

RE-VISIONING ISLAMIC HISTORY AND HERITAGE FOR SOCIAL COHESION: Thinking Globally, Acting Locally

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Abstract: Today, Islam appears to many a rigid religion, teaches social fragmentation, and potential fear for people of other faiths and sects. But Islam even 1400 years back emphasized pluralistic values, vision and wisdom, appreciated diversity with equality. One of the best ways to come very close to the cure of the situation of mistrust among the sects of the same religion and among different religions of South Asia, is trying to inculcate and promote peace and harmony through Sufi literature, traditions and values. This paper will concentrate on how mystic literature can contribute to Intra/Interfaith reconciliation and peace. History shows that in a hostile situation and challenging times, problems were tackled effectively by Muslim Saints in the Sub-continent by cleansing and beautifying the inner and the outer aspects of human-beings. This paper will try to prove that reform in society comes through love, humility, softness and not through violence and aggression. Preaching (Dawa) is an expression of love, therefore, Islamic spiritual values can inculcate flexibility rather than rigidity, tolerance rather than intolerance and acceptance of others which will lead to pluralism. Spiritual values will become motivating powers and minimize string of violence. This paper aims to establish a culture of peaceful coexistence through mutual understanding which is one of the essential components for sustainable development in contemporary Pakistani and other Muslim societies.

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PEACEFUL CO-EXISTENCE : A CONTEMPORARY CHALLENGE

What is peaceful co-existence? Everyone should be welcomed. How to raise social awareness, when our society has been already brainwashed and reprogrammed for conflict (not for coexistence). We do not live in a well-ordered world but in a world of struggle, strife , toil and tears. Therefore, we need an adjustment between a peaceful human desires and a hostile environment. Religious violence is a much discussed and debated topic in the academia, social media and contemporary public sphere. Islam is a religion of peace but according to reports and even otherwise it is obvious that extremism, radicalization and intolerance are growing especially in Muslim societies at various levels. Today, there is mistrust; the world is moving from the certainty of the past to the global present where the old is dying and few things make sense. There have been cases of terrorism all around the world-France, Belgium, Turkey and Pakistan. Moreover, South Asia is passing through a dangerously volatile situation because of rising extremism and terrorism. Pakistani economy and domestic stability are in shambles due to ethnocentrism and fundamentalism. Pakistan's relationship with its next-door neighbors is thorny. Extremism like cancer has made the society malignant. Narrow -minded and prejudiced approach has infected the body of the community. Children, young, the middle-aged and the old, mostly speak hatred and violence. The very sanctity of the country is at stake. Due to this ethnic and political violence, social and economic conditions are getting worse by the day making the region more and more unstable. How did Muslims come to this state of

uncertainty and ignorance which leads to hatred towards everyone, when in the past they were confident of their place in the world and lived with the best examples of harmony. The open-minded Islam with diversity and pluralism is now for Muslims, mostly "a romance of the distant past- in its pure and unadulterated form. Today, Muslims place social, intellectual and religious problems in historical and cultural contexts where there was certainty, trust and peace. Seyyed Hossein Nasr writes that, "The vast world of Islam is actually like a Persian medallion carpet; it has incredible diversity and complexity, yet it is dominated by the unity into which all the geometric patterns are integrated. This unity leads to diversity and diversity is integrated into unity".¹

A thousand years before renaissance in the West, Islam was the only religion which had connections with all major religions of the world- Judaism, Christianity, Zoroastrianism, Hinduism, Buddhism, Chinese religions, African religion and Sibirian Shamanism (archaic religions).² Thus, Muslims as majority communities and minority communities have lived with various diverse cultures .³ All major religions of the world emphasize peace and preach peace. Therefore, Islam is also related to peace. Islam is also trying to create peace to the degree possible in a world full of disequilibrium, tensions, conflicts and afflictions.⁴

SOURCES OF DIVERSITY IN ISLAMIC WORLD

The Quran and Sunnah acknowledge and appreciate diversity and peaceful coexistence . Islamic Jurisprudence (*fiqh*) was developed in various circumstances to accommodate diversity with equality. Well qualified

