Dialogue Among Civilizations : India and Iran

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> I used to dream of a Persian where bulbuls made a love to the roses, where in dreamland gardens poets sat around their wine cups and invoked visions of ineffable meaning. But now that I have come to your country my dream has been formed into a concrete image and finds its permanent place in the inner chamber of my experience …. I have visited Saadi's tomb; I have sat beside the resting place of Hafiz and intimately felts his touch in the glimmering green of your woodlands, in blossoming roses. The past age of Persian lent the old world perfume of its own sunny hours of spring to the morning of that day and the silent voice of your ancient poet filled the silence in the heart of the poet of Modern India.
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> *Rabindranath Tagore, 9 May 1932*

Contacts between different civilizations have often in the past proved to be landmarks in human progress. Greece learnt from Egypt, Rome from Greece, the Arabs from the Roman Empire, medieval Europe from the Arabs, and Renaissance Europe from the Byzantine. Persia, or Iran, after being no more than a mere name in the west, became in the eighteenth century progressively better known as contact became closer and more frequent. The conceptions of Persia formed by the European differed widely, some regarding her merely as a country to trade with, others as a land to evangelize, while others again looked upon her as an ally against the Turks. No wonder, two small volumes entitled *Persia* were added in the year 1835, to 'Uncle Oliver's Travels' in the Library for the Young Series published by Messer's Charles Knight of Ludgate Street.

Again, as in the Indian of Warren Hastings and his successors, European soldiers, diplomats, politician, archeologist and missionaries visited Persia and wrote documented accounts of flora and fauna, of religious practices, of the system of taxation and education, or the method of tying horses by the leg in the stables. As time went on, it came to be realized in Europe that Persia – a land in which civilization has flourished for

nearly 5,000 years of recorded history – meant something more than all this, that she had a real culture and literature of her own and that her people, having long since appreciated the virtues of being jahan-dida (one who has seen the world), had a fine taste for poetry and a keen zest for mysticism and for philosophical speculation. The Persian themselves, like the elites of Bengal and Maharashtra in nineteenth century India, retained great pride in their glorious past long after they were conquered, and guarded the traditions of the past, so that they would not and could not give up such traditions by deliberately wiping out their glorious memories. 'There is as much sense in Hafiz as in Horace, and as much knowledge in the world.' So Sherlock Holmes took leave of a Case of Identity and the sad romance of Mary Sutherland.

Maxime Rodinson identifies three tendencies at work in the nineteenth century: a utilitarian and imperialistic sense of western superiority: full of contempt for other civilizations; a romantic eroticism, with its delight in a magical east whose increasing poverty spiced its charm; and a specialized scholarship whose main concerns lay with past ages. These three tendencies were more complementary than opposed. The unconscious eighteenth – century view, guided by the Universalist ideology of the age, respected non-European peoples and cultures. This was replaced by the conscious, theoretical European self-centeredness of the nineteenth century (The Western Image and Western Studies of Islam, in Joseph Schacht and C.E. Bosworth (eds), The Legacy of Islam, Oxford, 1979, P 43)

India was colonized but Persian was not; yet the two countries were equally affected, especially because they were coming into conflict with the expanding and aggressive imperialism of Europe. In the subcontinent, the widely different concerns and pursuits of, say William Jones, founder of the Royal Asiatic Society of Bengal, and Macaulay, author of the Minute of Education (1835) exemplified the changing language and vocabulary of colonialism and its construction of images and perception. Indeed European self centeredness and racial arrogance, detailed by scholars like Bernard S. Cohn and Thomas Metcalf, became marked features particularly after the 1857 revolt in India. Most British were convinced, as reflected in the writing of R. Kipling, that they possessed the virtues necessary to dominate the world, and history seemed to bear them out. Until the end of the Boer War their superior position was evident, and it is from this position of confident superiority that they looked at India.

