Unit 18

Islam

Contents

Learning Objectives

After studying this unit you should be able to:

● describe the genesis of Islam;

● outline the teaching of Islam;

● delineate the life of prophet Mohammed; and

● Provide some aspects of Islam in India.

18.1 Introduction

In this unit, the genesis of Islam as historical phenomena has been discussed while doing so, social and cultural treatments have been given so that sociological perspective can be understood. Even some lights are thrown to clarify the sectarian divisions in Islam. The teaching of Islam bounds the individuals cutting across the national and a racial boundary forming the equalitarian society has been elucidated in section 1.3. The concept of Islam and law which have been drawn from the words and deeds of prophet Mohammad constituting the normative customs of the Muslims regarding to rituals have been analysed in section 1.4. Section 1.5 of this unit gives a detailed note relating to the Prophet Mohammad's birth and work as well as the conditions under which he extended Islam as religion. However, sub section 1.5.1 of this section gives a sketchy description of the spread of Islam beyond its birthplace. The section 1.6 presents a brief account of the metaphysics of Islam clarifying it through God, revelation, spiritual realm, humanity, final judgment which have appeared in respective subsections (1.6.1), (1.6.2), (1.6.3), (1.6.4), (1.6.5) of the section 1.6. However, the situation of Islam in India has appeared in section 1.7 and finally the summary of the unit is given.

18.2 Genesis of Islam

Islam is extensively applied as a term for those who have faith that Koran is the true word of Allah (God), transmitted to the human kind as a revelation through his messenger, Prophet Mohammad. Earlier, the term was used in scanty to submission which is commonly bracketed with belief *Iman*. The believer of this faith is a Muslim. However, the term "Islamic"

denotes social as well as cultural settings of the faith consisting of Muslims' theology and Islamic Law.

Islam as a historical phenomena, conceived in Arabia in the early stage of the seventh century. Regarding the genesis of Islam, two focal elements must be separated from each other in religious backdrop, namely; the purely Arab background and the intermingling elements of Christianity and Judaism (Megher, Paul K, 1979).

With a prosperous economy in South West Arabia there has existed a civilization (Sabian era). At the beginning, the Sabian religion was a Trinitarian star cult, which in the fourth century had been replaced by a monotheistic cult – Al Rahman denoting mercifulness. However, in due course, in the sixth century, the elements of Judaism and Christianity were accepted by Al. Rahman. Nevertheless, this tradition of adaptation could not be continued for long because the Meccans had never dealt with them nicely due to the Judo-Christian ideas.

During the revelation of the Koran, it was clarified that the primary background of Islam is Arab rather than Judo-Christian. Nevertheless, the latter elements have had their strong impact on Islam.

The sectarian division in Islam can be observed on the basis of succession after the death of Prophet Mohammad. The sect which holds that succession belongs to *Qurayash*, the Prophet's own tribe is *Sunnites*. And those believe that succession belongs to *Imam* are the *Shiates*. However, *Sunni* Caliphas and *Shiate Imams* have never accepted the authority of each other. Apart from this division of power and privilege, there is no centrally organized religious authority in Islam. Perhaps, this is the sole factor that the social organization of Islamic Society varies significantly from society to society in classical Vs. local. For instance, in the localities of Africa and far east, Islam had absorbed the pagan elements and in India the elements of caste system representing the amalgamous feature of classical and local elements.

18.3   Teaching of Islam

The primary religious obligations of Islam are termed as "pillars of Islam". They are imperative upon every believer. They are: (1) to pronounce the testimony *shahadat*; "there is no other god then Allah (God) and Mohammad is the one Apostle of God; it is more than enough to bear this testimony to make one totally a Muslim; (2) the ritual prayer Namaz *salat*; which is performed five times a day after certain intervals (at dawn; noon; after noon; sun down; sun set and late evening) facing towards Mecca. Namaz is an individual's obligation which may be offered at any place. However, it is a must, to save noon of every Friday when the believers are obligated to attend public services in the mosque. Hence, collective offering of Friday's Namaz is desirable; (3) Almsgiving *Zakat* is a fixed percentage, varying according to the nature and value of goods possessed by an individual as well as fixed by the several Islamic schools; (4) One month's fast during the month of *Ramazan*; and (5) To make the pilgrimage *Hajj* to Mecca at least once in one's whole life span. It is obligatory for those who are capable economically and physically (Robinson 1998: 322).

