

MUSLIM

MINORITIES

IN ASIA

— Dr. Ali Kattani —

ASIA was traditionally the land of Muslim strength. It is the homeland of Muslim peoples whose name itself in the course of history became identified with Islam: the Arabs, the Persians, the Turks and the Malays. But Islamisation of two great peoples remained incomplete, these are the Chinese and the Indians. Traditionally, Asian Muslim minorities never knew the type of persecution to which their brethren were subjected in Europe. When this happened, it was temporary as during the Ching dynasty in China, or it was Christian-European inspired such as the Russian orthodox persecution in Central Asia which was inherited by the Communists of Russia (and later spread to China as well); the British protestant persecution in India, later inherited by the Hindus, the Spanish Catholic persecution of the Muslims of the Philippines, which was inherited by their present-day converts. Let us now consider each area separately in some detail.

Central Asia

Central Asia had become a Muslim majority area during the first centuries of the Abbasid dynasty. Trans-Oxania became the heartland of Muslim learning and Arabic studies. This pre-eminence was stopped temporarily during the Mongol invasion in the 13th century, but was revived in the later centuries under the Timurids of Samarqand. Central Asia was not only the land of Muslim majority, it was also the centre of Islamic expansion in Eastern

Europe and India.

The carriers of Islam in the later centuries were the Turks who joined Islam tribe after tribe with great enthusiasm until they all became Muslims by the end of the 18th century, with the exception of some small elements on the fringe of the Turkish land.

The Muslim power in Siberia and Eastern Russia already showed signs of weakness at the turn of the 16th century. From then on the expansion of the Russian state was continuously at the expense of the Muslim

territories. The first Muslims who fell into a status of minority to the Russians were the Tartar Muslims of Kazan, when the Russian Ivan stormed Kazan and conquered it in 1552. After the fall of Kazan, the Muslims who came under the Russians were subjected to a persecution comparable only to the Spanish Inquisition. The attempt to convert them forcibly to Christianity failed, however, and they came back to Islam after many years of apparent profession of Christianity. They are Muslims to this day.

After Kazan, the Muslim lands fell one after the other into Russian hands: Crimea (1783), Kirghizia (18th century), Caucasia (early 19th century) and finally Transoxania (*Mawara al-Nahr*) with its Islamic centres of Bukhara and Samarqand (1847-81).

By the turn of the present century, these Muslim territories witnessed an unprecedented Islamic revival which centred, of all places, in Kazan itself, the first Muslim city to have fallen to the Russians. This was cut short by the Communist revolution which continued where the Czars left off. Persecution of Islam is continuing to this day.

Just before the October 1917 Revolution, the Communists praised the Muslims and Islam and promised the Muslim population freedom from the Czarist yoke. When after 1917 the Muslims discovered that they had been betrayed, they rebelled against the new Communist colonialism, in Bashkiria, in Crimea under the leadership of Shalabi and in Bukhara under the leadership

of its Emir Said Alim. These revolutions were put down mercilessly, and hundreds of thousands of Muslims were slaughtered between 1917 and 1921. In 1926, the Communists decided to enforce an "agricultural reform" in Kazakhstan by nationalising the entire herds of the nomads. One million Muslims died of starvation as a result.

When the revolts of the Muslims failed, a Tartar Emir, Sayyid Sultan Ali Uglu (called by the Russians Sultan Galiev), came out with an original idea. He proposed to Stalin the creation of a Muslim state federated with the Russian state. He was hanged in 1937 for his boldness as an "enemy of the people" (may God have mercy on him).

The Communist regime followed a policy of cultural suppression of the Muslims. Their languages have been broken up into a multitude of dialects. Arabic, which was an official language among some populations, as in Daghestan, has been eliminated. Arabic script was replaced, first by Roman script, then by Cyrillic script. It is interesting to note that the Communist "reformers" did not consider it necessary to change the peculiar Armenian and Georgian scripts. The history of all the Muslim peoples has been subjected to a thorough distortion to fit the Noble-Serf or class system of the defunct Christian Orthodox Russian establishment. Worse,



Muslims performing Id al-Adha prayers in Hong Kong.

freedom has been granted to the state and its functionaries to attack Islam, whereas the Muslims have no right to refute these propagandist attacks and defend Islam. Needless to say, mosques have been closed. Some have, however, been reopened lately. Islamic schools are all but non-existent. Some form of Islamic organisation under the control of the Communist State has been tolerated to exist.

The Russians (Christians and Communists) practised toward Muslims the same policy which was followed by the Castilians in al-Andalus, the Normans in Sicily, and the Jews in Palestine. They brought a flow of Russian immigrants to the Muslim countries, and often converted the Muslims forcibly before 1917 to Christianity, and after 1917 to Communism. When they failed they forcibly evicted them from their homeland. Today the Muslims are no more in Crimea and they are in a minority in the biggest of their states, Kazakhstan. It is estimated that more than six million Russians have been settled

in Muslim territories since 1939, quite obviously with a view to rendering the Muslims ineffective.

