

Remarks

by



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on

Accommodating Diversity in a Globalising World: The Indian Experience

at

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A traveller from a distant land in *mashriq-al-aqsa* comes to *Maghrib-al Aqsa* and marvels at his good fortune. His sense of history quickly reminds him that centuries earlier a great name from this land had travelled to India and recorded in some detail his impressions about the governance, manner and customs of Indians. He attained high office and also had his share of minor misfortunes.

I refer, of course, to Sheikh Abdullah Mohammad ibn Abdullah ibn Mohammad ibn Ibrali al Lawati, better known as Ibn Batuta of Tanja.

I thank the Government of the Kingdom of Morocco, and His Excellency the Rector of the University, for inviting me to address the Mohammad V University today.

Even in distant India, the contribution of Moroccan intellectuals to modern thought and challenges is known and acknowledged. Names like Abdullah Al-Arui and Abid al-Jabri readily come to mind; so do the contributions of feminist writers like Fatima Mernisi and Fatima Sadiqi. The challenge in each case was that of modernity and the contemporary responses to it. Each addressed a specific aspect of the problem; the general question was posed aptly by al-Jabri: 'How can contemporary Arab thought retrieve and absorb the most rational and critical dimensions of its tradition and employ them in the same rationalist directions as before – the direction of fighting feudalism, Gnosticism, and dependency?'¹

This is a rich field, amply and productively explored by contemporary thinkers in Arab lands. This included the debates on Arabism, nationalism, democracy and Islam. Much has also been written about the trauma, self or externally inflicted, experienced individually and collectively by Arab societies in the past seven decades. The misfortunes visited on Arab lands since the 19th century was in good measure a result of their proximity to Europe in the age of imperialism.

II

I would like to pause here and take up a related matter to draw the attention of the audience to some terminological questions. In current discussions in many places, the terms 'Arab' and 'Islam' are used together or interchangeably. But are the two synonymous? Is Arab thought synonymous with Islamic thought? Is all Arab thought Islamic or visa versa? Above all, can all Islamic thinking be attributed to Arabs?

I raise these questions because for a variety of reasons and motivations the contemporary world, particularly the West, tends to create this impression of 'a powerful, irrational force that, from Morocco to Indonesia, moves whole societies into cultural assertiveness, political intransigence and economic influence.'² The underlying basis for this, as Aziz Al-Azmeh put

it, are 'presumptions of Muslim cultural homogeneity and continuity that do not correspond to social reality.'³

Allow me to amplify. Islam is a global faith, and its adherents are in all parts of the world. The history of Islam as a faith, and of Muslims as its adherents, is rich and diversified. In different ages and in different regions the Muslim contribution to civilisation has been noteworthy. In cultural terms, the history of Islam 'is the history of a dialogue between the realm of religious symbols and the world of everyday reality, a history of the interaction between Islamic values and the historical experiences of Muslim people that has shaped the formation of a number of different but interrelated Muslim societies.'⁴

This audience is in no need of being reminded of the truism that reasoning should proceed from facts to conclusions and should eschew *a priori* pronouncements.

What then are facts?

The Wikipedia indicates the world's Muslim population in 2015 as 1.7 billion. The Pew Research Center of the United States has published country-wise and region-wise religious composition and projections for 198 countries for the period 2010 to 2050. It indicates that in 2010 Muslims numbered 1.59 billion out of which 986 million were in Asia-Pacific. It projects that four years from now, in 2020, the corresponding figures would be 1.9 billion out of which 1.13 billion (around 60 percent) would be in Asia-Pacific. The comparative figures for West Asia–North Africa would be 317 and 381 million (19.9% and 20.52%) and for Sub-Saharan Africa 248 and 329 million (15.59% and 17.31%) respectively. Within the Asia-Pacific region Indonesia, India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Iran, Turkey together would account for 830 million in 2010 and 954 million in 2020.

These numbers underline the fact that an overwhelming number of Muslims of the world are non-Arabs and live in societies that are not Arab. Equally relevant is the historical fact they contributed to and benefited from the civilisation of Islam in full measure. This trend continues to this day.

