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## Islam in Central Asia: A Study from Historical Perspective

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### **Abstract:**

*The region of Central Asia, since many years, i.e. more than 3000 years became a crossroads for major ethnic and cultural migrations. The region also became a trading and meeting place for ancient world's great civilizations such as Persian, Greek, Indian, Chinese and Islamic. The most influential were the Islamic civilizations for the region. Before Russian Invasion Central Asia passed through many ethnic and cultural shades. Russian invasion exploited these nations socially, economically and politically and deviate these republics from their cultural and ethnic history which was Turkic and Iranian in nature. These republics were made dependent on the Soviet legacy. Therefore, after Soviet-break-up the region was left on its own feet and destiny with so many challenges ahead to stand as an independent nation. Therefore, the research is an attempt to analyze the impact of religion and past legacy on Central Asian Republics to form their national identity as Muslims and not Russians.*

**Keywords:** Religion, Turkic culture, Islam, Soviet rule, Muslim Identity.

### **1. Introduction**

The Central Asia is a region consisting of five republics known as Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan and Tajikistan. These were former Soviet-Union republics which got independent in 1991 after the Soviet disintegration. These countries contended with many problems such as the fast growing population with administrative structures that are poorly prepared to face independence. The Central Asian states never faced much problem or any kind of security threat in political, economic and social sphere when they were part of the Soviet Union. In fact, they were in a good condition and were beneficiaries of socio-economic transformation during Soviet era. Therefore, these republics were against the Soviet disintegration. In the aftermath of Soviet break-up, everything got destroyed in all the former Soviet republics. So, during the last two decades' Central Asian leaders have been facing various security concerns such as political security, border security, environmental security, energy security and so on. The disintegration of Soviet made them fell on their own feet and destiny and led them to disaster. These republics had to start on their own and had to lead a new political and economic and social life. Therefore, to heal from this sudden disaster, the republics chose to alienate themselves from Soviet history and used their cultural and religious history to form their social and national identity as Muslims.

Before Soviet period the region faced many migrations which were Turkic, Persian, Islamic, Greek, Chinese. The major influence on the region was Turkic and Islamic civilizations. The region has also been an arena of great power rivalry. The present cultural and religious impact on Central Asia goes back to its Historical evolutions. The geographic location of these republics is very important in order to know about the practical and present implications for Central Asia. The geographic location had much influence on the present day ethnic and political situation of Central Asia. It is necessary to look into the past to know about present Central Asia because after Russian Invasion its geographic boundaries were also demarcated by the Russians according to the Russian interests. The earlier name of Central Asia was Turkestan due to the Turkic cultural influence.

Historically, Kazakhstan was noted to Northwest Asia, whereas Afghanistan and parts of North Iran such as the province of Khorasan were believed to be part of Central Asia. The cultural geography of the region also does not correspond to the current definition of Central Asia. The southern republics of Central Asia i.e. Tajikistan and Uzbekistan are similar to the Irano-Islamic culture. These are more adhere to ideological influences of their southern neighbors than to Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. Kazakhstan evolution is likely to be affected more by events in China or Russia than by events in Afghanistan or Iran, and in the similar way Turkmenistan would be more affected to events in Iran, Pakistan and Afghanistan. In short, the region had great influence of historical events which shaped its present identity.

### **2. Objectives of the Paper is as Follows**

- To analyze the historical events of the region which laid religious influence on the region.
- To look into the cause which made the Central Asian republics to form their national and social identity as Muslims.

### 3. Methodology

The methodology used for the Present paper is based on historical and analytical method. The data have been collected from the secondary sources and these sources were collected from different books written by different scholars, articles published in different journals. The data in the sources was critically analyzed.

### 4. Religious and Cultural Evolution in Central Asia during Different Invasions

Historically, Central Asians were nomadic people and tied to the Silk Road. As a result, it has acted as a crossroad for the movement of people, goods and ideas between Europe, West Asia, South Asia and East Asia. During the pre-Islamic and early Islamic times, Central Asia was predominantly influenced by Iranian culture. The region included sedentary and nomadic population. The nomads were exclusively Turkic, but the sedentary people included both Iranian (Tadzhiks) and Turkic (Uzbeks, Karakalpaks, etc.). Tsarist ethnographers described the sedentary population as 'Sart' a word which does not have any clear origin and to which they wrongly attached a racial and even linguistic significance. They used this word to show the cross connection between the Aboriginal Tajik (Iranian) inhabitants and their Uzbek (Turkic) conquerors. The name was given at first only to Iranians, then to the Iranians and the Turks. The 'Sarts' did not consider themselves as belonging to any particular race but as 'Muslims' (Geoffrey Wheeler, 1966). Thus the original population of Central Asia was of the same Iranian heritage as the Persians. The attachment of Transoxania (Earlier Central Asia name) to the Persian Samanid Empire until the end of 10<sup>th</sup> century<sup>resulted</sup> in the introduction of Iranian cultural influence, which is still apparent today in larger towns. But from the 6<sup>th</sup> century onwards successive Turkic invasions from the west brought complete Turkification among these nomads. Due to this reason Central Asia was once known as Turkestan, as most of its people belong to Turkic origin. The destruction of the cities of Turkestan in the 13<sup>th</sup> century was, thus, mainly carried out by Turkic people from the Kazakh steppe, which resulted in further encroachment of Turkic influence in the settled areas of Central Asia. Today, the Tajiks are the only Central Asian nationality which can be identified as Iranian stock. This is mainly on evidence of their language, which closely resembles the Persian of Persia and Afghanistan. The Uzbeks were the largest Turkic group in the Soviet Union and the largest in the world after the Turks of Turkey (Julian Baldick, 2002).

