

GLOBALISATION AND EMERGING CHALLENGES TO ISLAM IN ASIA

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Globalisation is posing challenges in almost all the fields - economic, political, cultural and religious. Ideally speaking every change brings its own challenges which have to be faced either by conserving what has been inherited leading to increased orthodoxy resulting in more conflict or creatively accommodating change and synthesising it with what is inherited.

In fact colonial period in 18-19 centuries and early twentieth century was also a period of struggle between orthodoxy and change and that also gave rise to many new challenges. In that sense globalisation is not something entirely new. Even pre-colonial period also involved elements of globalisation, if globalisation is all about connectivity. In pre-colonial period too, there was worldwide trade. The silk route is famous in history. International trade has always been a link between various civilisations. Globalisation is nothing, if not about connectivity.

However, there is a qualitative difference between pre-colonial, post-colonial and connectivity in the globalised world today. Pre-colonial coming together of civilisations was based on free exchanges of trade and cultural values. No country or civilisation enjoyed hegemony neither there was dictation of terms by any power. Hegemonic relationship started with the colonial period. And in globalised world, which now happens to be uni-polar world this relationship has become totally hegemonic. It is globalisation on the terms and conditions set by USA and the military-industrial combine within USA.

There is yet one more difference between the colonial and post-colonial

globalised world: revolution in information technology. The information technology holds overwhelming power today. Communication has become instantaneous. Any information emanating from one part of the world can spread instantaneously in all parts of the world. It is this information technology (or information industry), which is crucial to what we call globalisation.

Thus we can say that hegemonic relationship and information technology are defining elements of globalisation. We can also add fast spreading consumerism to these defining elements. The emerging challenges in Asia and Africa due to intensification of process of globalisation has to be understood in this background. The Western hegemony in cultural field being total is causing identity crisis among religious and cultural communities in Asia and much more so among Muslim communities.

What is called the phenomenon of 'fundamentalism' in Islamic world is result of globalisation. But it is not true to maintain, as the American media does, that it is Islam and Islamic world, which is responsible for it. Firstly, phenomenon of fundamentalism is not confined to Islamic world alone. One can hardly ignore Christian fundamentalism in America today. Rightwing Christians or born again Christians are controlling US politics and have played great role in election of George Bush Jr. to the President's post. It is these right wing Christians who not only advise President Bush but also influence his security policies. They have been instrumental in war on Afghanistan and Iraq and are posing threat to Iran and Syria. They have their own powerful TV channels and think tanks. They evolve policies and accordingly advise the President.

Also, US consumerism has totally commercialised culture and marginalized Asian and African cultures has left hardly any space for them. This bulldozing of all other cultural identities is causing great deal of turmoil among the marginalized cultural communities. As a reaction to this neo-orthodoxies are becoming more and more powerful. Islamic resurgence in many Asian countries is basically due to neo-imperialist domination on one hand, and, complete commercialisation of culture, on the other. Continued American aggression in the idle East is causing

emergence of Islamic fundamentalism and Islamic militancy also termed as 'Islamic terrorists'.

Any threat to American ruling class, though basically a result of its own coercive policies in Middle East, is blamed on 'militant Islam'. America supported the Shah of Iran to the hilt causing great deal of anger among people of Iran and when people of Iran overthrew the Shah under the leadership of Ayatollah Khomeini, American media put entire blame on Islamic fundamentalism. Iran, after the Islamic revolution, became a threat for US rulers. The Muslims in Iran could only be mobilised through their religious identity. There was hardly any way. Ali Shariati's speeches, articles and books are best example of this mobilisation. Ali Shariati, a modern Islamic thinker, and not a fundamentalist in any sense of the word used by American media, influenced thousands of Iranian youth who were instrumental in making Islamic revolution. Ali Shariati and his followers were reacting to American hegemonic policies in Iran. Ayatullah Khomeini could also throw challenge to American policies by mobilising Iranian people appealing to their Islamic identity. Nothing else could work more effectively.

Islam, throughout ages has provided Muslims with a sense of unity and has deeply influenced their way of life, their weltanschauung and has shaped their outlook. Also, there has been no secular movement of the kind, which arose in Europe and no consumerist culture of the type, which swept the west to make them indifferent to religion and, religion remains integral part of their psyche. Thus people in Asia in general, and Muslims in particular, can be mobilised only through religious appeal. When they feel threatened or face aggression from American rulers, they react by asserting their religious identity.

This then is perceived as religious fundamentalism by Western media. Its genesis is never studied impartially and objectively. It is denounced most vociferously and with missionary zeal. It is, in a way zealotry in the reverse. One cannot fight 'fundamentalist forces without tracing its genesis in American policies. President Bush has greatly aggravated Islamic militancy in Asia.

However, it will be wrong to establish straight-line relationship between American policies and developments in Islamic world. Globalisation, like any other socio-economic phenomenon, works in complex ways. Colonialism too, had contradictory impact on the Islamic world. It also brings awareness for change and reform. Colonialism resulted in producing major Islamic thinkers like Mohammad Abduh in Egypt and Sir Syed Ahmed Khan in India.

