

Globalisation and emerging challenges to Islam in Asia

ASGHAR ALI ENGINEER

GLOBALISATION is posing challenges in almost all the fields - economic, political, cultural and religious. Even pre-colonial period also involved elements of globalisation, if globalisation is all about connectivity. In pre-colonial period too, there was worldwide trade. Globalisation is nothing, if not about connectivity.

However, there is a qualitative difference between pre-colonial, post-colonial and connectivity in the globalised world today. No country or civilisation enjoyed hegemony neither there was dictation of terms by any power. Hegemonic relationship started with the colonial period. And in globalised world, which now happens to be uni-polar world this relationship has become totally hegemonic. There is yet one more difference between the colonial and post-colonial globalised world: revolution in information technology. Any information emanating from one part of the world can spread instantaneously in all parts of the world. It is this information technology (or information industry), which is crucial to what we call globalisation.

Thus we can say that hegemonic relationship and information technology are defining elements of globalisation. The emerging challenges in Asia and Africa due to intensification of process of globalisation has to be understood in this background. The Western hegemony in cultural field being total is causing identity crisis among religious and cultural communities in Asia and much more so among Muslim communities.

What is called the phenomenon of 'fundamentalism' in Islamic world is result of globalisation. Firstly, phenomenon of fundamentalism is not confined to Islamic world alone. It is these right wing Christians who not only advise President Bush but also influence his security policies. This bulldozing of all other cultural identities is causing great deal of turmoil among the marginalized cultural communities. Continued American aggression in the idle East is causing emergence of Islamic fundamentalism and

Islamic militancy also termed as 'Islamic terrorists'.

America supported the Shah of Iran to the hilt causing great deal of anger among people of Iran and when people of Iran overthrew the Shah under the leadership of Ayatollah Khomeini, American media put entire blame on Islamic fundamentalism. Iran, after the Islamic revolution, became a threat for US rulers. The Muslims in Iran could only be mobilised through their religious identity. Ali Shariati, a modern Islamic thinker, and not a fundamentalist in any sense of the word used by American media, influenced thousands of Iranian youth who were instrumental in making Islamic revolution. Ali Shariati and his followers were reacting to American hegemonic policies in Iran. Ayatollah Khomeini could also throw challenge to American policies by mobilising Iranian people appealing to their Islamic identity. This then is perceived as religious fundamentalism by Western media. One cannot fight 'fundamentalist' forces without tracing its genesis in American policies. President Bush has greatly aggravated Islamic militancy in Asia.

However, it will be wrong to establish straight-line relationship between American policies and developments in Islamic world. Globalisation, like any other socio-economic phenomenon, works in complex ways. Colonialism too, had contradictory impact on the Islamic world. It also brings awareness for change and reform. Colonialism resulted in producing major Islamic thinkers like Mohammad Abduh in Egypt and Sir Syed Ahmed Khan in India.

It has adverse impact in as much as western hegemonic policies creates resentment but also is instrumental in producing modern Muslim thinkers. These modern Islamic thinkers are working hard to bring modern changes in Islamic world and rescue it from the clutches of orthodoxy. There is widespread poverty and illiteracy in the Muslim world. And in oil rich Saudi Arabia there is vice-like tight grip of conservative rulers who fear any change.

These rulers, unable to deliver on governance, want to keep conservative ulama happy and placated. It is interesting to

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note that Saudi Arabia is reeling under very complex response to forces of globalisation. The American policies in Middle-East create lot of anger among the Saudi youth and they resort to terrorism and want to reinforce orthodox Islam. But, on the other hand, a new awareness is fast spreading among Saudi people, particularly women, and they are demanding changes and reform in age old laws and practices. A section of people of Saudi Arabia feel that Wahabi Islam is intolerant of other sects of Islam as well as other religions and breeds hatred and

violence and hence they are demanding changes in educational institutions and introduction of more tolerant version of Islam. The Saudi rulers are responding cautiously. Three rounds of dialogue have taken place with women already though these dialogues have yet not conceded much to women. Recently Kuwaiti rulers also had to concede right to vote to women. The Kuwaiti women were demanding right to vote for quite some time and fought very hard to gain this right and they did gain it. While some are fiercely opposing a woman leading men in prayer

others are quite supportive.