Muslim jurists have always issued *fatawa* in favor of sectarian harmony and reconciliation. The Holy Prophet (PBUH) is a mercy (Quran, 21:106) for mankind. After the formation of the Medina city-state concept of "Ummah" was introduced to cover the public sphere including both Muslim and non-Muslim inhabitants of Medina. Imam Abu Hamid al Ghazali (d.505/1111), a great Sufi and Jurist, his writings shows that his mission was to define the boundaries within which competing theologies can coexist in mutual recognition of each other.⁵ The political and social situation in South Asia from the 7th to 18th Centuries was by and large full of chaos, turmoil and violence. The state of mankind had shrunk. There was smallness of thought and feelings all around. Society stuck to rigid rules and followed them, without any thought to their destructive after effects all around. In that dark and hostile atmosphere these *Awliya* (Saints) emerged to break evil rules and create new rules which took the people out from darkness into light. To these Sufi saints, the universe was absolutely one whole. They shuddered at the idea of manyness, the Sufi Saints and poets and South Asia rose to reform religion and clean society of its hostility and evils. Sufism has always been synonymous with making sense of diversity from a developmental mindset which fosters trust and cooperation in values with people. It emphasizes on common humanity and focuses on universal mindset. The denial mindset has minimum recognition or diversity. They don't assimilate in the larger society. Harmony, peace and development in a society requires open-mindedness, listening to others, and increasing general knowledge of diversity in society-a non judgmental perception of differences in other. It also requires an adaptive mindset shows empathy, flexibility, social adaptability, and openness. The adaptive mindset accepts different ways of thinking, feeling and behaving.

This way society tries to understand diverse others from their perspective and not from ours. The society tries to understand how the diverse others wish to be understood rather than how we wish understand them. On the contrary an intellect based understanding without the heart's involvement is ineffective and harmful.

SPIRITUAL RENEWAL : A CURE OF CLOSED-MINDSET

The revival of Islamic society from within over the centuries has usually been accomplished by the people who have followed the spiritual path, by the great sufis such as Shaykh 'Abal al-Qadir al-Jilani or Abu Hamid Muhammad al-Ghazali or later Shaykh Ahmad Sirhindi in India and many others. Even the Hanbali jurist and reformer Ibn Taymiyyah was a member of the Qadiriyyah Order".⁶ Sufism is to trust and be trusted, to serve but not be served, to purify oneself and bring about purification in others by teaching, by being humble and teaching people to be humble, to be aware of people's problems with courtesy and respect. Imam Junaid Baghdadi (d.910) defines Sufism as "*adopting every high quality and leaving every low quality*".⁷ Shaykh Abu'l Hasan ash-Shadhili (d.1258), the great North African spiritual master, defines Sufism as "*the practice and the training of the self through adoration and worship to return the self to the path of Lordship*".⁸ According to Sufi doctrines, a continuous battle is to be fought against all evils, ignorance, and hatred. Human beings must reform themselves by not surrendering to worldly passions, temptations and prejudices. Sufi teachings and poetry is full of ethical values as love, respect, kindness and generosity, polishing the latent virtues and aiming at purifying hearts by making the soul free from cruel to passions, thoughts and

inclinations. Sufis want to cleanse human beings and societies infected with diseases of the lower self by involving human beings into meditation and devotional prayers. This way human beings are taught to cultivate a superior and a more sublime character. They model their teachings within Shariah framework. The Quran teaches through stories in which time and place are insignificant. The good and bad situations, their good or evil effects or the reward or wrath of Allah is sublime. Following the Quranic pattern a considerable bulk of Sufi teaching is enshrined in parables, stories and other symbolic forms of expression. Sufi wisdom emphasize the need for man to live a life of active endeavor and strive for the cultivation of the inner, sublime life and transcends geographical and cultural boundaries. They are the beacons of light, in today's era of chaos and war, such places of religious and ethnic harmony are symbols of peace.

