



MUSLIMS AND THE BRITISH RAJ : A STUDY OF ATTITUDES OF VARIOUS SECTIONS

Neelam Rani

Research Scholar,

Deptt. of History,

M.D. University, Rohtak

Abstract

The Muslims of India never lost their identity like earlier immigrants to India. They have always regarded themselves separate from the rest of the people of India at least from the religious angle. But simultaneously they have not always rejected the title of "Indian". The two- nation theory supported by colonial authorities through the cloak of western nationalism over the Islamic conception of a separate culture and so converted a cultural and religious entity into a separate political force in Indian sub-continent. Here it is important to point out that Muslim attitudes towards British Raj was never monolith in nature. Various sections or strata of the Muslim community have their own attitude towards the colonial authorities. In the present study, Muslim political attitudes of various sections towards British Raj are to be analyzed. In this study, somewhere we find that Muslim political attitudes towards British Raj actually identified with Islamic Political Attitudes towards western culture and civilization.

Key Words: *Muslim Attitudes, Westernization, Ulama, Caliphate, Theology.*

The Muslims are proud of the popularity of Islam all over the world. No religion has ever maintained so strong a hold over the people of the world as Islam. And, in fact, if understood in the true spirit, it definitely provides a happy compromise between the spiritual



and temporal aspects of man's life. Of course, at one time, a number of evils crept into the body of Islamic beliefs. The Muslims began to consider themselves a class of superior human beings. This vain pride tended to arouse jealousy and enmity among the followers of other religions, especially the Christians.

It is now a part of the psychology of the Muslims that whenever they fail in other fields of life, they tend to withdraw to their religious defences and justify their failures and stagnation of religious grounds, thereby adding to the unpopularity of Islamic beliefs. Islam spread rapidly within less than half a century after the death of Prophet Muhammad, and there arose under the Caliph an immense empire stretching from Spain to India. This makes the Muslims suppose that the Arabs had attained a high degree of civilization. Andre Servier observes:

Since the second century of the Hijra the Caliphs have decided, so as to avoid any variation of religious dogma, to lay down exactly the spirit and the letter in the works of four orthodox doctors. It is forbidden to make any interpretation of the sacred texts not sanctioned by these works, which have fixed the dogma beyond all possibility of change, and by the same strike have killed the spirit of imitative and of intelligent criticism among all Musalman, [sic] people, who have thus become, as it were, mummified to such extent that they have stayed fixed like rocks in the rushing torrent that is bearing the rest of humanity onwards towards progress.¹

In fact owing to the existence of these four orthodox interpretations of the Islam, the Muslims rarely if ever use the golden principle of *ijtihad*-the principle by which Islam authorizes people to adjust to new conditions and changing circumstances. It was Shah Waliullah who reminded the Muslims in India of the need to use the principle *ijithad*. In a dissertation Al-Haj Mohammedullab showed how, thanks to the principle of *ijtihad*, Muslim law could never be rigid, Imam Ali Yusuf points out how the use of this principle is allowed only to a *mujtahid*, a Muslim wise, adult, intelligent by nature, well acquainted with the meaning of Arabic words and mandatory passages in the Quran, and learned in the



traditions of the Prophet.² Accordingly Shah Waliullah's successors allowed the Muslims to acquire English education though with some caution. However, their narrow approach nullified the utility of the principle.

Thus it is that the Muslims do not accept any truth, of whatever nature, unless it is Islamized, i.e. unless it is proved to them it supported by one of the sacred foundations laid by God and the Prophet as interpreted by the found orthodox schools. It is, therefore, impossible to introduce into the law, and consequently into society, any modifications made necessary by the evolution of ideas or the progress of science. Even the less Islamized sections of Muslim society always make it a point to respect the law of religious solidarity. Secular interests may divide them only for a brief time, but they can never be a permanent barrier to their union. A Muslim, whoever he may be submits to the strict discipline of Islam. He acts always in conformity with the higher interests of Islam. He would never willingly sacrifice even a fraction of the Muslim world to a non-Muslim Power.³

Northrop, however, denies that there is any trait of fanaticism or conservatism that is peculiar only to Islam. Fanaticism and conservatism are, according to him, common to all theistic religions. He observes:

