

# The long-distance Ummah

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**The enthusiasm for Islamified world at times assumes ironically absurd character. For instance, in 1996 the Muslim Parliament of Great Britain recommended that all mosques in the UK be wired up to the network in order to provide porn-free access to Internet and [to] establish places where Muslims can socialize in a halal environment .**

Distance to London from Karachi is no longer measured in nautical miles. Now London is roughly six-hours from Karachi. The communication revolution by imploding the experience of distance has transformed the phenomenon of age-old migrations. The magical emergence of internet and mushroom growth of satellite TV, in the last two decades, has translated in 'Dish Cities' across Western Europe. From Paris to London, suburban ghettos populated by migrant groups have one feature in common: dish antenna atop almost every flat. Hence, the term 'Dish Cities'.

This dish antenna keeps Diasporic populations of all varieties in spiritual, emotional and nostalgic hock to their respective homelands. Hence, the contemporary migration trend is in a way has certain new features unlike the past when human hordes (often even individuals) once displaced, would adopt and assimilate to the societies they would join. Arriving cultures would contribute and in the process mix with the host cultures. This is how it often has been. In case of new comers even now, according to Stuart Cunnigham, "Much diasporic cultural expression is a struggle for survival, identity and assertion, and it can be a struggle as much enforced by the necessities of coming to terms with the dominant culture as it is freely assumed."

In this process of survival and identity-assertion, the communication revolution has intervened in many ways. A 'long-distance' nationalism is one expression of such an intervention. In case of Muslim Diaspora (Up to 40 per cent of today's Muslims live in minority situations, says Dassetto) the intervention engendered by the communication revolution has a dual role. Now the Muslims living in the West are not merely long-distance citizens of their respective homelands, they are also members of a long-distance Ummah. It will not be out of place to point out here that Muslim Diaspora, like other Diasporic populations, has its own dissidents. It is not a homogenous Diaspora.

This long-distance Ummah does not seek----save some extremist minoritarian voices----to impose Taliban-style Sharia in hosting countries. It enjoys---- and when attacked by neo-fascists it seeks shelter behind ----the liberal democratic gains made possible by revolutionary struggles conducted by western proletariat. This Ummah-in-exile has no intentions to return either to the Promised Land as was the case with sections of Jewish Diaspora. The long-distance Ummah is here to stay. It only refuses to share the (im)moral values of the host cultures. The stress on morals therefore constitutes the basis of Ummah-in-exile. If one goes by Pinna Werbner, "A moral community is not a unity. It is full of conflicts, of internal debate about right and wrong...Such debates...involve competition for the right to name. Who are we? What do we stand for? What are we to be called? Are we Muslims? Democrats? Pakistanis? Socialists? Blacks? Asians?"

Balance of forces in this competition for naming reflects the balance of forces back 'home' (Pakistan, Egypt, Turkey, Morocco, whatever). As the fundamentalists elbowed out progressive, left and

secular forces out of political arena in Muslim world, the ideological shift among Diasporic Muslims became also visible.

In case of Pakistan, for instance, it was----in the 1980s---- members of Struggle Group arrested in Amsterdam on the charges of conspiring to hijack a PIA plane (There however was no conspiracy ever hatched to hijack a plane. The Zia-dictatorship maneuvered to implicate Struggle members in a fake case). In Sweden, a vibrant and representative Pakistan Society was run by the members of Socialist Party (headed by C R Aslam) and Communist Party Pakistan. The main rival for left these days was PPP that could rally an even big support among expat Pakistani community in the name of Bhutto. Host of newspapers were published by progressives across Europe by radical expatriate Pakistanis. Now a days, it is the posters of either Maulana Mowdodi, Tahir ul Qadri, Maulana Tariq Jamil that mobilize Pakistani Diaspora. In case of second generation Pakistanis, even extreme outfits (Hizbul Tehrir, for instance) play the stimulant. Of course, petrodollars lavishly dispatched from Saudi Arabia also have played a big role. An equally important factor has been the patronage right-wing European governments offered (and continue offering) to Imams in a bid to keep immigrant labour away from trade unions. The petrodollars as well as official patronage has translated into assigning a central socio-political role to mosques. The mosque in turn catapults Imams into position of community leaders.

The salience of technology, in particular new media, has helped Imams and their cults to fortify their exalted positions. Look for instance at the product catalogue of London-based Islamic Computing Centre. The centre is selling WinHadith, WinBukhari and WinSeera. There is also Alim Multimedia 6.0. There are CD-ROM resources or software packages about ritual somatic. Since children are easy bets for building an Islamic future. We therefore easily find Disney-style animated adventure videos. Fatih-Sultan Muhammad, for instance, is 'inspirational adventure' which according to the advertisement material 'your family will see how the Muslims used not only their faith - but also strategic and technological superiority -to be successful.' There is Adam's World, a Sesame Street caricature, that 'introduces children to Islamic morals, values, and culture in a manner that's both interesting and entertaining'. Various episodes of this series has titles like 'Happy to be a Muslim', 'Take me to the Kaaba', 'Kindness in Islam', 'Ramadan Mubarak'. A lot of children stuff is available on CD-ROM . Also one finds celebrity-oriented material. Interviews with converts like Yusuf Islam (Cat Stevens) are widely marketed. There is 'Holidays Myths' that is offering advice how Muslims should deal with holidays such as Christmas, Easter, Valentine Day etc. The enthusiasm for Islamified world at times assumes ironically absurd character. For instance, in 1996 the Muslim Parliament of Great Britain recommended that all mosques in the UK be wired up to the network in order to provide porn-free access to Internet and [to] establish places where Muslims can socialize in a halal environment.

Despite such occasional halal gaffe, Islamisation of Muslim Diaspora has generated a big political economy by commodifying the articles of faith. This economy helps sustain the process. More the process deepens, easier it becomes to control women. After all, it is women's body that an entire edifice of cultural façade is built.

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