

SURVEY

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MISSIONARY EXPANSION OF ISLAM IN INDIA

Islam is a missionary religion and every Muslim is a missionary of his faith. Members of a missionary religion cannot rest satisfied until what they believe to be the truth is accepted as the truth by all members of the human family. This task of spreading the truth and converting unbelievers is raised to the status of a sacred duty in a missionary religion by its founder himself. It is this missionary propagation of the truth of their religion that has inspired the Muslims to carry with them the message of Islam to the people of every land into which they penetrated through conquest, trade or immigration. The missionary spirit of Islam manifests itself in all its aspects in the Indian subcontinent which has one-fourth of the total Muslim population of the world. The non-Muslim historians generally exaggerate the so called "forced conversions". On the other hand, some of the Muslim scholars naturally try to ever emphasize the persuasive and peaceful means used by the Muslim missionaries and mystics to propagate Islam in India. An attempt is made in this paper to bring out the missionary character of Islam and then to point out some of the relevant factors that led to the astonishing growth of Islam in the Indian subcontinent.

ISLAM - THE "ONLY RELIGION" FOR MANKIND

According to the Quran God has prescribed and perfected the religion of Islam as the only religion for mankind. "This day I have perfected your religion for you and completed my favour unto you, and have chosen for you as religion AL - ISLAM (5:3). The Quran speaks of itself as the best guidance for mankind (10:199) and Muslims as the best community of the world (3:110). In the light of these and other similar verses of the Quran some of the Muslim thinkers argue that mankind is left with no choice but to accept Islam as their religion. They cite the following verse in support of their view: "... and who so seeketh as religion other than the "Surrender" (to Allah) (al-Islam) it will not be accepted from him, and he will be a loser in the Hereafter" (3:85).

Fruits of Conversion

Those who embrace Islam, according to the Muslim propagandists will soon realize that in the present anarchic state of the world, the panacea for all troubles lies in accepting and adhering to the message revealed to the prophet Muhammad. Sheikh Muhammad Iqbal explains the fruits of conversion to Islam as follows: First of all, the supreme voice of one and only God called Allah, will unite the believers into one sacred and strong community which is immune to theoretical innovations. The word of God, called the Quran, will provide him with a code of conduct, a constitution for the state and society, that will guide him to the ultimate goal of spiritual solace and temporal satisfaction. He will enjoy a political set up which advocates and develops a high ideology, and institutions which remove and annul every possibility of oppression of man by man by upholding the inviolable rights of all. Islam will protect him through an economic system that denounces special privileges, guarantees conditions which ensure prosperity for all, rejects every form of exploitation and makes the government and affluent men responsible for the amelioration and advancement of the poor and the needy. He will definitely appreciate the simple and meaningful prayers and simple form of worship with no pompous rituals and complicated ceremonies which confer upon him the rewards of discipline and a feeling of mutual dependence in life.¹

“Convey the Message”

We do not see in the Quran a direct exhortation addressed to the Muslims “to go forth and preach and make converts”. But the entire tone of the Quran shows that it is a divine gift to be made known and shared among all men. So the Quran asks the Muslims to invite all people to embrace Islam so that all become worthy of God’s mercy and blessing. Carlton L. Riemer, an American Missionary working among Muslims in the Philippines, tries to explain the missionary character of the Quran through an exegetical study of various words and concepts. According to him the verbal noun form *balagh* derived from *blgh* which occurs seventy-five times in the Quran, comes to mean that which is conveying an idea or message, the proclamation etc. In a number of times in the Quran the duty or mission of an apostle is described as communication or proclamation. The task of conveying

1. Sheikh Muhammad Iqbal, *The Mission of Islam* (New Delhi: Vikas Publishing House Pvt. Ltd., 1977), p. 30.

the message is enjoined on him and this activity envelops his every other activity in life. Since the proclamation of God's message is his primary concern, he should not hold himself responsible if people accept, reject, believe . . . or ridicule the message.² "O messenger ! Make known that which hath been revealed unto thee from thy Lord, for if thou do it not, thou will not have conveyed his message; Allah will protect thee from mankind" (5:67).

How to Convey ?