18.4   Concept of Islam and Law

Apart from these, Islam recognizes the basic validity of Judaism and Christianity and conceives Mohammad as "the seal of prophets." The above recognition itself indicates conformity with the teaching of the Koran, since Prophet Mohammad was sent almost with the same message

as that of Abraham, Moses, John the Baptist and Jesus (Who held to be also messengers of God *Rasul*) to reaffirm the message against distortion and innovation that had crept into them and to bring the essential message to its final and perfect version. Since the pivotal stress of Islam is the Koran and a Prophet, hence the Koran has relatively more significance in Islam rather than the scriptures of Judaism and Christianity. It is treated by the orthodox Muslims to be "verbatim" and uncreated "speech of God." Because of the expressive command that the language has right from the beginning, it is believed to be a peculiar miracle that recognises the divine genesis of Prophet Mohammad's mission, preaching and teaching. His orthodox doctrines adhere notably to the text of the Koran and their recitation is the most common form of popular devotion. Although all matters pertaining to religion are not set forth explicitly in the Koran, yet the Prophet is considered to be the source and the model. His actions and words are the norms and references for the individuals and for the community which jointly constitute the *Sunna* that are embodied in the written form of traditions (*Hadith*). Although they are not very firmly considered revealed, yet they have canonical authority over the Islamic religion. In all, the formal religious law in Islam rests on the Koran and *Sunna*.

Action and Reflection 18.1

Talk to some Mohammedans about Islam. How do they describe the pillars of Islam. Make a not of what they say in your notebook.

A vital fact must be taken into account here that the nature of law in Islamic society lies in the legal theory of God's creation, human needs and political expediency. In such an evolutionary process of civilized life, the notions of anthropology, sociology and social justice are seemed to be secondary. Islamic society rests on the words of God, while edifice of practices is constructed by human knowledge and reasoning in the sense that *fiqh* is founded upon *Manqul* (revealed notions) that is Koran as well as *Sunna* (*Sunna* is created by human logic in the forms of *ijma* and *qiyas*). This situation indicates that the source of law and its purpose is different. The ultimate purpose of Islamic society is to seek closeness (*qurba*) to the Diving Being by conforming to His code, as this is the doctrine of duties and obligations of Islam. The established fact is that there is nothing to be accepted against the will of God. Such tendency is further extended and strengthened by the notion that without good deeds, the approval of Allah is not possible for salvation i.e. Divine Grace.

An evaluation concerning the definition of law in Islam may give some insights regarding the differences. Abu Hanif defines: that "the law is the soul's cognizance of its rights and obligations." The definition itself hints the subjective ingredients in the concept of *fiqh* as well in the pretext of conscience where the conscience is of an individual, which is a final arbiter. Hence, the individual in every action and dealing has to ask himself/herself "it is wrong or right". Considering this tendency, the Islamic terminology, of course, becomes significant but it has its own history (Fyzee, 1981:29). However, such a situation may be understood by taking into account *sharia* or *fiqh*. Such treatment hints that the Islamic Law (*fiqh*) is universally defined where as the individuals' rights and obligations are abstracted from the Holy Koran and *Sunna* or duced from both on the basis of knowledge (interpretation). Nevertheless, these act as core values in Islamic society and have their greater impact on the ritual, family and inheritance on one side while on the other, they jointly constitute the equalitarian social structure. Therefore, the world-view of Islamic society is non-hierarchical, monotheistic as well as historical in ethos, although, the historical ethos of traditions is the dominant authority in all