Globalisation too, is not a one-way street. It has adverse impact in as much as western hegemonic policies creates resentment but also is instrumental in producing modern Muslim thinkers. These modern Islamic thinkers are working hard to bring modern changes in Islamic world and rescue it from the clutches of orthodoxy. Of course their impact is limited compared to orthodox thinkers. The reasons are not far to seek. There is widespread poverty and illiteracy in the Muslim world. And in oil rich Saudi Arabia there is vice-like tight grip of conservative rulers who fear any change.

These rulers, unable to deliver on governance, want to keep conservative ulama happy and placated. It is interesting to note that Saudi Arabia is reeling under very complex response to forces of globalisation. The American policies in Middle-East create lot of anger among the Saudi youth and they resort to terrorism and want to reinforce orthodox Islam. But, on the other hand, a new awareness is fast spreading among Saudi people, particularly women, and they are demanding changes and reform in age old laws and practices. The Saudi rulers have to respond to this complex situation and have to do tight rope walking.

If they do not respond to this new awareness, they face problems and if they do too rapidly they face resentment from the conservative forces. A section of people of Saudi Arabia feel that Wahabi Islam is intolerant of other sects of Islam as well as other religions and breeds hatred and violence and hence they are demanding changes in educational institutions and introduction of more tolerant version of Islam. The Saudi rulers are responding cautiously. They would not like to displease the

ulama with whom they have age-old understanding.

In view of terrorist attacks in Riyadh and other places, Saudis were forced to hold an international conference against terrorism and proposed an international Centre to fight terrorism. They are also now trying to establish dialogue with the youth on one hand, and, with women, on the other. Three rounds of dialogue have taken place with women already though these dialogues have yet not conceded much to women. But the very fact of holding such dialogues is very significant and acceptance of need for change.

Recently Saudi rulers were forced to hold municipal elections though women were not allowed to vote and elections were held only for fifty percent of the seats and other fifty percent will be filled in by nomination. Appears too little and too late but nevertheless in the ultra conservative Saudi society strictly controlled by the ruling Saudi family it is too late but not too little after all.

These winds of change are blowing in all Muslim countries. Recently Kuwaiti rulers also had to concede right to vote to women. The Kuwaiti women were demanding right to vote for quite some time and fought very hard to gain this right and they did gain it. However, it is not all. Soon they will demand elective offices too. They are facing tough opposition from orthodox ulama but it has not stopped their forward march.

Now Amina Wadud of America has announced that she would lead Juma prayers which has caused lot of stir among conservatives. A lively debate has started on networks. This is the benefit of globalisation that informative debates can take place on websites and e-mail postings. While some are fiercely opposing a woman leading men in prayer others are quite supportive.

It has been pointed out that one Ghazala (a Kharijite woman?) led men in prayer in Kufa and that she recited two long surahs (chapters) from Qur'an while leading the prayer. It has also been pointed out that the Holy Prophet (PBUH) permitted a woman companion called Umm Waraqah to lead her family members in prayer including the male members. Imam Taymiyyah has also opined that a woman could lead men in prayers especially in tarawih prayers during Ramadan. Tabari also held that a woman could lead both the genders in prayer on the basis of Umm Waraqah hadith narrated in Abu Dawud.

In Indian subcontinent women are not even allowed to enter mosques, let alone being permitted to lead both the genders in prayer. It caused quite a stir a few years ago when an Imam in Kerala issued fatwa allowing women to enter the mosque and pray along with men although in a separate enclosure. The Sunni youth of Kerala demonstrated against the imam for issuing such a fatwa. However, things are changing fast now and something happening in one corner of the world spreads to other parts with lightening speed.

There is another vexed question of hijab causing lot of controversy. The French Government recently banned wearing any religious symbols in Government schools including hijab by young girls. It created great deal of stir not only among the Muslims in France but also in other Muslim countries. Before we comment on this question we would like to point out one more problem, which is a direct result of the process of globalisation.

Large number of people from Asia and Africa are migrating to the Western countries, especially to the USA and Canada, apart from Europe for better economic prospects. This economic migration has changed the whole religious, cultural and national scene. The diaspora has created problems both for host countries and for the migrants. Some political theorists are now talking of imagined national communities as in this globalised world national boundaries are breaking down as people of the different nationalities live in another country of entirely different nationhood.

The main problem is of alienation and feeling of loss of identity for the migrants from Asia and Africa. These migrants become intensely conscious of their cultural or religious identities back home and take highly conservative positions in cultural and religious issues be they Hindus, Muslims or Arabs or Indians. The Hindu migrants from India (excepting those committed to secularism) have become enthusiastic supporters of Hindutva, the ideology of rightwing Hindu nationalists in India. These members of diaspora tend to be much more conservative than their counterparts at home.

These migrants crave for visible symbols of identity. The Muslims in general and, Arabs in Particular enforce hijab on their women as a visible part of identity. Men themselves do not adopt such symbols of visible identity and take to western dresses making themselves indistinguishable from others but insist on their women wearing hijab including school going girls. They enforce hijab as part of Shari'ah.

