the Jaipur state's religious notions, it becomes apparent that there can not be any homogenous portrayal of the religious domain of Jaipur as it comprised of different faiths. The notional Hindu identity was formed of numerous religious identities like Vaishnavism, Shaivism, Shakti cult and others. Many non-Brahmanical Hindu as well as non-Hindu faiths like Ramanadis, Vairagis, Laltapanthis, Dadupanthis and Islam, Jainism, Christianity also flourished in the state. The prevalence of a plethora of varied forms of religious identities in Jaipur makes it essential to evolve an understanding of the ways through which the state expounded and advanced its political and religious ideology.

An engagement with the outlook of different Kachhwaha rulers brings out the fact that all the Jaipur rulers championed the popularity of specific deities and did everything to propagate them. Prior to Sawai Jai Singh's rule, Shila Devi was patronized by the Amber rulers. Man Singh I is renowned to have brought the idol of Shila Devi all the way from Bengal. Earlier the Jamwai Mata (local Goddess) cult was followed by the Kachhwahas. The predominant worshipping of female deities proves that the Jaipur rulers had strong allegiance to Shaktism. Infact, Sawai Jai Singh's father Vishnu Singh was a devout shakta and had taken diksha from a celebrated shakta acharya of south India.

It is a well documented aspect that the Kachhwaha

clan traced their descendance from Kush, the son of lord Rama, thereby leading them to have strong affiliation towards Rama bhakti. Sawai Jai Singh also acknowledged his strong faith in Lord Rama, due to familial associations. But some scholars also relate this to his close relation with Ratnakara Pundrik, who was a religious guide cum philosopher to Sawai Jai Singh and was a devout worshipper of Rama. On the account of these connections, it is apparent that Sawai Jai Singh at first was inclined to the bhakti of Rama and several works collected for and by him show his interest in Lord Rama's Cult. However, things started shifting during the tenure of Sawai Jai Singh as he showed strong leaning towards a specific krishna bhakti cult.

After years of devotion shown towards Lord Rama by him and his family, an incarnation of Vishnu, what led Sawai Jai Singh to switch over to worshipping Lord Krishana, another form of Vishnu, is an aspect worthy of study. During his visit to Vrajamandala in his early age Sawai Jai Singh had become interested in the life of Krishna. Afterwards, when he stayed at Mathura and Agra as governor, his contacts with the influential exponents of Gaudiya sect attracted him very much. He, therefore, developed his interests in the studies of Gaudiya literature and found delight in compiling and collecting important works dealing with the principles of this sampradaya.

Though, he believed in the Gaudiya sampradaya of the Vaishnavism yet he aimed to establish a uniform outline of the ways through which the remaining three sampradayas ie. Nibarak, Ramanuja and Vallabha could work in harmony with Gaudiya sampradaya. As a mark of creating uniformity, it is seen that though Sawai Jai Singh, followed Gaudiya sect devotedly and even established the temple of the Govinddev in Jaipur, the famous temple sites

of the other three sects namely Parashurandwara of Nimbark sect, Galta of Ramanuja sect, and Gangori bazaar and Brahmpuri of Vallabha sect, also flourished unhindered during his tenure.

Sawai Jai Singh in his attempt to liquidate the differences among them tried to make certain customs and practices binding for the practitioners and followers of all cults. These state sanctioned principles of worship were based upon Sawai Jai Singh's meticulous reading of Vedic dharmasutras and other related literature. Jai Singh asked Hari Krishna Mishra, a Karnataka scholar to write a treatise on the coordination of the vedic and Vaishnavite ways of worship.

Before understanding the ways through which Sawai Jai Singh articulated his religious conception, it is essential to take note of the ideas which dominated his religious vocabulary and how he himself not only tried to learn but also adhered to and made efforts to make them acceptable to all. He undertook the task of collecting and translating a large body of literature related to Vedic beliefs and practices. The same have been preserved in the pothikhana (library) of the Jaipur state. The specified literary works were collected from far and wide, especially from Ujjain, Ayodhya, Varanasi. Sawai Jai Singh was deeply influenced by Vaishnava philosophy that ultimate reality can be attained through three attributes i.e. karma (action), gyan (knowledge) and bhakti (devotion) and therefore he commissioned the explanatory treatises on these discourses by Krsnadeva Bhattacharya of Chaitanya sect and Balakrsna Bhatta of Vallabhacharya sect.

Apart from promoting scholarly works, Sawai Jai Singh himself authored some works like Siddhanataikya-prakasika, in his attempt to understand the path of

achieving the highest form of spirituality. This information is also substantiated through sammatipatras (bond) maintained in the Kapad Dwara documents. In one sammatipatra from Vrindavan Das to Sawai Jai Singh, it was mentioned that 'Vyas-Sutra Bhashya has been completed by him. Further it was requested that Nimbadiya Bhasya, written by him, should be elucidated by the Maharaja with his (the writer's) consent.' Tridandiji in a letter to Sawai Jai Singh 'agrees with him that the text written by ancient acharyas should be looked into and all controversies should be removed sincerely.' The collection of vedic literature and dharmasutras undertaken by Sawai Jai Singh was encouraged by many of his contemporaries. Shyama Charan Sharma in a sammatipatra stated that, 'Srimad Bhagavata is the real commentary of the Brahmasutra, though these sutras are not commented upon serially. Also, the commentary should be based on the tika by Sridhar Swami and the Bhagavata Sandarbha.'

Having addressed the notional frames through which Sawai Jai Singh developed his religious perceptions, it is crucial to look into the ways through which they were implemented and justified. Sawai Jai Singh set about claiming a ritualistic base for his rule, by performing several vedic sacrifices and yajnas. Interestingly, he not only pursued them but also tried to introduce his state officials as well as subjects to them through policies and regulatory orders. Sawai Jai Singh also showed a keen interest in the recording the tirthas and the pilgrimages. His pothikhana had a vast collection of maps of religious places. He got maps of holy places like Varanasi, Braj and Ayodhya painted on the walls of Bhojanshala or dinning hall of his palace. Sawai Jai Singh also tried to regulate the religious engagements of the

mass of his city though things were not made binding on the people.

From the above discussions it can be concluded that Jaipur city apart from being the administrative and commercial center of power, was also developing as a sacred city. However, these acts of Jaipur state cannot be seen in isolation, as such phenomenons, where rulers had put emphasis on religion and ritualistic practices as a tool for legitimization, were also going on in other parts of Rajasthan and across India at that time period. It can be asserted that Sawai Jai Singh, did try to promote the Hindu faith as its ardent follower, but he never let his religious approach hinder his political rulership.

Endnotes:

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The Gaudiya sampradaya/ sect traces its origin to Chaitanya who was born in 1486 C.E. in Navadvipa (Bengal). Due to his charming personality as a child he was given the epithet of Gaura and Gauranga which continued throughout his life. Chaitanya dedicated his entire life to the devotion of Krishna.

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