Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient, Vol. XXXII

THE ISLAMIC BACKGROUND TO INDIAN HISTORY

An Interpretation of the Islamic Past

BY

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The medieval period of Indian history, as conventionally fixed by historians, c. 1000 to c. 1750 had so deep an imprint of Islam, that during much of the period, India could be held to belong culturally to the Islamic World, not on its periphery, but close to its core. It is, of course, the uniqueness of India's situation, that at the very same time, strictly in terms of its Hindu component, it could be said to be a world in its own right, with Islam only as a peripheral phenomenon. Yet, since the Islamic connexion greatly influenced the political structure, the fiscal system and even much of the network of internal commerce and external trade, it is crucial to understand the background that Islam provided to Indian history, or in other words, to understand Islamic history till the arrival of Islam in Northern India, c. 1200[1]). A splendid effort to do so was provided by Professor Mohammad Habib in his introduction to a reprint of Vol. II of Elliot and Dowson's *History of India as told by its Own Historians*, Aligarh, 1952. A year later Hamilton Gibb came out with his well known essay, "An Interpretation of Islamic History", published in *Journal of World*

1) Here I am ignoring the Arab conquest of Sind in early 8th century, the Muslim communities in various parts of India in the subsequent period, and the Ghaznavide conquests of the 11th century. Islam, as an important social and cultural factor in Indian history, begins its history only with the Ghorian conquests and the establishment of the Sultanate around the beginning of the 13th century.

History, 1953[2]). Nearly thirty-five years have passed since then, years during which much has been written, and many new insights obtained. The present essay proposes to offer a rather personal reappraisal of the first six hundred years of Islamic history based admittedly on only a partial reading of the vast literature on the subject and with a confessed bias towards what seems more relevant from an Indian point of view, though not deliberately neglecting other possible angles of vision.

I

In any narration of the events of the past, the emergence of Islam within a neglected, seemingly "wild" desert, and its rapid transformation into one of the great historical cultures of the world, presents a subject of great drama and wonder. There have been greater and more rapid conquests. The Mongols in the 13th Century too arose out of the steppes to create the one sole world empire in pre-modern history, twice or thrice the size of the Islamic Caliphate at its greatest extent; and they achieved it in far less time. But the Mongols created no international culture; their own language was overwhelmed by the babel of tongues of their subjects; instead of assimilating, like the Arabs, they were themselves assimilated by others. Clearly, then, without denigrating the claims of *Pax-Mongolica* for historical analysis, one may still assert that an analysis of Islam is likely to tell us much more about what has happened in a large part of Asia and Africa during the last fifteen hundred years.

How does one set about the task? There has recently been a spate of criticism of the "Orientalists". Amidst this protest, Edward W. Said's critique is perhaps the most comprehensive as well as reasonable[3]). In so far as "Orientalism" is conceived as an attempt to study eastern cultures, especially Islam, in the way man studies

2) Reprinted in Gibb, *Studies on the Civilization of Islam*, ed. Stanford J. Shaw and William R. Polk, London, 1912, pp. 3-33.

3) Edward W. Said, *Orientalism*, New York, 1979.

Zoology, or animals of lower orders, many of the criticisms are perhaps quite valid. From this valid objection, however, there has been a tendency to go on to assert that Islamic history can only be understood by those who believe in Islam, who can study it on its own terms, and, still better, interpret it *in its terms*. This is a very attractive notion, and by ruling out all comparisons with other cultures or systems (for each of them must then be studied on its own terms), it sweeps away the possibility of any arrogantly Euro-centric interpretation of Islamic history. One can, perhaps, see the most learned practitioner of this kind of exposition in Hamidullah, with his well-known biography of Prophet in two volumes.

