

Early Muslim Settlements in Central Asia: A Study of Interaction, Assimilation and Impact

Naseem Ahmad Shah*

The history of Central Asia is the history of mankind on account of the region's interaction with widely diverse nationalities namely Iranians, Greeks, Scythians, Chinese, Arabs, Turks and Russians down the ages. This region has been the hub of great civilizations and the fountain-head of incredible human experience making room for the particularities of the peoples who came into it. It is a rainbow and an extraordinary network of such cultural unity as rested upon similar geographical features and similar ways of life.

The study of Islam in Central Asia is fundamentally the study of a historical process. Whatever the extension and depth of its penetration in numbers and quality may have been Islam was characterized by forms of accommodations characteristic to the Central Asian idea of the harmony of society maintained by itself over any view of Islamic exclusiveness. The broad features of this process were:

- a) The settlement of early Muslims and the reciprocity of culture contact, leading to the weaving of a new religio-social pattern
- b) The actual process of assimilation
- c) Dualism changing in the course of time into parallelism

This civilizational synthesis as witnessed in medieval Central Asia is of utmost significance in our times that is riven with great cultural polarizations and ideological disagreements.

* Professor and Director, Shah-i-Hamadan Institute of Islamic Studies, University of Kashmir, Srinagar.

We need to probe the dynamics operating behind the humanist ethos of Central Asia and the history and cultural legacy of this region that cannot be appreciated without understanding the early Muslim settlements in Central Asia that resulted into profound changes in the cultural, political, religious, economic and ethnic landscape and demographic spectrum of the region.

The early Muslim settlers in Central Asia were the soldiers who were stationed in the province of Khurasan in about 650 A.D. This was followed by the large scale and well organized settlements of the Arabs in Khurasan province in 670 A.D. when the Governor-General of the East, Ziyad bin Abu Sufyan finalized the reorganization of Kufa and Basra by sending fifty thousand families from the twin cities of Kufa and Basra to the province of Khurasan. All these inhabitants were settled in the region watered by the river Oxus and among them were the two companions of the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ — namely, Abu Abdullah Burayda bin Husaib and Abu Basra al-Sulaimi¹. In the beginning, the newcomers were housed in the separate quarters but very soon the walls of segregation succumbed to the pressure of assimilation and reconciliation.

The vast number of Arab migrants set themselves more into the process of assimilation and most often kept themselves aloof from the factional strife that obtained in the Arab provinces at home. In collaboration with indigenous population of Central Asia the settlers resorted to the peaceful and profitable activities of trade and commerce². Many Arabs began to invest in the agricultural lands and readily agreed to pay the land taxes³. The settlers even preferred to invest into the less fertile and uncultivable lands of Central Asian provinces and many were given land grants in the form of unproductive lands. As a result these land grants worked as cohesive force for assimilation process in Central Asia⁴.

It is very interesting to note that the 50,000 (Fifty Thousand) families who settled in Central Asia at this stage belonged to the tribes of Banu Bakr, Banu Abdul Qays, Banu Tamim, Banu Azd and Ahl al-Aaliyah (the men from Madina) mostly Qaysites⁵. By the time of Qutaiba's arrival in Khurasan as Governor in 705 A.D., an enormous number of Arabs (both soldiers and civilians) had already settled in various Central Asian provinces. The composition of Arab soldiers in Central Asia at this period of time is referred to in the sources as: Ahl al-Aaliyah - 9,000 (Nine Thousand); Banu Bakr - 7,000 (Seven Thousand); Banu Tamim - 10,000 (Ten Thousand); Abdul Qays - 4,000 (Four Thousand); Banu Azd - 10,000 (Ten Thousand) and Kufites - 7,000 (Seven Thousand)⁶. The new settlers were highly instrumental in encouraging the process of acculturation and assimilation by way of social interaction, commercial collaboration and propagation of tenets of Islam to the local population. In Bukhara, the historic example of tolerance and accommodation is found and it certainly reminds us of the *Mu'akhlat* (Brotherhood) of Madinah that was established during the period of Prophet ﷺ. The inhabitants of Bukhara accommodated the Muslim settlers in the *Shahrستان* (city) itself. Though it is difficult to ignore the inconveniences that occur by such arrangements but at the same time such arrangements do not last long unless a tolerant reconciliatory attitude is demonstrated from both sides⁷.

As a result, a number of Mosques were constructed in the Province and the people were encouraged to attend the Friday prayers by way of giving them monetary gifts. Again as a policy of tolerance and forbearance, the local Muslims were allowed to recite the Holy Qur'ân in the prayers in their native language till they learnt that much of Qur'ân which was needed for prayers⁸.

