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## ISLAM IN INDIA

It is rather difficult in a short paper to present a sketch of the various aspects of Islamic civilization as it developed in Indian environment and to make the survey at the same time meaningful. I shall, therefore, refer only to some significant features of this civilization in order to illustrate the outstanding contours of that civilization in their historical setting.

It is sometimes claimed that Indo-Muslim culture as it developed in India was in form and content the same as Islamic civilization in any other part of the world, and that it is a "comprehensive, varied and an essentially integrated pattern" of Islamic civilization in general. This is not so. This civilization does contain elements adopted from older traditions—Mediterranean, Iranian and Arab—which went to give it a distinct form, but over it were super-imposed in this subcontinent, Hindu and Buddhist elements which produced a type much more complex and hybrid than is generally admitted. The essential ingredient, however, in the process of the formation of Indo-Muslim culture was the faith of Islam. This process of borrowing and assimilating, of remoulding and inter-weaving of older culture threads into the new pattern, resulted in a new cultural synthesis—"or as near a synthesis as generally occurs on the untidy stage of history". According to a tradition of the Prophet of Islam, Muslims were permitted to accept what was good in other traditions and reject what was bad from an Islamic point of view. In the new environment the absorption and assimilation of Hindu rites and practices was inevitable though these borrowings were covered with an Islamic patina. Side by side with this readiness to borrow and assimilate was found a stubborn desire to eliminate foreign modes of thought and foreign scales of values. Elements of material civilization as well as political institutions and administrative techniques were welcome; ideology, may be defined as "emotionally integrated collective ideas" whenever alien to cherished Islamic beliefs or norms of conduct was rejected. Usefulness remained the ultimate criterion of acceptability of foreign elements.



"All cultural developments stem from definite existential situations" and shape their contours as responses to them, and as means of satisfaction of the psychological, spiritual and material needs of a society at any given time. Any changes which came later were determined by changes in primary attitudes to life and the feeling that some aspects of the alien culture were not in keeping with the ethos of the adopting society. It would be a useful and interesting study to know how and when different cultural elements mingled and fused into basically new ways of acting and feeling; the relation between the different facets of our culture and the attempt at reconciling the emerging pattern with the extreme religious consciousness and the ever-present desire to conform to the strait narrow path of *shariat*. The joy of life and the desire to exact the maximum out of it, the economic strains and stresses, the hide-bound social institutions which had outlived their utility and their rationale and the evident disparity between the ideal and the actual practice will be strikingly evident in this study. One might well ask as to whether the basis of this culture was spiritual or material, and the question will be difficult to answer. The study of the geology of this civilization resolves itself into a study of a society "where diversity of background on the one hand and the unity of current political and cultural institutions on the other were both marked, a society in which men consciously tried to create a new world out of the materials of the old". While the pious tried to make Muslim society follow the traditional pattern of Islamic society, ignoring the nature of the encounter between the two alien civilizations and the antagonisms which this confrontation created, the kings and their courts evolved a new view of life, a new code of political behaviour necessitated by the sullen resistance of the conquered people and created its material coordinates to fit in the prevalent alien environment. It was the ruling class which played a decisive role in evolving a composite culture in the conquered countries and the *ulema* who tried to maintain the essentially Islamic character of the Muslim community.

When we talk of our 'Cultural Heritage' the first problem naturally is that of understanding the term "culture" and its contents. Man is essentially a social animal and his gregarious instinct compels him to live in society. It is here that he finds the means of self-discovery and of the full flowering of his personality. He develops in society certain beliefs and modes of behaviour, rites and ceremonies, dogmas and sanctions which are subordinate to the art of self-discovery and the permanent search for the contact with the Divine. The term 'culture' is in



ordinary parlance used as synonymous with good taste and refined manners. It is also used for those material coordinates which embody good taste and refinement. When we speak of the architectural monuments of Muslims in our country, their paintings and works of art, the musical tradition developed by them, the minor arts which embellished life and contributed to that gracious living which is associated with them, we are speaking of Muslim culture. Our collective institutions, political and educational, our code of laws, and the elaborate system of ultimate ends or norms of life are comprehended in this elusive term, culture. Those ideas and beliefs, those norms or standards of perfection, those ultimate moral values by which we judge every object, every action, every principle of life, or briefly "the sense of ultimate values which a certain society has and according to which it wants to shape its life" constitute the rich contents of culture.