It has also been pointed out that the Holy Prophet (PBUH) permitted a woman companion called Umm Waraqa to lead her family members in prayer including the male members. Imam Taymiyyah has also opined that a woman could lead men in prayers especially in tarawih prayers during Ramadan. In Indian subcontinent women are not even allowed to enter mosques, let alone being permitted to lead both the genders in prayer. The French Government recently banned wearing any religious symbols in Government

schools including hijab by young girls. It created great deal of stir not only among the Muslims in France but also in other Muslim countries. Large number of people from Asia and Africa are migrating to the Western countries, especially to the USA and Canada, apart from Europe for better economic prospects. This economic migration has changed the whole religious, cultural and national scene. The diaspora has created problems both for host countries and for the migrants. The main problem is of alienation and feeling of loss of identity for the migrants from

Asia and Africa. These migrants become intensely conscious of their cultural or religious identities back home and take highly conservative positions in cultural and religious issues be they Hindus, Muslims or Arabs or Indians. The Muslims in general and Arabs in Particular enforce hijab on their women as a visible part of identity. Men themselves do not adopt such symbols of visible identity and take to western dresses making themselves indistinguishable from others but insist on their women wearing hijab including school going girls. They enforce hijab as part of Shari'ah.

Hijab for all women is a post-Qur'anic usage. Qur'an requires women to wear dignified dress rather than veil themselves from head to toe. The concerned verse on displaying adornment or sexual charms (zeenah) is from Chapter 24, verse number 31 and this verse leaves lot of space by saying except what appears thereof (illa ma zahara minha) for displaying certain parts of women's body (like face, hands etc). However, this verse was interpreted by the 'ulama in a way to impose more restrictions on women than required and Arab cultural dress for women became a requirement of shari'ah law. It is for this reason that the French Government banned wearing of hijab in government schools as violation of secularism. Hijab, as pointed out above, has become an identity symbol rather than religious requirement per se. In Muslim societies women are often considered subservient either to parents or to husbands and are coerced, in the name of Islam, to observe strict dress code. The conservatives then enforce strict dress code as a reaction. All those committed to women's rights and dignity must fight against such shameless projection of women in advertisement. No fair elections are held and no free debates can take place in these Muslim countries.

In Bangladesh too right wing religious violence is spreading and attempts are being made to assassinate the political opponents.

This violence continues in Iraq even after so called demo-

cratic elections. Unfortunately the rulers invoke Islam to deny democratic rights to their people and perpetuate authoritarian regime. While no one should tolerate American intervention in any other country's internal matters, the Muslim countries should democratise themselves.

Globalisation has irretrievably ushered in an era of information technology; no country can do without promoting information and knowledge. The Muslim countries lag far behind in this respect though Islam was the first religion to make acquisition of knowledge obligatory both on Muslim man and woman, even if available in far off place like China. Muslim women, more than men, lag behind in literacy and their survival in globalised world depends very much on knowledge. The Islamic world must make up as fast as it can to improve quality of its existence in this world.

The World Social Forum (WSF) promoted by those fighting for social justice have given a slogan 'other world is possible'. Should Islamic countries not take lead in making such a world possible by setting up norms of justice, compassion and wisdom in promoting non-exploitative world? The Islamic world is full of tyranny and darkness of ignorance.

Diversity is Allah's creation (see 30:22, 5:48 etc.) and for dialogue see 3:63 etc. President Khatami of Iran rightly proposed that we should promote dialogue of civilizations in the modern world to avoid clashes between them. While an Asian proposed dialogue of civilisations the American Professor Huntington talked of "clash of civilisations".