Numerically, however, the Muslim population under the Russians is quite impressive. They numbered in 1971 about 36,000,000 people and their percentage increased from 11.3 % in 1939 to 13.5 % of the total

population of the Soviet Union in 1971. Lately they have evinced signs of Islamic revival. Their future seems to be promising despite the hostile policy of the Soviet government since they have weathered the fiercest storms and have established their capacity to survive.

India

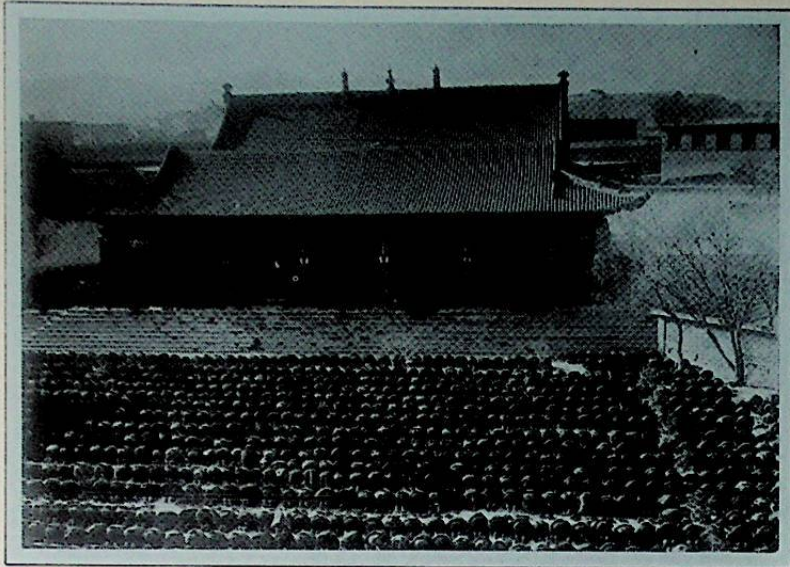
Islam in India has been present since the Umayyad period, and a considerable part of India has been under Muslim rule most of the time. It is, therefore, not easy to understand how the Muslims remained in numerical minority up to this day.

When the British took over India, the Muslims lost more and more of their influence until it declined to a level much below their numerical strength. The loss of power and influence for the Muslims in the areas under the Moghul emperor came as a sudden shock when the revolution of 1857 was brutally suppressed and the British government formally seized control of almost the entire sub-continent and pursued a

conscious policy of reducing the Muslims to the position of hewers of wood and drawers of water. The same policy was being actively pursued earlier by the British in the areas which were under the control of the British East India Company.

When the British were about to leave, it appeared that under the future regime which would be based on a "one man one vote" principle, the Muslims would be left at the mercy of a Hindu majority which was bent on obliterating their language, culture and religion. The Muslims understandably looked at the future with fear and suspicion. They finally came up with the idea of forming an Islamic state — Pakistan — in areas where they were in a majority. This area was kept by the British to a minimum.

On the other hand, the establishment of Pakistan left the Muslims of India in an even weaker position. Percentage-wise they are no more than 12 per cent of the total population they are subjected to a pressure they have never known before. Altogether they form a tenth of



Muslim worshippers performing Friday's congregational prayers at Dong Kwan mosque, China (1401 H).

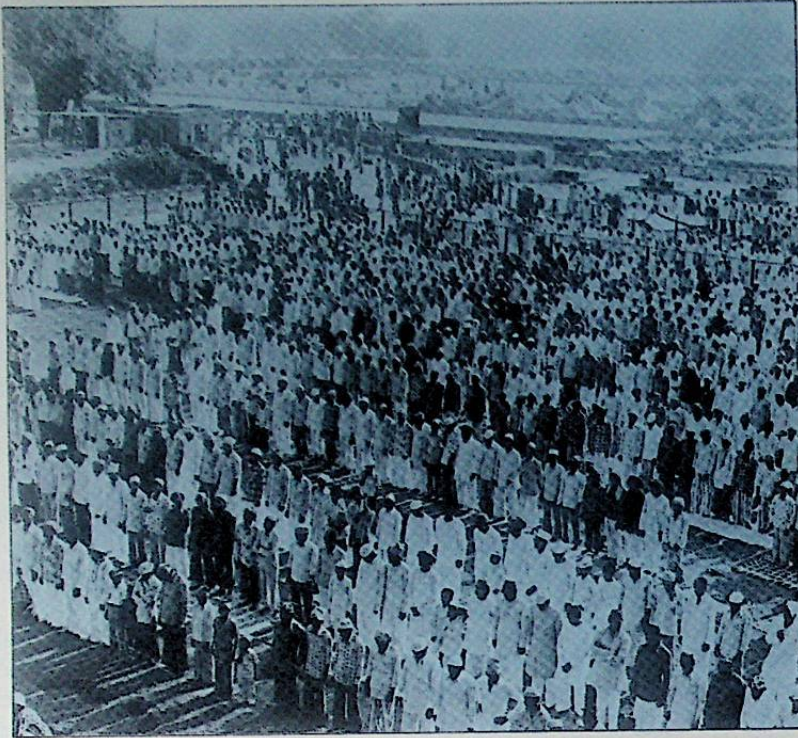
the Muslim body (about eighty million), yet their survival is at stake and gigantic efforts are required to ensure it. The Muslims in India are subjected to a continuous erosion of their positions in all fields. Politically they have been continually eliminated from most positions of decision-making, worse, they have been continuously eliminated from public functions, their percentages in the different ministries of the nation is