Since the ... commandments and behaviour and the trait of ... God vary from one theistic religion to another and are in many instances definitely contradictory as in the case of Mohammadanism [sic] Judaism, Christianity, and Shintoism, it is not a mystery that in history these religions have had difficulty not merely in getting on with each other but also in responding graciously and with mutual enrichment to the open mindedness of the Far Eastern ... non-theistic religions.⁴

However, to the zealous Christians Islam appears as a doctrine of death inasmuch as the spiritual is not separated from the temporal, and every aspect of activity, being subject to dogmatic law, formally forbids any change, evolution, and progress. They feel that Islam "condemns" all believers to live, to think, and to act as the Muslims lived, thought, and acted in the second century of the Hegira, when the law of Islam and its interpretation were



definitely crystallized. Attempts have been made in certain Muslim countries to rationalize the principles of Islam, but these are confined only to microscopic .section. The masses are even today strict adherents of the traditional beliefs.⁵

In contrast with the Western nations, thus, the Muslims have remained stationary and have made no effort to adapt themselves and their institutions to the requirements of modern times. Secure in their intransigent faith, they have not allowed any outside influence to affect them. On the contrary their hostility towards the infidels is more bitter than ever. The semi-education they have received in the European schools has only served to strengthen their hatred by leading them to imagine that they can do without foreign guidance. It is due to this feeling that there is Muslim nationalist party in every land governed or protected by a European Power. The aim of this party is to set the true believer against the infidel, to re-establish Islamic power, and to expel the foreigner.⁶

In India, during the first half of the nineteenth century, the Muslims did bear bitter feeling against the Europeans. Farquhar observes:

The European had so unceremoniously helped himself to the empire of their (i.e. the Muslims') fathers. The old education and culture rapidly declined, and for many decades the Muhammadans [sic] failed to take advantage of the new education planted by the conqueror.⁷

This, however, does not mean that the Muslims had no urge for change the progress. In fact they welcomed, admired, and adopted the European techniques of war during the eighteenth century. But this tendency for the post part operated unperceived. And it did not go far enough in view of the antagonistic policies of the British rulers.

Attitude the Muslim ruling class

In this political venture, the Muslim is guided by the directions of the Holy Book: "Make war on those who do not profess the true religion until they, in their humiliation, shall pay the tribute with their own hands. " At the same time Islam permits him to bow for the time being before a superior force. It does not impose upon him an attitude which might expose him to danger or reprisal. In extreme refit even a transgression of the dogmas is



permissible.⁸

The Muslim may, therefore, bend to foreign authority when he is not strong enough to resist. He may even make terms with it and accept titles and favours. However, as soon as he feels himself in a position to revolt, he should immediately do so. It is his imperative duty. This is what happened during 1857 in India. The Government, like others, is a religious institution. The Muslim may only be ruled by an Imam (Caliph) having the right and authority to watch over the observance of the precept of Islam and to ensure that the legal penalties are properly enforced in order to defend the frontiers, raise armies, levy fiscal tithes, suppress rebels and brigands, celebrate public prayers, admit judicial proofs in contested cases, and finally, proceed with the division of lawful body.⁹

In this origin the Caliphate was not a despotic Government. The Caliph had to consult before acting. However, this practice caused when the Arabs in the course of extending their conquests found themselves in the midst of peoples accustomed to despotic rule. The doctors of the faith who drew up the legislative text intended to reserve to themselves a share in the Government by specifying that the prince could not decide upon any matter without first consulting them. However, as they were at the mercy of his will and pleasure, it was he who in reality exercised power without control.¹⁰ This happened in India too. The despotic Muslim rulers influenced the opinion of the doctors of the faith. When in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries the rulers grew weak, the doctors of the faith felt that the time was opportune for efforts to restore Islamic beliefs and practices. But then it was too late, the power itself had passed from Muslims hands.

