

Splinters of Muslim Empires

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Within less than three centuries the Arabs forged an empire whose borders touched France in the west, China in the east, Asia Minor in the north, and Sudan in the south. The Muslims, by the ninth century, thus came to rule over one of the largest land empires in history. It was the mightiest military power on earth, and ran the foremost maritime business in the world, trading in a wide range of commodities across Asia, Europe, and Africa. Inheriting the knowledge and skills of ancient Middle East, of Greece, and of Persia, it added to them several innovations from outside as the use and manufacture of paper from China and mathematics from India.

By the tenth century, real power shifted to the local rulers who established dynasties in various parts of the empire. Soon, after quite extraordinary triumphs, Arab civilization was suddenly checked. Even in Spain, scientific, philosophical and material progress barely continued after the last decade of the twelfth century. The abruptness of this denouement poses many a question.

THE GOLDEN AGE

Was it caused by the passionate and all too effective onslaughts of Al-Gazali against philosophy and free thought? Not so, because Al-Gazali was a product of the environment, a symptom of the period as much as a cause. Besides, his influence faded away soon enough. A fourteenth-century Arab historian, Ibn Khaldun, ascribed the decline of Arab empire to a human weakness. As the ruling class became accustomed to a luxurious lifestyle, complacency followed, and it began to lose vigour. It no longer took sufficient heed of the subjects; there was jealousy and infighting, and the economy suffered. The state was now vulnerable to another nomadic tribe beaming with the first flush of enthusiasm. And the whole cycle would repeat. But if that was the case, the cycle could go on indefinitely. After all, there was no dearth of vigorous tribes.

A more plausible explanation of the fall of Arab empire could be constructed as follows. Most of the bedouin tribes who had, in 622, entered the umma of Madina under Mohammad threatened secession after the Prophet's death a decade later. Abu Bakr, the first caliph, quelled the uprising by diverting their labour to the external front. He induced the recalcitrant to join lucrative ghazu raids, i.e. traditional Arab ambush, upon non-Muslim lands with the promise of a share of the booty. The ghazu campaigns would get dramatic momentum under Umar, the second caliph.

The extension of ghazu abroad as a means to buy domestic peace had its own pitfall. Each additional territory brings in its trail a further obligation of expenditure—more troops have to be recruited, trained, equipped, and stationed in distant garrison towns, at a huge cost. That means more ghazu, and so on; once started ghazu turns into a compulsion. If stopped, the empire would totter.

Caliph Al-Walid of the Umayyad dynasty continued his march into North Africa and went on to establish an expensive garrison in Spain. Little was he

aware that the empire had reached its limit on the western front. His successor, Umar II, was thrashed in his attempt to capture Constantinople. This failure at the battlefield delivered a message that it was time to concentrate on economic growth at home.

The next dynasty, the Abbasid, did pick up the mantle. An economic system took root, grew, and bore fruit. Agriculture became commercialized, the surplus produce sold in towns at home and exported abroad. Sugarcane became an industry. Several industries—iron, wood, and textiles (linen, cotton and wool) — prospered. There were water-mills near Baghdad, and windmills at Seistan, while at Basra the flow of the Tigris was used to turn the wheels of floating mills.

But it was too little, too late. In the early thirteenth century, Mongols came down from the cold Asian steppe in the north to ransack Baghdad that had succumbed after a single battle; the merciless invaders set up an empire of their own in the Tigris-Euphrates valley. The Arab saga was over.

THE FINALE

In 1299, the Ottoman Turks founded in Asia Minor an empire, prefixed by their first name. They had shared with the Mongols the same wilderness of Mongolia wherefrom both had migrated west. Between the two tribes a lot more was common: descent, manner, and ethos. The law code, Yasa, of the Mongol empire was crafted by Genghis Khan himself. It was a narrow military system. The Ottomans adopted the Yasa. Military spirit pervaded all spheres of the empire: social, economic, political. 'Every labour was servile except the profession of arms.' Agriculture, industry, commerce were unbecoming of Muslim pride, hence meant for inferior others, the infidel.

At the beginning Muslims alone were obliged to join the army, and thus alone were eligible for the tenure of land. It was distributed as a reward for service and provided a source of recruitment in the form of military fiefs, free of taxes.

Feudal though it was, this Ottoman system of land tenure through military fiefs differed essentially from the feudal structure of Europe, in that land holdings were small and above all seldom hereditary. For all land was the property of the state. Thus at this stage, there was to arise in Ottoman dominions no landed nobility, such as prevailed throughout Europe. The sultans retained absolute ownership of the soil they had conquered. Moreover, as they continued to conquer, more holdings became available as rewards for more soldiers. Within the framework of this system in the fifteenth century, Sultan Orkhan organized a regular standing army, a professional military force on a permanent war footing, of a kind not to be found in Europe for a further two centuries. The Ottoman army was now ever ready, never to be caught by surprise.

For long the distribution of land had remained decentralized, administered by provincial governors. This led to abuses in the form of frequent and irresponsible changes in the ownership of land, which had already become a general practice. This in turn infringed the prerogative of the sultan, who in theory, as God's representative, was the owner of it all.

Sultan Suleiman (r. 1520-66) centralized the transfer of large fiefs, that must be now referred for approval to the central government in Istanbul—otherwise to the sultan himself. Local governors, however, retained their assignment to handle the cases of small fiefs only. The flaw in Suleiman's land reforms would soon

become evident. As time passed, the allocation of large fiefs depended less on the justice of claims to them than on palace intrigues and corrupt dispense of favours. There grew up a new class of big landlords who were often officials, courtiers, and servants of the palace and indeed often from outside it, moreover as a rule absentees living in the cities. By corrupt means it became possible for a single person to accumulate any number of fiefs, and build up a big landed property.

