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CAUSES OF SPREAD OF ISLAM

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Islam quickly spread all over the world and spread so quickly that before it completed 100 years of its origin it had spread right up to China in the east and up to Europe in the west. It had conquered, one can say, a large part of the globe shattering two most powerful empires of the time i.e. Persian empire on one hand, and, Byzantine (Eastern Roman Empire) on the other. No other religion had achieved such feat before.

Here in this essay we want to explore the causes of such quick spread of Islam. One has to explore political, historical, economic and sociological causes. Many people have analyzed these causes but most of them have, especially Muslims, assign success of Islam to sincere commitment of Muslims in those days to Islam and even Mohd. Iqbal, well known poet whose powerful poetry arouses emotions of South Asian Muslims, also feels that as long as Muslims were sincere and adhered to teachings of Islam, they continued to achieve success after success but once they ceased to be good Muslims, the Muslim society began to stagnate. I think such an approach is flawed and begs the question.

In order to comprehend the real causes of tremendous success of Islam, one has to take into account all the factors and draw proper conclusion. Of course the idea is not to ignore importance of sincerity and commitment of followers but to be more objective and scientific in understanding external causes in assessing the reasons for surprisingly quick spread of Islam.

In this connection it is important to note that Islam originated in urban area which was an international centre of commerce and finance. But the two greatest empires surrounding Hijaz (what is now called Saudi Arabia and where Islam originated) were mainly agricultural and of feudal structure. Commercial civilization is far more liberal and progressive than one which is based on agriculture. The horizon of agricultural civilization remains quite restricted in vision.

But the sociological background of Mecca was not so simple as we tend to assume. In fact it was much more complex. A commercial society was emerging from tribal society. Meccan society was, in fact, half way house between tribal and commercial. However, both tribal and commercial societies are more open and liberal than agricultural society though tribal society is far more equal than commercial society. Commercial society is far more unequal than both agricultural and tribal one.

It is true that Islam imbibed positive qualities of both tribal and commercial society of Mecca. Like tribal society it took its equality and from commercial society it took its dynamism as tribal society after all is not dynamic though it is equal. In tribal society there is not much emphasis on knowledge but in commercial society knowledge is a must. The Arabs had deep imprint of tribal values and even centuries after Islam came into existence they (Arabs) were not attracted towards knowledge. For them knowledge of their ancestry remained of prime importance.

Thus we see that equality is fundamental value in Islam. Unlike feudal society there was no concept of any hierarchy among Arabs. The Qur'an, therefore, made equality as a value and said that only those who are most pious are most honourable in the sight of Allah. This was very progressive and futuristic value of Islam.

All societies like those of Iran, Eastern Roman Empire and others were highly hierarchical and in these societies what mattered was one's status and place in social hierarchy and also the family in which one was born. It was ironical that when Islamic societies also were feudalized, the status and family in which one was born became very important. In Islam only *a'mal-i-salihah* i.e. good deeds which mattered and nothing else.

Now apart from 'good deeds' social status and family became more important a person was thought to be *sharrif* (noble) if he/she was what used to be called *najib al-tarfain* i.e. whose both parents came from high status families. His own good deeds mattered less. But the Qur'anic ideal had nothing to do with social status or even with riches one possessed. For example, Abu Dhar or Salman al-Farsi, both came from ordinary and poor families and tribes of poorer status and yet both were considered very close to the Prophet (PBUH) and Prophet used to praise them highly and showed high degree of respect for them.

In commercial society too it is riches which matter rather than individual dignity. And the Meccan society, as pointed out above, was becoming a commercial and financial society giving great importance to being rich. Those opposing the Prophet (PBUH) were rich and powerful because the Prophet (PBUH) was orphan and came from a poor family. Thus Islam went beyond commercial society and gave importance to equality and individual dignity which is most modern and democratic concept. Thus the Qur'an says that all children of Adam enjoy dignity irrespective of their birth, tribe, nation or status.

No one could even think of such radical form of equality. Thus Islamic teaching went beyond all other forms of equality. Even slaves, who had no rights whatsoever, came to acquire rights. They also began to have sense of dignity. This in itself was a great revolution. Women and slaves were among the lowest rung of society and both slaves and women acquired rights and sense of dignity. The case of Bilal Habashi i.e. Bilal of Habasha can be cited as an illustrious example.

Bilal was a slave who was liberated by Hazrat Abu Bakr who owned him. The Prophet (PBUH) gave him highest status. He asked him to give *azan* i.e. call to prayer for which many eminent companions of the Prophet aspired but the Prophet (PBUH) gave that honour to a slave to demonstrate that all human beings are equal before Allah. There was no such precedent of such radical equality anywhere else in history until then.