What I am saying is that while textbooks dwell upon the sensuous imagery of the great Persian poets – Omar Khayyam and the mid-fourteenth century poet Hafiz – their authors take insufficient notice of the impact of colonialism or neo-colonialism on our respective societies. At a time when ideologies are gasping for breath in a unipolar world and

globalization appears to have overwhelmed most countries, this tendency is much more pronounced in India than in Iran. Nonetheless, whether is for the purpose of exploring our heritage or for the purpose of forging closer economic and cultural ties, we need to incorporate rather than discard the colonial factor in our discourses. The critique of Orientalism irritates some people, but it sensitizes us, both as an idea and as an explanation, to the unpleasant and unlovely aspects of cultural hegemony and political domination of the west. This is what Ranade, Dadabhai Naoroji and R.C. Dutt talked about in the last quarters of the nineteenth century. This is what ‘economic nationalism’ was all about. In Iran, too, freedom and independence from western economic dominance were at the heart of the Tobacco Protest 1891-92 and the Constitutional Revolution of 1905-11. Much the same issues have provided energy to the unfinished Iranian Revolution.

Orientalism sensitizes us to western misrepresentation, stereotyping, and the colonial construction of a hostile politico ideological structure, a different civilization and an alien economic region. Apart from everything else, these representation have lent depth and legitimacy, even after decades of independence, to ‘primordial’ loyalties and identities in India and Iran. To resolve these problems, some of which are threatening to tear apart the fabric of our neighbors, notably Pakistan and Afghanistan, we need to question, weather it is the context of the nation or its fragments, the colonial assumption about our societies and develop our own theories (indigenous, if you like) of state and society. One can draw comfort from Tagore’s comment in 1932 that ‘my visit to Persia has given me faith in the power of the Eastern peoples to assert themselves and quickly find their way to a united manifestation of their undying heritage in spite of conflict and difficult and difficult economic circumstances.

I realize that, under the influence of Ali Shariati (the most popular exponent of Shia modernism) and his Husayaniyyah-i-Irshad in Tehran, the tone and tenor of the intellectual discourses has changed in Iran after the Pahlavi dynasty came crashing down. However, our own scholars in South Asia, mostly trained and tortured in British and American Universities, continue to follow, often uncritically, western models, methodologies and frameworks.

I personally believe that the basis of a meaningful Indo-Iran dialogue rests on some degree of shared values and traditions, if not ideological affinity, a sensitive understanding of colonialism and its legacy, and the adoption of refined methods to explore and interpret our past. Furthermore, our engagement must rest not so much on Samuel Huntington’s introduction of the concept of culture – albeit a dated and deeply

flawed one – to the study of foreign policy and international relations, but on a nuanced understanding of our respective societies.

When Sir Hamilton Gibb published Modern Trends in Islam in 1947, he set aside the religious aspects of the modern Turkish and Persian revolution. Fortunately, this theme has since been well explored. Yet one would like to reiterate, first and foremost, that religion and the state have been intertwined ever since the establishment of the Safavid Dynasty, reaching the apex of its power under Abbas I (1588-1629) and the assert that it is impossible to delegitimize, as the Shah of Iran had discovered much to his dismay, the role of Islam or the *ulama* in popular mobilization. We will do well to remember that on two more recent occasions, - the Tobacco Protest (1891-92) and the Constitutional Revolution (1905-11) Islam and the Muslim divines played an important oppositional role in the emergence of modern Iranian nationalism. Today, Islam continues to be, despite the rumbling in certain quarters, a sources of government legitimacy and national development in Iran. Government, both in Tehran and some other Muslim capitals, appeal to Islam to exchange their authority, buttress nationalism, legitimate policies and programs, and increase popular support.