These absentee landlords promptly ran their private estates as ranch for raising horses and livestock, and thus drastically altered the traditional agrarian pattern of land use throughout Anatolia. Peasants lost land, in desperation flocked to the cities for a living. Famine stalked the land. The economy faltered. The decay of the empire set in. With fluctuating fortune it would drag on until its ignominious exit in 1922. The once-fabulous Muslim empire would splinter.¹

PIECE COLLECTORS

In an interview taken at an Indonesian jail and shown on the BBC News, 25 June 2007, the British reporter asked a leader of Indonesia's Muslim organization, Moha-mmadiyah, whether, and if so, why he would kill an innocent civilian. The reply in effect was as follows. Yes, he would, if the person is a Westerner like the British interrogator. For, land that was at any time part of a Muslim empire was instantly considered a Muslim holy land for ever thereafter. If it is not ruled by a Muslim at a given moment, it must revert back. A non-Muslim country that occupies such land violates ipso facto the sacred divine will. That country thereby has committed a blasphemy, and its people are held responsible. England today occupies Afghanistan.

Asked further whether he had found this doctrine in the holy Koran, the leader replied in the negative and added that he himself had not read the scripture; he had learnt all his faith and duty from the instruction of a teacher in seminary.

The scripture is written in Arabic, and by ulema's decree it cannot be translated into any other language; all over the world the liturgy must be conducted in Arabic. Less than a quarter of the Muslims of the world are conversant with Arabic. Most of them do not comprehend the meaning—a situation ripe for misinterpretation and bereft of scope for informed dialogue. Similar is the plight of Hindus, too; the Vedas are in Sanskrit, a language beyond the pale of the people.

An important aspect of the Koran has been left obscure by the clergy. The Koran contains a model of economic growth which has received little of ulema's attention. Most of the Muslim empires had fallen because of negligence of the economy, despite the holy book's edict.² Growth of production in an economy, we know, derives from savings, investment, and productivity: the Koran has given ample signs of it.

'You shall sow for seven consecutive years. Leave in the ear the corn you reap, except a little which you may eat. There shall follow seven hungry years which will consume but a little of what you stored. Then will come a year of abundant rain, in which the people will press the grape' (12:47).

This verse narrates how the economy functions: you sow, and wait for a while for the production process to run its course, meanwhile you survive on your saved grain.

The recent record of rapid growth in East Asian countries, namely, China, South Korea, Malaysia, Thailand and Indonesia can be seen in the light of this theory. Their amazing growth can be explained by referring to the high rate of investment and the improvement of capital productivity through mass education and better healthcare.

Here is another verse advising dairy farming, horticulture, industry, and medicinal effects of certain products of nature.

'In cattle too you have a worthy lesson. We give you to drink: pure milk, pleasant for those who drink it. And the fruits of the palm and the vine, from which you derive intoxicants and wholesome food. Surely in this there is a sign for men of understanding.

'Your Lord inspired the bee, saying : "Make your homes in the mountains, in the trees, and in the hives which men should build for you. Feed on every kind of fruit." From its belly comes forth a syrup of different hues, a cure for men. Surely in this there is a sign for those who would take thought' (16:65-69).

This verse definitely indicates investment in the cultivation of bees as an important branch of the economy. It also implies that investment has productivity, a real rate of return in the shape of output. This is a remarkable aspect of an economic system: it allows you to reap more than what you sow. Suppose in one project you invest Rs 100; after a year it brings Rs 105. In another project the same amount of investment generates Rs 110. The first project has a rate of return of five percent, while the other makes 10 percent. If you have a total investment budget of Rs 100, on economic ground the second project is preferable to the first one, as its rate of return is higher. This leads to a rule about how to make a selection from among available investment projects: compare the rates of return of projects and choose the one with the highest score.

The Koran calls upon man to explore the mystery of nature. Nature has granted some of the wishes of man, but not all. Now it is for man to derive more from nature through scientific endeavour. Below are two relevant verses.

'In the creation of the heavens and the earth; in the alteration of night and day; in the ships that sail the ocean with cargoes beneficial to man; in the water which God sends down from the sky and with which He revives the earth after its death, dispersing over it all manner of beasts; in the disposal of the winds, and in the clouds that are driven between sky and earth: surely in these there are signs for rational men' (2:164).

The verse suggests an order of laws in the universe—laws, if discovered, would enrich man's knowledge and enable him to invent machine, equipment and tools, expanding his capability. A more immediate inference from the verse is the practical idea of irrigation to nourish crops in the event of draught.

'He has subdued the rivers for your benefits. Of everything you have asked for He has given you some' (14:35). Here is a sign that signals harnessing of river water for cultivation. The last sentence of the verse offers a challenge by saying that man must strive to derive greater benefits from nature.

Muslim empires in general scarcely cared for economics. At present, too, Muslim countries are mostly oblivious of the economy. History shows economic development has been a great solvent of poverty, superstition, and sectarian conflict. Better these countries do draw lesson from their own bygone days of

glory and tragedy, and pursue the economics laid down by the holy Koran, which is fairly consistent with the modern economics inaugurated centuries later by Adam Smith, in 1776.

References :

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