
Contribution of Islam in Shaping the Socio-Cultural and National Identity of the Central Asian States

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Abstract

"Religion is opium for people" was the Bolshevik slogan during Soviet period . In reality, Islam was one of the basic ideological enemies against the idea of Communism in Central Asia. Therefore, the period between 1920s-30s was of the 'The Rule of Terror' which launched suppression against religion including Islam. As a result of this suppression many Islamic leaders, many Sufi Qamil Murshids, masters and followers were killed, number of mosques were demolished; Muslim Madararas and Maqtabs etc. were destroyed. The objective of the suppression by the Soviet leaders was to replace the Islamic ideology with communist ideology from the minds of the people of Central Asia.

Suppression of Islamic ideology and eradication of Islamic cultural and religious values from the indigenous people of Central Asia was impossible because since centuries Islam would have been rooted in deep veins of the people of Central Asia. Islam got revived just after Independence of Central Asia from Soviet dominance and contributed in shaping the socio-cultural and national identity of newly independent states. This paper attempts to describe the comparative elements and differences of revival of Islam as a cultural and religious phenomenon in Central Asia after independence. It also examines the nature of the Islamic revival since independence and comparatively assesses the factors imposing the influence on the process of Islamic revival in the region. The Islamic revival is not uniform across Central Asia or even across regions within a republic. Islamic attitude in each of the republic have developed in different ways according to the measures of state efforts to control Islam. Each republic's different approach to religion has flaws in its ability to stand against the extremist ideologies and elements in endeavours to keep up with Islamization process. The revival of Islam and development of Central Asia are the simultaneous processes.

Main Words- *Revival of Islam, Bolshevik, Islamization, Radicalism*

Introduction

Islam reached in Central Asia in 7th Century and within a century Islam established as a prime religion of the region. The seventy years Bolshevik rule in Central Asia tried to destroy Islam in the region and the Islamic shrines were suppressed, closed or altered into workshops (Haghayeghi 1995). During Bolshevik regime, the two parallel Islam were existing simultaneously in Central Asia. The State pro Islam was called 'Official Islam' and traditional Islam was termed as 'Un-official Islam'. (Ro'i 2000). Islamic identity was very deeply imbibed in the lifestyles, cultures and traditions of Central Asian people so it was very hard to eradicate Islam out of the life of indigenous people of the region.

According to Martha Brill Olcott "the consciousness of having an Islamic heritage was one of the elements which for the Central Asians continued to express their identities - even if a specific individual knew practically nothing about religion and perceived none of its tenets" (Olcott 1995). So, this deep Islamic character is like a container whose content is yet to be filled. Pakistani observer Ahmed Rashid has asserted that "Central Asia is practically certain to become the new global battlefield" (Rashid 2002). Central Asian Government acknowledge that Islamist's radical actions pose a grave risk to their systems and have taken measures to make a new "official" Islam that is responsive to political pressure and to overpower uninhibited radicalism.

Suppression of Islam by Bolshevism

The Bolshevik policies of 70 years kept Central Asian Muslims fully aloof from the International Muslim community. The Bolshevik regime can be considered as the period of socio-cultural transition in Central Asia which has given special status to the Muslims of Central Asia. In the second half of the 7th century Islam was brought into southern part of the region by Arab armies. Later the religion became much popular and incorporated by northern tribes and nomads of the steppes.

Soviet regime tried to suppress and discourage Islam by every possible means and destroyed its organizations. World War II created some ventilation in which up to some extent Islamic religious system started re-establishing itself and some Islamic practices started with state permission and under state supervision. In entire Central Asia only two official Islamic institutions appear at that time which were one Madarsa in Bukhara and one Madarsa in Tashkent. 1980s established Islam as an ethnic identity and culture rather an active spiritual stream in Central Asia. 1980s is the time of Glasnost and Perestroika which invigorated the Islamic revival due to comparatively lenient Soviet bureaucratic strictness over Islam.

Three Editions of Islam in Central Asia

Islamic threat and weakening economy of region were two alarming reasons which made Government to adopt a modest attitude towards religious establishments. The Western scholars apprehensions about Islamic threat due to increasing growth rate of Muslim population in Central Asia made political regime more skeptical towards Islam. This attitude resulted into the need of 'official Islam'.

A new agenda got established by Communist rule in Central Asia as a part of this strategy, Islam is started being taken as a cultural option rather religious and to highlight the changed agenda of Government, many mosques were opened; growth was visible in the availability of religious literature, constructions of Islamic institutions and new centers for the education of the Quran was opened throughout the region. Special Government support provided to the elite Islamic community. By the independence it was common opinion that Islam is going to play a crucial and constructive role in Nation building, however the so called role was not confirmed. There was also a limited opinion about the way Islam would meet the needs and challenges of contemporary times. In fact, for the majority of the population, Islam was still a tradition and cultures rather a tool of social change.

Islam has been divided into three parts as radical Islam, traditional Islam, and government-sponsored Islam. Traditional Islam is the passive attitude to religion of the majority of Central Asian Muslims. 'Government-sponsored' Islam is a continuance of the effort to co-opt religion to attend the needs of the state that manifest official policies about Islam in 1980s.