The one conclusion I draw from this is that in ascertaining Islamic and Muslim perceptions on contemporary happenings, the experiences and trends of thinking of the non-Arab segments of large Muslim populations in the world assume an importance that cannot be ignored. These segments include countries with Muslim majorities (principally Indonesia, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Iran, and Turkey) as also those where followers of the Islamic faith do not constitute a majority of the population (India, China, and Philippines).

Amongst both categories, India is *sui generis*. India counts amongst its citizens the second largest Muslim population in the world. It numbers 180 million and accounts for 14.2

percent of the country's total population of 1.3 billion. Furthermore, religious minorities as a whole (Christians, Sikhs, Buddhists, Jains, and Parsis or Zoroastrians) constitute 19.4 percent of the population of India.

India's interaction with Islam and Muslims began early and bears the imprint of history. Indian Muslims have lived in India's religiously plural society for over a thousand years, at times as rulers, at others as subjects and now as citizens. They are not homogenous in racial or linguistic terms and bear the impact of local cultural surroundings, in manners and customs, in varying degrees.

Through extensive trading ties before the advent of Islam, India was a known land to the people of the Arabian Peninsula, the Persian Gulf, and western Asia and was sought after for its prosperity and trading skills and respected for its attainments in different branches of knowledge. Thus Baghdad became the seeker, and dispenser, of Indian numerals and sciences. The *Panchatantra* was translated and became *Kalila wa Dimna*. Long before the advent of Muslim conquerors, the works of Al-Jahiz, Ibn Khurdadbeh, Al-Kindi, Yaqubi and Al-Masudi testify to it in ample measure. Alberuni, who studied India and Indians more thoroughly than most, produced a virtual encyclopedia on religion, rituals, manners and customs, philosophy, mathematics and astronomy. He commenced his great work by highlighting differences, but was careful enough 'to relate, not criticize'.

Over centuries of intermingling and interaction, an Indo-Islamic culture developed in India. Many years back, an eminent Indian historian summed it up in a classic passage:

'It is hardly possible to exaggerate the extent of Muslim influence over Indian life in all departments. But nowhere else is it shown so vividly and so picturesquely, as in customs, in intimate details of domestic life, in music, in the fashion of dress, in the ways of cooking, in the ceremonial of marriage, in the celebration of festivals and fairs, and in the courtly institutions and etiquette'.⁵

Belief, consciousness and practice became a particularly rich area of interaction. Within the Muslim segment of the populace, there was a running tussle between advocates of orthodoxy and those who felt that living in a non-homogenous social milieu, the pious could communicate values through personal practice. In this manner the values of faith, though not its theological content, reached a wider circle of the public. This accounted for the reach and popularity of different Sufi personalities in different periods of history and justifies an eminent scholar's observation that 'Sufism took Islam to the masses and in doing so it took over the enormous and delicate responsibility of dealing at a personal level with a baffling variety of problems.'⁶

It also produced a convergence or parallelism; the Sufi trends sought commonalities in spiritual thinking and some Islamic precepts and many Muslim practices seeped into the interstices of the Indian society and gave expression to a broader and deeper unity of minds expressive of the Indian spiritual tradition. The cultural interaction was mutually beneficial and an Islamic scholar of our times has acknowledged 'an incontrovertible fact that Muslims have benefited immensely from the ancient cultural heritage of India.'⁷

I mention this because I am aware, but dimly, about the role of Sufi movements and 'zawiyas' in the history of Morocco.⁸ There is, in my view, room for comparative studies of Sufi practices in Morocco and India.

III

It is this backdrop that has impacted on modern India and its existential reality of a plural society on the basis of which a democratic polity and a secular state structure was put in place.

