

THE BAZAR AS A CULTURAL SYSTEM

An Anthropological Perspective

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Islam claims to be the universal religion of mankind. The claim is not without justification. The Islamic civilization encompasses people of varied racial and ethnic stocks, who speak a variety of languages and dialects and live under divergent economic and social conditions. Furthermore, the Muslim population is distributed in all geographical regions of the world. However, (the pervasiveness of the Islamic Great Tradition cuts across and transcends the diversity and heterogeneity of Muslim populations. The tenets, rituals, moral precepts and institutions of Islamic civilization have moulded the world-wide Muslim population into a tangible universal community or Ummah. As a universal faith and civilization Islam possesses not only inner strength and resilience but also considerable openness and flexibility. In the course of its onward march Islamic civilization has incorporated, wherever possible, several regional features and traditions into its matrix. Thus, in all parts of the Islamic world one notices a richly textured synthesis of the Great Tradition of Islam and the local, regional tradition. However, it is the Great Tradition of Islam which dominates the cultural landscape of the Islamic world and binds the Muslim people together.) Ernest Gellner, a keen observer of Islamic civilization, has perceptively observed

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that among all the world religions only Islam survives as a serious faith both as a folk and a Great tradition.⁽¹⁾

(The institutions which form the bedrock of Islamic civilization are marked by historical continuity, resilience and inner dynamism. One of these institutions, which has played and continues to play, albeit on a diminished scale, a significant role in the world of Islam is the bazaar of the market place. The bazaar, whose etymology is rooted in Persian, is a rather unique and universal institution in the civilization of Islam,) which is partly borne out by its diffusion into English as well as other Indo-European languages.

In what follows we shall examine the institution of bazaar as a cultural system. (In our view, the institution of bazaar at both the ~~general as well as regional level~~, should be considered not in isolation but in relation to the larger reality of Islamic civilization

Secondly, the bazaar has to be viewed in its historical, regional-cultural, and ecological contexts. Thirdly, it has to be seen as an integrated complex or system of structures, processes and functions. ~~In other words, the bazaar has to be studied, in the anthropological fashion, in a holistic, spatial-temporal perspective.~~

X Here it may not be out of place to mention that conventional historiography has tended to be a little too text-centred. Furthermore, the bulk of the corpus of conventional historiography comprises chronicles of royal dynasties and statecraft, which betrays an elitist bias. Consequently, we get to know very little about the social conditions prevailing at a given point of time in a particular region or about the day to day life of the common people. In recent years, the nascent field of social and cultural history has sought to rectify this elitist bias in historiography by shifting the focus from empires and kingdoms to social institutions and processes. A study of the institution of Bazaar in the civilization of Islam

has considerable promise for expanding the scope of social and cultural history.

(The information relating to the evolution of the institution of bazaar, its functions and changing character is available in a scattered form in several kinds of sources, including religious texts, historical treatises, literary narratives, Sufi malfuzat literature, and the like. The bulk of these sources are in Arabic and Persian, and to a lesser extent, in Turkish and Urdu. In addition, some information is available through anthropological field work.) Therefore, the information on the bazaar has to be gleaned from a variety of sources and subjected to analysis and interpretation within a framework which is informed by a judicious and creative synthesis of the text and the context. Needless to say, such an exercise has to be inter-disciplinary in character.

(The Islamic faith marked a fundamental and qualitative break with the the pagan ideology and society of pre-Islamic Arabia. The reach and impact of the Islamic revolution brought about by Prophet Muhammad of blessed memory can be better appreciated if seen against the backdrop of pre-Islamic Arabian society.) The study of pre-Islamic Arab society can also offer valuable clues in respect of certain historical and institutional continuities. For example, (A number of fairs and bazaars used to be held in the pre-Islamic period in different parts of Arabia in which traders and merchants from far and wide participate. The fair at Daba, as well as those at Ukaz, Suhar, and Sanaa, were international shopping centres which were frequented by Iranians, Chinese, Indians and Romans among others. (2) These fairs and bazaars continued to exist and flourish in subsequent periods as well. The merchandise which was imported from India and sold in these bazaars included perfumes, sandalwood, camphor, spices, coconut, cloth, precious stones, leather and teakwood, among others. (3)

The institution of bazaar as it existed in pre-Islamic Arabia continued during the Islamic period. However, trade and commercial transactions which formed the backbone of the institution, were subjected to the moral regulations of the Islamic Shariah. The Islamic faith prohibited the sale of liquor and forbidden animals and proscribed usury. In addition, it prescribed norms of trade and commerce, which were based on honesty and fair play, and sought to implement them in the institution of bazaar. (4)

Some of the prevailing customs and conventions relating to occupations and economic transactions were allowed to exist during the Islamic period. Thus, during the caliphate of Umar an eminent jurist Qadi Shurayh once told a group of Muslim cotton carders that their customs would be respected under the Islamic dispensation. (5) However, those customs which violated the spirit of Islamic tenets, such as the prevailing pre-Islamic practice of depriving women of inheritance rights, were disapproved. ~~It is therefore worthwhile to~~ examine how the Islamic faith and the expansion of Islamic civilization brought about significant modifications in the institution of bazaar.

