

Islam in India

The number of Muslims in India is greater in any single Muslim country, except Indonesia. There are about 105 million Muslims in India, out of 750 million of the total Indian population, which comes to about 15%. Their number is in fact greater than the whole Middle East Muslim population taken together.

The Muslims have lived in India, in small or large numbers, since the beginning of Islam. There are legends and traditions which say that Islam reached Rajputana, in the heart of India, during the days of the Prophet himself. Even if there is some doubt about the authenticity of that legend, there is no doubt whatsoever that Islam had entered India within fifty years after the death of the Prophet. It was brought there by the refugees who had fled Arabia to escape from the persecution because of sectarian differences. Since then Islam has taken root in the Indian soil.

When two cultures meet, they cannot remain isolated from each other. There is always tangible and intangible action and reaction; there is always a continuous give and take. It affects the newly arrived culture as well as the old established one. The resulting culture is, in most cases, more vital and refined than the originals.

Islam was spread in India through the efforts, and the good virtuous lives, of the Sufis, i.e. the mystics. It may seem strange to many who are influenced by the common cliché that “Islam was spread by sword.” Although this is not the place to talk on this subject; but I think some light should be thrown on it.

The fact is that it was not Islam that was spread by sword. It would be more to the point to say that the Muslim empire —or the Arab empire— was spread by sword. No doubt a great empire was established. But one or two examples will show how insignificant effect it had on the spreading of Islam:

Some 88 years after the death of the Prophet, the Caliph 'Umar ibn 'Abdu 'l-'Aziz came to the throne. The Muslim empire by that time had stretched from Spain and the north-west of Africa to the present day Pakistan, and going north to Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan (in present day's Russia). [1](#)

But what was done to propagate Islam in the colonies? (the answer may be found in a circular letter sent by the Caliph to his governors, in which he wrote that it was a matter of concern that even after all those decades of Muslim rule, nothing was done to spread Islam in the colonies; therefore, the governors should do something to rectify the situation. But this directive did not please the governors. The governor of Egypt wrote back that if he tried to spread Islam and people became Muslims, the jizya (poll-tax levied on non-Muslims under Muslim rule — it was the only tax they had to pay) would stop and the treasury would be empty.

The governor of Persia wrote that even the few persons who had accepted Islam, had not done so with sincerity; that they had not got themselves circumcised. Caliph wrote to the former that it was preferable to have the treasury empty and encourage the Egyptians to embrace Islam, rather than having the treasury full and the Egyptians outside the fold of Islam. To the latter he wrote back that the Prophet had come to propagate the Creed: There is none to be worshipped except Allah, and Muhammad is the Messenger of Allah; he had not come to circumcise the people.

However, this attitude of the new caliph was not liked by the ruling clique, and when he died only after two and a half years, it was widely believed that he was poisoned, because he wanted to take the empire towards a new direction.

Therefore, it is wrong to say Islam was spread by sword, rather it was the empire that was spread in that way. It were the Sufis whose piety and spirituality made them immensely popular among the Indian masses, and as a result of it, they entered into the fold of Islam. Even today, every year thousands and thousands of people, belonging to every religion and creed, visit their graves, to obtain blessings and peace of mind through them. Some shrines like those of Khwajah Mu'innuddin Chishti (in Ajmer) and Nizamuddin Awliya¹ (in New Delhi) are very famous and popular.

As I have said earlier, it was but natural that when Islam spread in India, neither Hinduism could remain unaffected by Islam, nor Islam could remain isolated from Hinduism.

Islamic belief in one God and the resulting brotherhood gave rise to many movements among the Hindus. Baba Kabir Das began his movement known as Kabir panthis, which was a revolt against idolatry and casteism. Thereafter, Guru Nanak established the Sikh religion with the same ideals. In recent past, Arya Samaj movement was started by Swami Dyanandji to preach against idol-worship and the caste system.

This much about the ideological side of culture. Now, we should turn our eyes to some other aspects.

¹. This is a fact which has been acknowledged even by some non-Muslim writers of India. See, for example, Khushwant Singh, A History of the Sikhs, vol. 1 (N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1963) pp. 20–28.

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