Sufism is decluttering and cleaning the hearts of all negative feelings, envy, jealousy and hatred and implanting positive feelings of love, care and respect to all. The sufi ethos of Sind has long been cherished as the panacea of extremism in Pakistan. Sufism is effective alternative to rising fundamentalism in Muslim societies by Pakistani liberals and also western think tanks. Sufism in the subcontinent in general and Sindh in particular, emerged and evolved as a formidable opposition to the king and the Mullah/ Pundits. Not only did it give voice to the voiceless victims of religious fanaticism, but also challenge the established political order. According to Shaykh Ali b. Usman al-Hujwiri , Sufism is of three kinds. First, towards Allah, by fulfilling His commandments without hypocrisy, second, towards men, by paying respect to elders, and behaving with kindness towards juniors and people who are lower in rank, with justice to one's equals and third,

towards one's self by not following the ego. Sufis make themselves right in all the three matters.⁹ Shaykh al-Hujwiri says, "A Sufi's heart is pure from the pollution of discord.....Love is concord and is the opposite of discord".¹⁰ Sufis do not believe in practices. They believe in morals. Practices are actions with motives whereas morals are praise worthy actions without motive. Morals are devoid of pretension. So, they are in harmony with the spirit. Sufis serve people by placing themselves in the rank of servants and all others in the rank of masters. They consider it their duty to serve everyone alike.¹¹

TOLERANCE: AN ESSENTIAL TOOL FOR PROGRESS AND ITS FUTURE

Tolerance one of the core values of Islam as is the secret for personal and professional success. The noble dreams cannot be fulfilled by the power of violence. The Sufis were the only people who stood for the suffering humanity and spoke against the cruelties of the corrupt kings and their even more corrupt ministers and followers. On the one hand they were the daring ones of the society and on the other hand, the voice of the voiceless. They endeavored and succeeded in implanting noble traits-humility, love, care, respect, bravery, selflessness and patriotism in the minds and hearts of people. The inner qualities are more difficult and subtle to work on. If you want to protect a society from outward dangers and enemies it has to establish a strong inner conditions. Insecure people wear a garb of arrogance. Secure people are contented and happy people and don't need pretensions. Therefore, they are always dressed meekly, humbly and simply. Hazrat Nizamuddin Auliya spread the

message of love to all parts of India. The saint brought peace and harmony among Hindus and Muslims of India.

Many Hindu devotees of Nizamuddin Auliya, their lives were filled with happiness because of his teachings. He preached that the world has Hindus, Muslims and Christians, but first everyone is a human being and that is how all human beings are brothers and sisters to one another.

Shaykh Nizamuddin Auliya emphasized love as a means to attain God. To him love meant love of humanity irrespective of caste, creed and colour. His vision of the world was marked by religious pluralism and kindness. His help encompassed the needy, by giving food to the hungry and by showing kindness on the destitute. He revolted against all rigid forms of social and political injustices of Society. Shaykh Nizamuddin's shrine is the confluence of great philosophers, religious and spiritualities and has thus become a center of Interfaith harmony. It is a place of worship not only for Muslims, but for people of all faiths and cultures. Khawaja Moinuddin Chishti of Ajmer is called *Gharib Nawaz* (the helper of the poor) and *sultan-e-hind* (the king of India) believed that the highest form of service to Allah is to alleviate the suffering of the poor and needy. He spread the message of love and peace throughout the length and breadth of India, regardless of race, religion, caste or status. People of all religions became his devotees and came to get his blessings. His message of love brought many Hindus into the fold of Islam.