People of other countries had come to know of Islamic teachings before Islam reached there through conquest or otherwise. Thus the slaves and other weaker sections of society were greatly attracted towards such teachings of Islam. Thus we read in history that when Muslims attacked these countries where there were slave owning or hierarchical societies these people of lowly origin welcomed them and even opened the doors of forts so they could enter without bloodshed. We find several such accounts in early historians like Tabari and Baladhuri's *Futuh alBuldan*

Before we discuss all this in detail first we would like to throw some light on as to why Arab Muslims invaded these countries? Did they go there to convert others to Islam with the help

of swords as is often alleged? Or did they go there to impose their rule over non-Arab societies? Or there was any other reason. In those days unfortunately there was no such discipline in modern sense as history. History was mere record of events rather than analysis of events.

We know about the Prophet (PBUH) that he did not invade any country or even other Arab tribes to establish his domination or to establish control over their resources. Mostly, with one exception, he fought when he was attacked. Thus he fought defensive battles. Even Abu Bakr, the first Caliph did not attack any other country as he was mostly engaged in putting down war of *riddah* (i.e. rebellion against Caliph's rule as these tribals had not had any idea of governance by urban people and to pay taxes to them).

These tribes had no objection to practice Islam as a religion but were not ready to pay zakat (tax) to a government and to submit to them. These tribes were highly independent and resented submission to those who were mainly from urban settled areas. They had never done so during the course of their history. Hazrat Abu Bakr had to quell this rebellion known as war of *riddah* i.e. war against those who turned back on their Islam.

However, major conquests began with the 2nd Caliph Hazrat Umar. Parts of Roman Empire (Palestine, Syria) and Iran were conquered during his time. The wars of conquest began from his time. Why Hazrat Umar launched on these conquests? Was there any provocation from those countries? Apparently there was no such provocation. Then why did he attack? There is no clear answer.

One reason which was economic in nature could be cited. After destruction of Ma'arib dam which is mentioned in Qur'an too, the fertility of Yemen was destroyed and people of Yemen had begun to migrate towards the fertile north. This caused social tension between the Quraish of Mecca and Arabs of Yemen. People of Yemen were seen as intruders. Also, before Islam, the Bedouin tribes of desert survived by invading each other and running away with animals and women of conquered tribes.

Since by the time of Hazrat Umar all Bedouins had embraced Islam and all Muslims were declared as brothers of each other (what the Qur'an calls *muwakhat*) it was no longer possible for one Muslim tribe to attack the other Muslim tribe and run away with their animals and women, survival became a problem in desert. A way had to be found out for survival which was not easy.

Thus pressure of migration from Yemen and question of survival of Bedouin tribes together created a difficult situation and since both Byzantine empire and Iran were located in fertile areas (the area comprising Palestine-Syria etc.) was known as 'fertile crescent' it has lot of productive potential and Arabs from south were eyeing it.

Thus economic pressure was one important factor in launching campaign for conquests. Baladhuri in his *Futuh al-Buldan* (Conquests of Countries) tells us that before every war an announcement was made that those who want to fight in the way of Allah and those who want to benefit from war (*nafi*) should join the army. Thus some joined the army to fight in the way of Allah and some for pure economic benefit.

Now one can well understand the category of people joining fighting forces for economic benefit but it is little puzzling that those who wished to fight in the way of Allah also were

invited to join. If we examine the treaties whose text is mentioned by Baladhuri we rarely find mention of conversion to Islam. Generally the treaty is about how much food grains, clothes, slavemen and slave girls the conquered country would supply to Islamic army and at times even cash is mentioned. This was negotiated jizyah extracted from conquered people. Thus there was no fixed amount for jizyah but it was negotiated with conquered people in lieu of military service.

Since there is no mention of conversion why some people joined as FIGHTER IN THE WAY OF Allah? What was the logic behind it? Was there any intention to colonize the conquered countries or establish Islamic domination? We are also reminded here about the controversy in Russia about whether revolution can be consolidated in one country or revolution in one country is not possible until revolution takes place in all surrounding countries, if not all countries?

The last possibility is ruled out in a way because Islamic revolution was socio-religious and not merely economic revolution. Islam did emphasize human equality but it was so more in the sense of human dignity than economic equality. Of course the Meccan Qur'anic verses strongly condemn accumulation of wealth and one Qur'anic verse also exhorts Muslims to give away in the way of Allah what is surplus i.e. more than one needs. But this is more of moral exhortation. The concept of *halal* earning is much wider in concept and not merely limited to private property.