becoming tragically small (often a mere 1 per cent). Their language, Urdu (written in Arabic script), is being systematically destroyed in favour of a Hinduised language, Hindi. In the name of a secularism which barely conceals Hindu fanaticism, Muslim institutions are being weakened, sometimes utterly eliminated. The case of the Muslim University of Aligarh is just an example. The Muslims are being kept continually in a state of insecurity of their lives and property because of large-scale killings which take place from time to time and are encouraged by criminal elements taking part in the so-called democratic process.

In spite of all that, the Muslims of India have managed to keep increasing in number and percentage. They remain an active part of the Muslim *ummah*. It is remarkable that Islam has been able to become an indigenous religion in the teeth of the worst kinds of fanaticism and



Ticalaan massacre August 8, 1975.



Open assembly for prayers outside Jama Masjid, Delhi.

bigotry. Thus, Islam holds out a great promise to purge the Indian society, which is suffering from injustice and inequality as few other societies of the world are, of some of its most deeply-rooted ailments. At present, Islam is passing in that country through a phase of test and trial, but its potential is gigantic and its mission indeed remains to be completed. The fact that among the Indian Muslims are found some of the most outstanding leaders of Islamic thought and some of the most active Islamic movements reinforces one's optimism about their future.

China

Islam came to China with Muslim traders along two routes, the inland route and the sea-route during the first Islamic century. The Muslim com-

munity increased slowly but continuously through immigration, mixed marriages and conversions.

Except for East Turkestan, which is really part of the Turkish world, the Muslims never formed a political entity in China. Under the Mongol dynasty, they were very influential to the point that that dynasty was considered by many as a Muslim one. The Muslim power collapsed with the Mongols and they suffered the Manchu persecution for 267 years. In the nineteenth century the Chinese Muslims fought bloody wars to rid themselves of this persecution. In Yunan, Khansu and Sinkiang, they were militarily routed which worsened their situation.

There was an Islamic revival in China after the nationalist revolution of 1911. However,

this revival was cut short by the Communists after their take-over in 1948. Under the new regime the Muslims are a non-entity, their numbers may be as high as eighty-million people, but the Communists claim that they are only ten million. Their situation is one of the worst in the whole world.

With the exception of the Eastern Turks, the Muslims are not even allowed to be a different "nationality" as is the case in the Soviet Union. All their mosques have been closed down with the exception of one mosque in Beijing which is used as an exhibition piece for foreign dignitaries. Islamic schools have been closed down, and Islam is taught nowhere. The Muslim family itself has been broken up in an effort to accelerate the Muslim integration into the mainstream of Communism. Islamic leadership has often been physically eliminated. Nevertheless, Islam has shown a power of survival hardly paralleled by other Muslim minorities and as late as 1967 during the Cultural Revolution the Muslims demonstrated violently in Beijing itself.

The Philippines

The carriers of Islam in South-East Asia were the Malays who themselves became Muslims as a result of merchant emigration from South India and South Arabia. The Muslim minorities expanded very fast in the islands that form Indonesia today as well as in Malaysia, until they became majorities.

In the Philippines of the sixteenth century, the same process of Islamisation was going on. Most of the islands were seats of Muslim states; and

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Manila itself (the present capital of the Philippines) was the capital of a Muslim principality. It was just a matter of time for the population to absorb the new religion and thus for the Muslims to become a majority.

However, the unpredictable happened. Philip of Spain sent in 1565 a fleet under Miguel de Legaspi "to settle the land and convert the people," and Manila was taken in 1570. The job was entrusted to five fanatical Catholic orders: the Augustinians, the Dominicans, the Franciscans, the Jesuits, and, later, the Recollects. When the Spaniards discovered the presence of Muslims in these islands, they identified them with the Spanish Muslims and called them Moros. Wars between Muslims and Spaniards and their Christian converts were long and bloody, but the Muslims were able to hold their own in the Southern islands of Palawan, Sulu and Mindanao, where they formed powerful and thriving states. A *status quo* was more or less maintained until the Muslims suffered a grave defeat at the hands of the Spaniards in 1848. In spite of this defeat, the Spaniards and their allied converts were never able to conquer the territories where the Muslims were in a majority. These territories remained in the hands of the independent Muslim state of Sulu.