Thus numerous challenges are emerging in our world and Asia has to measure up to those challenges in the globalised world. It requires great deal of wisdom on the part of Asian people and their rulers to respond creatively to these challenges and the emerging problems.

The author is associated with the Centre for Study of Society and Secularism, Mumbai, India.

Deepening Indo-US military relations

BOBBY SHARMA

'Indo-US Military Relations: Expectations and Perceptions,' a study by the US defense department has raised some very pertinent questions about Indo-US military relations. The report, a 176-page document, is a comprehensive analysis of military-to-military cooperation against the backdrop of the political and economic canvass of the Indian subcontinent. The report outlines the US's strategic concerns and how India serves them.

India's strategic location in the center of Asia, gives the US "closer access to areas of instability." Access to Indian military infrastructure will give the US a 'strategic hedge' against the volatility of Asia. The US is looking for a 'neutral territory' on the opposite side of the world that can provide ports and support for operations in the Middle East. The Indian Navy is rated operationally high, capable of providing necessary support like it did during the 1991 Gulf War and during Operation Enduring Freedom when its ships provided escorts to merchant vessels from the northern Arabian Sea till the Straits of Malacca. American occupation of Iraq, their targeting 'the axis of evil' and the rise of China as a 'peer competitor' has shifted US military concern from Europe to Asia. America sees India either as an ally of China or a counterweight to it. In addition, its presence here facilitates domination of the Indian Ocean.

There has been considerable warming of relations between the US and India since 1998. Perhaps the turning point was the Kargil war where the US sided, for the first time, with India against Pakistan. This resulted in increased military-to-military cooperation. The two countries have conducted many joint military exercises, including Indian paratroopers working with their counterparts in Alaska, and joint military

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airlift operations in Agra where the Indians were surprised by the Americans' routine airlift capability, which is far more than our strategic capability. There were also the *Shanti Path 2003* joint peacekeeping exercises, and the latest being Indian and US troops training in dense jungles and learning to flush terrorists out of their hideouts. There is also another joint air exercise being planned in Alaska.

Why is America so desperate to seek military-to-military cooperation with India? The Indian military is highly capable, well-trained and

potential partners, with sophisticated tactics, operational training, and high level of technology. Despite resource constraints, India offers geographically, a vast variety of landscapes from plains to deserts to jungles and high-altitude and snow-clad mountains.

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reconsidering its strategies to deal with terrorism, it is still worried about a rising China, which represents the most significant threat to the US, both economically and militarily. The Bush administration would like India to emerge as a counterweight to China. Americans therefore, want India to view China as a common strategic threat and may not be averse to a NATO type military alliance in the region to deal with China.

The most compelling strategic reason for the spurt in military-to-military cooperation is that by inviting India, the US is sending

out a stern message to its rivals in NATO that it can do without them and that it can find new geopolitical allies. The message is for Germany and France, the big two of old Europe. Besides, if China and a resurgent Russia join hands to check US expansionism, the US will expect India to play a camp follower. There is no doubt that the US is trying to build up support against China, France and Russia who all strongly favor a multipolar economic and strategic order. With Japan, Canada and UK already in their orbit, India's joining will only strengthen the American unipolar strategy.

Can we as a nation compromise on our principled stand of supporting a multipolar world? Such a step will antagonize our long term friend Russia. It will also not go down well with Chinese either with whom we are in the active process of improving relations. It is equally important to neutralize the nuisance value of the US in the context of the current thaw and prospects of peace with Pakistan.

Military relationships should, axiomatically result in shared technology. For a military relationship to endure, strong economic ties are imperative. Only strong and lasting economic relationship, based on a shared vision can insulate America and India from political changes in either country. We must strive for a balanced perspective and make it a two-way relationship wherein both sides gain not only in operational experience but also in technologies. We must also impress on the US to sponsor our case for a permanent seat at the Security Council of the UN. The two democracies, one the oldest and the other the largest, must inspire each other and not overawe others.

By permission, IPCS, New Delhi India

The author is a Defence Analyst.