In this context, one would like to underline the role of Shia Islam, with its powerful invocation of grief, sorrow, and martyrdom (some what akin to Sikhism after Guru Gobind Singh). Shia emotionalism, which manifests itself most vividly in the annual mourning ceremonies for Imam Husain, grandson, of the Prophet and the martyr of Karbala, took an special significance and provided the inspirational modern for the Iranian Revolution. Husain's martyrdom symbolized the role of Islam as a protest movement against the overwhelming forces of evil (incidentally, the Abbasid rulers came to power on the back of Shiite protest). Self sacrifice and even death in God's path were to be freely accepted, for to die in God's struggle was to become a martyr and win eternal rewards (see John L. Esposito, The Islamic Threat; Myth or Reality, P 110). Indeed, evocative Shia symbols, especially the Aza-khanas or imambaras and the sites where the Imams and their family members are buried, contribute to the making and crystallization of Iranian self-consciousness and lend a special and distinct character to Iranian nationalism.

At the same time it is worth mentioning in passing that the tradition of the martyred emphasized the importance of legitimate political power rather than theme of righteous suffering. Hence, the martyrdom of Stephen or the pathetic death of Teresa of Lisieux would strike Muslim consciousness, not as parables of adoration, but as almost disgraceful events (Bryan S. Turmer, Weber and Islam, p 64)

Historically, Shia Islam exercise a far reaching influence on Shia political culture than Sufi tendencies have in Sunni societies. Among other aspects, is has influenced the nature and character of Iranian nationalism. According to the late Oxford based scholar Hamid Enayat, there is nothing in the theoretical principles of Shiism to make in more amenable to ethnic or racial particularism than Sunnism. If Arab National is a quest for the unity of All Arabic speaking peoples who lost their identity and independence after the Mongol invasion in 1258, by contrast, what is called Iranian nationalism has been concerned less with the problems of nationhood than with that of freedom. This is simply because Iran had been an independent state since 1502 and the unity and identity of her people had been an accomplished fact (Modern Islamic Political Thought, PP 120-21). Besides, Iranian nationalists have often found themselves driven to understand the purely Iranian elements of their culture, mostly reminiscent of pre-Islamic times, or of the resistance to the Arab invasion during the first two centuries of Islam. In their eyes, the real renaissance of the national self consciousness starts with the great epic poet Firdausi (D. 1020), whose account of the Arab conquest remains to this day the most poignant epitaph on the destruction of the Sassanian state (ibid, p. 125).

Turning to the knitty-gritty of politics, it is worth pointing out that the symbolic component of politics in Iran, especially after the inglorious regime of the Shah, is especially significant because it could have been used as an instrument of persuasion as well as coercion. Yet bargaining models of politics, especially in recent years, suggest that persuasion rather than force, is increasingly considered to be the basis of politics in that country. This may appear to be oversimplification, perhaps it is. At any rate, what we need to be aware of is that politics in Iran, as indeed in other Muslim countries, is sufficiently complex. As a result, attempts to reduce it to a single formula leads to mystification; rather than being monolithic. Muslim politics, while aspiring to *umma*-wide universals, derives its force and significance from the specific contexts, times, and localities in which it take places. ‘Islam’ cannot thus be a threat, any more than the ‘West’ can be for Muslims. Muslim politics have a transnational dimension, as is illustrated by the responses to Israel’s unjust occupation of Palestine, but this does not imply that one Muslim cultural unit has coalesced or that a transnational Islamic space has acquired dominance. Even Muslims who denounce western values accept many westerns borrowings. (Dale F. Eikelman and James Piscatori, Muslim Politics. P. 163)

Whether it is Shia emotionalism or the nationalistic sentiments it generates, we have to come to terms with an Iranian personality and an Iranian ethos that is different from Arab or Turkish nationalism. Both historically and contemporaneously, Iran has plotted its own trajectory even when it was vulnerable to the assault of the great Islamic empires or the

western countries. This must serve as a *reference point for a cultural dialogue between India and Iran*.