By the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> centuries, Turkic people acquired hold in southern Central Asia which was earlier blocked by Sassanid Empire. The Arab invasions held in 8<sup>th</sup> century, opened the way for Turkic migrations. After the Arab invasions, late in the 10<sup>th</sup> century, Samanid Empire annexed Central Asia and made cities of Samarkhand and Bukhara under them. This dynasty patronized the development of new Persian language as the fully Islamized language. Although Arabs had great impact on the administrative policies of land and tenure, but, at the cultural level, influence of Persian in the settled areas was more and is still prevailing at the present times. The Turkic speaking population surrounding the grasslands were remained borderland. In this way, many nomads entered the path of Muslims and migrate to the Middle East from 10<sup>th</sup> century onwards, but actual conversion to Islam took place slowly in the 18<sup>th</sup> century (Adeeb Khalid, 2007).

After the Samanid dynasty, 13<sup>th</sup> century had the major setback in the history of Central Asia. The non-Muslim steppe nomads annexed Central Asia and destroyed the whole Central Asia and Muslims above all. This was the rule of Mongols. According to the contemporary Arab historian Ibn-al-Athir, the armies of Genghis Khan (Mongolian ruler), were of great disaster to Central Asia in a way that had never happened before. The actions of Mongols had great impact on the cultural and religious practices of Central Asia. The moral and ethical values of Islam were surrendered to Mongol practices. Mongols introduced their own code of laws and ethics known as *yasa* against Muslim law known as *Shariat*. Thus, the hegemony of Islam was overtaken by Mongols and, therefore, it took large time to recover such a religious change (Lawrence Krader, 1966). By the 15<sup>th</sup> century, Islam again revived in Central Asia due to emergence of various Sufi saints. The famous among them were *Naqshbandiya* and *Kubraviya*. They spread the teachings of Islam to whole Central Asia. During the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> century onwards, even the Mongol rulers had become Turkified and embraced Islam because most of the Mongol forces were recruited by local Turks, and therefore, the region remained less effective to the Mongol cultural practices. Moreover, the last dynasty of Mongols i.e. Timur dynasty also gave impetus to developments of Islamic art and culture in Central Asia (Ibid).

### 5. Tsarist and Soviet Period

After Mongols, the last invasion was Russian invasion in Central Asia under Tsarist rule and which further continued during Soviet period. Russians captured the Central Asia in 1865 by breaking the walls of Tashkent city of Turkestan, the then Central Asia. Russians were continuously encroaching the southern part of the region, which they finally annexed through capturing Kazakhstan, and then from there to whole Central Asia. Before Russian conquest, the region had dominance of Islam, but with the passage of time, the religious ideology of Central Asia got affected by Russian rule. This rule changed the religious and cultural history of Central Asia completely. This empire brought changes in the social and political sphere and new religious policies were also established (Geoffrey Wheeler, 1996). The whole Central Asia was brought under the modern world through colonization.

Tsarist rule was a bit liberal towards religious policy of the region. The Tsarist government brought modernization into the region by introducing science and technology, education, railways, telegraphs. Tsar used very pragmatic approach by disregarding and ignoring Islam as by doing this, they thought that Islam would diminish on its own without state support. Russians were in Central Asia to grab economic interest out of the natural resources of the region, therefore, to curb the fanaticism in the Islam which could become threat to Russian rule, they adopted ignorance policy towards Islam in Central Asia. The modernization brought by Russians gave way to a new kind of movement in Central Asia known as *Jadidism*. The Jadids were the intellectuals who brought reforms in the traditional Islam. These groups took benefits of modernization and reinterpreted Islam (Ahmed Rasheed, 2001). Jadids related modern education with Islam to promote true teachings of Islam which would provide the solution for Muslims to meet the demands of the age and would

ensure their survival. Jadidism was a cultural reform movement based on Usul-e-Jadid, meaning new educational principles. It shared in great deal with other modernist movements in the world at that time. These movements were to unite and reconcile western modernism with Muslim traditions and was to spread against colonized states ruled by non-Muslims. Jadidism was a radical thought and it rejected the traditional teachings of Islam. They brought religious reforms and modern education. They considered the traditional Islamic teachings as non-beneficial for the Muslim community because they led Muslims with confused and dark knowledge. They separated Islam from traditional Customs and tied it to the political and economic interests. These activities of Jadids made Russians afraid as they were becoming threat to the Russian colonialism (ibid). Thus, Tsarist period, saw new kind of transformation of Islam which was quite radical in nature.

