



CAN TEMPLE DESECRATION BE RATIONALIZED? A CRITIQUE OF RICHARD M. EATON

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In his article ‘**Temple Desecration and Indo-Muslim States**’ published in the book *Demolishing Myths or Mosques and Temples? Readings on History and Temple Desecration in Medieval India* edited by Sunil Kumar, Richard M. Eaton provides a hypothesis in order to rationalize temple desecration in medieval India by Indo-Muslim rulers, their field commanders and governors. In his article he writes that there were only 80 known instances of temple desecration and destruction recorded in the Persian sources that he has used to construct his hypothesis.¹

According to Eaton’s hypothesis not all temples but only royal temples of Hindu rulers which according to him were political institutions that gave legitimacy to the Hindu raja’s rule were targeted for desecration or destruction when Muslim rulers conquered non-Muslim kingdoms.² The reason Eaton gives for this phenomenon is that Hindu rajas had a shared sovereignty with deities patronized in royal temples.³ Field commanders, governors or Sultans destroyed royal temples which housed the state deity in order to delegitimize the Hindu ruler’s authority. The image of the deity housed in the royal temple was the protector of the king and the kingdom. By destroying the image of the state deity and the royal temple they ended the conflation between the former Hindu ruler and his sovereignty over his kingdom.⁴ Eaton also writes that temple desecration occurred only during military conflicts when Indo-Muslim states expanded into non-Muslim domains⁵ and justifies his hypothesis by writing that temple desecration occurred “on the cutting edge of a moving military frontier”.⁶

He also writes that once the territory of a Hindu raja became a part of an Indo-Muslim State the temples lying within that territory were treated as state property and were protected⁷ unless a non-Muslim officer in an Indo-Muslim state rebelled against the ruler. In that case the temple associated with that officer was desecrated or destroyed.⁸

In this way Richard M. Eaton provides a rationale for temple desecration and concludes by writing that there was a rational basis behind temple desecration in medieval India and only selective temples were vulnerable to attacks and that all temples were not destroyed by Muslim rulers.⁹

¹ Richard M. Eaton (2008), ‘Temple Desecration and Indo-Muslim States’, in Sunil Kumar, ed., *Demolishing Myths or Mosques and Temples? Readings on History and Temple Desecration in Medieval India*, p. 106.

² Ibid., pp. 103-104.

³ Ibid., p. 108.

⁴ Ibid., p. 109.

⁵ Ibid., pp. 108-109.

⁶ Eaton, ‘Temple Desecration’, p. 106.

⁷ Ibid., pp. 112-113.

⁸ Ibid., p. 114.

⁹ Ibid., pp. 121-123.



However the hypothesis presented by Richard M. Eaton does not appear to be true if one reads older books like M.S. Commissariat's monumental three-volume *A History of Gujarat and Indian Architecture (Islamic Period)* by Percy Brown.

When one reads these books one finds that temples lying within Indo-Muslim states were not always protected or treated as state property. In fact one finds evidence of Hindu and Jain temples being demolished in order to be used as building materials for the construction of mosques and other Islamic structures.

The earliest evidence of this practice is given by Percy Brown when he writes that the Quwwat-ul-Islam Mosque situated in the Qutb complex in Delhi was constructed by demolishing 27 temples of the former city of Qila Rai Pithaura by the Slave Sultans of Delhi.¹⁰

Further evidence of this practice is found in Volume I of M.S. Commissariat's monumental work *A History of Gujarat* where the author writes that the Jama Masjid at Cambay built in 1325, the Jama Masjid at Bharuch built in the first half of the fourteenth century, Masjid of Hilal Khan Qazi at Dholka built in 1333, the Old Jama mosque at Dholka built in 1361 and the Ravali masjid in Mangrol built in 1386 were all constructed from the spoils of Hindu and Jain temples¹¹ and this is evident if one examines the architectural details of the Quwwat-ul-Islam Mosque in Delhi¹² and the Jama Mosques in Cambay, Bharuch, Dholka and Mangrol.¹³

All the above mosques, namely, the Quwwat-ul-Islam Mosque at Delhi built by the Slave Sultans of Delhi and the mosques in Gujarat built by the Tugalak Sultans of Delhi were constructed from spoils of Hindu and Jain temples when both Delhi and Gujarat had been fully integrated into the Delhi Sultanate. Then how can Richard M. Eaton write that temples lying within the domain of Indo-Muslim states were protected monuments.