The term 'Civilization' in its literal sense means those things that have to do with life in the 'civitas' or city. Civilization has further been defined as "an attempt to outwit nature, to lift man out of the normal setting in which he is one of a host of animals struggling to survive.... It is created laboriously but each successive generation must be taught to accept it and to utilise it." Both the words 'Culture' and 'Civilization' are now used more or less as synonymous. Culture and civilization thus comprehend enlightenment and discipline acquired by mental and moral training. Taylor defined culture as "the list of all the items of the general life of a people, while civilization represents a higher standard of living in a material sense and sometimes proves to be an obstacle to cultural progress and is not always an ally. But sometimes an enemy of culture". Civilization has its origin in curiosity and physical necessity; culture is the unending quest for perfection.

Islamic culture is difficult to define. It is a state of mind stemming from the basic teachings of Islam—the belief in the oneness of God, unity of mankind and the dignity of man and personal responsibility for one's actions. To understand Islamic culture one has to understand the fundamentals of Islam.

Some writers deny the very existence of Islamic culture; others deny its any originality both in essence and basic structure. Both these views are based on a misreading of Islamic history and misunderstanding of the faith and what it means to a Muslim. Islamic culture, sober and practical, tried to harmonise the material and spiritual needs of an individual and the society to which he belonged. "The culture of Islam", in the words of Pickthall, "aimed not at beautifying and refining



the accessories of human life. It aimed at beautifying and exalting human life itself".

Islam in Indo-Pakistan subcontinent was introduced first in South India chiefly by Arab merchants and travellers who had had long and peaceful contacts with the peoples there much anterior to the appearance of Muslim armies, first in Sind and later in Northern India. This fact has been mainly responsible for the different forms which Islamic expansion in the subcontinent assumed, the nature of the reaction of the Indian people to it and the course of its subsequent development. In the South, Islam appeared not in the wake of armies but along with a mercantile community. It was received well and the small Muslim community that established itself there found an honoured place in its new environments. In Sind the Arabs followed a conciliatory policy and established a benevolent patriarchal government. But the Turkish invasions which started in the beginning of the eleventh century met with stout and determined, though ill-concerted and ill-organised, resistance. The Turks followed a more tough line than the Arabs towards the conquered people, but when their rule was stabilised and Hindu resistance whittled down their rule became more tolerant and accommodating. As in Sind so in India, political necessity, the disturbed conditions in Islamic hinterlands, political sagacity and the sobering, chastening influence of Islam dictated a policy of justice and fairplay. In most cases the lands of the Hindus were returned to them; their places of worships were respected, and members of the traditional ruling classes amongst the Hindus were associated with the administration whenever it was safe. The Turkish invasion, however, constituted in the words of the late Dr. Pannikar, "an overpowering onslaught on the religion of the Hindus such as India had never seen and has not yet quite forgotten or forgiven".

The establishment of Muslim rule in northern India is the turning point in the social, religious, and political history of this subcontinent. The isolation in which India had forced itself as a protective measure soon after the death of Harsha was broken and foreign contacts re-established. The thirteenth century saw the greatest and the most fearful of human tragedies — the irruption of the Mongols. The Turks saved northern India from the devastating flood of Mongol invasions. With the establishment of the Sultanate of Delhi in 1210 and subsequent expansion under the Khaljis and the Tughluqs, a certain degree of political unity was established and conditions created for the flowering of arts, letters and architecture. For more than three hundred years the Sultans of Delhi,



in spite of the wars of succession and the suicidal indiscipline of the army chiefs, in spite of the pressure on the western frontiers and the sullen hostility of the conquered people were able to hold politically and militarily their own and escape absorption into Hindu society on cultural and religious levels, unlike the Bactrian Greeks, the Huns, and the Shakas who had lost their identity as separate cultural units. This maintenance of identity was due to, firstly, the essential vitality of their advanced international culture, and secondly, because they maintained their social and cultural contacts with their coreligionists across the frontiers. The Sultans could not, however, because they had neither the inclination nor the opportunity and nor perhaps the ability, to convert the political unity which they had partially secured by force of arms into a national unity. It were the Mughals who made a bold attempt to revive the national unity of India, not only on political and administrative levels but on cultural level as well. In this they were "greatly helped by having before them three hundred years' history of the Delhi Sultanate, its failures as well as its successes". But the Mughuls failed in this bold adventure. The Muslim community remained a distinct entity. Muslim conquest in spite of its benevolent treatment of the conquered people had created a venom which the various Muslim governments had failed to take note of and paid the penalty for it.

