

Chapter 70: Decline In The Muslim World

The second decline of the Muslim world, its Dark Age, dates roughly from the beginning of the twelfth/eighteenth century to the middle of the thirteenth/ nineteenth century. With the exception of Indonesia where decadence started earlier, all the Muslim countries witnessed a terrible decline not only in their political status but also in their intellectual and cultural life soon after the awakening of Europe from a long slumber, an awakening which was the result of her intellectual, scientific, and philosophical movements.

While the Ottomans lost their glory after Sulaiman the Magnificent, the Safawids after Shah `Abbas the Great, and the Mughuls in India after Aurangzib, the European nations went from strength to strength, acquiring more and more territories and trade centers from the Muslim rulers, defeating them on land and sea, and finally pronouncing the Muslim empires to be suffering from incurable diseases.

Several reasons have been assigned to this catastrophe, some of which will be discussed in the course of this chapter. Broadly speaking, the reasons are either political or non-political; hence our discussion of them has been divided into two parts—the first dealing with political causes, and the second with the non-political ones. Since the political causes were a little different in each case, the great Muslim empires of this period have been treated separately. Non-political causes, however, have been discussed together.

A. Political Causes of the Catastrophic Decline

1. Turkey

Sulaiman the Magnificent was the last and the greatest of the first ten Ottoman Sultans who together in a period of three centuries raised Turkey from nothing to one of the most dreaded and powerful empires of the world. But climax is generally followed by decline, so we find signs of decadence appearing in the later part of Sulaiman's reign. According to Kotchi Bey, a Turkish historian, the decline or at least the signs of decline are visible towards the end of Sulaiman's reign can be attributed to the following causes.

Sulaiman did not participate regularly in the deliberations of the Council of State but listened to the discussions only from behind a veil. His successors dispensed even with this formality. The result was that the king, instead of profiting from the mature and seasoned advice of the councilors, acted arbitrarily or was in most cases swayed by the opinion of his harem and the prejudiced views of flatterers and fortune-seekers.

Sulaiman would appoint men to offices of trust and responsibility without their having them pass through the grades of lower offices, e.g., Ibrahim was promoted from the post of Master of the Pages to that of Grand Vizier. The criterion of appointments to high offices of the State was friendship, flattery, and the recommendation of the harem and not merit, experience, or intelligence. Sulaiman permitted his favorite viziers to amass wealth. Rustam Pasha, a son-in-law of Sulaiman, remained Grand Vizier for fifteen years. He was skilled, in the art of filling the Government treasury through exactions of large amounts of money from persons appointed to State offices.

These exactions fixed during Sulaiman's own time became arbitrary and exorbitant later in the hands of his successors, so much so that the office of tax-collector went to the highest bidder. State officials whether high or low tried their utmost to amass as much wealth as possible by fair or foul means.

This tendency to grow richer and richer through corruption, nepotism, and exploitation, though immediately beneficial, often led the officials concerned into troubles. The bare fact that an officer was enormously rich was a sufficient proof of his being dishonest and corrupt, and, therefore, a sufficient ground for his being exposed to condemnation. Many rich officers lost their lives on charges of corruption, and their property was confiscated by the Government.

The immediate effect of these malpractices was not great, but in course of time, especially when the Turkish Empire fell on evil days, they assumed enormous importance and became potent causes for its downfall.

A brief mention may be made of the Janissaries who revolted against Sulaiman the Magnificent when he withdrew from Vienna in 936/1529 realizing the futility of his campaign. The Janissaries were a military force recruited from the Christian youth. They came into being during the reign of Murad I (760/1359–790/1389). They not only proved a weapon of rare strength in wars against the enemies of the Ottoman Empire, but also, because of their loyalty and devotion, helped the Sultans in keeping turbulent forces under control.

The Janissaries were a useful instrument in the hands of strong Sultans, but in the times of degenerate Sultans they became a kind of Praetorian Guard, dictating the deposition of Sultans and the nomination of their successors. In the eleventh/seventeenth and the twelfth/eighteenth centuries, they became a menace to the State and were given short shrift by Mahmud II in 1242/1826.

Another important event which took place during the reign of Sulaiman the Magnificent was his granting of preferential treatment to France in matters of trade and commerce, and also his allowing her to

establish consular courts and exercise judicial rights over the French subjects in the Ottoman Empire. This was done to counteract, through alliance with France, the power of the Holy Roman Empire in South–East Europe. After Sulaiman, when the Sultans lost their prestige, other Christian powers demanded the same political and commercial concessions as were accorded to the French and obtained them as a matter of fact.

This proved very dangerous. It not only led the foreign Christian powers to foment troubles on the plea that discrimination was practiced against the Christians but it also made the Christian subjects look to anti–Ottoman powers for help and survival. The loyalty of the Christian subjects thus became divided; indeed, their loyalty to outside powers exceeded their loyalty to the Ottoman Sultans. To every subsequent reform that the young Turks aimed at, "capitulations" served as a major handicap.