Since the ideational and existential dimensions are closely intertwined in Islamic civilization, there is a significant inter-linkage between the growth of the institution of bazaar and the Islamic emphasis on trade and commerce. The Prophet encouraged his followers to take up trade and commerce as instruments of economic betterment and social welfare.

Historically, the growth and expansion of bazaars has been closely linked to urbanization. As early as the first century of the Islamic era we find that with the growth of population new bazaars and markets sprang up in Madinah. Interestingly, the Prophet appointed an educated lady, Shifa bint Abdullah, as an officer or inspector in charge of a market. It may be surmised that women used to bring their merchandise for sale in the market and that Shifa was appointed

to cater to their economic and other needs. (6)

With the growth of urbanization and the expansion of cities in different regions of the Islamic world the bazaar became a necessary adjunct of the Islamic city. Thus the famed cities of Baghdad, Khurasan, Samarkand, Bukhara, Isfahan, Samarkand, Tashqand, Qurtuba, Lahore and Delhi attained international renown for their flourishing and magnificent bazaars.

Seen in a holistic and integral perspective, three inter-related dimensions of the institution of bazaar in the civilization of Islam may be delineated: (a) structural, (b) functional, and (c) dynamic.

The bazaar, as a unique institution in the the civilizational matrix of Islam, should be viewed in relation to the structure of social space as well as the constituent institutions of Islamic society. The core of the Islamic city was formed by a complex which included the mosque, the madrasah, the public bath and the water supply. Close to them was located the bazaar, which was flanked by residential quarters. The most important structural feature of the bazaar is its inter-related and interactional character. This is but a reflection of the Islamic ethos which admits of no disjunction between religious and secular pursuits. Thus, the bazaar formed part of an integrated entity or complex -- the neighbourhood -- in the Islamic city. Each neighbourhood had its own identity while partaking of a larger identity. (6)

The structure of social space as defined by the civilizational values of Islam has a distinct bearing on architectural patterns in the world of Islam. The architectural style of the bazaar reflects three motifs. The first of these is aesthetic elegance which reflects and reinforces the quiet harmony of the social space. Thus the bazaars of Kashan and Isfahan which were built during the seventeenth century, stand out for their architectural elegance and finesse. Secondly, the architectural style reflects and demarcates the multifunctional

character of the complex, of which the bazaar forms a part. Thirdly, it symbolises an Islamic cultural identity at the micro level. (9)

~~The Thousand and One Nights contains a vivid description of the famed bazaars of the medieval Islamic period. Architecturally, the bazaar constituted a distinct quarter of the city, which was divided into streets or sections. The streets were covered in order to protect the shops as well as the customers from the extremes of weather. Each section or street was lined by purveyors of distinctive categories of merchandise. Furthermore, each section had a bakery, restaurant, coffee house and inn or rest house. Beyond the commercial complex lay the residential quarters. Often, the residential quarter interpenetrated the space of the bazaar.~~ (10)

~~What is outlined in the foregoing comprises the most common and basic structure of the bazaar in the Islamic world. One should take cognizance of significant regional variations as well, which were determined by the size and composition of the city, the level of economic and technological development, as well as other cultural and regional factors. The growth and expansion of cities in the Islamic world brought in its wake differentiation of population and occupation. As urban centres grew larger and heterogeneous, so did the bazaars. In this process the bazaars reflected, on the one hand, the world-view of Islamic civilization and, on the other, regional ethos. For example, during the nineteenth century there developed an exclusively women's bazaar in Delhi.~~ (11) On the whole the bazaars existed and functioned under the shadow of the civilizational values of Islam.

The dialectic of unity and diversity in Islamic civilization is reflected, among other areas, in the occupational structure. Islamic egalitarianism encompasses all walks of life, including the means of securing livelihood. Unlike other cultural traditions, Islam

recognizes no distinctions based on birth, occupation or status. Every occupation is considered "clean" and therefore pursuable. It is a testimony to Islamic egalitarianism that scores of eminent scholars, jurists and sages have risen from the ranks of occupations which are generally considered lowly and demeaning.⁽¹²⁾ Even the ordinary and illiterate hawkers and petty shop keepers in the bazaar displayed in their dealings and behaviour the religious and moral precepts of Islamic civilization.⁽¹³⁾

In the civilization of the world of Islam the bazaar has served a multiplicity of functions, which include the economic, social-cultural, religious and literary. The economic functions of the bazaar hardly need elaboration. The bazaar provided livelihood and employment to a large section of the population and thereby served as the nerve centre of the economy. It served as a conduit for the sale of village products to townsmen and city dwellers. It was an important mechanism for the diffusion of arts and crafts as well as technology. In addition, it provided avenues for upward social mobility.