Without totally denying the claims of this school to legitimacy, I would still argue that the basic premises here are not acceptable. A believer has a perfect right to expound the tenets of Islam ''on its own terms'', in its own terminology: but this would be theology, without any indignity necessarily attaching to that term. Can it be History? Islam, as a historical phenomenon, has always interacted with other elements that have undisputably originated and existed outside its fold. Will it be valid to see them on terms supposedly proper only to Islam? If not, how, then, is the interaction to be interpreted? For if one is to understand the Islamic phenomenon in a historical perspective, the interaction is not peripheral but central to any analysis. The conclusion is inescapable that whether it is the history of feudal Christendom or of Lama-Buddhism or of Islam, one would need the same critical apparatus, the same freedom from assumptions or given premises, and the same sharp critical faculty.

This can be illustrated by the very first problem one faces: the emergence of Islam within the womb of what Muslims call the ''Jahilliya'', the society and culture in which the Prophet was born. Is ''Jahilliya'' to be understood ''on its own terms'' (hardly known to us now, at firsthand) or on those of Islam, whose followers understandably exaggerated the allegedly evil customs of the ''Jahilliya''. One must now rather examine the degree of exaggeration in the Islamic traditions about that period and reconstruct, by

additional use of other sources, of what was really happening in the Arabian peninsula before the rise of Islam. There is no proof that the Pre-Islamic Arabian Society was in a primitive communal stage, as E. A. Belyaev has argued; nor, as he further asserts, that it was being converted into a slave-owning one[4]). One would rather say that the Bedouin society, based on tribe, was indeed pastoral; but it had long developed individual property, even if this was counted in terms of camels and date-palms, rather than money. Slavery was a convenient, but not essential, prop of this property system. Outside Yemen agriculture was only of secondary importance; but this, along with date-palm cultivation, would again emphasize individual right and economic and social differentiation. Thus, clearly, private property, which is the basis of Islamic civil law, already existed in Arabia. Islam helped at best to standardise and systematise its norms. As far as slavery is concerned, it is possible that slavery became more important after Islamic conquests (with the train of captive slaves they generated); but it is unlikely that here too Islam either greatly modified or intensified slavery. It recognised it practically just as it had found it.

Where, then, was there in a sphere other than ideological, a true break with ''Jahilliya''? Montgomery Watt's thesis of town-nomad conflict may be taken to develop a proposition of the triumph of urbanism over pastoral rusticism[5]). The essential difference between the town-dweller and the Bedouin is recognised in the Quran, where the nomad is spurned[6]). There is no doubt that the initial success of Islam is related to the existence of commercial oases, notably Mecca, within the desert wastes of the Peninsula. One can trace this situation, perhaps, to the discovery of the Monsoons that occured around the time of Christ. This discovery suddenly shifted the main ports to the mouth of the Red Sea. The Red Sea itself is unaffected by the

4) *Arabs, Islam and the Arab Caliphate*, London, 1969, p. 115.
5) Watt's major works are *Muhammad at Mecca*, Oxford, 1953; and *Muhammad at Madina*, Oxford, 1956.
6) *Surah IX*, p. 98.

Monsoon winds, and so posed a tedious barrier to sailing ships within its waters. The trade between the Mediterranean and India must needs, therefore, pass overland through Hijaz, connecting the Levant and Egyptian ports with those of Yemen. Of this overland caravan trade, Mecca became the undeclared capital. It also became, apparently, the entrepot from where some of the luxuries of civilization were distributed among the nomadic tribes (or rather among their chiefs and "wealthy" families). Mecca sealed its position by installing, in the *Ka'ba*, the images of gods (including the one called Allah) and goddesses to establish for itself a position of a pilgrimage centre for the tribes of the peninsula. The response of Mecca to Islam was governed, among other factors, by this alliance of commerce with religion. Could Islam offer a more attractive alternative in terms of persuading the tribes to respect the security of the Quraysh in the name of religious sanctity? As Shaban and Rodinson argue, the moment Islam would be shown to offer a far more effective claim on the nomad than Lat and Manat[7]), the *Ka'ba* would assume even a greater sanctity under its banner. The Meccan reaction to Islam passed quickly from surrender to reconciliation, and then, ultimately, to dominance[8]).