Thus the question of Islam in one country or international Islamic revolution did not arise. But it is also a fact that Islam being religion and universal in nature it is not territorially limited. Most of the theologians and ulama maintain that Islam does not recognize any territorial limits and hence there is no concept of nationhood in Islam. This needs to be discussed in greater detail but not here.

Yet one more factor could be fear of invasion by foreign forces like Iranian or Byzantinian. Roman Empire had always wanted to bring Arab territory under its control since it amounted to controlling profitable trade route from Yemen to Palestine. It had tried once by making an Arab a king under its own control. He was seen as a stooge and Arabs rejected him as a king. Thus Romans had not succeeded in controlling the Arab land. Arabs were fiercely independent and would not submit to any authority.

But we do not find mention of any such fear among the causes of invasion. It seems various factors counted including establishing Islamic domination over these lands, economic pressure as these wars of conquests brought tremendous wealth and also some kind of fear of attack. After Islamic revolution, also, lot of fertile land was captured in these wars of conquest. Arabs man of whom had not known counting beyond `100 became owners of millions. Some of them accumulated so much that they had to use spades to gather dirham and dinar together.

Even some of the companions of the Prophet accumulated so much wealth that Abu Dhar had to recite the Qur'anic verses against accumulation of wealth to warn them of the severe punishment awaiting them in the after-life. Inb Khalladun, the noted historian gives names of some of the companions of the Prophet who lost count of their wealth. Also these conquests created Arab domination zone right up to Central Asia in the East and up to Europe in the west. Thus these conquests benefited Arabs in number of ways.

One more question to be answered is how did Islam spread so fast when the main objective of the conquest (as alleged by some prejudiced historians that Islam spread with sword in one hand, and, Qur'an in the other) was not spread of Islam. Again there are many reasons, in fact a complex web of reasons. Some of them will be discussed here:

Firstly, from very beginning of Islam two trends became prominent i.e. political Islam which was more about power and enforcement of shari'ah law and as it happens power became main objective of conquests and led to great deal of bloodshed among Muslims themselves and enforcement of shari'ah law threw up the tribe of 'ulama which Qur'an had not proposed. These 'ulama established their monopoly and their opinion in any sphere of life became central.

The second trend was that of Sufism and Sufism, as opposed to political Islam was mainly spiritual and put equal or more emphasis on *tariqat* (a spiritual way or set of spiritual exercises) and kept itself aloof from political power struggles. They led, like the Prophet (PBUH), utterly simple life and they put more emphasis on inner peace and inner security.

Of these two trends the rich and powerful opted for political Islam and were involved in power struggle and never had inner peace and security. The masses of people, on the other hand, were attracted towards Sufism in search of inner peace. The Sufis gave them feeling of dignity and respect unlike ruling classes who despised them. Thus people of lowly origin found not only inner peace and solace but also feeling of dignity and hence were attracted to Islam through these Sufis,

Even in 20th century one finds poverty stricken masses from Algeria in the west to Indonesia in the east, having embraced Islam and this is one reason why Islamic world has remained so backward and poor. Even most of the Arabs in Gulf countries until discovery of oil was quite poor and even today those Arabs living in Egypt, Algeria and other Arab countries without oil remain quite poor.

Thirdly, many former non-Muslim power elite, in order to retain their position among new power elite, converted to Islam and through them many of their dependents too embraced Islam. Thus in conquered countries both poor and a section of rich embraced Islam. Sufism remained very widespread throughout Islamic world. It was only rise of Wahabi Islam in what is now called Saudi Arabia that Sufi Islam was suppressed by use of force and slowly lost its influence.

Sufi Islam still remains highly popular in various parts of Islamic world, especially in non-Arab Islamic world. In South and South East Asia Sufi Islam remains a predominant trend and influence of Sufi saints extends beyond Muslims to non-Muslims as well. Thus in India several Sufi saints are worshipped by Hindus, Parsis and Christians. They are mostly seekers of inner peace and solace.

Thus it is sheer political myth spread by western imperialists that Islam spread through sword. History does not bear it out. At best it is, what I call, 'super-simplistic approach to a very complex problem and not without political motives. Those who believe in such myths never take trouble to study history and either become victims of political propaganda or indulge in such false propaganda in order to achieve their political motives.

For the poor Islam came as a liberator as its doctrine of equality and human dignity greatly attracted them and for power elite it became a source of power and riches and these rich broke every precept and moral conduct of Islam which enemies of Islam ascribed to Islam. In fact power elite break the spirit of morality in every religious tradition, not only among Muslims. The powerful can get away with anything. Thus the basic doctrine of Islam is peace but the power elite, in order to fulfill their lust of power ended up projecting Islam as religion believing in violence and spreading through violence. However, it was Sufi Islam which saved the day.

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