Sources provide us with the detail of the social composition of the Arab tribes who settled in Bukhara: In the area from the Gate of Bazaar (*Dar-i-Bazaar*) to the New Gate (*Dar-i-Nau*),

the Arabs belonging to Mudar and Rabia were settled and in the rest the Yamanites. The settlers on the left side of *Koi-Rindan* were the people belonging to Bani Hanzala and the right side known as *Koi-Vizir* (Ayub bin Hassan), that was also known as *Koi-Kakh* was inhabited by the settlers belonging to the ruling class. Another street known as the *Dar-i-Attaran* (street of perfume sellers) was given to the settlers from Bani S'ad. Beyond the quarters of Bani S'ad, the Arabs from Bani Asad were settled in *Dar-i-Bani Asad*. Yet another quarter of *Shahristan* of Bukhara which according to Narshakhi was mostly inhabited by the Arab settlers was known as *Dar-i-Kibriya*. This settlement was also known as *Fagsadarah* or *Fafsadah* and in the days of Narshaki this part of the *Shahristan* was used as graveyard. Yet another street known as *Dar-i-Hifra* or *Hiqra* that was also the residence of Khwaja Imam Abu Hafs Kabir Bukhari, the greatest *Wali* of the time and the pioneer of the legacy of Islamic learning in Bukhara. The seventh quarter of the *Shahristan* was known as *Dar-i-Nau* (New Street). While entering from this gate on the left side was the mosque of Quraish and Maqatil bin Sulaiman al-Quraishi lived there⁹.

Another major settlement of Muslims in Central Asia took place in 732 A.D., when, at the orders of Caliph Hisham, twenty thousand men and women were asked to take up their residence in the different parts of Central Asia¹⁰. Our sources do not provide us the exact location of these settlements but this is, however, self explanatory that they must have settled in the Transoxanian provinces of Central Asia.

So far as the settlement of Muslims in Samarqand and in adjoining cities is concerned one can draw the conclusion from the account of Tabari that out of more than twenty thousand men who were engaged in the military operation of the region, a formidable number was retained to settle down in the region. As regards the settlement of Muslims in Tashqand and Farghana, Ibn al-Athir has clearly mentioned that before undertaking the

campaigns in these provinces, Qutaiba ordered his soldiers to be accompanied by their families with a view to settle them in Farghana¹¹. Baladhuri further confirms the fact by saying that Qutaiba settled the Arabs in Farghana and Shash¹². Therefore it could be plausibly brought out that a fairly good number of Arab tribes accompanying Qutaiba may have settled in Khwarazm, Kish, Nasf, Khujandeh, Farghana and Kashan¹³.

Social Composition of Settlers

Between 650 and 750 A.D., as discussed above, a fairly large number of Muslims settled in different parts of Central Asia. These settlers belonged to different classes and social groups whose positions and functions varied from one another. Among these settlers we have the references to governing class, soldiers, preachers, traders and many other people.

Doubtless the number of the Muslims who were directly involved in governing Central Asia constituted a small population but the number of the Muslims who migrated with them must have been fairly large. Because the administrators were usually accompanied by their families and other tribesmen¹⁴.

Besides soldiers the settlers in Central Asia were preachers who constituted the core group of new comers¹⁵. For instance, Ashras bin Abdullah, the Governor of Khurasan, settled a delegation of preachers and *Ulamâ'* in Samarqand and adjoining cities of Transoxiana¹⁶. The delegation of *Ulamâ'* was sent in 730 A.D. under Abu Sayda Saleh bin Tareef. Other *Ulamâ'* in this delegation were Rabi bin Imran Al-Tamimi, Haytham Shaybani, Abu Fatima Azdi, Aamir bin Qushayra, Buhyar bin Khojandi, Baran Ambari and Ismail bin Aqaba. These *Ulamâ'* and preachers succeeded in popularizing the faith and admitting into the fold of Islam thousands of people¹⁷. The great change accomplished by these preachers lay in the stress they laid upon the principle of justice and equality in Islam and its disapproval to the caste and

class ridden concept of society. This helped in forging a new relationship between Islam and Central Asian peoples and the way was opened for the adoption of a universal religion which could provide a stable framework of exterior observance and organization of inner life in a changing world. A remarkable new factor has to be addressed while bringing out the changes in respect of religion. The secular diffusion of Islam and the formation of neo-Islamic communities took place as a result of the activities of preachers. It is very interesting to note and as pointed out by Barthold, the large scale conversions to Islam resulted in the tremendous deficit in the central treasury because the neo-Muslims were, with the acceptance of Islam exempted from *Jaziya*¹⁸.