Baba Bullhe Shah (1680-1752) is one of the great mystical poets of the Punjab. After the death of Aurangzeb, there were great political upheavals in the Sub-Continent to which Baba Bullhe Shah was a witness. In those painful times he bought solace to his supporters by his songs of

Sufi teachings. His poetry highly ranked especially in the Punjab and he is called " the Rumi of the Punjab".¹² Shah Abdul latif Bhitai, a Sufi poet, the very genius of Sindhi, was born in such disturbing and turbulent time in Sind. It was a time of bigotry and prejudices. Shah Latif like his father and grandfather believed in the Sufi teachings of Shaykh Ibn-e Arabi (*Shaykh Al Akbar*), who was the descendent of *Hatim Tai*. The guiding principle of his philosophy is not hatred, but love. It's not disunity but unity". This philosophy reveals the secrets of a hidden unity behind the apparent differences in world of diversity. This philosophy prevents oppression and many such evils as fanaticism in society. Shah Latif says,

*"The root of lotus flower fair
in deepest water grows-
High soars the humble-bee, but fate
their inmost wishes knows,
Though love, fulfillment it bestows,
and makes the lovers meet"*¹³

Shah Latif preaches the elimination of corruption as a key to the peace of a society. Latif despised selfishness and cowardice which he found in plenty in the feudal lords where as the poor people in spite of their difficulties lived a life of virtue, sacrifice, courage and generosity. According to him love is the essence of religion as love begets unity, strength and prosperity where as hate begets disunity, cowardice and destruction, he emphasizes on the qualities of

"patience, humility adopt for anger is disease-
forbearance bringeth joy and peaceif you would
understand"¹⁴

The real meaning of a pious life is service to suffering humanity and removing ignorance, superstitious, hopelessness and fears from society giving people a sense of safety and security. Shah Latif despises hoarding of goods as is the practice of the feudal lords. At one place, he says " the clouds were commanded by God to prepare for the rains. In a moment there were thunder and lightning. The hoarders of essential commodities will sell them at a higher price, but they will have to repent because there has been tremendous increase in the food grains. May these greedy and avaricious people never exist. All are praising Almighty God because He is the One who sustains the needy and poor Latif always prayed for the "you are king, master of the land and I sell fish, poor fisher maid, Do not forsake me, for it is said that I, Oh king, belong to thee."¹⁵

Shah Abdul Latif deals with the life of a fisherman, a spinner, a peasant and a prince with equal ease and familiarity. He speaks so perfectly in their idiom and phrase that one feels as if he entirely belonged to their class. When he deals with man, woman or child, he becomes one himself.¹⁶ Shah Latif's pluralistic vision and wisdom is reflected from every phrase as the Sarang-Rain Song where he extends his feelings of love, happiness and brotherhood not only to the people of his country, but to the people of other countries in the world. He is happy to give tidings of rain to first the people of the West, far away Muslim countries, neighboring countries and then to his own country.¹⁷ So, the Risalo of Shah Abdul Latif Bhitai is at once a "message" and an ideal" to help man achieve the heights of nobility and thereby contribute to peace and harmony in society.

Sufism teachings has had an effect on Muslims as well as Hindus. Annemarie Schimmel analyses the power of love in Mahmud-Ayaz's story and says that Mahmud of Ghazna, who conquered the whole of North West India and became a slave of his slave i.e. Ayaz. This story teaches the power of soft love to transform ugly lives into lives of beauty and harmony.¹⁸ Jalaluddin Rumi says, "if there were no love, the world would be frozen"¹⁹Such stories appealed to the untouchable caste system of Hindus. Mughal King, Akbar portrayed peace in his kingdom and harmony between the rulers and the ruled by paintings of the lion and the lamb lying together.²⁰ This portrayal represents the impact of Sufi teachings on him. In South Asia there was also regular and deep interactions between Muslim and Hindu Sufis. Many Hindu saints had Muslim Sufi saints as their guides. Numerous shrines of Muslim saints have been patronized by Hindu rulers. Rathore dynasty of South India respected Muslim saints. The shrine of Ghulam Shah Qalandar, a follower of Moinuddin Chishti (RA) has been renovated many times by Rathore rulers. The other Mughal, Dara Shikoh, was enlightened and believed in harmonious co-existence of heterogeneous religions. He also tried to find a common mystical language between the Hindus and Muslims. Dara Shikoh was a prodigious writer and his books are devoted to synthesizing the mystical traditions of Hinduism and Islam. While emphasizing the importance of Sufi interpretations in modern times Nasr writes, " Sufism also renders a great service to Islam in clarifying the question of comparative religion which, because of the spread of modernism, is becoming an important problem for certain Muslims and will certainly become even more important in the future".²¹

