

A Sociological/Anthropological view of 'Lived Islam' and its Implications

-NadeemHasnain

Abstract

Before the entry of sociologists/anthropologists, Islam remained within the domain of historians and theologians who took a static and largely textual view of Islam and Muslim societies. This presented a stereotypical view of both- Islam as well as Muslims. Empirical view of both gave rise to the 'Islam in Practice' which is now popularly known as 'Lived Islam.' The present paper takes a view of various shades of Islam and their implications through anthropological/sociological lens focusing on the South Asian Islam, largely Indian.

Key words: *South Asian Islam, Lived Islam, Different shades of Islam in South Asia*

In the present religious and political discourses such words and descriptions as *Wahabi, Salafi, Takfiri*, Radical Islam, Militant Islam, Fanatic Islam, Islamism, *Jihadi Islam* etc. are scattered all around not only in the media but also in the flood of writings being churned out day in and day out. Even lay persons the world over use these words in any conversation, of course, along with words like Moderate Islam and Liberal Islam. Where are the living, throbbing human beings practicing these? Can all Muslims be pushed under the same umbrella? Is it not the case of a visible and vocal minority versus the silent, and often invisible, majority? 'Anthropology of Islam' or the 'ethnography of Muslim communities' takes a different view. As Baudouin Dupret et al (2013) rightly points out, from the point of view of social sciences, "Islam is neither a set of practices and beliefs precisely bounded by textual orthodoxy nor just any social practice carried out by people who happen to be Muslim; discourses and practices are 'Islamic' when Muslims refer to them as such. Moreover, what is further important is to explore how Muslims make sense of Islam on day today basis – concrete practices, commitments and convictions and, of course, characteristic of daily or everyday Muslim life." This is now popularly known as 'Lived Islam' or 'Everyday Islam'.

In order to understand the 'Lived Islam' or 'Islam in Practice' and the way it is being contested and challenged everywhere by the radical, fundamentalists or Islamists we have to take a look at different shades of Islam – liberal or moderate, customary, revivalist and the fringe elements called *takfiri*. The 'purists' in order to purge Islam and Muslim societies of the 'impurities' ('un-Islamic' beliefs and practices') are demolishing and eliminating the shared cultural space which served as the bridge between Muslim and non-Muslim populations. This is true of multi-religious societies such as India. Through face to face *tableegh* (preaching), media driven preaching, e-resources and all the recently developed technologies of communication, customs and practices, language, naming, dress pattern, food habits and everything of the Muslims are being impacted.

NadeemHasnain, Ph.D, is former Professor of Social Anthropology in University of Lucknow, Lucknow, India.

Email ID: nadeemhasnain@gmail.com

Contemporary Shades of Islam

Though there have been multiple interpretations of Islam and several schools of jurisprudence, it did not result, in most of the cases, in such bitter polemics and bloodshed as we witness today. Islam is at war today as much with itself as with the outside forces. It is no more confined to the historical Sunni -Shia schism any more. Thus, it may be said to be grappling with the existential problem, the gravest in its history. There is a bitter conflict over these various interpretations. From Middle East and Gulf region it has spilled over to the entire South Asia more to Pakistan, Afghanistan and Bangladesh and, to a lesser extent, to India.

These various interpretations may loosely be classified into three sociological categories as vividly explained by Kurzman (1998):

- Customary Islam
- Revivalist Islam
- Liberal Islam

Almost all regions inhabited by Muslims have witnessed debates over these three traditions of socio-religious interpretations and the resultant social-religious life of Muslims

Customary Islam

In loose and broad terms, it may be described as a combination of regional or local beliefs and practices and those common throughout the Muslim/Islamic world. Some most common ones are reverence of Sufi saints, visiting their tombs, invoking their blessing, auspicious and un-auspicious day/dates, omens, amulets, caste like social hierarchies as in South Asian Islam etc. Moreover, Indian Muslims are not a ‘cultural community’ meaning that they do not have a common culture including language or common ethnicity and hence they may be seen through layers and layers of identities. Muslims coming under this category occupy a shared cultural space with the non-Muslims and there have been some sort of ‘symbiotic relationship’ expressed through syncretic culture and traditions. The great majority of Muslim, in most places and times, come under this category.

Revivalist Islam

Revivalist Islam is popularly described as Islamism, fundamentalism, or Wahabism/Salafism. It is now impacting the Muslims of virtually all regions of the world in varying degrees. Some of the features on the basis of which it may be understood are:

- It uncompromisingly believes that everything about Islam is eternal. Everything that the Prophet did, the *sharia* and the right of the ulema to interpret the Quran, that all human problems have been solved for all times to come. Islam has all the answers. Ironically, as ZiauddinSardar (2008) says, “it is from a people who have forgotten how to ask questions. Islam cannot survive as a static faith buried in history and Muslim societies

must discover a contemporary meaning of Islam. Wahabism, now, is the dominant religious tradition of Saudi Arabia”. Sardar Further maintains that the Wahabis/Salafis are opposed to the preservation of old heritage especially those related to Prophet so that the followers are not able to relate to the history of the Prophet, so that he should not be seen as a man living in a particular time and space that placed particular demands on him and forced him to act in a particular way. They (Wahabis) want to universalise and eternalize every act of the Prophet. For them the context is not only irrelevant but dangerous. It has to be expunged.