Traders formed another important group of Muslims to have settled in Central Asia. The Arabs who had an exceptionally rich legacy of trade could not but take an immediate advantage of their excursions in this highly prized trade zone. Central Asia that was the hub of east-west trade with international routes of access to all its important cities and was neighbouring the lands of the then world's richest commonwealth, i.e., China and India, opened dazzling prospects of trade for the Arabs who very soon found that the commercial activities in the Central Asian lands were more profitable and lucrative than their shares of booty as the members of *Diwan* (military register) thereby shifting their positions from the registers of *Diwan* to the occupation of trade and commerce¹⁹.

It is also worth mentioning that Arab merchants were active in supplying the needs of new garrison settlements for consumption goods, in forming partnerships with local producers, and especially in the huge operations of exchange and banking required in the distribution of stipends²⁰. They also formed vast commercial establishments manned by slaves and clients²¹. Merv, being an important trade centre, offered for the Arabs profitable

opportunities to which their accumulated wealth and wide contacts in the rest of the empire were eminently suited. The local merchants of the market town of Merv found it profitable to use these contacts and as a result the Arabs preferred to live in the towns rather than in remote rural pockets.

Having met each other as a result of early settlements, the Central Asian peoples and Islam, both were characterized by a series of gradations which acted as insulators passing on Islamic radiation gradually to animist societies. The interesting thing between the two was that Religion made less difference in belief as compared to the difference in ritual and customary observances. No acute tension seemed to exist between the two except for reasons that come within the orbit of polity or theocratic rule. The elements alien to the local genius were either rejected or taken with hesitation and those adopted were moulded into conformity. Again, the far-reaching and comprehensive effects of the settlement process was the levelling of nationalities within the Islamic empire and the creation of a new cosmopolitan society on the foundation of Islam that was demonstrated in the civilizational ethos of the region in the subsequent periods of history.

In fact, the settlement of Muslims in Central Asia was not simply a movement of the population but also a historical process of interaction and assimilation that is a landmark in the history of tolerance, mutual understanding and ideological cooperation. The Islamic and Central Asian cultures influenced each other by way of working as a unifying force that introduced universalist concepts into particularist societies and inculcated a new attitude and outlook of life. Both exerted a constant influence upon each other and resulted in a cultural outlook that was the synthesis of Turko-Persian tribal identities and Islamic system of beliefs and values. In the course of time the creative synthesis of multiple cultural strands as fructified into and represented by Turk

heritage became itself the paradigmatic standard in the ongoing and evolving cultural dialectics of Central Asia.

The process of cultural synthesis and assimilation has everywhere been a difficult one and in Central Asia too it was the result of a long drawn out process and has negotiated higher road blocks in view of the abiding and deep commitment of Central Asians to their cultural moorings, orientations and identities. The process of assimilation was, as a matter of fact, the result of the creative ingenious of Central Asians and what seemed to be theoretically impossible was translated into practice through historical institutions of great brilliance, wisdom and glamour. The Central Asian peoples skilfully managed the unavoidable correlation between the compulsions of political power and imperatives of cultural synthesis.

The mainstream version of Islamic discourse is universalist, finalist, transcendentalist and supra-cultural, but the field situation of Central Asia was multicultural and cross-cultural. The seemingly inevitable clash was replaced by reasonable understanding and historic tolerance and the Central Asians negotiated this process with great wisdom and sophistication without disturbing the strong commitment to their plural and syncretic cultural ethos. It was in Central Asia that Islam found the host to its philanthropic version and formulated, promulgated and propagated the Sufi perspective of Islam. In course of time the Turks became the torch-bearers of Islamic worldview, value-system and religious philosophy. Rather the Sufi approach itself was a culmination of the basic humanistic values that emanated from the Central Asian civilizational background. The interaction between the local traditions and the mainstream Islamic legacy gave this region the abiding values of tolerance, fellowship of faith and brotherhood of man. Its peoples have been great advocates and exponents of religious tolerance and horizontal humanist values.

Thus, Islam in Central Asia did not make any violent uprooting but offered immediate values without displacing the old. In a society that was divided on more than one fronts and engaged in continued internal warfare destroying thereby the precious resources of a region that was otherwise most fertile from the cultural and civilizational point of view and possessed such human resource energies that, once channelized properly, brought momentous and historical changes into the whole landscape of human civilization, Islam provided an inner impulse to the movements of change and worked as a cohesive factor that gave meaning to the whole social structure and a new social revolution was set in motion that rested upon a universal religion.

Central Asians accepted Islam, along with its legalistic form in such a way that the customary framework of society remained in tact, though there was gradual change in psychological attitudes towards social institutions. The clergy could not strictly adapt the law, their task was to get certain basic Islamic elements accepted into the body of custom. These elements changed custom as it were from within, gradually remoulding life in an Islamic direction, of course with a reasonable balance and coherence.