It was not possible to weld the Christians into the body politic, so they were jealous of their separate entity. Their separatist feelings were fanned partly by the agents of foreign Christian powers and partly by the mishandling of the situation by the unintelligent and unimaginative Sultans of the later period.

The Sultans who succeeded Sulaiman possessed neither the imagination nor the political acumen necessary to keep a vast empire intact. They frittered away their energies in petty squabbles, meaningless intrigues, and frivolous avocations. Little did they realize that in an age of technology and science their old weapons would prove worse than useless. Their defeat in 1094/1683 sealed their fate in Europe. But for the mutual bickering of the European powers, the Ottoman Empire could not have maintained its frontiers for any length of time. Then there was the growth of Western imperialism and also the emergence of Russia as a strong centralized State, both of which turned the scales against the Turks.

In the twelfth/eighteenth century the Muslim empires all over the world began to show signs of weakness and decay. This synchronized with the rapid strides of the European powers in technology and industry. These powers had developed superior naval military equipment as well as war strategy. The Muslim powers, quarrelling as they were among themselves, sought for the latest weapons from the Europeans who found thus a splendid chance to enter into the complexities of Oriental political intrigues and turn them to their advantage.

They meddled in the affairs of the Mughul Empire in India, the Mamluk rulers of Egypt, the Safawid monarchs of Persia, and, last but not least, the Sultans of the Ottoman Empire. The interfering powers were the English, the French, the German, the Dutch, the Spaniards, the Portuguese, and the Russians. This will show that practically every European power, impelled by her superior technical skill and actuated by commercial and imperialistic ambitions, set out to bring under their dominance as much of the Muslim world as they possibly could. The Muslim powers were no match for them.

During this period, the Turks made several attempts to reform the army and the administration of the Ottoman Empire. These reforms go by the name of *tanzimat*. They were undertaken to save the Empire

which had been enfeebled externally and internally, but for one reason or another they all failed.

After the Crimean War, the Turkish Empire continued to decline so much so that it came to be known as the "sick man of Europe"—a sick man whose days were numbered.

The question then is, why did Turkey suffer so miserably that her condition was declared to be incurable, not only by her foes but also by her friends? Many causes have been pointed out in answer to this question. It is said that the in-conclusive wars between the Ottoman and Persian Empires during the tenth/sixteenth to twelfth/eighteenth century weakened and exposed them both to European commercial penetration; that the Ottoman principles of administration were actuated by a desire for the well-being not of the State but of the sovereign; that the tenure of the Pashas was very short and that their high office could be purchased by bribery; and that the authority of the Sultans was weakening as the brief noontide of the Ottoman Empire passed.

It is also alleged that the Ottomans had been in Europe for over two hundred years—an extremely long time for an Oriental dynasty to retain its aggressiveness. Moreover, the tactics which had sufficed against the lions of Hungary had become hopelessly antiquated by the middle of the eleventh/seventeenth century. Coupled with these causes was the degeneracy of the Sultans. The supreme power of the State had fallen into the hands of the viziers or those of the harem—the centers of intrigues and corruption.

More explicitly, the allegation is that it was neither the Sultan who governed, nor the viziers who administered; the power was actually in the hands of necromancers and purchased slave-girls. Moreover, there were outrageous taxes and general corruption in the army, in which promotions were likewise made through bribery and not on merit.

Even after all this has been admitted, it remains a fact that the explanation in terms of external and internal factors would be incomplete unless one keeps in view the machinations of foreign powers which finally destroyed the Empire. "It was not corruption, not misgovernment, not inefficiency—that spelt the ruin of the Ottoman Empire. These things had always been present, but the Empire had remained. What destroyed it in the end was the pressure of European ambitions.... The Ottoman Empire died of Europe.

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2. Persia

Two powers, the Uzbeks (Uzbegs) in Turkestan and the Safawids in Iran, arose after the break-up of the Timurid power. It was at the hands of Shaibani Khan, the first ruler of the Uzbeks, that Babur, the founder of Mughul dynasty in India, suffered defeat. Because of his discomfiture, Babur turned his attention to India and laid the foundation of an empire which lasted till 1274/1857.

The Safawids began as leaders of a Shi'ite dervish-order in Azharbaijan and turned to politics after the collapse of the Timurid Empire when every chieftain took advantage of the chaotic conditions and tried to

establish himself. In 904/1499 their leader Isma'il proclaimed himself the leader of all Shi'ites, and three years later he took the title of Shah. To the Safawids belongs the credit of making Persia a nation once again. The rise of the Safawid dynasty marks the restoration of the Persian Empire and the re-creation of Persian nationality.

The Safawid State reached its peak during the reign of Shah 'Abbas the Great. With a few exceptions, the successors of Shah 'Abbas were a band of incompetent persons who reveled in atrocities, and exhibited utter indifference to serious matters of the State. The major cause of the misfortune of the Persians is associated with the interference of the Europeans in the internal affairs of Muslim countries on one pretext or another.

