



# Tales of Pluralism: The Legacy of Sultan Zain-ul-Abidin in Kashmir.

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**Abstract:** This study delves into the legacy of Sultan Zain-ul-Abidin in Kashmir, focusing on his reign as a beacon of pluralism and religious tolerance. The transitional period during the reign of Sultan Sikandar had caused socio-cultural shifts in the society, leading to the rise of the local Sufi order as a response to the alienating policies of that time. Sultan Zain-ul-Abidin's rule marked a unique phase where social harmony and stability were perfected over a half-century. His policy of universal brotherhood, equality, and religious tolerance set him apart, making him a torchbearer of a new age.

Amidst the broader historical context of Muslim rule in India and religious persecution in Europe, Zain-ul-Abidin's reign stands out as a period of remarkable tolerance. He promoted the idea of equality among his subjects regardless of caste, creed, or faith, nurturing a liberal and humane outlook. His approach was influenced by factors such as his upbringing, interactions with local Sufi scholars, and his stepmother's religious influence. His court physician, Shiva Bhatt, further fueled his commitment to religious freedom. Zain-ul-Abidin's policies aimed at restoring confidence among non-Muslims were evident through his restoration of temples, abolition of discriminatory practices, and participation in Hindu festivals. His efforts to rehabilitate his Hindu subjects included allowing them to return to their faith, reconstructing temples, and promoting their cultural practices. Despite criticisms from some quarters, Zain-ul-Abidin's legacy remains a testament to his enlightened approach to governance and his ability to balance his own religious convictions with a commitment to pluralism.

**Key Words:** Kashmir, Sultan Zain-ul-Abidin, religious tolerance, pluralism, social harmony, liberal policies.

## 1. INTRODUCTION:

The era of Sultan Sikandar marked a period of significant change. The societal and cultural landscape was undergoing a shift. The ulema, or religious scholars, advocated for a specific social structure where they held a primary role, while the aristocracy played a secondary role. However, this arrangement didn't yield the intended outcomes during Sultan Sikandar's rule. This model didn't align with the native intelligentsia's preferences, and they resisted conforming to the extent that their own existence was jeopardized. This segment of society voiced their sentiments, leading to the emergence of a local Sufi order. Various factors contributed to the establishment of this Sufi order.

Consequently, Sultan Sikandar began to alter his approach towards the end of his reign. Ali Shah later adopted a similar policy, but its outlines were discernible primarily during the rule of Zain-ul-Abidin. This made his reign distinctive. The turbulence in the social structure gradually subsided, and Zain-ul-Abidin's fifty-year rule perfected the system. This period can be seen as one of maturity, explaining why Zain-ul-Abidin held a prominent position among his contemporaries. Beyond his material and cultural accomplishments, his policy of promoting universal brotherhood, human equality, and religious tolerance alone validates this assumption. A comparative analysis of different eras makes it clear that he can be regarded as a trailblazer of the new age.

A comprehensive examination of the history of Muslim rule in India reveals that although Muslim rulers in general adopted a conciliatory stance towards their non-Muslim subjects due to political considerations, certain restrictions were nonetheless imposed on them, especially during the rule of fervent leaders like Firoze Shah Tughlaq (1357-1388 A.D.) and Sikandar Lodi (1489-1517 A.D.). Measures such as the imposition of the Jizya and the pilgrimage tax were introduced. Non-Muslim subjects were prohibited from wearing luxurious clothing, riding horses, and possessing advanced weaponry. They were also forbidden from openly practicing idol worship and were restricted from constructing or reconstructing temples near Muslim areas. According to Srivastava, their testimony in courts for cases involving Muslims was not accepted, denying Hindu subjects equal status with their Muslim counterparts.



In contrast, the situation in Europe was more severe, where the church held both temporal and spiritual authority. In many European countries, the state was subordinate to the church, and failure to use its institutions for promoting the state religion was considered a sin. Even after the Reformation, when church power diminished, rulers still claimed divine right as heads of both church and state. Common religious standards were seen as supporting political authority. Following the Reformation, Roman Catholics, who constituted the majority of the population under Protestant rulers, faced penalties for their faith. They were excluded from prominent positions and often treated as outsiders in their own countries. Even in England, which was emerging as a global power, Roman Catholics faced unfavorable conditions. Queen Elizabeth imposed fines on Roman Catholics who abstained from the Protestant church.

