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# Lecture 3: The Culture of the Muslims in India

*A lecture delivered at the Anthropology Department University of California Santa Cruz, on Thursday, 29th October, 1987*

As Professor Pandya has told you, I am supposed to speak on the Muslim Culture in India. Although I know about religion, I do not know much about culture. Therefore, whatever I will say, will be based not on book knowledge, but on personal experience and observation.

## 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 he 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'inuddin Chishti (in Ajmer) and

Nizamuddin Awliya' (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.

# Architecture

One of those aspects is architecture. Lotus is a very outstanding and holy motif in Indian culture. You must have seen pictures of the statues of Gautama Buddha in which he is shown sitting on lotus. Sometimes Shiva and Krishna are shown in the same position. It has its roots in the old legends and myths, going back to Brahma. When the Muslims settled in India, they brought dome and minaret from Middle East and Turkey. But the domes built by them in the early periods were, like those of the Middle East, simplistic in design.

Then the process of mutual give-and-take began, until we come to the ultimate poetry in marble, which is known as Taj Mahal, pictures of which you must have seen everywhere. If you study the upper section of its dome, you will see that the architects have capped it with inverted lotus. Thus by combining the Muslim dome and Hindu lotus, they have created the master-piece of Indian architecture, which is rightfully called the eighth wonder of the world.

We also find many features and designs in Muslim buildings in India which show the influence of the ancient culture that was prevalent in India.

# Languages

When the Muslims came to India, they gradually adopted the local languages. Many of their kings and military and religious leaders in the Northern, Southern, Eastern and Western India acquired literary distinction in their regional languages. Tipu Sultan of Mysore and Abdullah Qutub Shah of Golcanda were reputed poets. The Muslims spoke local languages, wrote in local languages and composed poetry in local languages, but it was not, and could not be, a one-way traffic. Their own language, i.e. Persian, also influenced the local languages. This is a natural process; language does not remain static: if it did, it would die. Every living language absorbs foreign words foreign ideas, and thus its strength grows and its beauty is enhanced. Thus, the daily contact in social gatherings, markets and administration gave birth to a composite language, Urdu.

"Urdu" is a Turkish word. Some say, it means army; others say, it means market. Be it as it may. The implication is the same: When people mingled with each other, in army or in market, this new language came into being. There is a difference of opinion concerning its birth-place. A group claims it was born at Delhi while another one says it was at Hyderabad (Deccan) in the South. What is certain is that the new language appeared in both places almost simultaneously; and it shows that there was a widespread inter-action and give-and-take ranging from Delhi in the north to Hyderabad in the south.

Urdu was, and still is, the commonly spoken language in a vast area of India and Pakistan. The Hindi-Urdu conflict is a bitter legacy of post-World War I politics in India. It may be said truthfully that as far as the spoken language is concerned there is little difference between Hindi and Urdu, The basic difference is in the scripts —the language written in Persian script is called Urdu, while that written in Devnagari script is Hindi. Of course when it comes to literary works, the Urdu writers and poets use many Arabic and Persian words and phrases, while those writing in Hindi lean mostly on Sanskrit expressions.

In some cases this tendency leads the writer* (who perhaps to prove their high erudition) to use Persianised or Sanskritised expression, as to make the Urdu or Hindi quite unintelligible to the common masses. However, the Urdu language was a common bond among the people of India, and especially between Hindus and Muslims. It was Urdu that gave India its famous revolutionary slogan, Inqilab zindabad (long live the revolution) which was heard from Assam to North-West Frontier, and from Kashmir to Ras Kumari. It is still heard in political rallies and processions. Urdu was not confined to the Muslims; hundreds, even thousands, of its writers and poets were, and are, Hindu. Pandit Rattan Nath Sarshar, Munshi Prem Chand, Brij Narain Chakbast, Daya Shankar Nasim, Firaq Gorakhpuri, Sahir Lodhyanawi, Rajendra Singh Bedi, Jagannath Azad, Arsh Malsiyani, Tilok Chand Mahroom, Gopi Chand Narang, Molvi Mahesh Parshad are just a few names that have come to mind at random.