The Napoleonic invasion of Egypt in 1213/1798 marks the beginning of modern history in Iran. Napoleon's plan to reach India through Iran was taken seriously by the English. Hence they advanced from the east. With Russia on the north and the English on the east Persia was virtually encircled. It was only on the Turkish side that her frontiers remained undisputed. Due to encirclement, Persia could do nothing but promote the cause of Britain and Russia in turn.

Many wars were fought between Persia and Afghanistan at the instance of Britain or Russia. Both these powers, however, extended their sphere of influence to consolidate and protect their respective interests. There was nothing to choose between the Russians and the British; both vied with each other in the matter of exploitation and territorial aggrandizement.

The intrigues of the West in Iran should not be made a ground for putting the responsibility of Iranian decline on the shoulders of the West alone. The Iranians themselves were mainly responsible for it. If one's own house is in disorder, one should not blame others for making capital out of it. In a country where political cohesion is lacking, where there is intellectual stagnation, religious intolerance, despotism, and authoritarianism, and where there is sloth, apathy, and indifference, it would not be surprising if it sinks. During this period Iran did not produce a single thinker of repute in any branch of knowledge. With the exception of a few poets, prose-writers, and historians there was no person worth mentioning.

3. India

The third great Muslim empire, i.e., that of the Mughuls in India, was at its zenith during the times of Akbar, Jahangir, Shah Jahan, and Aurangzib. After Aurangzib, who died in 1119/1707, there was a rapid decline. The causes of the decline of the Mughul Empire were many. The Ottoman Empire reached its peak during the regime of Sulaiman the Magnificent, the Safawids' in the reign of Shah 'Abbas the Great, and the Mughul Empire in the time of Aurangzib. As Sulaiman the Magnificent and Shah 'Abbas the Great were followed by a long line of incompetent successors, so was Aurangzib.

In the authoritarian type of society, if kingship becomes hereditary, it is inevitable that many kings should

be found with little or no initiative. And once rot sets in, it is very difficult to check it. In Muslim Empires one weakling was followed by another and that by still another and thus what had been achieved by the personal valor of a few great persons disappeared in no time. All the successors of Aurangzib, without exception, were persons of low worth.

They reveled in sensuous pleasures neglecting the onerous duties of the State. Instead of remedying the evils that had crept into the Mughul body politic, they kept themselves busy in luxuries and petty intrigues.

The Mughul nobility was in no better condition. They were also corrupted by a life of affluence, ease, and indolence. Along with the Mughul nobility, the army also deteriorated.

The foreign powers were quick to perceive the incapacity and rottenness of the Mughul army and also of the persons who presided over the destiny of the Mughul Empire.

In 1152/1739, Nadir Shah invaded India. By his orders not only were the inhabitants of Delhi massacred but also the entire wealth of the Mughuls was taken away. Nadir's invasion left the Mughul Empire "bleeding and prostrate." And then it was given no time to recuperate as Nadir Shah's invasion was followed by a wave of invasions conducted by an Afghan chief of the Abdali clan, known as Ahmad Shah Abdali.

From 1161/1748 to 1181/1767, Ahmad Shah led several expeditions and inflicted a series of defeats on the Mughuls, leaving them, after each invasion, very much weaker than before. His invasions not only broke the back of the Mughul army, but also left the country financially crippled. Like Nadir Shah he took away everything he could lay his hands on, leaving the country destitute. These invasions hastened the dismemberment of the tottering Empire.

During the reign of Aurangzib, Hindus had started raising their heads here and there, taking advantage of the unwieldiness of the Empire and the long absence of the monarch from the capital. They were also dreaming of reviving their past by establishing a Hindu Empire like that of Asoka or Harsha. Hence the Rajputs, the Satnamis, the Bundels, the Sikhs, and the Jats of Mathura revolted against Aurangzib and kept him busy till his end. After his death the turbulent elements grew stronger. A few new Muslim States—the 'Deccan, Oudh, and the Bengal Subah—which were practically independent of the titular Delhi Emperor, though outwardly avowing allegiance to his nominal authority, also arose and added to this confusion.

Neither the Muslims nor the Hindus were destined to build lasting kingdoms on the ruins of the Mughul Empire. The nation which ultimately succeeded to found a mighty empire greater than any which India had witnessed hitherto entered the portals of India in the guise of traders, seeking commercial privileges and concessions. Having secured a foothold, they began interfering in the internal affairs of the State in one pretext or another. Ultimately, because of their cleverness, superior military strategy, and latest war materials, they wiped off all the forces contending for supremacy on the Indian soil and became the

undisputed masters of the sub-continent for one century and a half.

These were the British who, acting on the maxim "flag follows trade," took advantage of the military weakness, intellectual stagnation, and mutual differences of the rulers, both Hindu and Muslim. True, there were other European powers like the Dutch, the Portuguese, and the French fighting for supremacy, but none of them succeeded against British diplomacy and naval strength and also perhaps against the Britons' superior knowledge of the Eastern mind.