- It thinks that the way Islam is being practiced today is the corrupted and distorted form carrying many ‘impurities’ and its ‘purification’ should be their top priority. That is why they want to go back to the earliest years of Islam as the earliest followers, *aslaf* (our forefathers) were the true believers and practitioners. The later generations, it is believed by them, have strayed from the ‘pure Islam’. The ideologues of Salafi Islam strongly believe that “our practices should be based on Quran and *hadis/hadith*, not on *anyfiqhimazhab* or schools of jurisprudence like Hanafi, Shafii” etc. Hence, they are also known as *Ahle-e-Hadis* as they base all their juristic decisions on Quran and *hadis* only.

Another term also in currency is *takfiri* and he/she is a Muslim who accuses another Muslim of being *Kafir* (unbeliever/infidel) and thus guilty of apostasy. The *takfiris* have become self appointed guardians of ‘pure Islam’ and thus think they have a right to declare any Muslim as apostate. Several extremist *takfiri* groups are violently targeting the Shias, Sufis, and several sub-sects and thus punish them for deviating from ‘pure Islam’.

Liberal Islam

It critiques both customary as well as revivalist type of Islam. The important features may be summarized as below:

- It emphasises on modernity, democracy, legal rights, economic progress etc.
- Fresh thinking in the light of new ideas and discoveries is required because Islam was rational and in consonance with the times and progress. Religion needs to be reinterpreted in accordance with the modern times. Some go the extent of giving a call to vehemently oppose the *ulema* responsible for the stagnation in Muslim religious thinking. As Tariq Ramadan (2009) comments, “to be believers and pragmatic is the first liberation that is hoped for”.
- It also argues that, if properly understood/interpreted, Islam is compatible with western liberalism and modernity. *Ijtihad*(analogical reasoning, an important concept in Islam) is also emphasized. *Taqleed* (blindly following a religious authority) is an anathema to the liberals of 20th century. The expansion of the right to practice *Ijtihad* directly threatened the authority of both revivalist and customary Islamic leaders. It urged all Muslims to study Islam to become their own authority. *Ijtihad* allowed Islam

to be interpreted in accordance with the perceived needs of the modern age” (Kurzman, ibid)

- Carrying the argument further the exponents of liberal Islam maintain that since the Quran emphasizes a ‘just’ society rather than an ideological state, the form the state takes is *not* mandated. Further, Quran refers to *Sharia* as a path not as readymade system of law waiting to be put in practice.
- It stands for freedom of thought and expression. Thus, introduction of modern/western subjects into traditional curriculum is the intellectual contribution of ‘liberals’.
- *Shura* (consultation) is not confined between a few. It should be left to the community to determine. This means that the participative democracy or one man one vote principle should be followed and that the democracy is absolutely compatible with Islam.

Three Models of South Asian/Indian Islam

Akbar Ahmed, an American anthropologist and scholar of Islam has come out with an interesting but significant scheme of classification of South Asian Islam/Muslims. Using three towns of India as metaphors he puts forward three streams of South Asian Islam/Muslims:

- Deoband
- Ajmer
- Aligarh

In this scheme Deoband stands for orthodox, textual and revivalist Islam which is largely exclusive in nature and emphasizes on purity. Significantly, despite its extreme orthodoxy and regressive attitude in socio-religious matters, it has been staunchly ‘nationalist’. The ulema of Deoband followed Mahatma Gandhi, took active part in freedom struggle and through its organ Jamiat-e-Ulema-e-Hind has been closely aligned with the Indian National Congress. Their Ulema opposed the demand for creation of Pakistan and preferred to go with Hindu Mahatma Gandhi and Nehru and not with the Muslim Muhammad Ali Jinnah who was spearheading the movement through the Muslim League.

Here, Ajmer stands for Sufi mystical tradition, love for all human beings irrespective of caste, race, religion or any other boundary. It respects diversity and is inclusive by its very nature. That is why even today a large number of non-Muslims continue to show their reverence to the *mazaars/durgaahs* of Sufi Saints and visit these for peace of mind and getting their wishes fulfilled.

Aligarh represents modernist Muslim response to world and its problems. Aligarh Movement led by Sir Syed Ahmed Khan promoted modern education, science and

technology and exhorted the Muslims of the undivided India to go for modern education and knowledge along with the religious (Islamic) teachings and knowledge.

Thus, the South Asian (Indian) Islam has never been homogenous but presently the second model (Ajmer) is now under attack by the revivalist Islamists in the name of purging Islam of 'impurities'. Many progressive Muslims who are not necessarily adherents of sufi school of thought maintain that some sufi practices may or may not be a part of the legitimate 'Islamic' practices yet they would continue to respect Sufism for its lofty humanism, peace and values of love and harmony and its role in serving as a bridge between different religious.