revealed religions, (Hodgson, 1960). Nonetheless, it is more striking in Islam. The significance of history in various religious faiths reveal that for the Christian history is significant and decisive but for Muslim history is decisive but not final (Smith 1957:21). Hence, the role of history to the revealed traditions has significantly contributed worldview of Islam as a holistic and socio-centric cultural oriented religion. Ideologically, the Islam does not allow any instutionalized role for priest, hence, *Ulema* not at all priests. The nature of such ideological orientation leads no clergy in Islam, i.e., any Muslim may lead a congregation in prayer offering (Smith, 1963: 38). The above situation suggests that in ideal typical form, Islam has perfect foundation of universal ideology in its conception of social order than any other religion. Sociologically speaking, the principle of universalism in the revealed tradition of Islam is distinct from hierarchism but hierarchism has no place in ideology.

Box 18.1 Holism and Hierarchy

The distinctive nature of such holism as well as much stress on the historicity of tradition have generated the specificity and exclusiveness in Islam. Moreover, the universalism is founded on the unity of believers, *Umma*, the collectivity of the Muslim. Such principle oriented unity passes cutting across the boundaries of nations. The unity, however, is abstracted from the conformity of the believers to the religio-ethical codes and principles embodied in the Koran and/or *Sunna*, the *Hadia* (many traditions), and the *Shariya* (legal codebook of Islam). The conception of nation in the sense of territory has no place in Koran, as the Koran does not mention a number of Islamic states but does mention the *millat* (one nation of believers). The holistic principle that is embodied in the notions of *umma* and *millat* carry on the egalitarian values. However, equality is meaningful within the immutable and persisting contexts of the principles of holism and hierarchy.

18.5 Prophet Mohammad

Mecca was invaded by Yemen in 570 AD, however, the invasion was not successful due to the army as the army was equipped with elephants. It was known as the era of elephant in the history. In the same year, Prophet Mohammed was born in a small clan of *Quraish* tribe. His father's name was Abdullah. Perhaps, the word 'Allah' has come from the name of Mohammad's father. Allah as the God might be possible, because of the actual rejection of polytheism by Mohammad's father. However, its influence on Mohammad is not known as he died before the birth of Mohammad. This critical situation was further extended as his mother died when he was about six year old leaving him an orphan. Mohammad's father's brother was a merchant operating a caravan and he looked after him. Prophet Mohammad also adopted the traditional occupation of the family and became a merchant. As a young man, he was appointed by a rich widow named Khadija to operate her trade through caravans. However, at the age of 25, Mohammad married her leading a happy family life. The life of prophet indicates that being a successful businessman and family man, he became a Prophet.

In 610 AD, at the age of 40, he began to have visions often in a cave on a nearby hillside of Mecca where he used to spend many hours in communication with Allah. Before revelation, the angel Gabriel appeared to him and told "you that are wrapped up in your vestments, arise," and give him further warning, "magnify your lord, cleanse your garments and keep away from all pollution."

Mohammed fled from such experiences to hide himself. But his wife Khadija encouraged him to listen to the revelations which came to him often. Also, his wife's cousin named Waragah, was a Christian by faith and motivated him much. Ultimately, Mohammad sensed that he was receiving messages from Allah. He started to transmit them to the Meccans. The message stressed on the acceptance of only one God, that the Mohammad is His messenger, that worship of idol and killing of girl children is totally forbidden, and that one must be prepared for the judgment, '*Kayamat*'.

Initially, a few after listening him, accepted Mohammad as a Prophet and embraced Islam and became Muslims. When Mohammad initiated preaching against the generations old practices of idols worship in Kabah many people of Mecca resisted, thus they became his opponents. Even economic disparities had also been condemned by the prophet. However, next 10 years were the span in which Islam grew gradually but with it, tension also increased to such an extent that it was difficult to sustain the life of the Muslims without the support of their clan-members against the sporadic violence. During that social setting, it was almost impossible to sustain with out the support of the clan members as there was nothing like formal law and order in the state. At one instance, a non-Muslim master attempted to torture to his Muslim slave of black race called Bilal. Bilal was forced to lie down on ground and heavy stones were piled on his chest to tarnish. But he was emancipated by a Muslim who purchased him from his old master. Besides many such kind of instances, the expansion of Islam was initiated in 615 AD, when some followers of Islam were sent by Mohammad to Abyssinia for the propagation of faith.