At the social level, the bazaar provided opportunities for interaction not only among the different sections of the urban population but also between peasants and pastoralists and townsmen. The social milieu of the bazaar facilitated linguistic interaction, exchange and diffusion. The bazaar also served as an effective vehicle and outlet of communication. The Prophet at times utilized the bazaar for the propagation of Islamic teachings.⁽¹⁴⁾ In India the bazaar served as an important mechanism for the formation and dissemination of a composite cultural heritage.⁽¹⁵⁾

The bazaar served as an important vehicle of Islamization. On the one hand, the conduct and behaviour of Muslim traders and merchants impressed and inspired non-Muslim traders and drew them to the fold of Islam. The latter, in turn, became agents of Islamization.

in their respective areas or lands. On the other hand, it served as an important mechanism for the diffusion of Islamic ideals and precept among the rural and marginal inhabitants of the hinterland.

Often, the rent derived from shops located in the bazaar provided a permanent source of income for the maintenance of mosques. Similarly, the rent or revenue from shops provided income for the maintenance of Awqaf or religious endowments, which supported madrasahs hospitals, caravansarais and other charitable institutions. (16)

In addition to economic, social and religious functions, the bazaar served literary and academic functions as well. For example, the bazaar of Ukaz provided an exciting opportunity to poets and genealogists, among others, to display their literary, oratorical and other skills. Professional calligraphers, scribes and copiers, as well as book sellers and binders, who occupied a respectable niche in the bazaars of the medieval period, played an important role in the development of literary and academic activities.

Over the years the bazaar has been, not a static, but a dynamic institution of Islamic civilization, subject to influences operating in the larger Islamic society. The reverberations of religious reform and revivalism were felt not only in mosques and madrasahs but also in the lanes and alleys of bazaars. Thus, describing the far-reaching consequences of the reform movement of the renowned thirteenth century Sufi saint of Delhi, Shaikh Nizamuddin Awliya (d. 1325), a contemporary historian Ziauddin Barani reports that the impact of the Shaikh's teachings was felt not only in religious centres but also in the bazaars of Delhi. Under the influence of his teachings, traders and merchants gave up their deceitful methods and foul play and took to honest dealings and righteous conduct. (17)

The rise and expansion of kingdoms and royal dynasties is invariably followed, sooner or later, by decline and disintegration.

There is a certain correlation between excessive material prosperity and moral decline.⁽¹⁸⁾ The process of decline and disintegration of Muslim society at the regional level was reflected in the institution of bazaar as well. The bazaars became not only a mirror image of corruption and moral degeneration which characterized the larger society but also reinforced it.⁽¹⁹⁾

What we have attempted in the foregoing is to suggest, rather tentatively, a framework of inquiry for a holistic understanding of the institution of bazaar in the civilization of Islam. In our view, such a study holds out considerable promise and potential for a comprehensive understanding of the dynamic interplay between the macro and micro dimensions of Islamic civilization.

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11. During the medieval period an extensive system of hawking developed in Delhi, according to which itinerant and petty traders and sellers moved about in different parts of the city, selling a variety of wares. The system was introduced during the medieval period for the benefit of purdah-observing women who could not visit the local bazaars. see Maheshwar Dayal: Alam mein Intakhab-Dilli. Delhi, 1
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The Prophet Muhammad is reported to have said: Verily by Allah ! I am not apprehensive about you being afflicted with poverty. Rather, I fear that the world might be spread out for you the way it had been spread out for those who were before you, and that you might scramble over it the way they did and that it might destroy you the way it destroyed them (Bukhari).

19. An interesting anecdote is narrated by Shaikh Nizamuddin Awliya in his malfuzat. Some merchants from Lahore went on a trading journey to Gujarat which was under the control of Hindu rulers those days.

The traders tried to sell their merchandise to Hindu customers at double the original price. When they could not succeed with the sale they reduced the prize to half. The Hindus of Gujarat, who were not used to this kind of transaction and were familiar with with dealings in which prices were fixed, were taken by surprise. On learning that the trader were from Lahore they wondered how a city with a (deceitful) system of transaction could survive and remain peaceful for long. As the traders were on their way to Lahore the Tartars attacked the city and devastat it. (Fawaid al-Fuad. ed. Amir Hasan Sijzi. Punjab, 1973, Part IV (2)

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