The British, like the Dutch in Indonesia, and like themselves and the Russians in Persia and the Ottoman dominions, played off one ruling power in India against another till these were exhausted and the British became the masters of the land. The War of Independence in 1273/1857 was the last effort on the part of the masses to throw off the foreign yoke.

But it failed miserably and, on the charge of engineering the revolt, the last Mughul ruler was exiled by the British to Rangoon where he died in extreme penury. That sounded the death-knell of the great Mughul Empire. After the War of Independence the Indian Muslims were almost dead politically, intellectually, and socially. It was the darkest period for the Muslims of India.

As it always happens when a great culture is at its zenith, the symptoms of its decline begin to reappear, even so it is during its darkest periods that the faint rays of light appear, unless its spark of life is dead and it is destined to speedy extinction. This period of decadence was not a period of unmitigated gloom. One good thing that happened was the development of the Urdu language—a mixture of Persian, Arabic, Hindi, and Sanskrit words, but altogether a new language with infinite capacity to develop and to expand. Another good thing was the birth of Shah Wali Allah whose teachings and contributions to the culture and thought of the Indian Muslims will be found in another chapter of this work.

4. Indonesia

Among the causes which led to the break-up of the Muslim rule in Indonesia the most important was the intrusion of the foreign powers, the Portuguese, the Spaniards, the English, and the Dutch. The first to arrive in the country were the Portuguese, who at the end of the middle ages had built up a formidable naval power and had gained valuable experience of sea-warfare through a long series of exploration and piratical adventures. They were, moreover, charged with a strong crusading spirit which impelled them to destroy Islam.²

To the religious motive was added, in course of time, an intense economic urge to wrest the trade monopoly from the Arabs. "Happily it was possible to serve God and Mammon at the same time, for by striking at Arab trade in the Indian Ocean, Portugal aimed a blow at the Ottoman Empire, which drew the major part of its revenue from the spice monopoly."³

Because of their superior war strategy, the Portuguese, notwithstanding the opposition of the Arabs and other Muslim traders, could expand their power and influence in no time. Their first viceroy, Francis de

Almeida, had no desire to extend his sphere of influence beyond the Malabar Coast and was anxious to remain contented with the commercial gains of that area. His successor, Don Affonso Albuquerque, however, realized that, in order to increase revenue resources to maintain the growing power of the Portuguese, and also to curb the maritime activities of the Muslim traders, who could collect the produce of the Spice Islands, Bengal, Siam, and China from Malacca, it was necessary that the policy of his predecessor should be given up. Accordingly he invaded Malacca on July 1, 1511, under his expansionist program. In the opinion of Crawford, his main motive was to spread Christianity⁴ and to crush the growing power of Islam through the extension of the Portuguese power and blockading of the Muslims' economic resources.

It was during the tenure of Don Affonso Albuquerque that Francis Xavier, a Portuguese Christian evangelist of outstanding merit and ability, was invited to Malacca in 1542/1545 with the express object of spreading Christianity among the natives.⁵ Francis Xavier was well known for his proselytizing activity, which was financially and militarily backed by the Portuguese Government. If the Europeans of those days acted on the principle that the flag followed the trade, they also realized that the perpetuation or stabilization of their imperialistic and colonial program required a vigorous policy of conversions to their faith.

The primary object of Portuguese infiltration in these islands was indeed commercial exploitation, but to this purpose nothing was more helpful than the creation of a solid block among the natives who, because of their religious affinities, would support the foreign government in all matters. As a result of Francis Xavier's missionary efforts, the Portuguese language, culture, and religion came to the notice of the Indonesians. The Portuguese sphere of influence increased and a few nature-worshippers renounced their tribal religion and embraced Christianity. On the whole, the Christian missionary program met a grand failure in Malacca and elsewhere, for nowhere could Christianity supplant Islam. The Spice Islands had been converted to Islam and no amount of coercion or persuasion could lead the inhabitants away from it. .

After their conquest, the Portuguese promulgated laws to crush the commercial activities of Muslim and Indian traders. In this mission Albuquerque had the support of an exiled Muslim Jaja Utimutis and a non-Muslim officer, Ninachetuen. A reign of terror started in Malacca. All anti-Portuguese activities were put down with a strong hand.

The Portuguese exploited the internal differences and the mutual jealousies of the native rulers. Ambassadors came to Malacca from the Sultans of Siam, Annam, Java, and Sumatra to seek the goodwill of the Portuguese and to obtain from them modern weapons of warfare which they could use against their rivals. All this helped the Portuguese to establish themselves firmly on the Indonesian soil. Military alliance with some of the important rulers of the islands encouraged Albuquerque to dispatch his fleet to weaker and less organized islands.

It was not difficult for the Portuguese to subjugate small principalities scattered here and there over the

islands, for where their military strategy failed, their political diplomacy succeeded. The annals of the Spice Islands are replete with tales of Portuguese atrocities, horror, and deceit. Sir Hugue Clifford describes the Portuguese as swarming into Asia in a spirit of brigandage.⁶ Their cruel and capricious behavior was stimulated by their crusading zeal.