The establishments of the Delhi Sultanate coincided with a period of trial and tribulations for the Muslim people all over the world. Internal commotions and external pressure on Muslim states, the decline of the Abbasid Caliphate, the sectarian and heterodox movements within the fold of Islam, the crushing weight of the Crusades in the West and the onslaught of the Mongols from the East, threatened to crush life out of the Islamic states. At this critical juncture in the history of Islam, when the Muslims of Central Asia were literally on the run, the Sultanate of Delhi supplied the rallying point and a haven of refuge for cultural forces of Islam. Lahore, Multan and Delhi became the centres of Muslim culture, attracting as they did the displaced scholars, saints, poets, generals, and statesmen from Central Asia's Islamic lands. The Delhi Sultanate in consequence "was almost automatically cast into the mould of the Eastern life and was patterned on their model.

After the decline of the centralised authority of the Sultans of Delhi in the 15th century, several independent states, Hindu and Muslim, were established in different parts of the country. These states were mutually hostile to each other and lacked political cohesion. The Mughuls who established themselves in Delhi in 1526 restored once again the political and administrative unity of India.



The appearance of the virile, vigorous Chagtai Turks on the scene in the early sixteenth century from the great human reservoir, Central Asia, and that steady fountain-head of Muslim strength and energy, gave a new lease of life to Muslim rule and a new vigour and vitality to Muslim community.

The Mughul conquest of India was a world event, and should be examined in relation to other contemporary events of world wide importance. The epoch in which Mughul empire was established was notable for the evolution of strength and order in Islam. The anarchy of early days gave place to order and stability which resulted in the creation of three great empires, so that the Muslim world became practically the Ottoman Empire, the Persian Safavi Empire and the Indian Mughul Empire.

With the coming of the Mughuls, Persian language and culture, Persian art and architecture began to exercise greater influence on the new Indo-Muslim civilization. After initial setbacks and resistance the Mughuls succeeded in consolidating their power. By the beginning of the 18th century the Mughul empire reached not only the zenith of its power and splendour "but also one of the peaks of generous imperialism known to history". The Mughul empire amongst the contemporary empires of the world was perhaps the greatest in respect of its extent, its wealth, its economic resources, its refinement and culture and above all the security of life and property and equality before law which the subjects, irrespective of race, colour and creed enjoyed. Its institutions, social, economic and political, had been evolved from the Persian, Turkish and Indian historical experience but the spirit that dominated it was that of Islam. A bold and noble attempt was made to blend the best elements of Islam and Hindu religions and civilizations, but this blending failed, as the attempt of the sufis had failed, to make a dent in the protoplasmic body of Hinduism.

"Mughul Civilization" writes Reincourt, "started in a dilemma and ended in the same unresolved dilemma; should it remain purely Muslim or should it be a synthesis of Islam and Hinduism? Should it remain true to the conquering civilization or attempt to blend the conqueror and the conquered? Swerving from one extreme to the other according to the personal whims of the various emperors, it was never able to make up its mind and failed to lay down one consistent, long-term policy".

Though the attempt at a synthesis between Islam and Hinduism in the field of religion failed, yet in other fields—literature, architecture, music, painting, dress etc.—the Islamic influence was remarkable and enduring. Interpenetrating of Islamic and Indian culture continued resulting in a cross fertilization of two great cultural units.



The Mughul conquest, expansion and consolidation was continued until by the time of Alamgir's death in 1707 the Mughuls had succeeded in establishing their rule over the whole of the country. But decline of the Mughul power began soon after the death of Alamgir, so that within 50 years of his death the glorious Mughul empire which had at one time been the most extensive, the most rich and prosperous and the most powerful empire in the whole world, began to crumble away and the Mughul emperors of Delhi retained only a shadow of their former power and renown till 1858 when the last Mughul emperor after the holocaust of 1857-58 died as a prisoner in Rangoon.