If these are reasonable notions, do we then assume that Islam was simply a development of institutions already present in Arab society and economy? This indeed is precisely Shaban's conclusion. Islam "was definitely Arab, based on Arab traditions, and shaped in Arab forms"[9]). It seems to me that this represents an exaggeration that may dangerously mar our understanding of early Islamic history.

What is missing in Shaban's thesis is any recognition that the essential elements of the Islamic faith cannot be shown to have grown historically out of Arabian soil. If one does not care to contest the

7) Maxime Rodinson, *Mohammad*, Penguin ed. 1973, esp. pp. 264-5 and M. A. Shaban, *Islamic History, A.D. 600-750 A New Interpretation*, Cambridge, 1971, pp. 13-14.

8) Shaban, *op. cit.*, p. 15.

9) Shaban, *Islamic History, A.D. 600-750 — A New Interpretation*, Cambridge, 1971, p. 15.

believer's faith in the message of Abraham, that message had admittedly long been forgotten in Mecca and it had left no living tradition. What was intruding into Arabia were the ideas of Judaism and Christianity radiating from the Roman Empire and later Byzantium. The notorious missionary gibe that Islam is a rehash of Judaism and Christianity has undoubtedly inhibited free discussion of the matter. But the link with both religions is explicitly recognised in the Quran, where God's message to Prophet Muhammad clearly reinforces, succeeds or supersedes that sent through Moses and Christ; the tradition of the Old Testament is appealed to in considerable detail. Its hearers did not deem these to be strange and incomprehensible narrations, for already all over Hijaz and Yemen there were Jewish and Christian communities of tradesmen, peasants and even pastoralists, who often lived, as at Madina, among pagan populations. The basis, introduced from outside, for challenging pagan beliefs already existed; without it the reception given to Islam in pagan Arabia, after an initial hesitation, would have been inconceivable. The ideology of Islam was, then, by no means "Arab", if it is intended to mean that its acceptance was the product of internal questionings spontaneously sprouting in nomad Arabia.

The core of what was new to pagan Arabia was the concept of *umma*, a concept which rapidly evolved from the sense of a federation of tribes or communities, pagan, Jewish and Muslim, with the Prophet as the arbitrator, into a community of Believers. There was no precedent for this in Arabia. The only precedents were external, the Jewish community, for instance, but still more, the Christian realm, embracing all, irrespective of race and tribe, who believed in God, His Son and the Holy Ghost. If Allah was central to the faith of Islam, the *umma* was Central to its organisation; and the latter, at any rate, was in its evolved form a purely external phenomenon.

Here one might also note that "Arabism" in the age of the Prophet would have been a total anachronism. The Arabs were conscious of no sense of superiority; there were grounds for lack of such consciousness. They envied the wealth and prosperity of their

neighbours; they were themselves visibly primitive and backward. That Allah in His mercy had sent them the last of the Prophets was a matter of Divine Grace, not a thing expected or natural. Believers could be proud if those other than Arabs became Muslims; Islam was thus, quite self-consciously, not an Arab but a Universal faith. Things were to change only later, when the Arabs subjugated other people in the name of Islam. Then alone could Islam become, in the eyes of its neo-aristocratic believers, the peculiar privilege of the conquering race.

Yet it was the externally introduced concept of *umma* that made the conquests possible: a unity to which tribal diversity became subordinate, and a unity that could, therefore, give cohesion and direction, if its leadership came into such able hands as those of Abu Bakr and Umar, the first two Caliphs. The unity did not, however, imply equality or democracy. For one thing, the Quraysh, as the sacred tribe of the past and now the tribe of the Prophet, enjoyed a rising prominence. Within the tribes the chiefs (saiyyids, shaykhs) had from the beginning retained their places upon joining the Islamic banner. There were thus all the elements present for a rapid evolution of an aristocracy within the *umma*, though such evolution could not but bring in the infusion of family and tribal feuds — the real ''Arab'' heritage.