In contrast to this, Zain-ul-Abidin, a man of elevated ideals and a creative mind would never have considered discriminating against his subjects based on caste, creed, colour, or faith. His sincere efforts aimed to instill confidence in them and allow them to practice their own faith if they chose, while also reviving their religious practices without infringing on the rights of Muslims. He was himself a devout Muslim, diligently observing religious duties, praying, fasting during Ramadan, and holding deep respect for Islamic scholars, regarding them as his "guides and mentors." He retained the position of Shaikhul-Islam and received the title of Naib-i-Amir-ul-Mumineen from the Abbasid Caliph of Egypt.

However, Zain-ul-Abidin's progressive mindset was not a mere whimsical inclination of a carefree ruler, but rather the logical consequence of a mind that was open and respectful. According to Dr. Zutshi, "it was by no means a case of the abandoning of fanaticism or a conversion to liberalism of a political strategist but a gradual evolution of a noble and perceptive mind increasingly sharpened by every wave of wholesome influence" Numerous combined factors played a role in shaping this remarkable monarch into a liberal and humanitarian ruler.

Zain-ul-Abidin inherited the ethos of liberalism from his predecessors like Shahmir and Qutub-ud-Din, and even to some extent from his father Sultan Sikandar, who later had to adjust his policies due to changing circumstances. However, this shift was just an experiment and was eventually discarded by Sultan Sikandar himself, as evidenced by his abolition of the Jaziya tax in the final days of his reign. The truth is, any form of fundamentalism never truly suited the inherently liberal nature of Kashmiris. Recognizing this, Zain-ul-Abidin delicately embraced a policy of openness and tolerance toward his subjects. Furthermore, the role of Shoba Devi, Zain-ul-Abidin's stepmother, in nurturing his character cannot be underestimated. She was a virtuous woman with a strong religious inclination, and her influence instilled a sense of tolerance in Zain-ul-Abidin toward his subjects. Similarly, Zain-ul-Abidin delved into the depths of Islamic philosophy under the guidance of Maulana Kabir, a knowledgeable scholar of the time. Maulana Kabir significantly contributed to shaping Zain-ul-Abidin's liberal and compassionate perspective. It was through his teachings that Zain-ul-Abidin overcame the biases of his era.

Most notably, the impact of local Sufi scholars and devout individuals sculpted his character, and he emerged as a leading figure. Shaikh Noor-ud-Din, the founder of the local Sufi order known as the Rishi order, deeply influenced Zain-ul-Abidin. He held a multifaceted prominence in Kashmir, being revered by all regardless of faith. Among local Muslims, he was hailed as Shamsul-Arifin (the eminent saint), while the other community regarded him as an incarnation of Lord Buddha, referring to him as Seha-Janand (the Blissful). A contemporary historian considered Noor-ud-Din as "the preeminent sage of his time," which is intriguingly significant as the historian never thought to mention prominent Muslim figures of that era.

Noor-ud-Din was born in the village of Kaimuh in 779 (1377-78 A.D.). His parents, Salar'd-Din and Sadra, who were originally Hindus, embraced Islam through the guidance of a Sufi named Yasmien. Noor-ud-Din emerged as a significant mystic, and his teachings reveal that his transition to a mystical life was not a random event, but a result of deep conviction. Right from his early days, Shaikh Noor-ud-Din displayed no inclination toward worldly matters. By the age of thirty, he fully renounced worldly pursuits and withdrew to a secluded cave for meditation. Initially, he sustained himself on wild vegetables, and eventually, he reduced his diet to just a single cup of milk. Ultimately, he subsisted solely on water.