We may also say that the Urdu language, or more correctly the Islamic literature, was saved, preserved and put in the hands of the public by a famous Hindu publisher, Munshi Nawal Kishore of Lucknow. This great son of India opened his eyes during the reign of the East India Company, and lived to see India being ruled by Queen Victoria. He started a printing press, and unearthed rare books of Hindu and Islamic philosophies, religions and literatures in Urdu, Arabic, Persian, Hindi and Sanskrit, and got them printed. This Hindu was held in such a great esteem that when the Muslim king of Afghanistan visited India, he made special request to the viceroy of India to make arrangements so that he could meet Munshi Nawal Kishore.

Pandit Jawahar Lal Nehru, the first prime Minister of India spoke Urdu. Dr. Rajendraprasad, the first President of India, has written in his auto-biography that his education began not with “Shri Ganesh” (i. e.. the Hindu formula) but with ” Bis-millahi 'r-Rahmani 'r-Rahim' (i. e . the Muslim formula). He took Hindi as a subject in his B. A. class.

It was Urdu which was chosen when the first attempt was made by Indians during the British Raj to use an Indian language as the medium of instruction at the university level. When Mir 'Usman 'Ali Khan, the seventh Nizam and last ruler of Hyderabad state, established the Osmania University with this object in view, there were misgivings in many circles. But the attempt proved tremendously successful. Committees were formed to coin Urdu terms for scientific and other subjects. Men of repute in various fields of knowledge were engaged to write books for the courses of studies. And teaching in Urdu medium started up to the Masters courses. And this was done without sacrificing the high standards of education. Soon the Oxford University in Britain recognised its degrees.

Unfortunately, the bitterness after the partition of India prompted the Indian leaders to deprive Urdu of its rightful place in India. Osmania University was turned overnight into a Hindi University; and all the academic and literary work done there in Urdu was relegated to oblivion and none of those titles are now available. Although, the Indian Constitution counts the Urdu as one of the 14 regional languages of India, the language has not been recognised yet as the regional language of any state or region. So, on governmental and official level, Urdu does not exist in India.

Pakistan has made Urdu its official language, although it is not a language spoken in any district of Pakistan. Punjabis speak the Punjabi language, Sindhis speak the Sindhi, Baluchis speak the Baluchi and the Pushto is spoken in the NWFR. Yet the official language of Pakistan is Urdu. Although it has been banished from U.P., Delhi and Hyderabad, the places where it was born, but —so far as the public support is concerned— it still flourishes in those areas. The number of the magazines and newspapers published in Urdu surpasses that of every other official language except Hindi.

# Azadari

Now we come to a particular manifestation of the inter-action between Muslim and Hindu cultures, that is “Azadari”. It is an Urdu word, which denotes mourning rites commemorating the martyrdom of Imam Husayn (peace be upon him) and is companions about 1350 years ago at Karbala in Iraq. The Shi’ahs and a great number of the Sunnis observe these rites during Muharram, the first month of the Islamic calendar. In India, this system was popularized by Abdullah Qubt Shah, the King of Golcanda, who founded the city of Hyderabad. Gradually it spread to the whole kingdom among the Hindus as well as the Muslims. In the month of Muharram, replicas are made of the mausoleum of Imam Husayn; these are called “ta'ziya” in Urdu. Processions are taken out with ta'ziyas in which poems are recited lamenting the tragedy of Karbala.

Legend says that ta'ziya was invented in India — not the Azadari on the whole, but only this particular system of making replicas of Imam Husayn's mausoleum. When Timur Lang (known in the West as Tamerlane) came to India, and could not go in the month of Muharram to Karbala to participate in the mourning ceremonies there, he built a replica of the to him in commemorating the events of Karbala (Those who are against ta'ziya say that it was the influence of the Hindu culture, even if their claim was correct, it doesn’t make it automatically unlawful or condemnable!)