Mohammad's uncle who was looking after him from his childhood protected him from an assault before he died in 619 AD. So much so, that Mohammad also lost his wife in the same year. These incidents led to a critical situation for him, thus he marched about 375 kilometres to the north in a city of Yathrib where he was given the status of Chieften of the city's tribes. However, the situation of Mecca arose so worse that Mohammad in association with two hundred followers migrated to town called Medina in 622. This, in Islamic history is called "*hijarat*" and it marks the beginning of Islam as a religion. Since that the Islamic calendar counting started which is popularly known as '*hijari*' in Islamic terminology.

In Medina, Mohammad was received by the people with respect as he was made town's head. Here, he started to implement the social changes that he received through the revelations. Hence, Mohammad had the status of a prophet as well as statesman. This makes the distinction between Mohammad and other Prophets as they were only prophets:

Action and Reflection 18.2

Read section 18.5 on the life of Mohammed. Write down what strikes you as its most important aspects in your notebook.

During those days Medina was an agricultural town comprising of *Pagans* who embraced Islam and Jewish who did not, leading distrusts and differences between the two. Consequently, Jews were expelled from the town.

On the account of trade, Medina and Mecca had antagonistic relation. Meccans went for war against Medina. Mohammad then became a general as well. War was continued till seven years sporadically, and it was associated with Muslims' victories as well as defeats. Medina was taken into possession for two weeks by the Meccans. By that time, many tribes had already embraced Islam. Hence, Mohammad succeeded in acquiring more allies leading surrender of Meccans to the Muslim army in 630 AD

and they also embraced Islamic faith. Mecca, thus, got the status of centre of Islamic Arabia. Mohammad cleansed the Kabah from its idol and restored it for the worship of Allah and the pilgrimage of Muslims as well. However, within short span of two years, the whole of Arabia accepted Prophet Mohammad as their leader and embraced Islam. On 8th of June 633 AD at the age of 65, Prophet Mohammad left the world.

Spread of Islam

Within a century, after the death of the Prophet Mohammad, the power of Islam had spread far beyond the Arabian peninsula extending from the Atlantic coasts of Spain and North Africa eastward as far as Ferghana in Transoxiana (Now in Uzbekistan) and across the Indus river into Sindh (Presently Pakistan). Currently, Islam is a predominant religion throughout North Africa, in the Middle East, the Sudan, Iran, the Kazakistan, Uzbekistan, Turkey Tadzhitan as well as in Kirgiz in Afghanistan, Pakistan and Sinkiang province of China. Whereas in Southeast ward into the Malay Peninsula of Archipelago in Malaysia, Sumatra, Java and Borneo etc. However, there are considerable minorities of Muslims in Albania, India and Southern Philippines, Somalia, Mozambique, Madagascar, Nigeria and Islam's influence is expanding rapidly in both east and west Africa even. (Meyagher, 1979).

18.6 Metaphysics in Islam

Apart from the five pillars, Islam has very deep understanding about the nature of every thing that exists in the universe. But the most important concerns of Islamic metaphysics are God, Prophet, Revelation and Religion; the spiritual worlds; the human beings and their ultimate goals for existence and, the last day of Judgment that they will have to face.

God

Islam is such a religion that it stresses the oneness of God (*Twhid*). The *Shahada* begins with "there is no god but Allah", constituting monotheism as a basic element of Muslim belief. Mohammad who came from polytheistic society, not only removed their idols, but also satisfied those people that the idols were powerless and helpless. That is why Islam interdicts to curve or draw images of God at the place of worship. Because of these interdictions, the mosques are not permitted to have images of any person or nature under any circumstances. Even partnership with Allah is sin (*Shirk*) and if some one does this would be considered or termed as Mushrik (Polytheist). God is all powerful and all knowing and that illustrate the total submission of human beings to the divine will. The Koran strongly asserts human responsibility and obligation warning men about the dire consequences of violating God's will. As at the beginning of every *Surih*, Allah is referred to "the most merciful, the compassionate" stressing on God as judge and punisher.