Noor-ud-Din's message was straightforward, emphasizing comprehensive understanding, love, and harmony among all segments of society. He was troubled by the division prevailing on social, economic, and religious grounds. While the caste-based structure of Hindu society had disintegrated, Brahmins still upheld their elevated caste status. Conversely, the Muslim society did not have this element, but foreign scholars who arrived in Kashmir during the relevant period were culturally sophisticated and enjoyed political privilege. This led to the development of a sense of superiority among them, with local masses being labeled as uneducated. They sought a special status, exhibited actions that demonstrated their perceived superiority, and regarded others as inferior.



The Shaikh referred to these so-called higher caste individuals as being unkind. It was particularly on the social front that Shaikh Noor-ud-Din prevented the fast-growing Muslim society from succumbing to caste divisions. He cautioned his contemporaries through these verses:

Distinction enjoyed the genealogy of Qureish  
Yet the Abu-Lahab and Abu-Jahal are the sons  
of the same clan.

However, his message was not confined to a particular class or religion, but addressed to mankind as a whole. He believes that:

We belong to the same parents  
Then Why this difference?  
"Let Hindu and Muslim (together)  
Worship God alone.

In another place he writes:

We entered this world as partners; we should have shared our joys and sorrows together."

He strongly condemns those forces that have created divisions within society. He highlights, "Even between two children from the same parents, among Hindus and Muslims, they sowed the seeds of hatred. How can the Lord be pleased with them?"

Similarly, due to his progressive ideas and his unwavering opposition to discriminatory policies, Noor-ud-Din was arrested and held in custody. Shaikh Noor-ud-Din passed away on 26 Ramzan, 842 (March 12, 1439), at the age of sixty-three. He was laid to rest in the village of Charer. Sultan Zain-ul-Abidin personally accompanied the funeral procession to the grave, symbolizing the reverence he held for the saint. This demonstrates how Shaikh Noor-ud-Din contributed to shaping the inclusive policies of Zain-ul-Abidin, who aimed to reconcile conflicting groups and unite them on common ground.

The influence of the court physician Shiva Bhatta also played a significant role in fostering liberalism within Zain-ul-Abidin. Jonaraja provides a detailed account of this incident. In the early days of Zain-ul-Abidin's rule, he suffered from a malignant boil on his forearm. Despite attempts by various Muslim physicians, none could cure him. Consequently, after an extensive search, a Hindu physician named Shiva Bhatta was discovered, and he successfully treated the Sultan. In gratitude, Zain-ul-Abidin offered Shiva Bhatta a substantial sum of money and other gifts, which Shiva Bhatta declined. While Jonaraja's account does not specify the exact reason for his refusal, Persian sources suggest that Shiva Bhatta asked for the rehabilitation and restoration of his fellow Hindus who had suffered under Sikandar and Ali Shah as compensation for his services.

Eventually, Shiva Bhatta earned the trust of Zain-ul-Abidin and became an esteemed minister. The Sultan sought his counsel on crucial matters. Upon Shiva Bhatta's demise, it is said that the Sultan distributed a significant sum of money in his memory.

## **2. Reconstruction of Faith among Non-Muslims :**

An overview of the global situation, especially in Asia, helps us better comprehend the enlightened role of Zain-ul-Abidin in terms of the socio-religious reforms he initiated to restore the confidence of non-Muslims. On a global scale, brutal wars were waged with the aim of attaining the title of Ghazi or martyr. Even the renowned conqueror Timur acknowledged that his purpose in invading India was to cleanse the land of infidels. After the sacking of Delhi, he resorted to a reign of terror, leading to massacres of the populace and the enslavement of women and children, who were either converted to Islam or kept as slaves. According to Malfuzati-Timuri, on that day, a hundred thousand infidels were slaughtered. The severity of Timur's actions led some Rajputs to immolate their wives and children.

In contrast, Zain-ul-Abidin earnestly worked to improve the condition of his kingdom by restoring and rehabilitating his Hindu subjects, aiming to alleviate their past suffering. He began this effort by granting complete religious freedom and declaring that "everyone is free to practice their faith as they have been educated." He subsequently called upon all Hindus who had fled to Jammu and Kishtwar to return, a call that received a positive response as Brahmins started returning to their homeland. The Sultan made vigorous endeavors to support their rehabilitation. Some were given residence within temples, deserving individuals received land assignments, and others were granted stipends and land without rent.