Islam as an Identity of the indigenous people

The Central Asian states advocates the segregation of state and religion. But in the many states, due to ideological vacuum created by Communism, Islam has taken place of a state ideology. After independence, new legal control on religion and on religious relations has been imposed in the Central Asian states. The main concern of the Government is to promote 'good' Islam which is advantageous in favor of the state and to evict 'bad' Islam of having potential to be a threat to stability of the republic. The third tendency of Islam in Central Asia is radicalism, which is developed with course of time with the connection with Wahhabism, which has deep roots in Saudi Arabia and spreading fanaticism and terrorism throughout the World. It has often been said that the Islamic revival in Central Asia is promoted by Muslims of other Islamic countries. It is true that the financial assistance for the building of mosques and madrasas, for the renovation of Islamic shrines has come from overseas both from government funds and private sources as well. Students from these two republics have gone in search of higher Islamic studies to Turkey, Pakistan and Egypt in quite large numbers.

Islam as An Idea of Islamic state

To make institutional links with the remaining Muslim communities of the World Central Asian States has made an organization 'Organization of Islamic Conferences'. Their effort to strengthen their Islamic bonds with other Islamic States is being successful as expenses to Mecca (for Haj) of thousands of Central Asians have sponsored by other Islamic states and especially by the Saudi rulers. Another significant way of Central Asian States to connect with Christian World is Islamic missionaries. The disintegration of Soviet Union made Christianity vulnerable to spread their religion into the Central Asia and they opened shrines and schools in many parts of the Muslim regions.

Islamic and foreign religious expansion in Central Asia triggered new concerns. Whereas Christianity wants to be flourished in Central Asia on the cost of the poverty and lack of resources of its people, the Islamic expansion is in the shadow of skepticism of the creation of fertile environment for radicalism. Each Islamic effort in the region is being considered as the promotion of independent Islamic thought and a step ahead towards the creation of Islamic States. This was the reason why Uzbekistan came forward as first republic to impose restrictions on Muslim missionaries from abroad.

Sufism also played a very significant role in revival of Islam in Central Asia. Sufism attracted many nomadic people and tribes due to its liberal religious policies and candid traditions. Sufism attracted nomadic tribes in large numbers towards Islamic religion and culture.

With the disintegration of Soviet Union in 1991 Islam started flourishing in Central Asia as it was deeply rooted in the region's society and culture. The nature of Islamic growth in the Central Asia was not similar to other Islamic countries. The Islamic institutions in the region got benefitted by the funding and support of some majority-Muslims states like Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Iran. These Islamic countries were supporting the Islamic Institutions of Central Asia for their own benefits. Like Saudi Arabia's prime interest into the region was to promote its own ideology of Wahhabism. Saudi Arabia provided assistance to the Islamic institutions of Central Asia by subsidizing pilgrims on the Hajj, building religious institutions and shrines throughout the region, distributing copies of the Islamic literature, and subsidizing Islamic education.

Islam in Traditional Life of the People

All the efforts of the Bolsheviks were failed to remove Islam from the life of the Central Asian people. Islam remained parallel to communism in Central Asia. Uzbekistan witnessed rigorous prosecution of Islamic people by Soviet authorities but in traditional life Islam went more deeper in spite of all these. Islamic traditions were displayed during the funeral ceremonies, wedding rituals, as well as in the persisting existence of Muslim relics and sacred places, etc.

Gorbachev's Glasnost and Perestroika along with the steps for the democratization of the society changed the authoritative approach towards Islam and gave necessary boost to the religious consciousness of the nation. Piusipher points out "Until the 1970s, Islam in the Soviet Union had been largely depoliticized. After the fall of Communism, Islam got revived. Muslims practiced openly and Islamic movements became politically important". According to Cummings "The Islamic Revolution in Iran and the 1978 civil war in Afghanistan that resulted of the mujahidin's counter offensive against the Marxist regime reinforced Soviet fears that Islam might be an ideological, socio-economic, and political competitor". (Cummings 2003) Today's concerns of the political regime about the threat of radical Islam might be used as a platform to voice the social defamation of the Islamic community. This fear has led the common opinion against Islamic movements, and has often been used as a weapon to suppress 'opponent's voice' more easily.

Conclusion

The ideological vacuums created by Marxism strengthen Islamic identity in the states of Central Asia. In the meanwhile the incident of 9/11 triggered new debates and concerns over the role of Islam and strongly advocated that terrorism is inevitable agenda of Islam. Scholars started debates over emergence of Islamic states which kept the religion under skepticism in general. The people of Central Asia are suffering from different state created adversities like poverty, unemployment, crime, mismanagement, and migration issues to which Islam is promising to cope them up. In Central Asia, Islam is an element of nationalism; Islamic revival and national rebirth are closely intertwined in each Central Asian republic. Islam is national self-identification, an instrument of spiritual freedom from Russia, distinct identity from the communist system and Slavic culture which were an expression of foreign colonial domination. Nationalism and Islam mutually synergize each other rather than act as opposing forces. Islamic consciousness shapes the national and



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regional identity of Central Asia and vice versa. In fact Islam is working as socio-cultural and national identity of the people of Central Asia.

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