The Quran does not give a systematic exposition of the manner and means through which the religion of Islam is to be preached. However it categorically rejects the idea of religion being forced upon any individual or group. Whatever the aberrations from which individual rulers or propagandists may have suffered, or warped interpretations of Islam, given by some of its fanatical exponents, one fails to find any justification in Islam for forced conversions. Several texts could be cited in support of this view :

I shall not worship that which ye worship

Nor will ye worship that which I worship

Unto you your religion, and unto me my religion (109 : 4 - 6).

But the classical text in support of this view would be: "There is no compulsion in religion" (2 : 256).

Similarly, Muslims are advised not to enter into argumentations and disputes to win converts to Islam. "And argue not with the people of the scripture (i.e. Jews, Christians and Sabians) unless it be in (a way) that is better, save with such of them as do wrong; and say : We believe in that which hath been revealed unto us and revealed unto you; our God and your is One and unto Him we surrender" (29 : 46). But it is to be noted that the Quran does not rule out entirely the possibility of arguing but only sets certain restrictions that it should be done not in a spirit of anger, superiority or harsh criticism but in a tone of dialogue and friendliness.³

In another place the Quran forbids the Muslims to exploit the precarious situations and extreme needs of others, even if they are idol worshippers, to make them accept Islam as their religion.

2. Carlton L. Riemer, "Quranic concepts as a Basis for the Missionary Activities of Muslims," *AL-Basheer*, Vol. I: No. 1, (January - March, 1972), p. 6.

3. Carlton L. Riemer, *op. cit.*, p. 16.

If any agnostic or unbeliever comes to you asking for asylum (from enemies) your first duty is to give him asylum; then you should present to him (gently) the word of God; thereafter (without any conditions or obligations) you should see to it that he reaches a place of safety. (9 : 6)

The aim of the missionary activities of a religion should be prompted by the sincere desire of its members to share their faith experience with others. So the Quran exhorts its adherents, "Invite people to the path of your Lord with wisdom and fair exhortation, and reason with them in a better way" (16 : 25).

Muhammad as Type of Missionary

According to the Quran "Muhammad is the messenger of Allah and Seal of the Prophets" (XXXIII: 40). The Almighty Allah inspired him as He inspired those before him (XL ii : 3). He was chosen, called and inspired to convey God's message to mankind :

O prophet ! Lo ! We have sent thee as a witness and a bringer of good tidings and a warner. And as a summoner unto Allah by His permission, and as a lamp that giveth light. And announce unto the believers the good tidings that they will have great bounty from Allah. (XXX iii : 45-47)

When Muhammad was convinced of his divine mission, his earliest efforts were directed towards persuading his own family of the truth of the new message—i.e. the unity of God, the abomination of idolatry and the submission of man's will to that of God. Khadija, his own wife, was the first convert to Islam. Within three years of his mission he was able to gather a small circle of followers around him. Then he began to preach in the public but was not very successful in gaining any more converts. But as the number of Muslims began to grow, they were subjected to very severe persecutions by the people of the Quairish tribe. So the new converts took refuge in Abyssinia. However, with the conversion of Umar, the Muslims were able to adopt a bolder attitude. Muhammad continued to preach, especially during the annual pilgrimage at Kaba. Finally, in 620 A.D., he and his followers migrated to Madina where he spent the rest of his life reorganizing the new born community. In Madina Islam took the form of a religio-political community. Muhammad continued his preaching and with the help of his armed followers he was able to win more converts to

Islam. Ibn Sad speaks of a number of letters sent by the prophet from Madina to the chiefs and other members of different Arabian tribes and even to those beyond the limits of Arabia inviting them to embrace Islam.⁴ He sent missionaries to preach the new faith to the unconverted members of other tribes. After his triumphal entry into Mecca in 8 A. H., more and more tribes accepted Islam as their religion. Muhammed as a prophet and as an ingenious statesman could convert the warring tribes of Arabia into one of the most powerful religio-political forces of the world.

Islam becomes a World Religion

One-seventh of the world's population happen to be Muslims and these are scattered all over the world. Filled with the pulsation of a new political and religious life, they conquered and subdued Syria, Palestine, Egypt, North Africa and Persia. Within one hundred years after the death of Muhammed, the Muslims became the masters of an empire which extended westward to Spain and eastward beyond the Indus. The Muslim warriors established their religion wherever they went. Although, later, this great empire split up and the political powers of Islam declined, still its spiritual conquests continued without a break. In spite of lack of support from temporal power, Muslim missionaries carried their faith into central Africa, China and the East Indian Islands. Even outside the limits of strictly Muslim countries, a considerable number of Muslims could be now found in almost all the countries of the world. The most powerful factor at work in the production of this stupendous result has been the unremitted labours of Muslim missionaries, who often with political support have spent themselves for the conversion of unbelievers.⁵

Thus from the very beginning, Islam bears the stamp of a missionary religion that seeks to win the hearts of men, to convert them and persuade them to enter brotherhood of the faithful. As it was in the beginning, so has it continued to be upto the present day.