In 1896, President William McKinley of the USA decided to occupy the Philippines (named after the Spanish King who conquered them) "to Christianise and civilise the people." The Americans succeeded in taking over the Spanish Colony in 1899, but the

Muslim state resisted. The Americans fought a bloody war against the Muslims which lasted until 1914 when the Muslims were completely defeated for the first time in their history. On 11th March 1915, the reigning Muslim King (Sultan) was forced to abdicate his throne, but was allowed to remain the head of the Muslims. In April 1940, the Americans abolished the Sultanate completely and the Muslim territories were incorporated in the Philippines.

The difficulty was that these territories formed a third in area of the entire present-day Philippines, and the Muslim population had been depleted by centuries of warfare. The crime committed against the Muslims by the American colo-

nial administration was that they opened the Muslim territories to Christian immigration from the North. Immigration was slow at first, accelerated in the 1920s and has grown rapidly since 1939. After the independence of the Philippines, the national government began to pursue the same fanatical policies as practised against the Muslims by the Spanish and the Americans. The Muslims were considered outcasts in their own land. Criminal bands of religious fanatics were allowed to take over Muslim lands by force and entire Muslim populations were butchered. Others discovered themselves refugees overnight. The established Catholic Church encouraged, the State connived at and the army actively helped people



Front view of Dong Kwan Mosque in Sinning Town of Chin Hai Province.

to perpetrate the carnage of the Muslims. The Muslims found no other way but to fight for their physical existence. But they are fighting a lone battle. The Muslim world at large seems to have lost its sense of history and treats the problem as if it were a purely internal affair of the Philippines and as if the Muslims were always ruled by a Catholic establishment.

The reaction of the Philippines government to the present war is identical to that of the previous colonial governments. The Muslims are being suppressed, even obliterated by brute force. Even in areas of their greatest concentration they are allowed no autonomy in their own affairs. In every respect, the Muslims of the Philippines are the successors of the Muslims of Spain. The

fall of Sulu in 1940 reminds one of the fall of Granada in 1492. The Muslims are no more than 10 per cent of the total population of the Philippines (about 4,000,000 Muslims now). They are being subjected to conditions that are hardly any different from those of the Spanish inquisition. Our only hope is that they will escape the Andalusian fate. ■

—Courtesy: Al-Nahda

Message from Singapore

Kuala Lumpur Dawah Conference

Mr. Sayyid Hasan Mutahar,
Editor-in-Chief, Muslim World League Journal,
Makkah al-Mukarramah.

Assalamualeikum wa-Rahmatullah wa-Barakatuhu.

The Muslim Missionary Society, Singapore, sent a delegation comprising members, observers and a video team to the 15th Hijra International Conference held in Kuala Lumpur from 24 November to 3 December 1981 under the auspices of the Organization of Islamic Conference and the Malaysian Prime Minister's office. The working paper written by the President of the Society, Haji Abu Bakr Maidin, on "Problems confronting Islamic Dawah activities and strategy for the future covering Singapore" was selected as suitable for presentation at the conference along with 26 other working papers written by prominent Muslims from various parts of the world. Altogether about 250 delegates and observers attended the conference, which was opened by Dato Seri Dr. Mahathir Mohammad, Prime Minister of Malaysia. The chairman of the organising committee, Dato Haji Mohammad Nasir, who is the Minister-in-Charge of the Prime

Minister's Secretariat, presided over the closing session held on 3 December 1981. The delegates were then taken on a three-day group visit to Sabah, Sarawak and Trengganu. The conference was a success with useful deliberations taking place on a number of subjects during the working and plenary sessions. Mr. Zainal Othman Ariffin, Assistant Secretary-General in the Organization of Islamic Conference, represented his chief, Mr. Habib al-Chatti, and delivered a key-note address. Delegates and observers from Saudi Arabia, Iran, Iraq, Libya, Yemen, United Arab Emirates, Pakistan, Indonesia, Brunei, Singapore, Philippines, Japan, Thailand, Korea, Burma, Fiji, France, Guinea, Hong Kong, Lebanon, New Zealand, Somalia, Taiwan, Sudan, Spain, Sri Lanka, Britain, USA and Malaysia participated. Several resolutions were passed and many important recommendations adopted. Congratulations are due to the organisers for the excellent manner in which the sessions were conducted.

Abu Bakr Maidin, President,
Muslim Missionary Society,
Singapore, 8 December 1981.