Of course, long-standing contacts between India and Iran provide the obvious reference point. In his *Glimpses of World History,* Jawaharlal Nehru talked of Persia as 'the country whose soul is said to have come to India and found a worthy body in the Taj'. The zenith of Indo-Iranian cultural contact was reached in the Gupta period. From the third century AD the Sassanians extended their sway over much of northwestern India. Their motifs and techniques contributed much to the making of classic Indian art. Such influences were much more directly felt after soldiers, statesmen and merchants started arriving by sea in Gujarat and in the Deccan, a famous example being Mahmud Gawan (d. 1481), who served the Bahmani Sultanate in the Deccan, founded the famous *madarsa* in Bidar, modelled after Mirza Ulugh Beg's *madarsa* in Samarqand, and thus facilitated the dissemination of Indo- Persian learning. In other words, an influx of administrative and intellectual talent from Iran and Central Asia kept the medieval state in the mainstream of Islamic culture.

The Deccani rulers, mostly Shias, were emotionally attached to Safavid Persia (1502-1722). Babur, a Timurid, had formed an alliance with Shah Ismail in 1510-12, and his successor Humayun (1530-40) was given refuge and help by Shah Tahmasp I. Turkish was the language spoken in the private chambers of the Mughal imperial family, but it was not Turkish but Persian that was the literary language of India. For generations past, schoolboys in Indian *makatib* and *madaris* had to learn by heart the *Gulistan* and *Bustan* of Shaikh Sadi of Shiraz. It remained the official language in India until 1835. It was in Persian that Ghalib's progress was most marked, and by the age of eleven, he was already writing Persian poetry. He held the view that Persian was *par excellence* the language of literature, and that Urdu, by contrast, was an inferior medium for poetry and no medium at all for prose. He asserted his own excellence in Persian. The twentieth-century Urdu poet, Mohammad Iqbal - who had written 'I am of India, Persian is not my tongue' - composed in Persian, outstanding *masnavis* - *Asrar-i Khudi* (1915), *Rumuz-i Bekhudi* (1918) and *Payam -i Mashriq* (1923) - along with several collections of poems, including, *Zabur-i Ajam* (1927), *Javidnama* (1932).

Persian poetry had flourished at the Mughal court, though Ghalib did not think much of its quality. In this period, a particular school of Indo-Persian poetry, the *Sabk-i Hindi,* assumed its specific features, though its beginning can be traced to the Ghaznavid Punjab. It is said that more Persian literature was produced in India than in Central Asia and even in Iran during this period. It is this Persian culture, adapted to the Indian environment, which came to be known as Indo- Persian culture. Moreover, Persian

influences are evident in history writing, in the world of the Sufis and the spread of numerous Sufi orders, in architecture, and in the field of what used to be called the 'minor' arts - the weaving of carpets and textiles, the making of pottery and metal work, and the writing, binding, illuminating, and illustrating of books.

The Sultans of Delhi were largely influenced by the political and cultural ideals of Persia. They turned to the ancient kings like Jamshed, Khusrau and Bahram for guidance in political affairs rather than Muslim law. Autocracy, the keynote of Persia's political system, thus found its devotees in Delhi; the elective *imam* was forgotten and, in his place, the sultan ruled by a right that could not be questioned. Thus Balban's (1266-86) monarchical ideals were those of the ancient kings of Iran whose precepts and examples gave form and content to his autocracy; he could think of no illustrious names for his grandson but Kaikhusrau, Kaikaus, Kaiqubad and Kaiumars. For him, Persian was the only channel through which he could reach the intellectual world of Islam and thus buttress his claim to the championship of civilization against Mongol barbarism. For the eastern Muslims it was impossible to get away from Persian influence; in India it was to exercise a practical tyranny.

In some ways, the creative encounters between two civilizations are a fascinating story. Indeed, we can and should build on our knowledge to provide a solid foundation for greater Indo-Iran cultural exchanges. Yet we must be alerted to a painful reality and initiate immediate corrective measures. What I refer to is the dwindling number of scholars and generalists who are currently equipped to interpret the Indo-Persian culture and its rich and vibrant legacy. Sadly, our universities are depleted of medieval Indian historians for a variety of reasons. One of them is the absence of adequate facilities and the lack of motivation for learning Persian. In short, we have reached a stage in our intellectual journey when one may well be tempted to write the obituary of medieval Indian history in South Asia. But let us not do that as yet, and echo, in the words of Tagore, the sentiment :

> The night has ended.
> Put out the light of the lamp
> Of thine own narrow dark corner
> Smudged with smoke,
> the great Morning which is for all
> appears in the East.
> Let its light reveal us to each other
> who walk on the same path
> Of pilgrimage.