The Spaniards were the second foreign power to exploit the Indonesians; they were drawn towards these islands by the enormous profits which the Portuguese had made out of their monopoly of the spices. Thus, war ensued between the two, which continued for three years. In 1529/1529, a treaty was concluded between the contending powers, according to which both Spaniards and Portuguese could rule over different parts of Malacca. Till 1530/1530, the Spaniards and the Portuguese were the only two foreign powers contending for supremacy in political domination and commercial exploitation of the Indonesians. They were helped in their designs by the internal differences and mutual jealousies of the ruling chiefs who frequently sought the help of the foreigners to overthrow their rivals.

As in India the English took advantage of the mutual quarrels of the rajahs of the Deccan and Karnatak, so did the Portuguese and the Spaniards exploit the dissensions of the ruling chiefs of Indonesia. Acting on the policy of "divide and rule," the foreign powers conspired to break up the unity of the Muslim Sultans of the islands and later used them as an instrument in the furtherance of their commercial designs. The natives were struck by the superior strategy and war technology of the foreigners and curried favor with them to obtain their expert advice and the latest war instruments.

Despite their agreement on their respective sphere of influence in the island of Malacca, the Portuguese and the Spaniards could not desist from waging war against each other. Finally, the Spaniards suffered reverses and were expelled from the Spice Islands in 1540/1540. For forty-five years after the expulsion of the Spaniards the Portuguese ruled over the Islands. Their death knell was sounded by the arrival of the Dutch in 1595/1595. Thus, the third foreign power which was destined to rule over Indonesia for about four hundred years, that is from June 2, 1595, to December 27, 1949—a period of colonialism longer than that vouchsafed to any power so far—was the Dutch.

The Dutch could claim superior war technology and also better war strategy in their struggle against the local potentates, but what helped those most was disintegration prevailing in Indonesia in the eleventh/seventeenth and twelfth/eighteenth centuries and even earlier. The rulers were weakened by internecine wars and were often compelled to contract disadvantageous pacts of military and commercial nature to obtain the latest military weapons from the Dutch and secure their support and blessings in their own designs.

The harmful nature of these pacts can be gauged from the fact that in about a hundred years, that is to say, between 1677/1677 and 1777/1777, the whole of Java lay at the feet of the intruders and what was worse its "merchants and shipbuilders lost their occupations and the fisheries and forests were no longer profitable. The Javanese became a people of cultivators and the economic content of their social life was stunted."⁷

The Dutch introduced a system of indirect administration through which they utilized the native aristocracy for the furtherance of their own designs.

The decadent elements of the Indonesian society were supported by the arms of the Dutch so long as they helped them in the commercial exploitation of the populace, that is to say, so long as they deposited in the Dutch coffers whatever amount the Dutch wanted from the different sections of the society. The result was appalling. While the utterly rotten aristocracy acquired great powers with regard to the populace, it degenerated into a pliable tool in the hands of the Dutch and lost its independence.

Before the arrival of the Dutch, the Chinese had their trading concerns in Java, though much limited in scope. The Dutch looked on them with a favorable eye, as it was felt by them that there were no people in the world that served them better than the Chinese; too many of them could not be brought to Batavia.⁸

Consequently, the Chinese were increasingly absorbed in the country's economy. Not only did they retain imports as originally planned but they also took part in the exports of the Dutch East India Company. Because of the privileges and powers which the Chinese enjoyed, their relations with the natives resembled those of the appointed aristocrats.

At the beginning of the twelfth/eighteenth century the Company stood at the zenith of its power. But it collapsed in 1213/1798 and the Indonesian territory was placed under the direct authority of the Dutch Government. The aristocratic members of the Indonesian society, however, continued to occupy the topmost positions. To strengthen their positions, the offices which they held were made hereditary, and they were allowed to retain a certain percentage of the crop collected from the natives.

The aristocratic nominee of the Dutch Government was answerable to the Dutch officer above him and not to the peasantry whom he kept under strict bondage. The peasants were required not only to pay fixed land-tax, but also to sow crops needed by the Government and to put in labor to the amount desired by his foreign and local bosses. The result of this tyrannous system was that Indonesia was often visited by widespread famines which took a heavy toll of human and animal life.

As the entire trade was in the hands of the Dutch and the Chinese, the Indonesians could acquire neither trading experience nor contact with the market economy. In the words of Van der Kolff, the cultivation system "caused a gap between the producer and the market whereby there was no knowledge of the market, no outlet for enterprise, and no possibility of developing a native trading class."⁹

Moreover, the Dutch-Chinese monopolists fleeced the peasant to such a degree that it killed all his creative qualities and initiative as a farmer. The taxes were so heavy that the peasant was forced to borrow money from the Chinese, the only source of credit, who lent money at exorbitant rates of interest. The peasant could pay back the money in kind only; consequently, he was forced to sow the crop acceptable to the creditor and to sell the same at the rate fixed by him.