The framers of our Constitution had the objective of securing civic, political, economic, social and cultural rights as essential ingredients of citizenship. Particular emphasis was placed on rights of religious minorities. Thus in the section on Fundamental Rights 'all persons are equally entitled to freedom of conscience and the right freely to profess, practice and propagate religion.' In addition, every religious denomination shall have the right to establish and maintain institutions for religious and charitable purposes, to manage its own affairs in matters of religion, and to acquire and administer movable and immovable property. Furthermore, all religious or linguistic minorities shall have the right to establish and administer educational institutions of their choice. A separate section on Fundamental Duties of citizens enjoins every citizen 'to promote harmony and the spirit of common brotherhood amongst all the people of India transcending religious, linguistic and regional or sectional diversities' and also 'to value and preserve the rich heritage of our composite culture.'⁹

Given the segmented nature of society and unequal economy, the quest for substantive equality, and justice, remains work in progress and concerns have been expressed from time to time about its shortfalls and pace of implementation. The corrective lies in our functioning democracy, its accountability mechanisms including regularity of elections at all levels from village and district councils to regional and national levels, the Rule of Law, and heightened levels of public awareness of public issues.

The one incontrovertible fact about the Muslim experience in modern India is that its citizens professing Islamic faith are citizens, consider themselves as such, are beneficiaries of the rights guaranteed to them by the Constitution, participate fully in the civic processes

of the polity and seek correctives for their grievances within the system. There is no inclination in their ranks to resort to ideologies and practices of violence.

The same diversity of historical experience, and the perceptions emanating from it, is to be found in Indonesia that has the world's largest population of Muslims and where two Islamist parties – Nahdatul Ulema and Muhammadiyah function legally, have large memberships, and participate in political activities including local and national elections. On a visit to Jakarta a few months back, I had occasion to solicit their views on contemporary debates on Political Islam. They said Islam in Indonesia has united with the culture of the people and their Islamic traditions have adapted themselves to local conditions. They felt Indonesian Muslims are moderate in their outlook, that Islam does not advocate extremism, and that radicalization of Islam is harmful and does not benefit the community.

Both instances cited above indicate that in countries having complex societal makeup, accommodation of diversity in political structures and socio-economic policies is not an option but an imperative necessity ignoring which can have unpleasant consequences.

IV

I come back to the principal theme of this talk. Why is the Indian model of relevance to our globalizing world?

Globalization has many facets – economic, political and cultural. All necessitate the emergence of a set of norms, values and practices that are universally accepted. A sociologist has defined it as 'the compression of the world and the intensification of consciousness of the world as a whole.'¹⁰ An obvious implication of this would be assimilation and homogenization. In a world of intrinsically diverse societies at different levels of development, this could only result in denial of their diversity and imposition of uniformity. Such an approach can only result in conflict.

The challenge for the modern world is to accept diversity as an existential reality and to configure attitudes and methodologies for dealing with it. In developing such an approach, the traditional virtue of *tolerance* is desirable but insufficient; our effort, thinking and practices have to look beyond it and seek *acceptance* of diversity and adopt it as a civic virtue.

We in India are attempting it, cannot yet say that we have succeeded, but are committed to continue the effort. We invite all right-minded people to join us in this endeavour.

Thank you.

- ¹Abu Rabi, Ibrahim M. Contemporary Arab Thought: Studies in Post –1967 Arab Intellectual History (London 2004) p 265.
- ²Gilsenan, Michael. Recognizing Islam: Religion and Society in modern Middle East (London 1982) p19. ³Al-Azmeh, Aziz. Islam and Modernities (London 1993) p 4.
- ⁴Lapidus, Ira M. A History of Islamic Societies (Cambridge 1988) p.xx.
- ⁵Tara Chand. The Influence of Islam on Indian Culture (Allahabad 1922) pp 141-42
- ⁶Mujeeb, M. Indian Muslims (London 1967) p 120 ⁷Nadvi, Abul Hasan Ali. Muslims in India (Lucknow 1980) p76. The Arabic version of this monograph was published by the Nadwatul Ulema, Lucknow, in 1976. ⁸Julien, Charles-Andre. History of North Africa – Tunisia, Algeria, Morocco (London 1970) p 210. Also, Willis, Michael. J. Politics and Power in the Maghreb – Algeria, Tunisia and Morocco from Independence to the Arab Spring (London 2012) pp 17, 163, 178.
- ⁹Constitution of India, Articles 25, 26, 29, 30, 51A(e) and (f).
- ¹⁰Robertson, R. Globalization: Social Theory and Global Culture. (London 1992). p 8.

