



## EMERGENCE OF ISLAM AND ISLAMIZATION IN MEDIEVAL INDIA: A STUDY OF ORIENTALISM

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Islam and Islamization have been important themes of research among historians. Islam is a major world religion which has swayed the minds and hearts of a large section of mankind.<sup>1</sup> Islam literally means submission.<sup>2</sup> Accordingly, Islam is a religion based on the universal principles of submission to God.<sup>3</sup> Islam demonstrates the ability to absorb and adapt to the local cultures of areas wherever it has reached. People embraced and accepted the faith, regardless of their nationality, in great numbers. When an individual, belonging to one religious group, joins another religious group after converting to that religion, in religious terminology, it is called proselytism. But this is a limited concept of conversion, which needs to be viewed in a more scientific light.<sup>4</sup> Islamization is an event which takes place in a person's life as a result of intellectual revolution or spiritual transformation. It is not simply leaving one religious tradition for another.<sup>5</sup> Conversion does not mean just saying some formal words, changing one's name and leaving one cultural group to join another. It entails not just an outward change of religion, but a profound alteration of the mindset after passing through many stages of soul-searching and self-analysis.<sup>6</sup> Conversion is a fluid process of changing affiliations of religious beliefs and traditions with a range of possibilities.<sup>7</sup> It has been stated, "India has seen conversion backed by political regimes or worked as forms of resistance to particular social and political regimes. India has seen both mass and individual conversions as well as conversion bolstered by varying degrees of duress and those caught in moments of dialogue and religious interchange."<sup>8</sup>

Islam is seen as a universal religion of mankind. All Prophets in this sense were the Prophets of Islam because their call to people was identical. Prophet Muhammad never claimed to be more than a man. He felt an urge to lift up people from the quagmires of idol worship and to devote them to the worship of one God. Muhammad of Mecca was a Prophet in the same tradition of prophetic succession and claimed that he was sent with the same message as given to the earlier Prophets.<sup>9</sup> He preached simple but firm moral codes of kindness towards the poor and needy and loyalty to friends. He urged that they should devote their time in prayer and be sincere and faithful in their devotion to God.<sup>10</sup> Revelations which Muhammad received have been preserved in the Quran for the enlightenment of all succeeding generations. According to Islamic tradition, Quran reveals God's will to mankind. It is God's message to man. The *Sunnah*<sup>11</sup> and *Hadis* tell of actions and sayings of Muhammad and of the customs of early Muslims. Quran and Sunnah define the limit of beliefs and actions of Muslims.<sup>12</sup> The last Prophet of Islam, Prophet Muhammad, completely changed the intellectual outlook of Arabia. Within a span of 23 years, he transformed the barbarous and impious Arabs into a civilized and religious nation. During his life, and after his death, Muslims took the message of Islam to every corner of the world, and within a few years, Muslims became the super power of the era. Having emerged in Arabia during the seventh century, Islam spread to other countries of the world like Syria, Iran, Iraq and Egypt from the middle of the seventh century to the

<sup>1</sup> *The fascinating elements of Islam are: (i) the passionate belief in one God, without a second and one who is the creator of the universe, full of power, mercy and goodness and (ii) the utter subservience of the human will to the divine will. Abdul Haq Ansari and et.al., Islam, p.vii.*

<sup>2</sup> *Etymologically, Islam means peace i.e. peace with God by recognizing and paying homage to his oneness and peace on earth with one's neighbours. The Quran expresses in very clear terms that 'there is no compulsions in religion.' Ibid., p.viii.*

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid., p.1.*

<sup>4</sup> *The religious view of conversion relates only to religious tradition. In this respect, it is relatively limited in its spectrum. The scientific outlook, on the contrary, is much broader in scope, being based on the eternal principles of nature itself. Maulana Wahiduddin Khan, Islam Rediscovered: Discovering Islam from its Original Sources, p.262.*

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid., p.263.*

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid., pp.269-270.*

<sup>7</sup> *Without any fear of contradiction, it may be pointed out that neither Islam nor the Prophet approved of conversion by compulsion. The holy Quran is quite clear on the point of acceptance of the faith by non-Muslims. Sheikh Mohammad Iqbal, The Mission of Islam, p. 33.*

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<sup>9</sup> *Rowena Robinson and Sathianathan Clarke, (Ed.), Religious Conversion in India, pp.13-14*

<sup>10</sup> *M. A. Karandikar, Islam: India's Transition to Modernity, p.2.*

<sup>11</sup> *Abdul Haq Ansari and et.al., Islam, p.vii.*

<sup>12</sup> *Sunnah – Lit. "A path or way, a manner of life" A term used in the religion of the Muslims to express the custom or manner of life. Hence, the tradition which records either the sayings or doings of Muhammad. Consequently, all traditional law is divided into (1) Sunnatu'l Fi'l or What Muhammad did (2) Sunnatu'l Qaul or What Muhammad enjoined (3) Sunnatu't Taqdir, or that what was done or said in the presence of Muhammad and which was not forbidden by him. Thomas Patrick Hughes, Dictionary of Islam, p.622.*