The Dutch paid no attention to the education of the native inhabitants of the colonies except that they allowed a few families to benefit from learning. According to governmental records, public primary schools were instituted in 1266/1850. There were no secondary schools. No library worth the name was to be found in Indonesia before 1235/1819. Officially, a library with about 20,000 books came into existence in 1262/1846, but no native was allowed to enter its precincts till 1313/1895. It contained Dutch books mostly. The number of Arabic books was negligible.

Politically and intellectually, the Muslim civilization could not sink lower than it did in Indonesia by the middle of the thirteenth/nineteenth century.

B. Non-Political Causes

Several non-political causes can be assigned to the general decay of the Muslim society during the period under review. As these causes operate in all parts of the Muslim world with varying degrees of intensity, it would be better to discuss them all at one place. The political fall of the Muslims was conditioned by factors both external and internal.

As the external factors were almost in all cases due to the interference of the Europeans, so the internal factors were in almost all cases due to the intellectual, moral, and spiritual bankruptcy of the Muslims themselves. Thus, primarily the Muslims themselves were responsible for their decadence. The machinations of the imperialistic nations were helped, or shall we say abetted, by the inefficiency of Muslim rulers and the colossal ignorance of the masses.

So long as the Muslims were in the vanguard of knowledge, they led the civilized world in culture, science, and philosophy. But as soon as they lost interest in free and independent inquiry, they ceased to exist as a dynamic force. Not only in Indonesia which was ruled and exploited by a colonial power for a long time, but also in Persia, Turkey, and India where the semblance of Muslim power existed for some time, one finds absence of interest in scientific pursuit or genuine philosophical quest.

No one can deny the great urge for inductive study that existed among the Muslims in the first few centuries of their era. Nor can one deny the priceless contributions of the Muslims to the world of scientific and cultural thought. Islam can boast of its splendid thinkers in every discipline and in every department of human life. There are great names in the field of physics, medicine, geography, mathematics, astronomy, history, and linguistics—to mention only a few out of the several branches of human knowledge wherein the Muslims scored triumph by virtue of their painstaking study and inductive methods of investigation.

But it is surprising as well as regrettable to note that not a single scientist of any repute existed in the entire Muslim world from the beginning of the twelfth/eighteenth century to the middle of the thirteenth/nineteenth century. On the other hand, what one finds in this period is a condemnation of the modern scientific knowledge because of its supposedly anti-religious tendencies.

While the Muslims gloried in the achievements of the past, they neglected the new weapons of inquiry which the West had discovered with the progress of science and technology. The result was a terrible catastrophe. Whereas the other nations progressed, imbued as they were with modern spirit of inquiry, the Muslims frittered away their energies in fruitless controversies of a theological and trans-empirical nature. Instead of imbibing the results of modern science and conducting inductive inquiries, what they did was to question the compatibility of modern knowledge with their mistaken views of religion and to pooh-pooh it because of its materialistic import.

None really understood the meaning of materialism or for that matter the meaning of spiritualism. What was done, however, was that a dichotomy was created between the two and in all discussions spiritualism was overweighed, and materialism run down with all the force that ignorance could muster.

Since the Muslims in the four countries mentioned above lacked the capacity to cope with the demands of the modern scientific world, they regressed as it were to the past and took refuge in the long exploded myths and dreams which were very good for the time for which these were conceived and nurtured but quite out of date in the modern world. Little did they realize that a passionate clinging to the past is an indication of mental morbidity which lead eventually to death and destruction. As individuals regress or get fixated under the stress of life, so do nations. When the realities of life are hard and unpalatable, decadent communities like neurotic individuals take refuge in the past and find solace in their earlier achievements.

Generally speaking, the Muslims of this period evinced no knowledge of that great principle of movement in the social structure of Islam, technically called *ijtihad*. This principle has been variously interpreted by jurists, but all seem to agree, despite their differences, that a reinterpretation of the Qur'anic injunctions for legalistic and extra-legalistic needs of a society is not at all forbidden by Islam. On the other hand, there are *ahadith* of the Prophet which strongly commend the exercise of independent and free inquiry in the domain of jurisprudence and the enactment of laws for the welfare of the community. [10](#)

No doubt, there are differences among the jurists as regards the nature and scope of *ijtihad*. But the existence of this principle and its operation in the early stages of Muslim society is a clear proof of the fact that Islam never accepted a static view of human society. The present is never a replica of the past, nor is future a copy of the present. If exact duplication and identity is abhorred by the course of historical events, how can socio-political enactments of one age apply in totality to the socio-political requirements of another age?

The Muslims of all the four countries under review preferred to rest on their oars and blindly accepted the interpretations of the past. Acceptance of freedom is not an easy task; it involves great dangers as Eric Fromm has amply shown. The human mind flees from freedom, especially if it entails fresh responsibilities and new ventures in the domain of thought. The Muslims miserably lacked the courage to think for themselves and consequently flew to the past for shelter. But the inevitable result of mental procrastination was the creation of a society extremely rigid and immobile in outlook and intellectual

framework.