The Mughuls had succeeded in restoring peace and order in the wide flung empire, had encouraged trade and industry, patronised arts and letters and extended and improved cultivation, but in spite of this they failed to build a sound material basis for their civilization. While the empire was expanding, its prosperity was fed by new conquests and the tapping of new sources of wealth. When the empire ceased to expand its economic progress also ceased. The resources of the empire were grossly mismanaged and the worst sufferers were the peasants on whose prosperity the state entirely depended.

The 18th century is a period of chaotic fermentation without any directing principles or settled institutions.

The Muslims could not convert the administrative and political unity which they had imposed by force of arms into a national unity. This was perhaps the greatest failure of Islam in India. The reasons for this are to be found in the closed Hindu society and the constant fear-generating influence of certain Muslim pressure-groups on the policies of the Muslim rulers. Political sagacity and expediency dictated a policy of closer collaboration with the conquered people and a closer cultural rapprochement; fear and consideration of prestige demanded exclusiveness and display of force. This dichotomy became the most potent single cause in the failure of the Muslims to hold their own.

Mughul power, prestige and pomp soon met its most severe challenge. At the juncture the three possible and inevitable consequences were a class war within the social body; an organised violent revolution from within; or the conquest and domination by a foreign people alien both to the dominant minority. The Muslims struggling restlessly to preserve their power and the subservient majority, the Hindus, struggling to come back into their own created conditions for the enslavement of both by a foreign power.



The culture which Islam's adherents developed in the subcontinent was distinguished by a character all its own. It was neither Arabic, Persian, Turkish, nor any more Hindu, but a blend of all these cultures, a perfect synthesis created by the inherent strength of Islamic ideology. It is, in fact, Islam which provided that new-born culture with its justification to exist and, in later years, lent credibility and validity to the struggle for Pakistan.

To the Muslims 'the religion' of Islam is more than a religion in the literal sense; it is also their practical frame of reference for all forms of human activity, the code of conduct applicable to any problem. Strictly speaking there can be no 'half-Muslims'. The influence of Islam therefore, embraces all domains of life, spiritual and secular.

Our spiritual as well as materialistic culture depended on two principles—the spirit of a gentleman patterned by moral demands of our society and the spirit of religion with its commands and prohibitions. The Muslim aristocracy and the *ulema* and the *sufis*, the former by choice and the latter by profession, by their example and patronage kept learning in existence even in the midst of arms and confusion. The Persian and Arabic literature produced in Indo-Pakistan before the decline of Muslim power, both secular and religious, finds an honoured place in the literary tradition of the Islamic world. Active and fruitful contacts were kept alive with the Muslim savants in Central Asia and the Arab lands. The Muslims of India and Pakistan made extensive contributions to the study of *Hadis* and *Fiqh* and maintained high standard of learning. The high degree of culture was due to the excellent system of education which prevailed in the country. Big libraries were maintained by the rulers and the leading noblemen in the country. According to Father Manrique the library at Agra in 1641 contained 24,000 volumes valued at six and a half million rupees. Works from Sanskrit and even Greek and Latin were translated into Persian, the language of culture and refinement in those days.

Col. Sleeman who had considerable contacts with the princes and people of India during the nineteenth century records his impression about the quality of Muslim education in India in the following words :

"Perhaps there are few communities in the world among whom education is more generally diffused than among Muhammadans in India. He who holds an office worth twenty rupees a month commonly gives his son an education equal to that of a Prime Minister". Further, "a Muhammadan gentleman of education is tolerably acquainted with astronomy as it was by Ptolemy, with the logic and ethics of Aristotle,



with the work of Hippocrates and Galen, through those of Avicenna... and he is very capable of talking upon all subjects of philosophy, literature, science and arts and very much inclined to do so, and of understanding the nature of the improvements that have been made in these in modern times".

Bernier who visited India in the 17th century speaks highly of the intellectual curiosity and tone of learning of two noblemen with whom he was closely associated. Fazil Khan, whom he taught the principal languages of Europe and Danishmand Khan who studied astronomy, geography and anatomy, read with avidity the works of Gassendy and Descartes.