<sup>13</sup> *Abdul Haq Ansari and et.al., Islam, pp.vii-viii.*



twelfth century. Islam expanded from Central Asia into the Indian subcontinent, South East Asia and Africa. But there have also been phases of retreat and withdrawal, notably in Spain and in Central and South Eastern Europe.<sup>13</sup>

The first Muslims to set foot in the subcontinent were Arab invaders who conquered parts of Sind and southern Punjab in 711. When Muhammad bin Qasim conquered Sind, he followed a lenient policy and treated the local population generously. The establishment of Muslim rule also paved way for the future propagation of Islam in Sind and the adjoining regions. Later, Sind also attracted Ismaili missionaries who were so successful that Sind passed under Ismaili rule. With the conquest of Lahore by Mahmud of Ghazni, missionary activity was believed to begin under the aegis of Sufis. The Islamization process started with the establishment of the Delhi Sultanate (1192-1526), which meant a series of Turko-Afghan Muslim dynasties in Delhi. But the invaders-turned rulers did not come to spread Islam, nor did they represent Islam's high culture. They came at the end of the magnificent Abbasid Caliphate (749/750 – 1258). The Delhi Sultanate, theoretically subordinate to the Abbasids, proclaimed itself the protector and patron of Islam after the destruction of the Baghdad-based caliphate in 1258.<sup>14</sup>

The entire Islamic world, extending from Algeria to Afghanistan, has become the focus of international attention, owing to a series of political developments. The Arab-Israel conflict, which has been going on for several decades, created conditions for the use of terrorism as a political weapon by the Palestinians. The western countries have acquired a huge interest in the oil-exporting countries of the Islamic world. The USA and its allies have fought a major war in Iraq and also increased their presence in Afghanistan. Terrorists swearing by Islam, whether led by Osama bin Laden or by Pakistan-based Taliban, have carried out dreadful acts of violence in all parts of the world. Fundamentalist elements have issued legal decrees (*fatwas*) calling for the death of writers like Salman Rushdie and Taslima Nasreen. These developments have generated an enormous amount of hatred and suspicion against both Islam and Muslims on a world-wide scale.

In India, the above result has been produced by a different set of factors. Since the 1980's Hindu right wing organizations started a movement for Ram temple at Ayodhya, which led to the demolition of the Babri Masjid on 6 December 1992 and anti-Muslim riots in different parts of the country and a series of bomb blasts in Mumbai.<sup>15</sup> The Godhra train in Gujarat incident became the cause of a long bout of riots in which hundreds of Muslims were massacred. The public debate developing around these events, as seen in print and electronic media, often targets Islam and Muslim. The infamous hate speech of Varun Gandhi, which was made in the run-up to the coming parliamentary elections, should be seen in this context.

The attempt to distort the image of Islam is not a recent phenomenon. The prejudice can traced to western scholars who were pioneers in reconstructing the history of Islam and Islamization in different parts of the world. In the beginning, Christians depicted Muslims as idolaters, polytheists and the arch-villains of Christendom. Later, they started learning Arabic and translating original texts.<sup>16</sup> They tried to understand the rise and expansion of the Islamic civilization. In 1834, there appeared *The Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland*. It was followed in 1839 by *The Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal*, which took the place of the *Asiatic Researches* of William Jones's group. In 1841, the Bombay branch began to publish its own journal. The year 1842 saw the founding of the American Oriental Society which also had its own periodical.<sup>17</sup> C.H. Becker, Edward G. Brown and Reynold A. Nicholson are some of the interpreters of eastern civilizations to the west. From here, we trace the birth of Orientalism.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>13</sup> P.M. Holt, Ann K.S. Lambton and Bernard Lewis, (Ed.), *The Cambridge History of Islam, Vol.II, p.ix.*

<sup>14</sup> David Levinson and Karen Christensen, (Ed.), *Encyclopaedia of Modern Asia, Vol.III, pp.169-171.*

<sup>15</sup> On 6 December 1992, the Babri Masjid, a mosque in the city of Ayodhya in the Gangetic plains, was brought down by a large crowd numbering in thousands. While a police force of nearly 20,000 looked on, the crowd set to work on demolishing this (in the words of the Indian state), 'disputed structure' with axes, shovels, picks and their bare hands. In the immediate aftermath of the destruction of the mosque, violence broke out across the length and breadth of India, in which the casualties were overwhelmingly of the Muslim faith. Vinay Lal, *The History of History: Politics and Scholarship in Modern India, pp.141-145.*

<sup>16</sup> Collections of manuscripts in the libraries provided scholars with the materials necessary for serious study. Printing, particularly printing in Arabic characters, whose beginnings we have noted – began to make each scholar's work available to all others. One specialist after another made it business to supply such indispensable tools as grammar, dictionaries, and editions of texts. Joseph Schacht and C.E. Bosworth, *The Legacy of Islam, pp.13-36.*

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p.46.