II

ISLAM SPREADS IN INDIA

The Indian subcontinent today has a Muslim population of nearly 200 millions. These may be divided into those of foreign origin who

4. T. W. Arnold, *The Preaching of Islam* (London: Constable & Company Ltd. 2nd edition, 1974), p. 34.

5. *Ibid*, p. 2.

brought their faith into the country along with them, and those who have been converted to Islam at different periods of history. The foreign settlement consists of three main bodies: first, and numerically the most important, are the immigrants from across the north-west frontier who are found chiefly in Sind and the Punjab; next comes the descendants of the court and armies of the various Muslim dynasties mainly in upper India and to a much smaller extent in the Deccan; lastly all along the west coast are settlements probably of Arab descent whose original founders came to India by sea.⁶ Since the scope of this article does not permit me to go extensively into a detailed study of the spread of Islam in India down the centuries, I limit myself to the study made on this topic by some modern historians. I am also inclined to agree with them that the growth of Muslim society in India took place also through conquest, colonization and immigration; however, it was mainly through the conversions effected by the persuasive methods and the life lived by Muslim missionaries in medieval India that Islam could gain the vast majority of its adherents in India.

Mappila Muslims of Kerala

“Islam in India in all probability began in Kerala and the Mappilas are the descendants of the first Indian Muslims.” This is the opinion of Roland E. Miller who made a monumental study about Mappila Muslims of Kerala.⁷ This view is also supported by S. S. Nadvi who says: “It is an open fact that long before the Muslims settled in Northern India, there were Muslim colonies in Southern India.”⁸ There were Arab traders in Kerala even before the time of Muhammad and so it is but natural that when the Arabs embraced Islam they brought their new-found faith also to the Kerala coast. Very soon the Arab settlements in Kerala became strong centres of Islam. We have every reason to believe that the early Muslim relations with the people of S. India were generally peaceful and friendly. The Muslims enjoyed the right of public worship and were sometimes invited to accept high government offices. Many of the Arab Muslims married local women and their progeny too received the same treatment as the foreign traders. This was the beginning of the well-known

6. *Census of India, 1891, General Report* by J. A. Baines (London: 1893) as cited by Arnold, *op. cit.*, p. 255.

7. Roland E. Miller, *Mappila Muslims of Kerala*, (Bombay: Orient Longman, 1976), p. 39.

8. S. S. Nadvi, “The Muslim Colonies in India before the Muslim Conquest”; *Islamic Culture*, viii (1934), p. 4.

Muslim community of Malabar coast, called Mappilas.⁹ The name comes from "Maha Pillai" which means "a great child" or a "bride-groom".¹⁰

About the spread of Islam in the earliest days in S. India Tara Chand gives the following account :

They, (Arab Muslims) must have entered upon missionary effort soon after settling down; for Islam is a missionary religion and every Musalman is a missionary of his faith . . . The South India was then greatly agitated by the conflict of religions; for Neo-Hinduism was struggling with Buddhism and Jainism for the upper hand. Politically too it was a period of unsettlement and upheaval. The Cheras were losing power and new dynasties were emerging into power. Naturally the minds of the people were perturbed and they were prone to accept new ideas from whatever quarter they came. Islam appeared on the scene with a simple formula of faith well defined dogmas and rites and democratic theories of social organisation . . .¹¹

Thus Islam flourished in the west coast peacefully and steadily, and it was crowned by the conversion of the last Cheraman Perumal who reigned at Kodungalloor. This peaceful contact and development stands in sharp contrast to the progress of Islam in North India where Muslim invasions paved the way for the spread of Islam. Immigration, inter-marriage, missionary activity, the support of the Zamorin, personal advantages supplemented by direct conversion were the specific factors of the growth of the Muslim community on the west coast.