Revelation

Islam stresses that God communicates humanity through selected persons whom He revels. God has done it even in the past through a number of individuals – Prophets like Noah, Salih, Had, Abraham, Moses, David Solomon and Jesus. Through them God has given humanity, a revelation which has been compiled into a book of some sort, yet not all the books are survived but the Koran as the scripture has been the scripture of Allah. The followers of the scripture are known as the "People of the Book". And they are often referred as Christian and Jews. The Koran pronounces two words to refer the prophetic figures, the first is '*Rusal*' messenger or apostle of God or Allah. This term was used in *Shahada* for Mohammad, who is *Rusal* of God, the second is *Nabi*, means 'Prophet' which is used only for the

Prophet Mohammad in the Koran. The use of *Nabi* also appears to be absent from the earlier prophetic revelations. The phrase used in the scripture is ('*Khatam a nabiyyin*',) means "seal of the Prophets", which has been understood by all the Muslims that Mohammad was the last prophet and the last messenger of Allah.

Spiritual Realm: Life after Life

The Koran describes paradise or heaven and hell in which paradise is place where men are rewarded by all kind of foods and women of their own choice. However, it is distinctly seemed to be symbolic. Hell fire is described as the punishment to the unbelievers. The Koran also mentions '*Jinn*' and angels, who too are created by God. Hence, Muslims believe their existence, though they cannot be seen, as they are mere spirits. Such kinds of spirits are variously referred in Koran by their names like Jibrail (Gabriel), who brought revelation to the Prophet Mohammad and Azrail, Israfil and Michael as well. Saitan – an evil spirit is also mentioned in Koran at the same time by the name of *Iblis*. According to the Islamic tradition, this was the spirit who declined to obey the God's command of bowing before Adam, as he would not bow to any other being than Allah. Because of his disobedient act, *Iblis* (Saitan) was thrown out from the heaven.

Humanity

The Koran speaks: "God created humanity from backed clay" but there is no mention that individual was being created by two different parts, a body and soul as this is associated with Christian belief. Nevertheless, at a later stage, this belief was accepted in Islam. The Islamic theology stresses that human beings were created for good cause. Islam does not say regarding the fall and original sin. Nevertheless, human beings are challenged continuously in their lives for constructing moral alternatives. Hence, human beings have free desire and so more free moral agents. In brief, it can be said that humanity in Islam is an essence of creation which supersedes even the spheres of knowledge and values.

Box 18.2 Mission of Human kind

Allah asked to the heaven and earth: "Would they take-up the task of creating a moral order of creation, on the account of heavy burden, it had been refused by them; Koran speaks humanity accepted the challenges rather a mission of humankind for the sake of establishing moral and spiritual orders on the earth." In this respect, *Iblis* (Saitan) is not only sole actor who tries to disrupt these moral and spiritual orders of the world but laziness in humanity and distortion of actual form of nature also act simultaneously where unbelief makes it very complex. Hence, Mohammad was called on by Allah to shoulder the responsibility to accept, to surrender, and to obey God's will borne by humanity. In Islam, creation has no option, but to become a true Muslim one has to surrender to the God's will. However, human being has open option in the form of humanity.

Final Judgment 'Kayamat'

The Koran often mentions about the day of judgement when all human beings will be accounted of their humanity through their deeds. If belief was formed true, they will be rewarded by Paradise (*Zannat*) and in case of unfaithful they will be punished by hell's fire. On the day of judgement – *Kayamat*, all dead bodies will rise up from their respective graves / tombs and with this, ultimately, the whole universe will be eliminated.

18.7   Islam in India

The impact of Islam on India is more than a millennium old. It influence initiated when Arab conquest the Sind in the beginning of eighth century.