<sup>18</sup> Orientalism refers to two intellectual trends in the west: the appearance or deliberate cultivation in literature and art of stylistic and aesthetic traits reminiscent of Asian cultures, which began in eighteenth century Europe and in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the scholarly study of pre-modern Asia, especially philology (the study of language and linguistics) and other text-based pursuits, by European and Americans. The fields of anthropology, sociology and cultural, political, and economic history, insofar as they address Asia, have since been called Orientalist as well. David Levinson and Karen Chistensen, *Encyclopaedia of Modern Asia, Vol.IV, p.393.*



Orientalism was concerned with the study of Asian civilizations, identifying, editing and interpreting the fundamental texts of these civilizations. Islamic studies became a major branch of Orientalism.<sup>19</sup> It studied Islam and other civilizations with European ideas of god, man, nature, society, science, history and consistently found non-western cultures and civilization to be inferior and backward. They believed that the west progressed and changed while the orient remained unchanging and backward. They developed a vision of the Orient as unfathomable, exotic and erotic where mysteries dwell, and cruel and barbaric scenes are staged. Muslims were presented as evil and depraved, licentious and barbaric, ignorant and stupid, unclean and inferior, monstrous and ugly, fanatical and violent.<sup>20</sup>

Orientalism discovered the past of the Orient, a past over which it had more authority and control than the indigenous people. Islamic law, which has a long history and tradition, for example, was not merely studied by Orientalists, they actually constructed it. In India, the Orientalists did not only discover the past, but also constructed it in a specifically dualistic form: thus Muslims became foreigners who represented the inauthentic India, while the authentic Hindus and their indigenous civilization had to suffer the oppression of the intruders. A new history was fabricated with a Hindu golden age, which fell to the age of tyranny of Muslim invasions.<sup>21</sup> Orientalism is not a construction from experience of the Orient. It is the fabrication of pre-existing western ideas overwritten and imposed upon the Orient. Orientalism justified both the exploitation of Asian people and their political subjugation.<sup>22</sup> In the words of a modern writer, “Orientalism is the great lie at the center of the western civilization: a lie about the nature of the west and about the nature of the great cultures and civilizations to the east of the west, a lie about us and them.”<sup>23</sup> Orientalism is composed of what the west wishes to know, not of what can be known. Once created, the Orientalist image more and more entrenched as Islam continued to expand.<sup>24</sup> All the ideas of fanaticism, barbarism, cruelty, despotism, servility, violence, and unbelief came together in Muslim nations which ‘belong essentially to the sword’, and have a history that negates civilization itself.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> The term ‘Orientalist’ occurred in England towards 1779 and ‘Orientaliste’ in France in 1799. ‘Orientalisme’ finds a place in the *Dictionnaire de l’Académie Française* of 1838. The idea of a special discipline devoted to the study of the East was gathering support. Joseph Schacht and C.E Bosworth, (Ed.), *The Legacy of Islam*, p.47.

<sup>20</sup> Peter Heylyn, considered the Quran a thing so full of tautologies, incoherencies, and such gross absurdities of so impure and carnal mixture, that he must lay aside the use of his natural reason who is taken in by it. Zia uddin Sardar, *Orientalism*, p.30.

<sup>21</sup> Legal Orientalism presented Islamic law in an essentialist manner and used this strategy to argue that Muslims are basically conservative tied to backward tradition and customs. *Ibid.*, p.7.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p.10.

<sup>23</sup> The foundation of Orientalism was laid by John of Damascus, a Christian scholar, who was a great friend of the Ummayyad Caliph Yazid. He declared Islam to be a pagan cult, the Kaaba in Makkah an idol, the Prophet Muhammad an irreligious and licentious man. He claimed Muhammad cobbled together his doctrine from the old and New Testaments through the instructions of an Arian monk. The writings and accusations of John of Damascus became the classical source of all Christian writings on Islam. *Ibid.*, pp.11-17.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p.19.

<sup>25</sup> Tibawi concludes that modern Orientalism, despite its academic advances, continues to rely substantially on the medieval images of Islam. It has only discarded old fashioned clothes in favour of a more modern attire. Illustrations of the persistence of the old ideas abound, not only concerning the Quran and Muhammad but also quite logically concerning Islamic theology, law and history. Orientalist scholarship lacks clear thinking, objective standards, basic courtesy, tolerance and moderation towards the Muslim points of view. In most cases, the religious and political affiliation of the Orientalists gets the better of their scholarly judgments. There is no concrete or conclusive proof in the voluminous output of Orientalists scholars on the origins of Islam that Islam borrowed from Bible or the Jewish scriptures. In this regard, Orientalist assertions are unproved vague generalizations, and Orientalist scholarship is little more than a learned process of producing ‘speculative discourses on the obvious’ *Ibid.*, p.58.