When you see some merry-making, you may ignore them. But if you find someone crying, you will certainly go near him to ask what was the matter. So grief always attracts, while it is not necessary that joy should do so. As the rites of Muharram were related to grief and mourning, they attracted all the people from every walk of life, belonging to every belief and creed. In pre-partition days Maharajas of Gwaliar, Bharaipur, Patiala and many other Hindu states actively participated in Azadari. They had built very grand ta'ziyas which were taken out in processions and then kept safely in the building especially dedicated to the memory of Imam Husayn.

Even now thousands and thousands of Hindus participate in Azadari. One interesting example is of Bhavnagar (Gujarat) where ta'ziya processions are taken out on the eve of the 10th Muharram; every ta'ziya is given a permanent number by the government, and that number fixes its position in the procession. The first ta'ziya belongs to a Hindu; and out of some eighty ta'ziyas, only two or three belong to the Shi'ahs.

This is how the things go. If one wants to remain in peace and harmony, one can easily do so. But how long can this unity survive? Unfortunately there are some bad elements in every country and every society; and India is a very big country. You must be reading in the newspapers, time and again, that there was a Hindu-Muslim riot in Moradabad, Meerut, Delhi, Aligarh, Ahmadabad and other places.

Divisive forces have gradually got upper hand. Communal riots are becoming a regular feature of Indian life. And every riot leaves a legacy of bitterness and distrust in its wake. Even more unfortunate is the fact that now there is no leader like Mahatma Gandhi who was ready to sacrifice his own life on the altar of communal harmony and peace.

Or like the Home Minister, Gulzari Lal Nanda, who, in 1964, had made all District Commissioners Superintendents of Police “personally” answerable for the peace in their districts. What is more disturbing nowadays is that in places like Meerut and Muzaffarnagar police and para-military forces had joined the attacking forces against the Muslims, and no action was taken against those responsible for it. This has created a pervasive feeling of insecurity in the Muslim community. That feeling is not good either for the community or for the country. But the politicians and the powers seem to be oblivious to this danger. They are either unable or unwilling to control this situation.

# Lucknow Culture

However, coming back to our topic of Muslim Culture, we must briefly mention the culture of Lucknow, the capital of the Kingdom of Awadh. When you go to visit a governor or president, there are some manners you have to observe, some etiquette you have to follow. This culture began at the imperial courts of the Muslim monarchy of Delhi. Of course, there existed the court etiquette in the palaces of the Hindu Kings of Rajputana. But the Moghuls of Delhi refined it into a very high degree. From Delhi, it spread to the courts of the provincial governors and rulers throughout India.

When it reached Lucknow, the Nawwabs and the Kings popularized it to such an extent that even common people began observing that etiquette – those manners, in their own houses. Thus the Lucknow culture came into being, where people on meeting one another bow down to each other, use approved phrases and words, each insisting that the other should go ahead — and many things like that. This culture spread in accord and due respect to everyone to Patna and Murshidabad in the East, and Hyderabad in the South. It enriched the Indian cultural fabrics. Although the hustle and bustle of modem life had taken its toll, it is still the hallmark of civility and culture. This culture teaches you to give preference to others,; it trains you to speak politely even while angry, to express your displeasure in a civilized manner.

In the past, the people of Lucknow gave so much importance to teaching their children good behaviour and proper manners of talking, sitting, walking, eating, drinking and things like that, that they used to send the children to some reputable courtesans. It may look strange but actually those courtesans

maintained very strict discipline in their places; nothing was done which could not be seen by the wives and daughters. And just by sitting in those gatherings, youths learned how to behave properly.

Those days are gone, although its influence may be found here and there. I am optimistic by nature, and I expect and hope that the respect and love which the Lucknow culture showed to others, the respect and love which Islam accords to others, which Hinduism shows to others, will eventually prevail; and the people of India will again return to their original way of thinking, and settle their differences amicably and peacefully, showing love and respect to one another, living in harmony and brotherhood.

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