My plea is to contextualize Iran's history and contemporary politics, turn to a serious examination of the Iranian revolution of the 1908-14 period, and, more generally, question the images, myths, and the existing categories invented by some scholars in the west. I wish to conclude this paper by urging my Iranian counterparts to understand our own society differently, and to come to terms with the strength and vitality of our democratic and secular experimentation. It is important, furthermore, to recognize the nature and character of Islam in India and delineate the loose and widely divergent tendencies amongst the Muslim communities (rather than community). Let me suggest a few tentative issues for discussion.

Many scholars working on South Asian Islam dwell on the so called Muslim mind, detail the 'Muslim outlook', and construe a unified 'Muslim identity' around the symbols of Islam; in other words, they underline the analytic primacy of culture and ideology and assign a privileged place to Islam. Assuming that Islam is not only distinctive but also inherently incompatible with western ideals of democracy and secularism, they regard the religion to be essentially different from all the others in that the concepts of beliefs. and political rule are fused through the unity of *din w a daw la,* the Prophet having both revealed a religion and founded a state. Predicated on this statement is an assumed resistance to secularism.

These theories need to be challenged. First, the mere fact of people being Islamic in some general sense should not be conflated with that of their adherence to beliefs and policies that are strictly described as 'Islamist' or 'fundamentalist'. Secondly, the commitment of some Muslim groups to specifically Islamic ideas and Islamic symbols does not indicate a unified structure of consciousness or community acting in unison. What should not be assumed is a monolithic conception of Islamic ideology and practice or teleology dictating the actions of the Muslims or a general acquiescence in the actions of few. We must bear in mind that the Muslim communities, like their counterparts in any other religious community, have multiple identities, with many acts to perform and many diverse roles to play. This explains why they, while remaining true to the faith, relate to the more immediate and pressing socio- economic needs in broadly secular terms and have greater affinity with members of their class or caste and not just with their co-religionists. The debate on the depth and nature of this interaction would go on, but one should not at any rate be guided by the contemporary experiences of Hindu-Muslim relations. Equally, one should guard against a discussion centred on the notion of an absolute Muslim / Islamic consciousness, and steer clear of the reification of Islam in the realm of political ideas. We should, instead, consider what political/social ideas particular

group of Muslims hold, and the relations between these and their social conditions and practice. The Syrian scholar, Aziz al-Azmeh, has pointed out:

> The very premises of Islamic studies are radically and thoroughly unsound; their very foundation, the identification and the construal of relevant facts, is based upon a political and cultural imagination ... Any proper writing of Islamic history has to rest on the dissolution of Islam as an orientalist category ... It has to liberate itself from Islam, and scrutinize Islamic histories, societies, economics, temporalities, cultures and sciences with the aid of history, of economics, of sociology, critical theory and anthropology. Only then will Islam be disassociated, and reconstituted as historical categories amenable to historical study.

Finally, identities in South Asian history and politics have seldom been unified; in colonial India they were increasingly fragmented and fractured. Indeed, they were not singular but multiple, and thus difficult to capture on a single axis. Constructed across different, intersecting and antagonistic discourses, and practices, they are subject to a radical historicization, and are constantly in the process of making and unmaking. (See Mushirul Hasan (ed.), *Islam, Communities and the Nation: Muslim Identities in South Asia and Beyond,* New Delhi, 1987).

Who, then, are the Muslims? What, if any, specific identity is associated with them? Is it divinely ordained or related to features that have always been characteristic of *Islamic* governments and societies? How important is the community's own self-image which is subtly moulded by a combination of 'internal' factors and external interventions? Is it the outcome of colonial images, of treating Muslims as an undifferentiated religious category? To what extent has the post-colonial state, too, viewed Muslims as a religious collectivity, who are also resumed to represent a separate political entity?