Female education, though limited in the scope, was equally widespread, particularly amongst the upper classes. Princesses Gulbadan Begum, Salima Sultana, Jahanara and Zebun Nisa stand out as some of the most cultured ladies of the times.

The two most notable features which the Muslim community, essentially monotheistic in religion and egalitarian in its social structure acquired in India, are worth noting. The one adversely affected its spiritual purity and the other its unity and homogeneity. Popular Islam which was a compromise between the rigid formal purist Islam and the superstition ridden belief in charms, magic and *pirs* imported innumerable rituals and beliefs into Islam and encouraged the formation of new religious fraternities besides the great universal sufi orders. The second feature is the appearance of caste into Islam. The late Dr. Mohammad Iqbal thus summed up this position: "Is the organic unity of Islam intact in this land? Religious adventurers set up different sects and fraternities, ever quarrelling with one another; and there are caste and sub-castes like the Hindus. Surely we have out-Hindued the Hindu himself; we are suffering from a double caste system—the religious caste system, sectarianism, and the social caste system which we have either learnt or inherited from the Hindus. This is one of the quiet ways in which the conquered nations revenge themselves on their conquerors".

In India, as elsewhere, Islam developed special qualities which led to the development of a culture in consonance with the unique Indian environment. During the last ten centuries ideas, institutions and movements with which the Muslims were confronted in other lands and among different people materially, sometimes consciously and sometimes unconsciously, determined the course and the content of social and religious movements in this subcontinent. The perennial supply of



fresh inspiration and example from other Muslim lands have made the Mussulmans in India cherish and nurture the precious exhilarating memory of the early triumphs of Islam and generated a feeling of being part of a wider world "transcending India in space and time", thus posing the difficult problem of loyalty to Islam, adjustment to an alien tradition, and the desire to keep pace with the rapidly changing world around them. "When the Hindus, conscious of new opportunities, started movements to revive pre-Muslim forms of culture," writes Dr. Qureshi, "the Muslim was left alone. He was isolated. Indo-Muslim culture was his creation; it was now the very blood of his vital veins. In so far as he was Indianized, he had become a distinct group in the world of Islam; in so far as he was a Muslim, he was a distinct group in India".

The peculiarly complex rigid Hindu social system and the difficult military and political situation made large scale conversions impossible with the result that Muslims in Indo-Pakistan subcontinent have continued to be in a minority during nearly six centuries of political dominance and surprisingly enough in regions, as for instance the United Provinces of Agra and Oudh (now Uttar Pradesh) which were all along the seat of Muslim political power and Muslim culture. The problem with which the Muslims in the subcontinent had been faced has not been the mere preservation of the rule of the dominant minority over a sullenly hostile subject majority, but the maintenance of the separate entity of the religion-oriented community. It is this last aspect of the history of Islam in India and the sustained socio-cultural activity for the preservation of that entity which holds the key to the understanding of the Muslims quest for identity.

The two nation theory which became the battle cry of the Muslim separatist movement in the last century owed its origin to the closed Hindu society which treated the Muslims throughout the centuries as aliens and about which al-Biruni, that acute observer of Indian social and philosophical systems, wrote thus : "We can only say, folly is an illness for which there is no medicine, and the Hindus believe that there is no country but theirs, no nation like theirs, no kings like theirs, no religion like theirs, no science like theirs. They are haughty, foolishly vain, self-conceited, and stolid. They are by nature niggardly in communicating that which they know, and they take the greatest possible care to withhold it from men of another caste among their own people, still much more, of course, from any foreigner". Further he continues, "All their fanaticism is directed against those who do not belong to them — against all foreigners. They call them *melchcha*, i.e., impure, and forbid having



any connection with them, be it by inter-marriage, or any other kind of relationship, or by sitting, eating and drinking with them, because thereby they think they would be polluted”.

To this subcontinent with its rich cultural heritage which had been static and frozen since the middle of the seventh century Islam brought a new religion, a new civilization, new way of thought and new values which had behind them the liberal cosmopolitanism of Islam and rich traditions of art and literature, of culture and refinement, and of social and political institutions alien to this land.