II

On the actual process of conquests little need be said, since much has been written. It is difficult to know what the initial reactions of the conquered people were. The Byzantine Empire was undoubtedly riven by sectarian quarrels, and the Sassanid Empire had been shaken by a revolt of the poor, led by Mazdak in the preceding century. But the factors behind the first successes of the Arabs lay probably more within their own new-found unity of purposes than in any support they would arouse among the ranks of their opponents. Yet

once the initial military advantage had been attained, the Arab conquests were relatively swift, and the vast structures of the two empires, with their taxes and rents, lay in the hands of the conquerors, even before the Pious Caliphate came to an end (661 A.D.)

What transpired now can be looked at from two angles: What happened to the conquerors, and what happened to the conquered.

On the first, I venture to think that Wellhausen's analysis, though demanding modifications in detail, still stands in its essentials[10]). On a close scrutiny of the traditions incorporated in Tabari, Wellhausen argued that with the ultimate rise to dominance of the aristocratic Qurayshite house of the Ummayyids there developed three basic contradictions among the ruling classes of Islam: (a) Between the tribal leaders of two great tribal federations, which evolved within the aristocracy of tribal leaders, viz., the Muzarites and the Yemenites; (b) between the Arab tribal leaders settled in Iraq (the conquerors of Persia) and the Syrians (who hosted, so to speak, the Umayyid Caliphate); and (c) between the Arabs, in general, and the non-Arab Muslims who tended to increase with 'unauthorised' conversions, that is, with people becoming Muslims without actual acceptance as clients (*mawwālī*, pl. of *mawlā*) by any Arab tribe. I do not think that Shaban in his *Abbasid Revolution* has really brought down Wellhausen's major thesis, though one would readily agree that Wellhausen's implied supposition of the continuation of pagan-Arab rivalries in an Islamic form, probably goes too far[11]). The Abbasid Revolution was seen by Wellhausen as an alliance of the Iraqites with the *mawwālī*, with loyalty to the House of the Prophet (the Alids) as the ideological cloak for their ambitions. One could, of course, agree that the natural result of such an alliance, when successful, was bound to be "the assimilation of all Muslims", but whether this was

10) J. Wellhausen, *The Arab Kingdom and Its Fall*, tr. Weir, Calcutta, 1927. One of the important modifications was introduced by D. C. Dennet in respect of Wellhausen's theory of the history of *kharaj* and *jiziya* (Dennet, *Conversion and the Poll Tax in Early Islam*, Cambridge, Mass, 1950).

11) M. A. Shaban, *The Abbasid Revolution*, Cambridge, 1970, esp. p. XIV. Clearly Shaban is much harsher on Wellhausen than the evidence warrants.

a conscious immediate "objective" of the Abbasid Revolution, as Shaban supposes, may perhaps be doubted.

This brings us to the question as to who the *mawwālī* were; that is, to say, we must now ask the second question, as to what was happening to the conquered. It may be seen from the actual records of the Arab conquests, e.g., of Sind, given in splendidly detailed narration in the *Chachnāma*, that the first converts to Islam, the "clients" accepted by Arabs belonged to the high and middle nobility rather than the masses who for a much longer time remained unconverted. Muḥammad ibn Qāsim, the conqueror of Sind and his successors, even continued the Brahmanical restrictions on the pastoral "unclean" community of the Jatts[12]). The conquerors also continued the earlier taxation, so that a very heavy land-tax (kharāj) assimilated and incorporated the earlier burdens. It is doubtful if Arab conquests meant any kind of liberation or even much relief to the poor of the conquered lands.