Interestingly enough, when the first all India census was tabulated and analyzed in 1881, the enumerators found that Muslims numbered only 19.7 per cent of the population. They uncovered a geographically dispersed aggregate of Muslims forming neither a collectivity nor a distinct society for any purpose, political, economic and social. Out of a total population of about 50 million (or one - fifth of the computed total population of 'British India'), the Muslims in Bengal spoke Bengali and those in Punjab used largely Punjabi as their language. Those living in Tamil Nadu spoke Tamil; those settled on the Malabar coast, mostly Mapillas, spoke Malayalam. They found Muslims whose religious rituals had a very strong tinge of Hinduism and who retained caste and observed Hindu festivals and ceremonies. Islam in these regions became a religion of accommodation rather than a

religion of transformation, especially after the rise of Sufism which catered to the emotional and orgiastic needs of the masses. As the historian Peter Hardy pointed out:

> The entry of Muslims in South Asia by so many and separated doorways, their spread over the subcontinent by so many different routes, over a period of centuries, and the diffusion of Islam in different forms from one area to the another, ensured that this religion would present itself to the peoples of South Asia in many different epiphanies seen from different angles. Neither to its own adherents nor to non-Muslims in South Asia has Islam seemed monochromatic, monolithic or indeed mono-anything It has indeed been said that Islam in South Asia has been united only by a few common rituals and by the aspirations of its scholars. (Peter Hardy, 'Islam and Muslims in South Asia', in R. Israeli, ed., *The Crescent in the East: Islam in Asia Major,* London: Humanities Press, 1982, pp. 39-40).

Islam came to the subcontinent not in a single time span, but in succession divided unevenly in different periods; consequently, its diffusion took place in a variety of forms. from class to class and from one area to another. The difference in the phases in which people 'experienced' Islam brought with it variations in the nature of challenges facing its followers in different regions As in Iran where Islam incorporated a variety of outlooks and orientations and has been capable of multiple levels of discourse and interpretation, in its local and regional specificity, the' essential' core of Islam in India was not immune to changes by historical influences. Ordinary Muslims were not, as one is often led to believe, members of a monolithic community sitting sullenly apart, but were active participants in regional cultures whose perspectives they shared. They look upon their commitment to Islam not only as one among other values, but also as something which was itself differentiated internally into a number of detailed commitments.

Thus Islam in India past and present, unfolds a bewildering diversity of Muslim communities. No statistical data is required to establish their location in multiple streams of thought and interactions with them. Their histories, along with social habits, cultural traits and occupational patterns, vary from class to class, from place to place and from region to region. They speak numerous dialects and languages and observe wide - ranging regional customs and local rites despite the intervention of the Islamists. Caste exists as a basis of social relations, although it differs from the Hindu caste system in details. In several domains Muslims make up an integral part of the larger socio-cultural complex dominated by values and ideologies of the Hindu caste tradition.

The noteworthy point is how, in the aftermath of Independence and Partition, the secular and democratic regime rather than the Islamic dimension provided the overarching framework to religio- political leadership of the Muslims to forge new alliances and electoral coalitions. Those holding the reins of leadership located problems and found answers to contemporary dilemmas within the democratic and secular paradigms and sought adjustments not as members of a larger collectivity. They accepted state laws without insisting on the application of the Islamic law, except in the case of marriage, divorce and inheritance. Although this simple truth is not widely accepted, it is none the less necessary for social scientists to spell out the nature and implications of these internal differentiation and the negotiated commitments flowing from them (See My *Legacy of a Divided Nation,* London, 1997). Beneath the so-called unity of the 'Muslim community', we need to identify a variety of religious and political outlooks and competing agenda. This will enable us to unravel the 'mysteriously known essence' (Edward Said, *Orientalism,* p. 305) of Islam in India and Iran, and challenge the widely held perception of a monolithic 'Islamic threat' .