Blind imitation of the past became the hallmark of the Muslims. The verdicts of Imams and jurists were accepted more in letter than in spirit. While the jurists and other religious thinkers never claimed infallibility or finality for their legal and theological decisions, the Muslims thought that the last word had been said on the subject and that amendment or departure amounted to sacrilege. The early thinkers interpreted and applied the tenets of Islam according to the needs and requirements of their time. But to suppose, as the Muslims did, that their solutions were true for all times indicated incapacity to think afresh in accordance with the changing needs of society.

Not only were the early jurists quoted in support of legal and social pronouncements, but also the sayings of the Prophet, quite a good many of which lacked authenticity. No one can deny the relevance of Hadith, provided its authenticity is guaranteed by unimpeachable evidence and criteria of sound historical criticism. Some *ahadith* do certainly meet these requirements, but not all.

Unfortunately, the religious divines of this period were not mentally equipped to sift the fabricated and cooked *ahadith* from the genuine ones. Hence all sorts of *ahadith* were dug up to lend authority and weight to what ever the divines wanted. As most of them had no acquaintance with old or contemporary scholarship, they relied on cheap commentaries and second rate catechism. In this way what passed for authority was not the Qur'an or *Hadith* or the decisions of jurists, but the presentation of them by ignorant and bigoted persons.

As a result of reactionary tendencies, reason became the target of attack and even an object of ridicule. It was contended that reason was foreign to religious truths and led only to their distortion and misrepresentation. Consequently, all domains of knowledge were given scant attention and their findings were not properly appreciated. Science was discredited on the plea that it led to materialism, and philosophy was opposed as intellect was debarred from entering the portals of divine knowledge. Science and philosophy condemned, what remained was a fairy tale, very comforting to the ignoramus but extremely injurious to the nation as a whole.

The Muslim mind continued to be fed, for a century and a half, on fiction and myths. The result can be well imagined. Not only was there a dearth of scientific thinking in this period but also an absence of genuine philosophical activity. In the heyday of Islam there existed thinkers of great repute; they built their philosophies on the teachings of the ancients but they also made splendid contributions of their own to the storehouse of human knowledge. The States created the proper atmosphere for intellectual pursuits.

Throughout the length and breadth of the Islamic world as it existed during the period under review, one misses freshness and originality of thought. Philosophy requires a soil and a climate to grow and develop and where the conditions of a society are such that neither the proper soil nor the appropriate climate is available; it is hard to find any activity which can be characterized as critical or intellectual.

Another force which worked negatively for the Muslims was mysticism. There is nothing basically wrong with mysticism as such. Every great religion has a mystic strain and so has every great philosophy, for mysticism is the assertion of a trans-empirical reality which is one and ineffable, bears resemblance to the human self, and can be realized through intuition and self-abnegation.

Mysticism records its strong protest against the intellectualization of philosophy. It maintains that the Ultimate Reality, union with which is sought by the mystics in their moment of contemplation, is attainable not through the exercise of ratiocinative processes or logico-mathematical techniques but through the operation of intuitive faculty which enables one to see face to face.

As the preceding chapters have amply shown, among the Muslims there had been great mystics who delved deep into the realm of the spirit and had moments of great insight. They enriched the literature of mysticism by their valuable experiences and observations. In the Dark Age, however, with which we are concerned here, mysticism ceased to exist as a live force and, instead, degenerated into a mode of escape from the hard facts of life. According to Karl Mannheim, absorption in transcendental problems is a characteristic of decadent and retrogressive societies. [11](#)

Instead of grappling with problems that face them, they retreat to the world of transcendence and waste their time in discussing vague and nebulous questions. All mystics in Islam, however, were not escapists. Some of them, at least, indeed the very best of them, did realize the urgency and the imperativeness of the problems facing the society of their time.

But to a large majority of mystics, unfortunately, interest in worldly affairs was of secondary importance; what interested them primarily was their preoccupation with the external form of mystical practices. They decried the ordinary criteria of knowledge, much as the ignorant *mullas* did. The mystics of earlier periods had described the mystic state as the direct experience of Reality, but now the so-called mystics even preached that ignorance was an advantage in the pursuit of holiness. The cumulative effect of this doctrine was that the masses lost their faith in the exercise of reason and regarded it as a Satanic force leading to heresy and atheism.

But the baneful effect of the degenerate type of mysticism was not confined simply to the indictment of intellectual inquiry. It had far-reaching consequences, for as Iqbal says, "The emphasis that it laid on the distinction of *zahir* and *batin* (appearance and reality) created an attitude of indifference to all that applies to Appearance and not to Reality." [12](#) is The spirit of total other worldliness, Iqbal observes further, "obscured men's vision of a very important aspect of Islam as a social policy."

A one-sided concern with transcendentalism indicates, according to psychoanalysts, a state of mental infantilism. In so far as the path generally adopted by the so-called mystics of this dark period and their followers ceased to be that of deep contemplation of or of wrestling with problems through scientific understanding and experimental control, it was at best the path of least resistance; it degenerated into a path of controlling supernatural agencies through the recitation of certain liturgical formulas or by

wearing certain amulets and practicing certain charms.