The arrival of the Portuguese on the Malabar coast inflicted a deadly blow on the growth of the Muslim community there. Miller rightly points out this fact :

...the combination of Portuguese political control and religious aggressiveness severely impeded the advance of Islam

9. I. H. Qureshi, *The Muslim Community of the Indo-Pakistan subcontinent* (610-1947) (The Hauge: Mouton & co., 1962), p. 15.

10. R. E. Miller, *op. cit.*, pp. 30-32.

11. Tara Chand, *Influence of Islam on Indian Culture*, (Allahabad: 1936, The Indian Press Ltd.), p. 33.

in Kerala. The Portuguese coastal presence had blocked the Arab influx and the subsequent inter-marriages and Hindu conversions to Islam. . . The results of the Portuguese period for the Mappilas may be summarised as: economic retrogression, estrangement from Hindus, bitterness against Christians and a new militancy.¹²

Even during the post-Portuguese European period, the situation of the Mappilas was not much improved. Since their rapid growth along the west coast was checked they turned inland where they met out caste-classes who were in need of a change and were ready to accept one. There was a growth southward also, especially towards Allepey. The most excruciating effect of the European blockade of Kerala was that it cut off from the Mappilas the source of their preachers and holy men, who had come from Arabia to guide and encourage them in their faith.

Mappilas were also conscious of their religious duty of propagating Islam. On the whole, as Miller points out, it has been carried out in an informal and unstructured way and has been dependent on the piety of Individual Muslims. In the past, a large number of people belonging to the lower strata among the Hindus had become Muslims, but now it has significantly decreased due to the sociological changes in Kerala. So now there is only a slight increase in the number of Mappilas through conversions and inter-marriages. Formal conversion activity has been carried out in Kerala by the "Maunath-ul-Islam Sabha" at Ponnani and "Tarbiyat ul Islam Sabha" in Calicut. Special facilities have been provided for the "catechumens" such as the welcome, circumcision and instruction of the new converts, who are given religious training during which they are provided with free food, lodging and clothing. It is estimated that 300 to 1,000 converts are received at Ponnani annually.¹³

Even a brief sketch of the spread of Islam in S. India is incomplete without the mention of the Muslim rulers of Mysore, Hyder Ali and his son Tippu Sultan during the period 1757-1799. These invaded the Malabar coast several times beginning 1766 and, naturally, the Muslims welcomed them with great enthusiasm since that was an occasion for them to give vent to their pent up resentment in violent ways

12. Roland E. Miller, *op. cit.*, pp. 74-75.

13. *Ibid.* p. 241.

against their ruling Nayars, Brahmins and the foreigners. The religious policy of the above conquerors has been the subject of heated controversies, However there is no doubt that these two in their expansionist invasions persecuted non-Muslims and indulged in forcible conversions. Many of the modern historians try to explain that Hyder Ali and Tippu Sultan were motivated to follow this repressive religious policy not because of their sincere zeal to propagate Islam, but because of their political and economic greed.

Muslims of the East Coast

The principal settlement of Muslims on the east coast was at Kayalpattanam in Tinnevely district, in Tamil Nadu. The Ravuttans of Madurai and Trichinopoly believe that they were converted to Islam by Sayyid Nathar Shah (969-1039) who now lies buried at Trichinopoly. He is said to have converted a large number of Hindus to Islam. His successor Sayyid Ibrahim Shahid was a militant hero who led an expedition into the Pandyan kingdom, and occupied the country for twelve years, but was later slain. Many Hindus had become Muslims because of his activity.¹⁴ Shah al-Hamid (1532-1600) is another noted missionary saint who conducted many mission tours in South India and finally settled in Nagore where he converted many Hindus to Islam.

The Dudekulas, another group of Muslims in South India who live by cleaning cotton and weaving, attribute their change of religion to Baba Fakhir al-Din, the saint of penukonda. He was a disciple of Nathar Shah of Trichinopoly who sent him along with 200 religious mendicants on a proselytizing mission. He finally settled at Penukonda. He performed many miracles there and converted even the king of the place and his example was followed by a large number of inhabitants of the neighbouring places.¹⁵

Lacative and Maldive Islands

It was most probably from Malabar that Islam crossed over to the Lacative and Maldive islands, whose entire population is now Muslim. Here too, as in Kerala, the Arab and Persian traders married native women and then paved the way for active proselytization. The conversion of the first Sultan of Maldive, Ahmad Shanurazah, occurred about 1200 A.D. Sheikh Yūsuf Shams al-Din, a native of Tabriz,

14. Tara Chand, *op. cit.*, p. 40.

15. Qadir Husayn Khan, *South Indian Musalmans*, as cited by Arnold, *op. cit.*, p. 268.

and Mumba Mulyaka, an Arab preacher, are considered to be the most successful missionaries in Lacadive Islands.¹⁶

The Deccan

The Deccan also was the scene of the successful labours of many Muslim missionaries. Arab traders settled down as early as the tenth century in large numbers in the towns of Konkan. As in Kerala here also they married local women and thus established their own centres for trade and religious activities. Under the Muslim dynasties of the Bahmanid (1347 - 1490) and Bijapur (1489 - 1686) kings, a large number of Arab traders and missionaries are reported to have come to this land and converted many Hindus and low caste people to Islam through the example of their life-style and preaching. One important thing to be noted here is that we have no record of forcible conversions under the early Deccan dynasties whose rule was characterized by a remarkable toleration.¹⁷ There were many successful missionaries in the Deccan, of whom the following are the most important: Pir Mahabir Khandayat (Bijapur), Sayyid Muhammad Gisudaraz (Poona and Belgaum), Sayyid Abd al-Qadir Jilani (Dhanu), Hashim Pir Gujarati (Dharwar), Shah Muhammad Sadiq Sarmast Husayni and Khwājah Khanmir Husayni (Nasik) and Sayyid Muhammad bin Sayyid (Belgaum).

Spread of Islam in North India

We are not certain if there were any Muslim trading communities in the North like those in South India before the advent of Islam in that region. The history of Islam in North India properly begins in the year 712-713 A.D. when it was introduced into Sind by the Arabian General Muhammad bin Qasim. During the three centuries of Arab rule there were many accessions to the faith of the conquerors. It is difficult to believe that all the conversions were peaceful and voluntary. According to Qureshi the Buddhists of the area welcomed the invaders because of their deep dislike of the Hindus. He goes on to explain that the Arabs not only did not exercise any pressure upon the population to accept Islam but they also gave them all the facilities which they extended to the "Dhimmis" in other areas which they conquered.¹⁸ It was an act of extraordinary clemency to treat

16. *Ibid* p. 270.

17. *The Bombay Gazetteer*, Vol. X. p. 132; Vol. XVI. p. 75, as cited by Arnold, *op. cit.*, p. 271.

18. I. H. Qureshi, *op. cit.*, p. 39.

the Hindus as Dhimmi¹⁹ because in the eyes of the Muslims the Hindus are idolaters and hitherto no idolater had been given that status.

The establishment of Muslim rule in Sind opened the way for the propagation of Islam in North India. Kufi mentions, at various places, that chieftains and others accepted Islam on the invitation of Muhammad bin Qasim.²⁰ It is quite possible that many Buddhists who were dissatisfied with their religious principles and were unhappy with the Hindus might have become Muslims either out of a feeling of deep conviction or as political opportunists. Muslim traders also must have exhibited some proselytizing zeal like their counterparts elsewhere. One of the best known missionaries of the earliest period was Sayyid Yusuf al-Din who converted 700 families belonging to the Lohana Caste. These people later migrated to Cutch where their number increased because of converts from among the Cutch Lohanas.²¹

Sind was also the scene of activity of many missionaries of the Ismaili Sect of Islam, like Pir Sadr at Din and Abd Allah. In accordance with their tradition, the Ismaili missionaries worked secretly and tactfully. There are several instances on record where Ismaili missionaries posed as Brahmins or Hindu priest and instead of flatly contradicting the doctrines of faith they sought to subvert, they accepted its basic assumptions and introduced some Ismailic beliefs in a disguised form and thus gradually paved the way for total conversion.²²

The Ghazanavid conquest of the Punjab gave orthodoxy an opportunity for more vigorous missionary activity. The conversion of the inhabitants of the Western plains of the Punjab is said to have been effected by the preaching of Baha al-Din of Pakpattan. Islam spread in Sind mainly through the activities of Sufi missionaries ; but it is difficult to say exactly when they started their activities there. The famous Suhrawardi missionary, Baha n'-din Zakariya (d. 1264) was able to re-convert thousands of Ismailis and Hindus to Sunni Islam. The members of his family and many other Sufi-cells were also active

19. "Dhimmi". A non-muslim subject of a Muslim government who, for the payment of a polltax (jizyah) is guaranteed the security of his person and property in a Muslim country.

20. Kufi Muhammad Ali, *Chacknamah* (Delhi: 1939, p. 209) as cited by Qureshi *op. cit.*, p. 40.

21. *Bombay Gezatteer*, Vol. I. p. 93. cited by Arnold *op. cit.*, p. 274.

22. Qureshi, *op. cit.*, p. 43.

in the Multan and Sind. The long history of Islam in Sind shows that the Muslim majority in Sind is the result of the strenuous efforts of Muslim missionaries and mystics over a period of twelve centuries. Lahore, where the Ghaznavids had established their rule, gradually became one of the most famous Islamic centres of the world. Shaik Ismail was the most successful missionary over there who converted thousands of non-Muslims and brought them to the fold of Islam.²³

Jammu and Kashmir

Among all the States of India Jammu and Kashmir has the highest percentage of Muslim population. But, unfortunately, historical records that should explain this phenomenon are very scanty. In all probability this high percentage are attributed to the long and persistent missionary efforts of Faqirs and Dervishes, including Ismailan preachers sent from Alamut.²⁴ The first Muslim king of Kashmir Sadr al-Din is said to have been converted by a certain Darwesh Bulbul Shah in the early part of the fourteenth century. Later Sayyid Ali Hamdani accompanied by Foo Sayyids established hermitages there, and these succeeded in converting large members of Hindus to Islam. It is a historical fact that there were fierce and large-scale persecutions of the Hindus during the reign of Sultan Sikandar (1393-1417). Kashmir became a province of the Mughul Empire under Akbar, and this helped the spread of Islam in that mountainous region.²⁵

Rajputana

There are contradictory reports about the spread of Islam in Rajputana. But all agree that the famous saint Khwāja Mu'in-uddin Chishti (d. 1234) who now lies buried at Ajmer, and his disciples were mostly responsible for the extensive spread of Islam in that land. Through them prospered the Chistya Silsilah order of Sufis who played important roles as missionaries in the subsequent history of Islam in the Indian subcontinent.²⁶ The disciples of Mū in-uddin Chishti like Qutb u'd-din Bakhtiyar Kaki, Sheikh Hamid-u'd-din Nagor, Sheikh Nizam-u'-d-din Auliya of Delhi, Sheikh Ali Sabir and so on were also well known for their holiness, learning and missionary zeal.

23. Arnold, *op. cit.*, p. 281.

24. *Ibid.*, p. 291.

25. Bevan Jones, *The People of the Mosque* (Calcutta : Baptist Mission Press, 1965), p. 160.

26. Qureshi, *op. cit.*, p. 74.

Uttar Pradesh and Bihar

There is evidence to show that Muslim communities existed in the area now covered by the states of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar before the establishment of the Sultanate of Delhi. Following the conquest and subsequent establishment of Muslim rule, soldiers, administrators, theologians, scholars and Sufis came to this land, and these were responsible for the later spread of Islam in this region. As Qureshi points out, the conquest by itself did not lead to any mass conversions, but it created an environment for missionary work. Here also the missionary activities were centred around the Sufi Silsilahs which could send missionaries even to other regions. One special feature in this region was that the Sufi missionaries created religious fervour and missionary zeal around neighbouring Muslim population, and this in turn could produce many enthusiastic missionaries even from among the ranks of ordinary men.

Bengal

The growth of the Muslim community in Bengal, in undivided India is particularly significant because it has one of the largest Muslim populations anywhere in the world. The port of Chittagong now in Bangladesh, was a centre of Arab commercial activities even before the establishment of Muslim rule in India, and so naturally Muslim missionaries also must have been very active there. But after the conquest, it is in Bengal that the Muslim missionaries in India achieved their greatest reward as far as the number of converts is concerned. Many of the Buddhists of Bengal became Muslims to avoid the persecutions and harassment by the Hindus. The long continuance of Muslim rule in Bengal since the twelfth century has also contributed greatly to the spread of Islam in that region. Zealous Sufi missionaries like Shaikh Jala-u'd-din Tabriz, Shaikh Siraju-d-din Uthman, Ala u'l Haqq, Nur u'l Haqq and others also played key-role in propagating Islam in Bengal. Political and military pressure helped conversions to Islam in the fourteenth century. Regarding the spread of Islam in Bengal Qureshi makes the following remark :

A significant part was played in this process by warrior-saints who were eager to take up the cause of any persecuted community . . . The (Sufis) acted mostly as peaceful missionaries, but if they saw that the expousal of some just cause required military action they were not averse to fighting.²⁷

27. Arnold, *op. cit.*, p. 279.

As Arnold points out, in Bengal Islam was not opposed by any consolidated religious system to bar its progress as in north-west India where the Muslim invaders found Brahmanism full of fresh life and vigour.²⁸ Another thing to be noted is that it is not in the ancient centres of Muslim government that the Muslims of Bengal are to be found in large numbers, but in the country districts where there are no traces of settlers from the West, and in the places where low caste Hindus and outcastes most abound.²⁹ As a result of these efforts in favourable circumstances, Bengal in course of time became a Muslim area.

Some Observations

By way of conclusion, I would like to make a few observations regarding the spread of Islam in general and in India in particular.

The teaching of the Quran regarding non-Muslims is confusing to a casual reader and so many Muslim rulers have taken shelter under some Quranic verse for justifying the aggressive steps they have taken against the non-Muslims. Muslims are told that Allah has perfected Islam as their religion (5 : 3); the Quran offers the best guidance for mankind (2:185) and Muslims are the best Community (3:110). About the non-Muslims the Quran says: "Allah hath sealed their hearing and their hearts . . . theirs will be an awful doom (2 : 6 - 7, 39, 90). The Quran forbids the believers even to be friendly with the non-believers (3 : 28, 118). According to the Quran, polytheists are the most abominable of sinners whom Allah has cursed (4 : 48 - 52). So the Quran exhorts the Muslims to make war on the unbelievers, especially on the polytheists for they are impure and all their actions are in vain (4 : 48 - 52).³⁰ "And slay them wherever ye find them" (2 : 190). Verses like these have "misguided" many Muslims for they take these verses literally and fail to grasp that the high ideals of brotherhood and peace are to be extended even to the non-Muslims including the so-called "idol worshippers".

28. *Indian Evangelical Review*, 1882, January, p. 278 as cited by Arnold, *op. cit.*, p. 279.

29. Harsh Narain, "Feasibility of a Dialogue between Hinduism and Islam", *Islam and the Modern Age*, (New Delhi: Jamia Nagar), Vol. VI. No. 4, p. 58.

30. Qureshi, *op. cit.*, pp. 16-19.

Muslim rulers in the past, especially in the earliest days of Islam, have committed atrocities on non-Muslims. But it is not fair on our part to interpret all those cruelties and persecutions as deliberate means employed by them to propagate Islam. Islam was born as a religio-political community in unfavourable circumstances and so for its existence and growth in the earliest stages the founder himself had recourse to arms and violence, which is explained as "self-defence" by some of the historians. The fact that even in the lands the Muslims conquered the non-Muslims were offered the status of *Dhimmis* indicates that the earliest invasions were not entirely motivated by religious zeal but were rather for political exigencies. Islam does not make a distinction between the sacred and the temporal and so whatever the Muslim rulers have done to satisfy their vested interests and political motivations are unfortunately attributed to their religion as well. We have to accept the fact that many of the Muslim rulers in the past misrepresented the religion of Islam which in fact, stands for peace, equality and brotherhood.

Regarding the growth of Muslim society in South India, I.H. Qureshi observes certain patterns. In the first stage, the propagation of Islam was carried on by the Arab traders. Later Muslim saints started coming to South India succeeded in maintaining the religious fervour of the Muslims and in converting many non-Muslims. Muslim settlements with their mosques and staff attached to them played an important role in the spread of Islam in South India. However, the efforts of the early missionaries in South India did not achieve the spectacular results which the missionaries of Islam achieved later in other areas. Later, Muslim population there grew considerably, with the establishment of Muslim rule in North India, because a large number of Muslims migrated from Iran and other Muslim countries. This tendency came to an end only with the integration of the Nizam's dominions in the Indian Union.

According to Qureshi, the Muslims failed to accept the challenge which the situation offered in South India. The egalitarian and democratic teachings of Islam should have aroused greater and more organized effort in the face of gross inequalities inherent in the system of untouchability which was extremely rigid in South India. There does not seem to have been a concentrated effort in the direction of

converting solid blocks of territories where the soil promised to be fertile. Thus South India remained essentially a non-Muslim land.³¹

One question that comes up again and again for discussion in this context is whether political coercion was used in India by the Muslims to gain converts. To deny this would be a serious insult to the history of India since happenings like the brutal massacres of Brahmins by Mahmud of Ghazna, the persecutions of Aurangazeeb, the forcible circumcisions effected by Hyder Ali and Tipu Sultan remains fresh in the memory of the people. But as Qureshi rightly points out in the course of several centuries in such a large country it is too much to expect that all the Muslim rulers were free from religious bias or the desire to win converts even by coercion. But it is generally recognized that its extent was very limited.³² On this point Arnold writes in 1896 as follows : “. . . among the 66 millions of Indian Musalmans there are vast numbers of converts or descendants of converts, in whose conversion force played no part and the influences at work were the teaching and persuasion of peaceful missionaries”.³³ Our own brief survey made above also testifies to this fact. It is historically certain that those who accepted Islam became of some inducement or to escape punishment for a rebellion or who were taken prisoners in wars, never formed a large proportion of the native Muslim population of the Indian subcontinent.

The real cause for the rapid spread of Islam in India is the social conditions of life among the Hindus themselves. According to K. A. Nizami, Muslim society in India grew through conversions which took place voluntarily at tribal levels and often through the peaceful persuasion of Muslim mystics. He substantiates this view as follows :

The social set-up of India in the 11th and 12th centuries was based on the principles of caste . . . the caste Hindus lived within the city walls and enjoyed all the privileges of city life; the non-caste people were compelled to live outside the city walls and were denied all civic amenities as the idea of physical pollution was one of the basic principles of the Hindu social system. When the Muslims conquered these caste cities they

31. *Ibid.*, p. 75.

32. Arnold, *op. cit.*; p. 254.

33. K. A. Nizame, “Hind”, *Encyclopedia of Islam* (Leiden: Holland, Brill, Vol. III, Second edition, 1954), p. 428.

threw open their gates to everybody with the result that the egalitarian principles of Islam attracted large numbers of non-caste Hindus and professional groups to the fold of Islam. It was this conversion of lower caste population to Islam which swelled the Muslim society in the country.³⁴

A concrete example could be cited in this connection. In Tinneveli, at the close of the last century, people belonging to a very low caste-the Shanārs had become very prosperous and they asserted that they had the right to worship in temples from which they had hitherto been excluded. A riot ensued, in which the *Shanārs* suffered badly at the hands of Hindus of a higher caste, and they took refuge under Islam. Six hundred Shanārs in one village became Muslims in one day and their example was followed in other places.³⁵

According to another groups of Muslim scholars like Abdul Hassan Ali Nadvi, it is the superiority of the teachings of Islam that attracted so many non-Muslims to its fold. He writes :

Every year a considerable number of men would enter the Islamic fold of their own accord and free will and for the simple reason that Islam enjoyed a superiority over other faiths because of its rationalistic teachings, its solidly monotheistic creed and its enlightened concepts of universal brotherhood and social justice. . . The glorious message of the Quran, the glittering life example of the prophet and the simple impeccable precepts of the faith did never cease to conquer new minds and captivate new hearts. . .³⁶

Muslim immigrants to India have also helped the growth of the Muslim community in India. As Qureshi remarks, though we cannot accept the assertion of all those who claim a foreign origin, there is a substantial number of Muslims born of foreign immigrants in India. India always offered asylum to the Muslim refugees during the Mongol invasions of the Islamic world. The Muslim rulers used to encourage immigration and we hear about separate departments under some governments set up to handle the problems of the new comers.

34. The Missionary Review of the World, Vol. XIII, (New York: 1900), p. 72

35. S. Abdul Hassan Ali Nadvi, *op. cit.*, p.12.

36. Qureshi, *op. cit.*; p. 81.

Present-day scholars, especially Muslim historians, try to attribute the significant spread of Islam in India to the slow and patient missionary work carried out in the past by the pious members of the Sufi Silsilahs. These Silsilahs began to decline with the establishment of British rule in India and today they are no more active, though they have not completely disappeared. This has caused a major setback to the growth of Islam in the subcontinent. A few decades ago Islam had lost the pre-eminence and glamour which it had enjoyed in the days when it was the dominant power not only in the Indian subcontinent but in the entire East. But today Islam is gaining once again its lost enthusiasm and vitality, thanks to the pan-Islamic movement and the Arab national resurgence, and their fabulous resources.