Attitude of the nobility and the Ulama:

The vizier takes the sovereign's place in the administration of affairs, the command of the army, and the supervision of officials. His office is a dangerous one since the incumbent serves as a buffer between the prince and the people. He must submit to the caprices of the one and expose himself to the hatred of the other; but the position is so lucrative, and admits of so great abuse of actual power, that candidates have never been wanting. Hence, the



attitude of a vizier of his counterpart is determined by the patron, who is the real source of his power. He is loyal and obeys the prince; for it is on the prince that his inscriptive career depends. This naturally leads to a degeneration of the character of the incumbent. Administrative divisions

are looked after by a divan, or a council of State, composed of high personages; but, being concerned chiefly to curry favour with the prince or with his vizier, the councillors turn out to be servile creatures ready for any compromise.¹¹ This explains why the Mughal nobility so readily kowtowed to the British rulers as the power of the Muslim rulers declined.

The ulama, or doctors of theology and jurisprudence, form a special body whose duty is to watch over the observance of the fundamental laws and to register as religious dogmas the decrees issued by the council of State. The Ulama depend upon the goodwill and pleasure of the sovereign. They are, in addition, charged with the dispensation of justice. Their supreme head is the Shaikhul Islam, who must be consulted before a law is proclaimed, a tax imposed, or a war undertaken. It is under his order that the qadis dispense justice without appeal.¹² Strong-willed rulers have always sought to undermine the independence of the ulama. In India in the eighteenth century, as the political power of the rulers declined, the nobles and the Ulama gained the upper hand in the affairs of State. The former sought to further their political and material ends, and the latter set about the task of religious restoration and purification of Muslim society. The ulama has hardly begun their efforts in this direction when they were confronted by a new but more formidable challenge. Since they had often criticized even their own Governments for adopting what they regarded as un-Islamic ways, they could not easily accept the decrees of the foreign rulers without judging them with reference to the basic principles of Islam. They were especially careful in dealing with the decrees of the foreign rulers because they were aware that these rulers', being Christians, were imbued with religious antagonism aimed at discrediting Islam and its civilization.

Attitude of the Muslim Elite:



According to the ulama, human *knowledge* is derived from two principal sources, viz. reason and faith. The sciences are also of two kinds, viz. the rational (aqilia) and the positive (naglia). The rational sciences are those which man can acquire by his own reason, without the *help* of revelation, and include geography, mathematics, chemistry, physics, astronomy, etc. The Muslim had contributed to the development of these sciences even before the dawn of the European Renaissance. In fact it is admitted that Muslim civilization made no mean contribution even to the European Renaissance, which carried European civilization to the heights. Of course the Christians deny this, and say that what the *Muslim philosophers* and scientists taught was *all* borrowed from Greek and Latin and that they did not contribute anything original. However, in Course of time the study of the rational sciences among the Muslims was relegated to a secondary place and was made to yield the *palm* to the science of revelation. We find the same phenomenon in India during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. A section of Muslims felt the need to evolve a formula so that the rational sciences *could* be given their due importance in the curricula without prejudice to the study of *theology*. And in no case was a *Muslim* to avoid or go without *religious* education. Ibn-e Khaldun says in his prolegomena that one of the distinctive marks of Musalman [sic] civilization is the practice of teaching the Quran to young children."¹³

When the British rulers introduced a system of public instruction, the Muslims shied away from it. Had the Muslims been wise, they would have taken advantage of the new educational system. They felt, however, that it was not proper for the descendants of the ruling class to receive education in institutions which did not care to provide instruction in their religion and culture.¹⁴

The Muslim obviously did not realize the extent of ruin suffered by the country in general and by the Muslims in particular. Nor did the Ulama in their ignorance of, and indifference to, the consequences of the loss of political authority, give a correct lead to the rest of Muslim population of the country. The absence of a middle class among the Muslims owing to their education further aggravated the problem of Muslim backwardness.¹⁵



In fact, the Muslim rulers expected events to take a miraculous turn somehow, and the religious leaders propped up the masses who followed them. The nobility and the elite were susceptible to change because they were much more concerned to ensure their present prosperity than about some future religious revolution. Such Westernization as occurred at this time among the Muslims was confined to those two classes, viz. the nobility and the elite. Even they had to come to terms with well-entrenched religious resistance.

The above description of the attitudes of different sections of Muslim community clearly proved that the Muslims attitude was not monolith in character towards British Raj. Various strata of the Muslim society behaved differently towards British authorities with different motives and in different circumstances their behaviour changed.

Notes & References

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