As the percentage of literacy became appallingly low in the Muslim world, the credulous masses troubled by want and privations could be easily deluded into thinking that the recitation of certain words could rid them instantaneously of all their ills. These short-cuts were offered by the Sufis to the disciples who avowed solemn faith in them. In nearly all Muslim countries there arose a long line of hereditary *pirs* who claimed direct and immediate contact with eternal verities and professed to ensure the spiritual uplift of their votaries provided they had unshakable faith in them.

Thus, along with unquestioning obedience to the divine Law as embodied in the Qur'an and the Sunnah, there arose the need for implicit faith in the spiritual leadership of the *pir* one chose for oneself. Thus the simple folks were saddled with an authority more terrible and tyrannous in nature than that of the traditions of a degenerate society.

Mystic ideas were transmitted to the disciples only after having induced in their minds a high state of receptivity. What was thus accepted under stress of emotions took firm roots in their souls and could not be dislodged by any amount of logic or re-education. Consequently, there arose among the masses a cult of saint-worship. The unwary and credulous people did obeisance to the *pirs* as if they were the incarnations of God on earth.

Offerings were made to them in all sincerity; they were required by the disciples to get their desires granted, to ensure their salvation, and to secure their union with God. The practice of saint-worship soon developed into the habit of shrine-worship. Annual pilgrimages to the shrines of saints became the occasions to celebrate their death anniversaries as national fairs. The saints would be haloed in mists of lore and legend, and the oft-told tales of their marvels were bathed in glory of their spiritual effulgence. Little wonder if superstition flourished and reason remained an outcast.

Pre-deterministic and fatalistic ideas became an essential part of the creed of the masses. Hence epidemics, floods, famines, and deaths happened at the appointed hours and nothing could be done to avoid them. This tendency was encouraged amongst the Muslims by their appalling ignorance of science and the cheap methods of faith-healing placed at their disposal by the clever *pirs* and the so-called Sufis. Fatalism flourishes in darkness and there was enough of it to spare in the Dark Age of Islam. The occurrence of an epidemic, poverty, flood, or drought presents a challenge to a scientist's ingenuity and technological skill. To a fatalist nothing comes as a challenge, for he is safely enwrapped in his acquiescence and resignation.

Mysticism not only bred fatalistic tendencies, it also encouraged indifference to social morality. As the *pir* was supremely concerned with the betterment of his soul, so was his protege. For the spiritual uplift of the soul the cultivation of another-worldly attitude, asceticism, and renunciation came as necessary prescriptions. Self-denial and detachment were deemed the highest virtues.

The prevalence of saint-worship and adherence to the mystic cult left no scope for the development of

practical ethics. The masses could be easily aroused to a high pitch of indignation if one uttered a word against a so-called saint, but they would not be stirred if sanitation was neglected or if delinquency prevailed. In this period it was not noticed that for self-realization the performance of civic duties was as essential as the performance of the spiritual duties. The neglect of social and practical ethics cancelled all programmes of humanitarian activity and left the Muslims far behind in the task of social and political reconstruction.

No Muslim country seriously thought of a social welfare programme for the regeneration of the masses. If anything happened in that direction, it was just by chance and not as a result of some well-planned scheme. The society was left to drift—to sink or to swim as it may. The chances of its sinking exceeded those of swimming, and it actually did sink under the severe demands of life and the world around. The decline was all round. The Muslims lost their empires; the Muslim society went to pieces; science and philosophy disappeared. Even fine arts and minor arts which were the distinguishing features of the second period of revival languished painfully.

The excellent traditions of the early painting were lost; most of the artistic activity confined itself to producing bad copies of the paintings of the early masters. The same degeneration appeared in minor arts. In literature too there was all-round deterioration; traditional poetry encouraged by the princes retained its charm, but created no new forms. The greatest poet in the Indian sub-continent before Ghalib was a weeping poet. Prose became a string of long-drawn-out phrases, cumbersome and involved on the whole.

The Muslims were at the lowest ebb in about 1266/1850. The kings and the nobles took to a life of lewdness and lasciviousness; the masses were ignorant and apathetic; the administration was bureaucratic and autocratic; and what is worse, no attempt was made to appreciate and profit by the scientific and technological developments taking place around them. The West took advantage of the incompetence of the rulers and the hollowness of the Muslim society. They had superior weapons, better ships, more effective techniques, strategy, and diplomacy. In addition, they had qualities of character which the Muslims ceased to possess.

If the strength of a nation is to be measured in terms of the awareness of a challenge and its acceptance, it can be said that during the second decline, the Muslim nations all over the world excelled one another in their lack of understanding of the Western challenge. The West regarded the solidarity and expansion of the Muslim dominions a serious threat to its imperialistic and colonial programme. Hence it was out to throw off the Muslims by whom the challenge was hardly understood. Accordingly, their response was as weak as their understanding of the challenge.

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