We have further evidence of peacetime temple desecration from Volume II of M.S. Commissariat's monumental work *A History of Gujarat* which deals with the period of Mughal rule in Gujarat.

In this volume Commissariat writes about the desecration of a Jain temple of Chintamani-Parsvanath built by the Jain magnate Shantidas Jawahari who was also the first *Nagarsheth* of Ahmedabad by Prince Aurangzeb in 1645 when he was the Subahdar of Gujarat.¹⁴

According to Commissariat the account of its desecration by Aurangzeb is recorded in the *Mirat-i Ahmedi* of Ali Muhammad Khan as well as given in the travelogue of the French traveler, M. de Thevenot who visited Ahmedabad in 1666.¹⁵ He says:

“Ahmadabad being inhabited by a large number of heathens, there are Pagods or idol-temples in it. That which was called the Pagod of Shantidas was the chief, before Aurangzeb converted it into a mosque. When he performed that ceremony, he caused a cow to be killed in the place, knowing very well that, after such an action, the gentiles, according to their law, could worship no more therein. The inside roof of the mosque is pretty enough, and the walls are full of the figures of men and beasts; but Aurangzeb,

¹⁰ Percy Brown (1956), *Indian Architecture (Islamic Period)*, p. 10.

¹¹ M.S. Commissariat (1938), *A History of Gujarat*, Vol. I, pp. 63-74.

¹² Brown, *Indian Architecture*, p. 10.

¹³ Commissariat, *A History of Gujarat*, Vol. I, pp. 63-74.

¹⁴ M.S. Commissariat (1957), *A History of Gujarat*, Vol. II, pp. 140-141.

¹⁵ Commissariat, *A History of Gujarat*, Vol. II, p. 141.



who hath always made a show of an affected devotion, which at length raised him to the throne, caused the noses of all these figures, which added a great deal of magnificence to that mosque, to be beat off".¹⁶

Now the temple described above was neither a royal temple housing a state deity nor did its desecration occur during a military conflict between an Indo-Muslim ruler and a Hindu raja. It was a temple of a Jain merchant of Gujarat, Shantidas Jawahari, which was desecrated by Aurangzeb when Gujarat was fully integrated into the Mughal Empire.

Therefore, from the evidences of temple desecration and temple destruction cited above one can conclude that Richard M. Eaton is wrong in stating that they occurred "on the cutting edge of a moving military frontier".¹⁷ Nor does the figure 80 cited by him appear to be correct because Percy Brown and M.S. Commissariat cite many more instances of temple desecration and destruction which Eaton has overlooked in his essay. The above evidences also prove that his hypothesis of selective temple desecration i.e. only royal temples housing state deities were vulnerable to attack by Indo-Muslim rulers is incorrect; the evidence of this is provided by the desecration of the temple of the Jain merchant of Gujarat, Shantidas Jawahari, by Aurangzeb in 1645. Moreover, the other part of the hypothesis that temples within the domains of Indo-Muslim states were treated as state property and protected is rebutted if one reads Percy Brown and M.S. Commissariat's works where it is written that Hindu and Jain temples were demolished for use as building materials for the construction of mosques even after a Hindu kingdom had been fully integrated into an Indo-Muslim state.

Thus, one can conclude that Indo-Muslim rulers and their field commanders and governors relentlessly desecrated and destroyed Hindu and Jain temples as and when they pleased and there was no selective temple desecration as stated by Richard M. Eaton in his hypothesis.

References

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3. —. *A History of Gujarat*. Vol. II. 3 vols. Bombay: Orient Longmans, 1957.
4. Eaton, Richard M. "Temple Desecration and Indo-Muslim States." In *Demolishing Myths or Mosques and Temples? Readings on History and Temple Desecration in Medieval India*, edited by Sunil Kumar, 93-139. Gurgaon, Haryana: Three Essays Collective, 2008.

¹⁶ Ibid., pp. 141-142.

¹⁷ Eaton, 'Temple Desecration', p. 106.