Impact:

1. The fundamental result of Muslim settlements apart from revolutionizing the society by acknowledging a new nucleus of life and acceptance of Islamic *Weltanschauung* was the exerting of considerable pressure on existing resources.
2. The settlements resulted into the political unification of Central Asia by centralising the administration of otherwise small, independent and warring principalities.
3. The settlements helped in strengthening and widening the network of international trade in Central Asia and revolutionized the economic life of the region by way of

improving the forces of production and the production relations in the region. The improving of security scenario compounded to the improvement of economy of the people.

The role of traders in the process of acculturation was more important than that of nomads. Islam has always followed the trade routes. All nomads in Central Asia along the trade routes quickly became Muslims and away from trade routes Islam spread with a slow speed. All trading colonies included clerics. The clerical profession and trade were closely allied and in many regions the terms for 'trader' and 'cleric' (Muslim) were synonymous. It was a common place phenomenon in Central Asia that well organized states were most quick to absorb Islam in their system. Such states fostered and protected trade, both internal and long range. In contrast to this the peasants and cultivators were found to enter the fold only with a superficial bearing. But here again there was a difference. The nomads of mutually hostile groups subject to all vicissitudes and crises of nomadic life — drought, animal blights and terrible conflicts — found in Islam a means towards tribal cohesion and solidarity. In such societies the conditions and nature of assimilation differ from those which prevailed among townsmen and cultivators.

The continued numerical expansion of Islam under the favourable conditions available in Central Asia facilitated the process of communication, security of the trade routes and growth of towns, accompanied by a renewed surge of Islamic pressure and diffusion.

In the course of time Central Asian people acknowledged a new nucleus of life and there followed a gradual reorientation of life around this nucleus, which revolutionised the society and resulted into deep cultural changes, of course with different levels of acceptance of Islamic institutions and the consequent degrees of actual change.

The influence of Central Asia and Persia became stronger partly through the influx of countless Persian and Turkish functionaries into the State structure and partly through the rapid assimilation of Persian tradition and above all, perhaps, by virtue of the dynamics involved in the levelling tendencies of Islam plus the needed executive concentration for the administration of such a vast area.

An immense scribal clan was required to carry on the business of the state, and they were recruited largely from the clients and organized in a whole series of bureaucratic divisions (Chancery, Finance, Army, Post and Intelligence). Arab aristocracy was replaced by a new ruling class, consisting of the wealthy and educated Turks. The indigenous population was building up immense fortunes both in money and real property very often through the holding of government jobs, which gave great opportunities of economic growth and social recognition to Central Asian peoples through trade, banking operations, business speculation and the utilization of the land.

The military arm of the regime was totally depending upon the Central Asian guards. Ultimately, indeed, the Turks were to infiltrate Islam *en masse* and became its executive power for centuries and the strongest political formation ever engendered by Islam.

Perhaps the most profound, far-reaching and comprehensive effects of the settlement process was the levelling of nationalities within the Islamic empire and the creation of a new cosmopolitan society on the Islamic foundations.

References and End Notes

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- ² M. A. Shaban, *Islamic History*, Cambridge, 1971, p. 174.
- ³ *Idem*
- ⁴ Joel Carmichael, *The Shaping of the Arabs*, London, 1967, p. 105.
- ⁵ Julius Wellhausen, *The Arab Kingdom and its Fall*, London, 1973, p. 398.
- ⁶ H. A. R. Gibb, *The Arab Conquests in Central Asia*, London, 1923, p. 40.
- ⁷ Abu Bakr Muhammad al-Narshakhi, *Tarikh Bukhara*, Tehran, 1943, pp. 65 ff.
- ⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 66.
- ⁹ Narshakhi, *op. cit.*, pp. 73 ff.
- ¹⁰ Shaban, *op. cit.*, p. 140.
- ¹¹ Ibn al-Athir, *Al-Kamil fi al-Tarikh*, Leiden, 1866-71, Vol. V, 4, p. 2.
- ¹² Baladhuri, *op. cit.*, p. 431.
- ¹³ *Idem*
Muhammad bin Jarir al-Tabari, *Tarikh al-Rusul wa al-Muluk*, Leiden, 1905-21, Vol. III, 2, p. 210.
- ¹⁴ Baladhuri, *op. cit.*, p. 410.
- ¹⁵ T. W. Arnold, *The Preaching of Islam*, Delhi, 1984, p. 206ff.
- ¹⁶ Ibn al-Athir, *op. cit.*, pp. 360-61.
- ¹⁷ *Idem*
- ¹⁸ Barthold, *Turkistan Down to the Mongol Invasion*, Britian, 1977, p. 190.
- ¹⁹ Carmichael, *op. cit.*, pp. 132-4.
- ²⁰ H. A. R. Gibb, *Studies on the Civilization of Islam*, Princeton University, 1982, p. 7.
- ²¹ *Idem*