He took a bold step by allowing Hindus who had previously converted to Islam under duress to return to their original faith if they so wished. Nizam-ud-Din stated, "Most of the Brahmins who had converted to Islam during the reign of Sikandar reverted back," and the Muslim scholars had no authority over them. Hence, it is evident that while global conflicts often aimed at imposing religious conversions through force, Zain-ul-Abidin's approach was characterized by tolerance and a sincere endeavor to restore and rehabilitate the non-Muslims in his realm.



Even though Jonaraja and Srivara do not mention this particular aspect, we find confirmation of this truth in a local Persian source that laments the revival of customs among non-Muslims during Zain-ul-Abidin's reign that had been extinguished during Sikandar's rule. These customs gradually gained popularity, to the extent that even Muslim scholars, ulema, and Qazis began to adopt them without hesitation. This transformation was undoubtedly a result of the Hindu's return and reconversion. Zain-ul-Abidin annulled all oppressive and discriminatory laws enacted in the past. In the words of Jonaraja, "he preserved the good usages of Kashmir (i.e Hindus) even as physician helps our digestive functions by medicine". They were now allowed to apply tilak on their foreheads, dress according to their traditions, and educate their children as they deemed fit. The Sultan made special provisions to encourage Hindu learning and culture. Allegedly, during Sikandar's reign, Hindu religious literature was either burned or taken away by Hindus themselves. Under Zain-ul-Abidin's rule, these texts were procured and distributed at state expense to learned Hindus in their original Sanskrit form and to Muslims in Persian translations for study. As a result of these efforts, "one hears", writes Srivara, "the pure and beautiful Dharmashastra recited, and holds the impression of colours and acts according to its injunctions". The king himself, interested in Hindu philosophy, studied works like the Nilamatapurana and Gita Govinda, which he had translated into Persian. Additionally, he prohibited cow slaughter, as well as the killing of birds and fish in Hindu sacred springs. He abolished the cremation tax imposed on non-Muslims. He also gradually stopped the debasement of currency; the indiscriminate conversion of idols into coins made of varying degrees of metal fineness, and ordered that coins be made of pure copper. While Jaziya, a tax on non-Muslims, was imposed during Sikandar's reign at a rate of two silver pals, Zain-ul-Abidin retained it, albeit at a significantly reduced rate of one silver mash. An inquiry arises here as to why, as an enlightened and benevolent king, Zain-ul-Abidin didn't entirely abolish this tax. A modern scholar supports Zain-ul-Abidin's policy by stating that he retained a nominal Jaziya amount out of respect for the sentiments of the ulema, not wanting to offend them.

However, this argument is problematic, as Zain-ul-Abidin had already alienated the ulema and orthodox Muslim community due to his keen interest in reviving Hindu practices, allowing reconversion, restoring dilapidated temples, and participating in their festivals. In reality, the retention of Jaziya wasn't a matter of sentiments or opinions. According to a modern scholar, "it was entirely driven by Zain-ul-Abidin's strong belief in creating the semblance of an Islamic state where all enjoyed equal rights," since even the substantially reduced Jaziya amount was never collected during his rule.

Zain-ul-Abidin enthusiastically promoted efforts to rejuvenate Hindu religion and traditions, yet unfortunately, he allowed the cruel and inhumane practice of sati to persist. Abolishing this practice would have been relatively easy, particularly as it didn't seem to have much support from Kashmiri Hindus. Srivara's observation affirms this, as he notes, "there (in Kashmir) according to the custom of the distant countries, females immolated themselves in the pyre of their beloved and were not forbidden by the king "(Zain-ul-Abidin). Although discontinuing sati would have been a significant service to humanity and likely garnered him more honor and credit, it can be deduced from this instance that Zain-ul-Abidin was averse to intervening in his subjects' religious matters, even in the slightest way. This tarnished his image of a liberal and ideal ruler.