Russian revolution took place in 1917 and overthrow Tsarist rule. With the end of Tsarist Rule Soviet Union was created by the Bolsheviks and Central Asia was merged into it. Its new boundaries were formed for the Soviet economic and political benefits. Soviet rule adopted new kind of ideology to govern the state and society in general and Central Asia in particular. The Bolsheviks followed the Marxist thought and were fully committed to build Socialism and a classless society. A society where there would be no ethnic, racial class, and such a society would be Socialist society. Their main aim was to make Soviet people as a whole one single community (G.E. Fuller, 1990). Socialism is a universal and transcendental philosophy which is based on the unity and working of the depressed classes. Therefore, Nationalism, an ideology based on ethnic differences and sense of belongingness to a particular group of people, history, culture, land, can have no place in Socialist society. Soviet policy was very harsh and strict. Moreover, Islamic movements such as Pan-Islamic, Jadidism and Turkestan led Russians to launch harsh campaigns to curb Islam in Central Asia. Bolsheviks considered Islam as backwardness and also it acts as hindrance to any nation's development. Thus, to improve any country's social, economic and political situation, the country has to be religiously free (Ibid).

Therefore, Soviet government took harsh measures to curb religious and traditional practices of the Central Asian people. Mosques were closed down. In 1920, Cultural revolution took place to attack on Muslim education and new schools were built and modern education was introduced in the region. Campaigns against illiteracy was also started and adoption of Latin alphabet in place of Turkic languages was done. Islam and Islamic traditions were banned completely. Women were asked to unveil in the public and work as labor. Also, policies such as "Isolationism" was adopted which broke Central Asia's links with rest of the Muslim world (Shoshana Keller, 2001). Thus, this was a major attack on the religious and traditional life of the Central Asian people. It was all done to exploit the region's natural resources.

Although, Soviet policies curbed the religion completely but it was growing at the underground level as an "Unofficial Islam". When Germany invaded Russia in 1941, Stalin took a political stand by introducing "Official Islam" in order to gain Muslim support in the war efforts. He allowed state-run Madrasahs which would produce clergy for the Mosques. Moreover, small section of Muslim people was allowed to visit Mecca every year. This was a complete political game to control the Muslim population. Thus, Unofficial Islam was also running parallel to it. This was the original Islam. It was practiced by the followers who were attacked by the Soviet Government. Unregistered Mosques started running secretly and some of the tea stalls were also being used as substitute of Mosques. People used to carry Islamic practices at their homes and also the "Sufi Secret Society" was more prevalent in the contribution of Islam during this period (Ahmed Rasheed, 2001).

Later during Gorbachev period, the introduction of *Glasnost* further exploded Islam. *Glasnost* means openness, and, therefore, it led people to accept their religion and practice their traditions openly. This policy uplifted restriction from people and they stood against in favor of Islam. Thousands of Mosques were built in Central Asia, Islamic literature was revived and Korans were brought from Saudi Arabia and Mullahs became leaders suddenly (G.E. Fuller, 1990). Thus, it shows that how deep rooted was Islam in Central Asian people.

## 6. Post-Soviet Period

Soviet Union disintegrated in 1991 due to political and economic crisis during Gorbachev period. This was a major setback to the Central Asian republics as they were forced to sudden independence of which they were not prepared for. They were completely dependent on Soviet Union for its social, political and economic activities. After independence, Central Asia was left on its own feet to stand as a new nation without any idea of politics. They had many challenges ahead to face such as, huge population, ethnicity, poor political and economic condition. Therefore, the republics chose to stand against Russian ideology and Soviet legacy and looked back to their history and chose Islam as their social identity. By adopting Islam as social and national identity, Central Asia stood as an independent republic (Rafi's Abazov, 2007). Moreover, ideas such as Transnationalism got spread in Central Asia from western world. These kind of ideas united and reconciled all people belonging to same ethnic origin and these were Pan-Turkism, Greater Turkestan, etc. Many surveys have been also conducted in Central Asia which proved that religion played very important role in shaping the social and national identity of the people of Central Asia. Modern Central Asians are very proud of their intellectual contribution to the development of Muslim philosophy and high culture (Gunn, 2003).

## 7. Conclusion

It can be concluded from the previous history of Central Asian republics that they were originally more affiliated to the Islamic world. Moreover, the region was more familiar to the Turkic culture. But Soviet government for its own economic and political benefits led Central Asian people to remain in isolation and curbed their religious and traditional practices. This hurt their sentiments a lot and after Soviet break-up they adopted Islam as their social identity to counter Russian regime and to recover their lost history. After Soviet dissolution, Islam became more rigid, fundamental and strong in Central Asia. Therefore, despite Soviet domination, Islam had a long lasting imprint on the minds of the Central Asian people. They claim that Islam was indigenous to Central Asia by relating

themselves to historical texts and famous Sufi saints and also their sacred stories related to the origin of Islam. Thus, Islam was deep rooted in the region and which burst out of Soviet disintegration and became a tool for the survival of the region.

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