Dawa (preaching) is an experience of love and tolerance for peaceful co-existence. After the conquest of Delhi by the Muslims in 1193 A.D. Persian speaking Muslims from outside the Subcontinent settled in and around Delhi in large numbers. They learned the local languages to understand the culture and people for better deliverance to society. *Burj Bhasha* (language) was spoken in the suburbs of Dehli. When Muslims mingled with local communities Arabic and Persian words were inculcated in *Burj* language.²² Sufi Saints learned and used the local languages to train the newly converted Muslims and disciples for effective communication in their convents such as Shaikh Abdul al-Qaqr al-Jilani(d. 561AH/1161AD) says in his prayers “*bi tahtarubin Lahubin*” is mixture of Arabic and Syriac (a dialect of middle Aramaic language) words and in another prayer he says, “*Ya Tamkhita, ya Mashtaba ya Batrashitha*” in Syriac language again.²³ Khawja Fariduddin Masud Ganjshakar (d. 661 A.H/1263A.H) wrote poetry in the local language, Punjabi,²⁴ although his language was Persian and Shah Muhammad Muzzammili, a scholar of Arabic and Persian wrote poetry in Hindi which was of equally of high standard²⁵ and Hazrat Amir Khusro (d.725 A.H /1325 A.D) was excellent in many languages like Turkish, Arabic, Persian, Sanskrit and the vernaculars of northern India. During his stay in Awadh, Delhi and Punjab he learned these northern languages. He also inculcated Hindi words and phrases in his Persian poetry and prose.²⁶

CONCLUDING REMARKS

It is obvious that violence and intolerance do not come to a society overnight. It is a gargantuan task to fight with extremist terrorism. So far, hard power strategies have been employed and are still being

employed in the world and in South Asia to curb terrorism violent hard power has resulted in a backlash by the terrorists/extremists with more violent strategies resulting in killing of endless men, women and children and causing physical and emotional injuries which are irreparable. So, the other way to deal with this monstrous task is to use soft power- the power given by Sufi teachings to fight fanaticism, fundamentalism, radicalism and sectarianism not only in South Asia, but all over the world. Political interpretation of Islam is harsh, reactive and aggressive, whereas the Sufi interpretation is moderate and subtle which centers on the inner dimensions of Islam leading to pure hearts and pure souls. Sufi teachings give the message of Universalism, inclusivism and an attitude of accommodation . This Sufi trend is present, although less in percentage, in all Muslim and non-Muslim countries of the world. Bomb-explosions are erasing cities and towns from the world map but the bomb of hatred, bigotry, prejudice and narrow- mindedness is ticking away in the hearts of feelingless people to explode. These human-heart bombs, unless diffused will wreak unimaginable havoc in the world. The only way to diffuse these human bombs can be achieved through soft power-the teachings of the Sufis. Sufi Saints used their sufi teachings to combat evils of extremism and hatred in the societies in which they lived successfully. The result was a total inner transformation of societies resulting in peace, harmony and stability. It is high time that Muslims adopt these soft tactics to fight sectarianism and other related evils with the aim of inducing inner and outer harmony in society. Islam is a vastly diverse religion with various interpretations in culture and intellect. We should revamp and revitalize our educational curriculums keeping in mind long-term

solutions with sufi teachings which advocate service to all, respect and love to all, and tolerance with all of humanity. Sufi teachings offer positive solutions which have worked successfully in the past and will work in the current violent scenario as well. The choice of soft power should be employed without any further delay to hinder any further loss and destruction. Let's work with soft power of Sufi teachings to deliver the world from the clutches of extremism. Muslims should recall that their most glorious and enlightened periods were due to varied cultural aspects of Sufi thought.

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