The converted aristocracy, such as the *marzbāns* and *dihqāns* of the Sassanid regime, became inevitable adjuncts and middlemen to the Arab rulers. In course of time, they would be Arabicised in culture, and, perhaps, speech; they would never be tribalised. In essence, therefore, they came to represent a more coherent and homogeneous class than the tribally divided Arab rulers. As conversions percolated downwards, Hajjaj ibn Yusuf could rave against the rising *mawwālī*, but invain. The future belonged to them.

III

We may yet, with Wellhausen, suppose the Abbasid Revolution to be a coalition between the Iraqite Arabs and the *mawwālī*, the latter, still probably a minority among the subject population, but indispensable to Iraqite rule.

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12) *Chachnāma*, ed. N. A. Baloch, Islamabad, 1983, pp. 163-64.

The Abbasid Caliphate was the period when the classical world of Islam really took shape: A sub-terranean Persian basis, influx of Hellenic and Hellenistic thought and sciences, Arabic as the vehicle expression — such was the trinity of Abbasid High Culture. It saw the emergence of the great juridical schools, the formulation of the Orthodox (Ashᶜarite) theology, the beginnings of sufism. This high culture, with Arabic as its main vehicle, was the obvious result of a tremendous cross-cultural fertilisation.

Alongside the development of this culture whose last great representatives in the eastern lands were Avicenna and Alberuni (early 11th century), there seems to have occurred a process whereby Islam, from being the religion of an elite minority, became the faith of the masses. By the time of Mongol conquests, the Muslims obviously formed the vast bulk of the population of Western and Central Asia. The Christians, Parsis and Buddhists had been reduced to small minorities. It was probably this basic fact that saved Islam when its splintered political fabric was all but destroyed by the Mongols in the 13th century.

The process of conversion, as it neared completion, created new problems for Islamic polity: a state where the rulers and subjects were both Muslims, and where, therefore, the Muslims must bear the brunt of the taxation. For such a state neither the practices of the Prophet, more suitable for a semi-pastoral economy, nor the policies of Umar I, when the Muslims were the conquerors and all other people their subjects could form a precedent. If Muslims were to pay *'ushr* or one-tenth of the produce, no state could subsist financially. Inevitably, law adjusted to circumstance. The notion of *kharāj* as a tax on all peasants, comprising the surplus, irrespective of the faith of the tax-payer, came to be conceded by the jurists of the Hanafite School[13]). In practice this prevailed from the Atlantic to the Altai mountains. Conversely, the ruling class could no longer claim a

13) The most useful compilation for the Jurists' opinion on the taxation is Aghnides, *Theories of Mohammadan Finance*, Lahore, 1961.

legitimacy on the basis of its Arab or Islamic origins. The Arab tribal claims on conquered lands in the form of *dhiyā'* which the early Caliphs had had to admit, similarly disappeared as the *iqtā'* or transferable revenue-charge became universal. The ruling classes came to be detached from earlier roots, and, but for exceptional cases, like the Siljuq tribe under the Siljūqids, the nobility became a class totally dependent not on hereditary claims, but on the pleasure of the ruler. The classic new state was that of Ghaznīn, whose ruler Maḥmūd (999-1030), the great conqueror, was supposed to be the first Sultan of Islam. Thus arose the characteristic state of Medieval Islam, which seems to have formed the model of Marx's "Asiatic Despotism"[14]).

Inspite of these rather ominous features, the medieval states of the Islamic World (from 13th century onwards) had many positive contributions which may be readily admitted: patronage of commerce, a high level of urbanisation, a minimum degree of security. There were other features, which no longer appeal to the modern mind: oppression of the peasantry, growing orthodoxy and stagnation in science and learning. But these questions, though important, are outside the area of our present concern, which has only been to raise issues about the stages of evolution of the Islamic polities and societies of the early period, before its arrival in India with the Ghorian conquests of c. 1200.

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14) I have discussed the characteristics of the state now formed in the Islamic world in my paper, 'Political Structures of the Islamic Orient', 16th and 17th Centuries,' to be published in *Medieval India — I*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi.