

*Reflection*

## GLOBALIZATION AND EMERGING CHALLENGES TO ISLAM IN ASIA

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Globalization is posing challenges in almost all fields – economic, political, cultural and religious. Ideally speaking, every change brings its own challenges which we have to face either by (i) conserving what has been inherited, leading to increased orthodoxy, resulting in more conflict or (ii) creatively accommodating changes and synthesizing them with what is inherited.

In fact, colonial period during eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and early twentieth century was also a period of struggle between orthodoxy and change and had given rise to many new challenges. In that sense globalization is not something entirely new. Even pre-colonial period also involved elements of globalization, if globalization is all about connectivity. In pre-colonial period too, there was worldwide trade. The silk route is famous in history. International trade has always been a link among various civilizations. Globalization is nothing, if not about connectivity.

However, there is a qualitative difference between pre-colonial, post-colonial connectivity in the globalized world today. Pre-colonial coming together of civilizations was based on free exchanges of trade and cultural values. No country or civilization enjoyed hegemony; further, there was no dictatorial power to control the terms and conditions and to take advantage of the same. Hegemonic relationship started with the colonial period. In a globalized world, which now happens to be a uni-polar world, this relationship has become totally hegemonic. It is globalization on the terms

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and conditions set by USA and the military-industrial combine within USA.

There is yet one more difference between the colonial and post-colonial globalized world: revolution in information technology. The information technology holds overwhelming power today. Communication has become instantaneous. Any information emanating from one part of the world can spread instantaneously in every part of the world. It is this information technology (or information industry) which is crucial to what we call globalization.

Thus, we can say that hegemonic relationship and information technology are defining elements of globalization. We can also add fast spreading consumerism to these defining elements. The emerging challenges in Asia and Africa due to intensification of the process of globalization have to be understood against this background. The Western hegemony in cultural field being total is causing identity crisis among religious and cultural communities in Asia and much more so among Muslim communities.

What is called the phenomenon of 'fundamentalism' in Islamic world is a result of globalization. But it is not true to maintain, as the American media does, that it is Islam and Islamic world, which is responsible for it. Firstly, phenomenon of fundamentalism is not confined to Islamic world alone. One can hardly ignore Christian fundamentalism in America today. Rightwing Christians or "Born-again Christians" are controlling the US politics and have played a great role in the election of George W. Bush to the office of the President. It is these right wing Christians who not only advise President Bush but also influence his security policies. They have been instrumental in war on Afghanistan and Iraq and are posing threat to Iran and Syria. They have their own powerful TV channels and think tanks. They evolve policies and, accordingly, advise their President.

Also, the US consumerism has totally commercialized culture and marginalized Asian and African cultures, having left hardly any space for them. This bulldozing of all other cultural identities is causing a great deal of turmoil among the marginalized cultural communities. As a reaction to this, neo-orthodoxies are becoming more and more powerful. Islamic resurgence in many Asian countries is basically due to neo-imperialist domination, on the one hand, and a complete commercialization of culture,

on the other. Continued American aggression in the Middle East is causing re-emergence of Islamic fundamentalism and Islamic militancy, which are now classified under the umbrella expression 'Islamic terrorists'.

Any threat to the American ruling class, though basically a result of its own coercive policies in the Middle East, is blamed on 'militant Islam'. America supported the Shah of Iran to the hilt causing great deal of anger among people of Iran and when people of Iran overthrew the Shah under the leadership of Ayatollah Khomeini, the American media put the entire blame on Islamic fundamentalism. Iran, after the Islamic revolution, became a threat to the US rulers. The Muslims in Iran could only be mobilized through their religious identity. There was hardly any other way. Ali Shariati's speeches, articles and books are best example of this mobilization. Ali Shariati, a modern Islamic thinker, and not a fundamentalist in any sense of the word as used by the American media, influenced thousands of Iranian youth who were instrumental in making Islamic hegemonic policies in Iran. Ayatollah Khomeini could also throw challenge to the American policies by mobilizing Iranian people through an appeal to their Islamic identity. Nothing else could work more effectively.

Islam, throughout the ages, has provided Muslims with a sense of unity and has deeply influenced their way of life, their *Weltanschauung* and has shaped their outlook. Also, there has been no secular movement of the kind, which arose in Europe and no consumerist culture of the type, which swept the west to make them indifferent to religion. In fact, as far as Islamic followers are concerned, religion remains an integral part of their psyche. Thus, people in Asia, in general and Muslims, in particular, can be mobilized only through religious appeal. When they feel threatened or face aggression from the American rulers, they react by asserting their religious identity.

This, then, is perceived as religious fundamentalism by the western media. Its genesis is never studied impartially and objectively. It is denounced most vociferously and with a missionary zeal. It is, in a way, zealotry in the reverse. One cannot fight fundamentalist forces without tracing its genesis in the American policies.

However, it will be wrong to establish straight-line relationship between the American policies and developments in the Islamic world.

Globalization, like any other socio-economic phenomenon, works in complex ways. Colonialism, too, had contradictory impact on the Islamic world. It also brought awareness for change and reform. Colonialism resulted in producing major Islamic thinkers like Mohammad Abduh in Egypt and Sir Syed Ahmed Khan in India.

Globalization is not a one-way street. It not only has adverse impact in as much as western hegemonic policies create resentment but also is instrumental in producing modern Muslim thinkers. These modern Islamic thinkers are working hard to bring changes in the Islamic world and to rescue it from the clutches of unhealthy 'orthodoxy'. Of course, their impact is limited compared to orthodox thinkers. The reasons are not far to seek. There is widespread poverty and illiteracy in the Muslim world. Moreover, in oil rich Saudi Arabia there is vice-like tight grip of conservative rulers who fear and resent any change.

The rulers, unable to deliver on governance, want to keep conservative *ulama* happy and placated. It is interesting to note that Saudi Arabia is reeling under very complex response to forces of globalization. The American policies in the Middle East create a lot of anger among the Saudi youth and they resort to terrorism and want to reinforce orthodox Islam. But, on the other hand, a new awareness is fast spreading among Saudi people, particularly women, and they are demanding changes and reform in age old laws and practices. The Saudi rulers have to respond to this complex situation and have to do a tight rope walking.

If they do not respond to this new awareness, they face problems and if they do too rapidly they face resentment from the conservative forces. A section of people of Saudi Arabia feel that Wahabi Islam is intolerant of other sects of Islam as well as other religions and breeds hatred and violence and, hence, they are demanding changes in educational institutions and introduction of a more tolerant version of Islam. The Saudi rulers are responding cautiously. They would not like to displease the *ulama* with whom they have age-old understanding.

In view of terrorist attacks in Riyadh and other places, Saudis were forced to hold an international conference against terrorism and proposed an international centre to fight terrorism. They are also now trying to establish dialogue with the youth, on the one hand, and, with women, on the other. Three rounds of dialogue have taken place with women already,

though these dialogues have yet not conceded much to women. But the very fact of holding such dialogues is very significant and highlights the acceptance of need for change. Recently, Saudi rulers were forced to hold municipal elections though women were not allowed to vote and elections were held only for fifty percent of the seats and other fifty percent were to be filled in by nomination. Although this appears too little and too late, in the ultra conservative Saudi society, strictly controlled by the ruling Saudi family, it is not too little after all.

These winds of change are blowing in all Muslim countries. Recently, Kuwaiti rulers also had to concede right to vote to women. The Kuwaiti women were demanding right to vote for quite some time and fought very hard to gain this right and they did gain it. However, it is not all. Soon they will demand elective offices too. They are facing tough opposition from orthodox *ulama* but it has not stopped their forward march.

Now Amina Wadud in the USA has announced that she would lead Juma prayers, which has caused lot of stir among conservatives. A lively debate has started on networks. This is the benefit of globalization that informative debates can take place on websites and e-mail postings. While some are fiercely opposing a woman leading men in prayer others are quite supportive. It has been pointed out that one Ghazala (a Kharijite woman?) led men in prayer in Kufa and that she recited two long *surahs* (chapters) from Qur'an while leading the prayer. It has also been pointed out that the Holy Prophet (PBUH) permitted a woman companion called Umm Waraqah to lead her family members in prayer, including the male members. Imam Taymiyyah has also opined that a woman could lead men in prayer, especially in *tarawih* prayers during Ramadan. Tabari also held that a woman could lead both the genders in prayer on the basis of Umm Waraqah hadith narrated in *Abu Dawud*.

In the Indian subcontinent, women are not even allowed to enter mosques, let alone being permitted to lead both the genders in prayer. It caused quite a stir a few years ago when an Imam in Kerala issued *fatwa* allowing women to enter the mosque and pray along with men although in a separate enclosure. The Sunni youth of Kerala demonstrated against the Imam for issuing such a *fatwa*. However, things are changing fast now and something happening in one corner of the world spreads to other parts with lightening speed.

There is another vexed question of *hijab* causing lot of controversy. The French Government recently banned wearing any religious symbols in government schools, including *hijab* by young girls. It created great deal of stir not only among the Muslims in France but also in other Muslim countries. Before we comment on this question we would like to point out one more problem, which is a direct result of the process of globalization. Large number of people from Asia and Africa are migrating to the Western countries, especially to the USA and Canada, apart from Europe for better economic prospects. This economic migration has changed the whole religious, cultural and national scene. The diaspora has created problems both for host countries and for the migrants. Some political theorists are now talking of imagined national communities, as in this globalized world national boundaries are breaking down, and as people of different nationalities live in other countries with entirely different national and cultural identities.

The main problem is of alienation and feeling the loss of identity for the migrants from Asia and Africa. These migrants become intensely conscious of their cultural or religious identities back home and take highly conservative positions in cultural and religious issues whether they are Hindus, Muslims or Arabs or Indians. The Hindu migrants from India (excepting those committed to secularism) have become enthusiastic supporters of Hindutva, the ideology of rightwing Hindu nationalism in India. These members of diaspora tend to be much more conservative than their counterparts at home. These migrants crave for visible symbols of identity. The Muslims, in general, and Arabs, in Particular, enforce *hijab* on their women as a visible part of identity. Men themselves do not adopt such symbols of visible identity and take to western dresses making themselves indistinguishable from others; they, however, insist on their women, including school going girls, wearing *hijab*. Interestingly, they enforce *hijab* as part of Shari'ah.

The Qur'an does not use the word *hijab* for all women but it has used only for wives of the Holy Prophet. This verse on *hijab* (33:53) is very clear in its intent and context. *Hijab* for all women is a post-Qur'anic usage. Qur'an requires women to wear dignified dress rather than veil themselves from head to toe. The concerned verse on displaying adornment or sexual charms (*zeenah*) is from Chapter 24, verse 31, and this verse leaves lot of space by saying except what appears thereof (*illa*

*ma zahara minha*) for displaying certain parts of women's body (like face, hands, etc.) However, this verse was interpreted by the 'ulama in a way to impose more restrictions on women than required and Arab cultural dress for women became a requirement of Shari'ah law. Any way this is not the place to discuss such an issue. Suffice it may to say that *hijab* continues to be a controversial issue and needs to be discussed separately.

In this content, what is important for us to address is its significance as part of visible identity for culturally alienated Muslim minorities in western diaspora. However, the westerners identify veil more as a sign of Islamic fundamentalism than a need for cultural or religious identity. It is for this reason that the French Government banned wearing of *hijab* in government schools as violation of secularism. France being a democratic country, it is not proper for the government to ban wearing of a particular type of dress in schools. School authorities demanding the same is a different matter. This measure, not only divided Muslims in France but also French society itself. There were heated debates among French writers, journalists and intellectuals on whether ban on *hijab* is justified. *Hijab*, as pointed out above, has become an identity symbol rather than religious requirement *per se*. While any woman should be free to wear *hijab*, if she wants to, there should not be any coercion on anybody into wearing one. In Muslim societies women are often considered subservient either to parents or to husbands and are coerced, in the name of Islam, to observe strict dress code. It amounts to violation of her human rights.

It is also a fact that in the globalized consumer society women are used extensively in advertising industry to sell products. Thus, woman has become the market icon and she is being shamelessly exploited by major companies selling their products. They are often scantily dressed and sometimes appear only in bras and panties. This is resulting from boundless consumerism, and it evokes strong reaction in various parts of Asia. The conservatives, as a reaction, then, enforce strict dress code. All those committed to women's right and dignity must fight against such shameless projection of women in advertisement. While she has full right to enjoy complete freedom, it should be with full dignity and sense of responsibility.

It should also be pointed out that there has been much greater awareness today among people of their rights thanks to information revolution. This is a positive side of globalization. Yet, in Asia and

particularly among Muslim majority countries, there is woeful lack of political freedom. Most of the rulers are authoritarian and suppress human rights and indulge in torturing their opponents. Fair elections are not held and open and free debates cannot take place in many of the Muslim countries.

The Muslim youth, because of the lack of freedom and inhumane suppression of their fundamental rights, take recourse to violence, which is then dubbed as 'Islamic terrorism'. The Saudi society, which is highly suppressive in nature, is experiencing 'terrorist violence'. As a result it has now initiated dialogues at various levels.

The US government gets the opportunity to export 'democracy' at gun-point as it did in Afghanistan and Iraq giving further boost to terrorist violence. This violence continues in Iraq even after so called democratic elections. Scores of people are dying everyday in suicide bombing. The only remedy is to develop democratic institutions in these countries. Unfortunately, the rulers invoke Islam to deny democratic rights to their people and continue to perpetuate authoritarian regimes. While no one should tolerate American intervention in any other country's internal affairs, the Muslim countries should democratize themselves.

Globalization has irretrievably ushered in an era of information technology; no country can do without promoting information and knowledge. It is undoubtedly an age of knowledge. The Muslim countries lack far behind in this respect though Islam was the first religion to make acquisition of knowledge obligatory both on Muslim man and woman, even if available in far off places like China. Muslim women, more than men, lag behind in literacy; of course, their survival and development in a globalised world depends very much on the acquisition of right knowledge. The Islamic world must make up as fast as it can to improve quality of its existence in this world.

The Qur'an lays great stress on values like justice, equality, compassion and peace apart from knowledge and wisdom. Thus, Islamic countries, ideally speaking, should have been the models for the rest of the world in these matters. However, they are lagging far behind. It is for the Muslim intellectual, if not orthodox *ulama* to seriously reflect on this and evolve better and effective alternatives. The World Social Forum (WSF) promoted by any NGOs and others fighting for social justice has given rise



to a slogan, "other world is possible." Should Islamic countries not take lead in making such a world possible by setting up norms of justice, compassion and wisdom in promoting a non-exploitative world? However, there are no such promising signs at all. The Islamic world is full of tyranny and darkness of ignorance.

Also, the Qur'an has laid so much emphasis on diversity and dialogue (diversity is Allah's creation, see 30:22, 5:48, etc.; dialogue, see 3:63, etc.). In the age of globalization diversity has increased due to economic migration and one must promote dialogue between diverse groups and diverse civilizations. President Khatami of Iran rightly proposed that we should promote dialogue of civilizations in the modern world to avoid clashes among them. However, while an Asian leader proposed dialogue of civilizations, an American professor, Huntington, talked of "clash of civilization."

Thus, numerous challenges are emerging in our world and Asia has to measure up to these challenges in the globalized world. These challenges are extremely complex and difficult. It requires a great deal of wisdom on the part of Asian people and their rulers to respond creatively to these challenges and the emerging problems.