The character of the Hindu society was substantially changed after long and intimate association with the Muslims. “Islam introduced in India”, says Pannikar, “a conception of human equality, a pride in one’s religion, a legal system which in many ways was an advance on the codes of the time”...The new spirit which the Hindu monarchs of Rajputana and of Vijaynagar dynasty displayed as champions of *Dharma* and as upholders of religion was the direct result of the contact with Islam... Religious factor became an active factor of policy with Hindu kings as a result of Islam”.

In the field of religion the impact of Islam on Hinduism was perhaps more deep and far-reaching in its subsequent manifestations. Medieval Hindu theism, the rise of the Bhakti movement, the softening of the rigours of the caste system, the release from the choking and soul-killing religious rituals can all be traced to the influence of Islam. The rise of vernaculars to the status of regional languages was the result of the encouragement and patronage extended to writers in these languages by Muslim rulers.

Islamic impact broadened and liberalised the human relationship. The rise of the Bhakti movement and the development of regional languages powerfully contributed to the rise of militant Hindu movements in the eighteenth century.

“The Muslims kept learning in existence even in the midst of arms and confusion”. The role of the Sufis in the study of the history of Islam in India and the contribution made by them to the development of Muslim culture is still to be studied with care and sympathy.

“Pre-eminent among these problems relating to the life of the Muslim community in all regions since the twelfth century”, writes Professor Gibb, “is the activity and influence of the sufi shaikhs and orders. It was into the sufi movement that the life-blood of the community flowed ever more strongly. No adequate history of Islam can be written until it, with all its causes and effects, has been studied patiently and with scholarly in-



tegrity. In no region, moreover, is this study more fundamental or more urgently required than in that of Islam in India".

The people of Medieval India found an escape from the injustices of the social system, the cruelty and hardships of a despotic government based on the violence of the violent, in the soul destroying formulae of dogmatic theology, in popular mysticism of the time with its neighbourly warmth, its insistence on good works and good faith and its simple straightforward approach to the problems of life and death. The teachings of the mystics never became revolutionary. They did not contribute to the discontent with the social and religious system but to a submissive fatalistic conciliation of the rebellious spirit to the hard and pitiless realities of life.

There is no field of cultural activity which did not receive enlightened patronage from Muslim rulers and other members of the ruling class in Indo-Pakistan subcontinent. The architectural monuments still excite the wonder and the admiration of posterity, and competent European connoisseurs of art and architecture go into rhapsodies in their appreciative tributes to the genius of the Muslims. These architectural monuments are mute but eloquent witnesses to the aesthetic spirit of the Muslims.

True it is that in early stages the attitude of Muslim rulers, divines, sufis, scholars was at variance with each other as to the nature of the response to the political and cultural challenges from the subject majority. Some saw in the policy of adaptation and assimilation of the culture and religious rituals of the Hindus, the danger of utter absorption of Islam in Hinduism and resisted it politically and ideologically. Others considered it to be the only means of survival and therefore made compromises. Both these attempts failed and after 1740 the energies of the Muslim were mainly diverted towards stemming the demoralisation and decline that had set in and turned to "rehabilitating the Muslim community temporally and spiritually." The end of the eighteenth century marks the end of the most creative and fruitful period of Indo-Muslim culture.

What is going to be the shape and the contents of our new culture is difficult to say. So far it has been the question of selection and adaptation. To all appearance the new culture is going to be imitative and soulless. The danger is real, for the disorganised, intellectually muzzled, and economically depressed intelligentsia has to contend against the neo-rich class dominated by the ideal of personal self-enrichment.

Our culture, the patterning of it if I may call it so, has been so far the monopoly of our aristocracy which was divorced from the masses who lived in villages or in working class slums. This has made it difficult for



them to share naturally and easily the common class-life around them. "The prosperity of a country depends" wrote Luther, "not on the abundance of its revenues, nor on the strength of its fortifications, nor on the beauty of its public buildings, but it consists in the number of its cultivated citizens, on its men of education, enlightenment and character".

Pakistan came into being as a realisation of an ideal and a dream which entailed untold suffering and sacrifice. The way of life which we hope to adopt and the house which we intended to build, still awaits our efforts and dedication towards that end. "Our generation dare not hope to enter the promised land; it must be enough for us if we labour to set the feet of our children on the road at whose end it lies".