The Qur'an does not use the word hijab for all women but it has used only for wives of the Holy Prophet. This verse on hijab (33:53) is very clear in its intent and context. Hijab for all women is a post-Qur'anic usage. Qur'an requires women to wear dignified dress rather than veil themselves from head to toe. The concerned verse on displaying adornment or sexual charms (zeenah) is from Chapter 24, verse number 31 and this verse leaves lot of space by saying except what appears thereof (illa ma zahara minha) for displaying certain parts of women's body (like face, hands etc). However, this verse was interpreted by the 'ulama in a way to impose more restrictions on women than required and Arab cultural dress for women became a requirement of shari'ah law. Any way this is not the place to discuss this problem here. Suffice it may to say that hijab is controversial issue and needs to be discussed separately.

Here what is important for us is its significance as part of visible identity for culturally alienated Muslim minorities in Western diaspora. However, the westerners identify veil more as sign of Islamic

fundamentalism than need for cultural or religious identity. It is for this reason that the French Government banned wearing of hijab in government schools as violation of secularism. In a democratic country it is not proper for the government to ban wearing of particular dress in schools. School authorities doing it is a different matter. This measure, not only divided Muslims in France but also French society itself. There was heated debate among French writers, journalists and intellectuals whether ban on hijab is justified.

Hijab, as pointed out above, has become an identity symbol rather than religious requirement per se. While any woman should be free to wear hijab, if she wants to but she, at the same time, should not be coerced into wearing one. In Muslim societies women are often considered subservient either to parents or to husbands and are coerced, in the name of Islam, to observe strict dress code. It amounts to violation of her human rights.

It is also a fact that in the globalised consumer society women are used extensively in advertising industry to sell products. Thus woman has become the market and she is being shamelessly exploited by major companies selling their products. They are often scantily dressed and sometimes only in bras and panties. This is result of boundless consumerism and in Asia evokes strong reaction. The conservatives then enforce strict dress code as a reaction. All those committed to women's rights and dignity must fight against such shameless projection of women in advertisement. While she has full right to enjoy complete freedom, it should be with full dignity and sense of responsibility.

It should also be pointed out that there has been much greater awareness today among people of their rights thanks to information revolution. This is a positive side of globalisation. Yet, in Asia and particularly among Muslim majority countries, there is woeful lack of political freedom. Most of the rulers are authoritarian and suppress human rights and indulge in torturing their opponents. No fair elections are held and no free debates can take place in these Muslim countries.

The Muslim youth because of lack of freedom and inhuman suppression takes recourse to violence, which is then dubbed as 'Islamic terrorism'. The Saudi society which is highly suppressive in nature is experiencing 'terrorist violence'. As a result it has now initiated dialogues at various levels. In Bangla Desh too right wing religious violence is spreading and attempts are being made to assassinate the political opponents.

The USA government gets the opportunity to export 'democracy' at gun-point as it did in Afghanistan and Iraq giving further boost to terrorist violence. This violence continues in Iraq even after so called democratic elections. Scores of people are dying everyday in suicide bombing. The only remedy is to develop democratic institutions in these countries. Unfortunately the rulers invoke Islam to deny democratic rights to their people and perpetuate authoritarian regime. While no one should tolerate American intervention in any other country's internal matters, the Muslim countries should democratise themselves.

Globalisation has irretrievably ushered in an era of information technology, no country can do without promoting information and knowledge. It is undoubtedly an age of knowledge. The Muslim countries lack far behind in this respect though Islam was the first religion to make acquisition of knowledge obligatory both on Muslim man and woman, even if available in far off place like China. Muslim women, more than men, lack behind in literacy and their survival in globalised world depends very much on knowledge. The Islamic world must make up as fast as it can to improve quality of its existence in this world

The Qur'an lays great stress on values like justice, equality, compassion and peace apart from knowledge and wisdom. Thus Islamic countries ideally speaking should have been the model for the world in these matters. However they are lagging far behind instead. It is for the Muslim intellectuals, if not orthodox 'ulama to seriously reflect on this and evolve better alternatives. The World Social Forum (WSF) promoted by any Nos and others fighting for social justice have given a slogan "other world is possible". Should Islamic countries not take lead in making

such a world possible by setting up norms of justice, compassion and wisdom in promoting non-exploitative world? However, there are no such signs at all. The Islamic world is full of tyranny and darkness of ignorance.

Also, the Qur'an has laid so much emphasis on diversity and dialogue. Diversity is Allah's creation (see 30:22, 5:48 etc.) and for dialogue see 3:63 etc. And in the age of globalisation diversity has increased due to economic migration and one must promote dialogue between diverse groups and diverse civilizations. President Khatami of Iran rightly proposed that we should promote dialogue of civilizations in the modern world to avoid clashes between them. While an Asian proposed dialogue of civilisations the American Professor Huntington talked of "clash of civilisations.

Thus numerous challenges are emerging in our world and Asia has to measure up to those challenges in the globalised world. These challenges are extremely complex and difficult. It requires great deal of wisdom on the part of Asian people and their rulers to respond creatively to these challenges and the emerging problems. Asia's success will depend on how it measures up to these emerging problems.

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