Dialogue with Naxals: Doomed to fail

PRAFULLA KETKAR

The euphoria over the talks between the Naxalites and the Andhra Pradesh government that began in October last year is over. This initiative, considered an unprecedented move to stop the four-decade history of violence in the State, has ended with the Naxalites deciding to pull out of the talks. But when we look into these developments, it seems inevitable that it was bound to happen, as the initiative was a halfhearted political gimmick without any groundwork or thinking. Without viable policy measures to address the roots of the problem, the dialogue was doomed to fail.

After taking over as Chief Minister of Andhra Pradesh, Y S Rajasekhara Reddy extended an invitation to the Maoists and the Jana Shakti to come for talks in line with his commitment during the election campaign. The State government allowed the ban on the ultras to lapse to create a conducive atmosphere. It gave them the status of State guests during the first round of talks.

These talks went on for four days from 15 to 18 October, but ended without conclusion. Both sides could not reach a ceasefire agreement. The crux of the disagreement was clause 7, according to which Naxalites wanted permission to retain their arms, which was unacceptable to the government. So the issue was deferred to the next round of talks.

Another issue highlighted by the ultras in the first round of talks was the distribution of land to the landless. The Naxalites wanted the government to constitute a land commission for this purpose with statutory powers. The ultras insisted on distribution of at least one crore acres of land. On this issue, the Chief Minister has set up a committee to identify the land, and the government decided to distribute one-lakh acres for the time being.

Besides these core issues of arms and land, the Naxalites raised issues like creating a democratic atmosphere, right to education and health, and restoring social welfare on top of the Government's agenda. Though the government was positive on these issues, it could give any firm commitment to the ultras.

Since the peace process began, senior police officials have accused the Naxalites of moving around with arms and indulging in criminal activities like extortions, intimidation and land grabbing. On the other hand, the CPI (Maoist) and CPI-ML (Janashakti) leaders allege that the government disallowed Naxal meetings and unleashed the police forces for undertaking combing operations and fake encounters. Still peace was prevailing

despite the atmosphere of distrust. Between 13 May and 31 December 2004, the Naxalites committed only four murders. Not a single policeman or Naxalite was killed during this period, though five encounters and a landmine blast took place in the last few weeks of the year. But the scene altered dramatically in January with the police launching combing operations in a big way and the Naxalites resuming their violent activities against political leaders, policemen and alleged informants. A series of encounters led to the death of 11 comrades, prompting the Naxalites to pull out of the talks.

This history is repeating itself in AP for the last thirty years ever since the movement spread to the State in 1968 and struck roots in the Telangana region. Successive chief ministers tried a "blow hot, blow cold" policy, but could not wipe out this movement.

Without learning anything from the mistakes made by his predecessors on the Naxal issue, YSR entered into a dialogue as a populist measure. It is true that Naxalism is a socio-economic and political problem. A comprehensive dialogue framework can resolve the problem, for which three pre-conditions are necessary. Firstly, the government has to take a decisive stand on the issues related to retaining arms by Naxals and land distribution. Secondly, without issuing clear-cut instructions to the police about dealing with Naxals under a ceasefire agreement, the process cannot be complete, as the police have to deal with the problem at the ground level. And lastly, the government has to differentiate between the political struggle and criminal activities by naxal groups. Crimes like extortion, money laundering, and arms supply are unpardonable, and the government should take firm steps to curb it.

Most importantly, Naxalism stems out of excessive socio-economic inequalities, which are not limited to AP. The Naxals are gaining ground in many parts of India, particularly Andhra Pradesh, eastern Maharashtra, western Orissa, Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh, Jharkhand, Bihar, West Bengal and some parts of Uttar Pradesh. They are establishing a strong network with other revolutionary organizations like the MCC, CPI (ML) and Maoবাদ in Nepal. So unless some clear policy formulation and guidelines are provided by the Center, the problem of Naxalism cannot be addressed effectively.

The author is Research Officer, IPCS, New Delhi, India.