### 3. Restoration of Temple structures :

In his commitment to religious tolerance, Zain-ul-Abidin undertook substantial efforts to restore the sacred sites of worship for Hindus. A Persian chronicler attests, "All the temples and idol houses that were destroyed during Sikandar's reign were repaired and reconstructed by Sultan Zain-ul-Abidin." Sanskrit sources also support this claim, with references in Jonaraja's works to the Sultan constructing temples in newly established cities like Zajnagar and Siddhapuri. Srivara, while praising Zain-ul-Abidin's exceptional dedication to rebuilding Hindu places of worship, remarks, "The king made this land like a heaven by adorning it with Viharas and villages given to Brahmans, with monasteries which help in the performance of pious acts, and with hermitages where the inmates have not to labour

Zain-ul-Abidin didn't merely permit his non-Muslim subjects to celebrate their social and religious festivals; he actively engaged in their festivities and undertook pilgrimages to their shrines. Detailing the Sultan's involvement in Hindu festivals, Srivara recounts, "Every year on the day of Nagayatra and Ganachakra, the Sultan participated himself and fed the devotees for five days with rice, meat, vegetables and fruit or food. On the last day Sultan dismissed the devotees after presenting them with quilts money and other things". The Sultan also engaged in the festival of lamps, a celebration held in honor of the legendary birth of the Jehlum river. Seated in a boat on the river, he spent the entire night listening to songs and observing the worship performed by the citizens. He also took part in the Chitra festival, an event marked by grandeur and extravagance in the spring season. On this occasion, he visited various locations to witness the flower displays, as well as to enjoy the music and dancing.



#### 4. Putting an end to Discriminatory Practices :

Zain-ul-Abidin, often rightfully referred to as a precursor to Akbar, didn't implement reforms merely for show; his reforms were deeply rooted. During previous reigns, the court was dominated by foreign ulema, and the Hindu community was relegated to a secondary status. Zain-ul-Abidin disapproved of this religious-based discrimination, leading to a broadening of court etiquette with a sense of fairness and equality. This shift allowed for the inclusion of numerous skilled and talented individuals in the ruling elite. Consequently, non-Muslims once again felt secure in their homeland. Prominent figures among them included Shiva Bhat (Shri-Bhat), who served as the Superintendent of the Court of Justice, Karpur Bhatt, the court physician, and Rupya Bhatt, the royal architect. Alongside these figures, there were numerous lesser-known Hindus mentioned in local Persian chronicles as "groups of non-believers and polytheistic communities" who received "benefits" from the Sultan.

#### 5. Conclusion:

The legacy of Sultan Zain-ul-Abidin, known as the "Budshah of the masses," in the region of Kashmir stands as a testament to his enlightened rule and commitment to religious pluralism. Zain-ul-Abidin's reign marked a significant departure from the oppressive religious policies of his predecessors, particularly Sultan Sikandar, who had enforced harsh measures against non-Muslims. Zain-ul-Abidin's era was characterized by a transformative period of social and cultural change, influenced by the emergence of Sufi orders that sought harmony and inclusivity. Zain-ul-Abidin's policy of religious tolerance was a defining feature of his reign. Unlike many rulers of his time, he aimed to foster a sense of unity and brotherhood among his subjects, regardless of their faith. He extended freedom of worship and participation in religious practices to both Muslims and non-Muslims. The Sultan's commitment to this cause was evident in his efforts to rebuild temples and restore sacred places of worship that had been destroyed during previous reigns.

Comparisons with other rulers, such as Akbar the Great, reveal the uniqueness of Zain-ul-Abidin's approach. While Akbar is lauded for his religious tolerance, Zain-ul-Abidin's situation was distinct. He did not need to revolutionize a deeply discriminatory system, as was the case in India. Instead, he aimed to restore the pre-existing tradition of religious coexistence in Kashmir that had been disrupted by previous rulers.

Zain-ul-Abidin's policy of religious toleration and his commitment to inclusivity and social harmony have earned him a place of reverence in history. His enlightened views and actions were ahead of his time and have left a lasting legacy. His reign serves as a reminder that leaders who prioritize unity, respect, and the well-being of all their subjects contribute significantly to the progress of societies and the preservation of cultural diversity. The story of Zain-ul-Abidin's reign in Kashmir remains an inspiring example of how leadership rooted in compassion and tolerance can positively shape the course of history.

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