Indigenization of Islam in India/South Asia

Of the three agencies responsible for the spread of Islam viz. Invaders, Merchants/Traders and Sufi saints, the first two had minimal influence and role in the spread of Islam in South Asia. The dominant message of these Sufi saints was love and oneness of humanity. They provided healing touch to the oppressed and marginalized sections of Indian society and that is why the lower caste groups suffering under the oppressive caste system accompanied by all sorts of social, economic and political disabilities looked at the abode of these saints as shelter. The Muslim mystic or Sufi saints played a significant role in the spread of Islam through the process of indigenization despite the fact that most of them came from outside India-Iran, Central Asia and other regions. A R Momin (1977) while writing on the Indo-Islamic tradition says that these mystics "maintained that Islam should be prescribed to the people in their own cultural medium. They had an attitude of tolerance and understanding towards Hindus and Hinduism. They also adopted many Hindu customs and ceremonies (Nizami, 1961)." Of all the Sufi *silsilah*/orders the Chistiya order played the most prominent role and were most popular among the masses. Some of these Sufis took to peasantry, dressed like the local peasants and took to vegetarianism. The Sufis learnt the local languages. This provides the local context of Islam in the Indian sub-continent and led to a number of syncretic traditions, composite culture and served as a bridge between Hindus and Muslims. In a way it may also be described as the 'parochialization of great tradition' as the sociologists and anthropologists may like to describe.'

Epilogue

'Lived Islam', the product of the peaceful story of accommodation and adaptation to local practices, may be summed up by terms like 'syncretic', 'hybrid', 'tolerant', 'people's Islam', 'moderate Islam' and some such terms.

But now growing number of Muslims are being pushed to an intellectual and socio-cultural ghetto by the ultra-conservative elements among them largely inspired by Saudi Arabia. The values and attitudes they are promoting are contrary to the spirit of our age. These elements also suffer from the 'poverty of reasoning'. They represent a classical example of persons 'existing in the present but living in the past'. They are trying to 'Arabise/'Saudise/'Gulfize' the South Asian Islam. Thus, a growing battle is on between a

native, deeply indicised Islam and a strident Arab import. Similarly a substantial section of the Shia Muslims too are suffering from 'Khomeinisation' of their society.

In this scenario the shared cultural space is now under attack, though still not under siege. It has to rise to encounter the growing might of organized 'religious fascism' of 'radical Islam'. The current political situation in the country with the Hindu rightwing on ascendancy is strengthening the 'radical Islamists'. Intimidation and humiliation of Muslims by the Hindu radical fringe groups in the form of 'Cow Vigilantism,' 'Love Jihad', 'GharWapsi' and 'Hindu Rashtra' are pushing Muslims closer to the ultra -conservatives and contributing to their radicalization. These fundamentalists are flourishing on alienation and a sense of victimhood among the Muslim masses. Siege mentality is slowly making its stride and demoralization is setting in. The radical elements among the Muslims are using the new communication technology effectively. The 'Cyber Islamic environment' has produced and coined new terms- 'E Jihad', 'digital sword', 'online fatwa', to mention a few. Like others, thousands of Islamic groups are also using television and internet technology. Thus, for the, first time in its history, we have 'Islam online' and different Muslim groups have waged a war in cyber space. Muslims of different schools of thought/*maslak*and jurisprudence are presenting their point of view/interpretation as 'true' and 'authentic' Islam and condemning or maligning others as 'fake' and 'distorted'. Different Islamist groups are battling each other but the common targets are the followers of Sufism, Shias, and others who are being dubbed as *Kafir* (infidels, heretics), 'deviants' and sometimes 'internal saboteurs'.

Besides the analysis of 'lived Islam/Everyday Islam' or 'Islam in practice' and how it is being contested and challenged by the radical elements and how the face of the 'lived Islam' is changing slowly, issues such as generational changes, reality of Islam for younger people and other identities and aspects like 'Muslim identity' have become important issues. Sense of community does not imply rigid boundaries of exclusion. Moreover, if Islam is to survive as a vibrant and relevant religion in the modern, globalized world it has to find a contemporary meaning and a modern, progressive interpretation through *Ijtihad*by progressive Islamic scholars or whatever other possible means.

References

- Dupret,et al (2013) *Ethnographies of Islam*, Edinburg University Press, Edinburg
- Kurzman,Charles(1998) *Liberal Islam: A Source Book*, Oxford University Press, Oxford
- Momin,AR(1977) "The Indo-Islamic Tradition", *Sociological Bulletin*,Vol26:2
- Ramadan,Tariq(2009) *Radical Reform:Islamic Ethics and Liberation*,Oxford University Press,Oxford
- Sardar,Ziauddin(2008) *Breaking the Monolith*,Imprint,Gurgaon