Hence, Islam is an important religion in India historically and very meaningful cultural tradition too. The Islam in India has been co-existing with Hinduism, representing their own traditional world-view. Value themes of Islam in general were holistic, ideologically the principle of inequality in the form of caste was not accepted and its values of transcendence were rooted in the principle of monotheism.

Islam does not provide any margin for social inequalities. The principal concept working in Islamic faith stresses that all human beings are equal before the Allah (Almighty). The concept prevails as *xalaqulla* (the people of Almighty). But the case of Indian Muslims suggest that the Hindu social structure is persisting along with the Islamic values in the form of inequality. Ashrafs always maintain their social distance from the converts in the establishment of marriage and kinship ties and never recognize them as equal to them. The caste inequality continues within the converts. They perform their traditional caste rituals and continue to remain engaged in their generations old traditional occupations (Singh, 1973, 193-194).

However, the apparent heterogeneity found in Islamic community from Arab to Indus makes out a case of social inequality. The Indian case appears to be peculiar one, as Indian Muslims seem to have accepted the caste – like structure within their social set up. Various movements for the recognition of 'backward' class within the Muslim are the sheer reflections of such an acceptance (Abbasi, 1999). A number of sociological and anthropological studies indicate the presence of caste – like structure among the Indian Muslims (Ansari, 1960; Dumont, 1970; Mandelbaum, 1972; Ahmed, 1978; Abbasi 1988; Chauhan, 1992). Dumont (1970) has treated it as a cultural entity and argued that the presence of caste – like structure among Indian Muslims is the result of cultural assimilation. On the other hand, several other scholars treat caste as a structural entity and argue that the elements of Hindu social structure have been transferred among Muslims as a consequence of conversion enmass during the Muslim rule in India.

The Indian case of Islam, hence, presents a typical illustration against the universal theme values of egalitarism and brotherhood. The inequalities are attributed and in way institutionalized by birth, to the highest and lowest strata of society. These structural features survive even after embracing Islam.

18.8 Conclusion

Islam came into existence in the early stage of seventh century as historical phenomena, through revelation, which are supposed to have come to Prophet Mohammad via the Angel Gabriel. These revelations are given in 114 Suras or chapters. However, Muslim doctors interpret that revelation must have came to Mohammad by direct inspiration of the Angel Gabriel or in visions in which the Angel Gabriel appeared to him. Before the revelation, the social setting of Arabia was such that killing of female girls was very common. Polytheism was practiced rampantly and clan based social organization was relevant. Idols worship was very common. In order to abolish these social evils, Mohammad was chosen by God as His messenger. Mohammad began to take the revealed message to the people of Mecca. His message emphasized to accept the one and only transcendental God; the Mohammad is His last and beloved messenger; that idol worship and killing female babies were forbidden and one must be always ready for the final day of judgement (*Kayamat*). Islam is a structured religion, having its major summary of teaching consisting in five pillars, which in turn determine the universal way of social life as well as life after death. In addition to the five pillars, Islam does have its metaphysics – an understanding about the nature of existing things. The

major concerns of Islamic metaphysics are : Allah, the Prophet, the Revelation, and the religion; the spiritual dominance further extends as heaven and hell, saitans, angels, and *Jinns*; then nature of human beings, their norms for existence, nature of physical realm and the last day of judgement they will have to face. All these ideological themes altogether constitute an Islamic society, cutting across the national and racial boundaries.

However, if sociological treatment is given to Islam, one would arrive that Islam originated in a nomadic socio-cultural setting in Arabia at the initial stage, having tribal egalitarian features in its social structure. Since the structure of such nomadic groups was not highly ordered and their shifting from clan and kin based egalitarianism to religion, oriented egalitarism was relatively convenient (Singh, 1973:65). However, Islam was even spread in the complex societies. Within a century, after the death of Prophet Mohammad, the power of Islam was established far from the Arab peninsula covering the Atlantic coasts of Spain and North Africa as well as across the Indus River.

18.9 Further Reading

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