

MUSLIMS IN SOUTH AFRICA

Moulana Ebrahim I Bham

The first Muslims that arrived in the Cape Colony, came as political exiles. Many of them were from noble and honourable families who fought against the colonisation of their lands by the Dutch and the British. They were sent to South Africa as prisoners. The colonisers tried to stop their influence in Indonesia, Malaysia, Africa and India.

The arrival of Imam Abdullah Ibn Qadi Abdus Salaam, known as Than Guru, who traced his lineage to the Sultan of Morocco and his ancestry to the Noble Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), heralded a new phase in the history of the first Muslims in South Africa. Together with Imam Abdullah were two other prisoners, Abdur-Rauf Badr al-Din and Nur-al-Iman, who were also imprisoned on Robben Island. Therefore the Cape Colony and more especially, Robben Island became famous as a prison long before the incarceration of Nelson Mandela.

While on Robben Island, Imam Abdullah (Tuan Guru) who had memorised the Quraan wrote several copies of the Glorious Quraan from memory. He also authored several books on Islamic jurisprudence while in prison, which he completed in 1781. Than Guru was released after 14 years on Robben Island at the age of 82. He passed away at the age of 95.

An interesting fact of note is that the first Mosque in South Africa was built on land donated by a Muslim woman, Saartjie van de Kaap, who was born to slave parents.

These early Muslims involved themselves in the social, educational and political life of their communities. They had the wisdom and foresight to establish centres where the focal point of their communities would be social and educational upliftment.

The scattered tombs of saintly scholars all around the Cape Peninsula up to this day bear ample testimony to their dedication to maintain their religion.

When slavery was abolished in 1838, British authorities realised the need for an alternative system of labour, and Indians were brought in as indentured labourers to work in the sugar cane fields in the Kwa Zulu Natal. Between 1860 and 1868, and again from 1874 to 1911, some 176,000 Indians of all faiths were brought to the Natal province. Approximately 70% of the first shipment were Muslim, forming part of the second phase of Muslim immigration to South Africa.

As a result of these two phases of Muslim migration to South Africa, further augmented by migrants from Africa and Asia after the liberation of the country from apartheid, Muslims today number over 1 million, representing 2% of the population.

Infrastructure

In South Africa today, there are more than 600 mosques, over 400 educational institutes, colleges, Muslim private schools and colleges of tertiary Islamic Sciences. Local universities offer Arabic and Islamic Studies as part of their academic curriculum. Some of the educational institutes rank with the best in the Country. The Azaadville Muslim School was recently ranked as the best private school in South Africa. This fact was widely reported in the mainstream media. Students of the various Muslim educational institutes also feature prominently amongst the top students of the country.

Muslims in South Africa also have an impressive system of Makatib (vernacular classes) which Muslim children attend after their normal schooling and are educated in the basic principles of their religion. The theologians in South Africa have set up a formal curriculum and through own educational boards supervise and coordinate assessments among other things. These initiatives of theologians have had a profound impact on the Muslim community of South Africa.

The curriculum of Islamic Studies for children prepared by the theologians of this country is now being implemented and in a number of countries like the USA, UK, West Indies, Chile, Bosnia, UAB, Malawi, Madagascar, West Africa, Thailand, Bangladesh. The textbooks have been translated into languages of some of these countries.

On the educational front, the Muslims have also established institutes of higher Islamic learning

(Darul Uloom) which produces the theologians and imams of mosques. This leads to the training of imams who are conversant with the language of the people and are also able to communicate effectively with the younger generation.

Together with the above the Muslim community in South Africa has a range of other institutions, inter alia the following; a) Social counselling services to individuals on the various problems they may be encountering b) Several private Muslim radio stations which beam to the public on a regular basis c) An independent TV station d) A host of charitable and relief organisation in-volve in both local and international relief e) A Muslim aids programme which counsels people on Hiv/Aids.

The entire above infrastructure is supported and sustained by the local Muslim community. The community is not dependent on petro dollars, thus not susceptible to outside influence.

Activism of the South African Muslim Community

In spite of their small numbers in relation to the total population, Muslims have made a profound contribution to the religious, social, economic, cultural and political development of South Africa.

During the darkest days of apartheid, Muslims played a role in protest politics with an impact far greater than their numbers would suggest. Some Muslims like Imam Abdullah Haroon, Ahmed Timol were killed by the apartheid security police. Ahmed Kathrada spent 20 years together with Nelson Mandela in Robben Island. Others like Ebrahim Ebrahim served terms of 20 years.

Muslim Theologians like Moulana Cachalia, spurred on by their religious convictions to take a strong stand against Racism and injustice were in the forefront of the ANC delegation to the Non-Aligned Movement conference in Bandung, Indonesia, that first brought the injustice of the apartheid system onto the world stage. Many Muslims were forced into exile. It was therefore not surprising that after the first free elections in 1994, there were 17 Muslim MPS in the first parliament of a new and free South Africa.

Together with this many Muslims were also in the cabinet of Nelson Mandela, including the Minister of Justice, Abdullah Omar, a prominent member of the Cape Muslim community. The first chief Justice in the new dispensation, Justice Ismail Muhammed was also a prominent member of the Pretoria Muslim community. This trend has continued with many Muslims still playing an active role in the decision making of the Country.

The Muslim community of South Africa is per-haps one of the most visible and vibrant minority communities in the world today.

The Muslim Inter-faith relationships in South Africa

As people of different faiths and background were together in the struggle against apartheid, interfaith re-lation has been relatively harmonious. After the new dispensation the then President, Nelson Mandela es-tablished a forum known as the NRLF, the national re-ligious leaders forum. This is a forum of the major re-ligious groups in South Africa. The forum meets on a regular basis, and amongst its achievements is the signing of pledge.

The forum also meets the president and the cabinet twice a year to discuss matters of mutual concern.

Challenges

Together with the above achievements the Muslim community faces major challenges to sustain the lega-cy built over a long period of time. Some of these challenges are obviously not unique to the situation of South Africa. Without attempting to enumerate or elaborate on all, these are some of the challenges:

a) The homogeneity of the Muslim community creates an inward looking mentality that treats most things from outside with suspicion. This in turn could inhibit cultural and social exchange.

- b) With the achieving of freedom, it has on occasions been misused creating a sense of complacency; indifference amongst the younger generation is of concern to the more mature members of the community.

- c) There are also perceptions of a degree of inflexibility in the institutes of higher learning.

- d) How to deal with an influx of Muslims from other countries.

- e) Balancing between the patriotic requisites of political and social engagement with religious confession according to the creed of Islam.

Conclusion

After 300 years of history, Muslims in South Africa have established themselves as an integral part of the nation. Their ability to adapt to circumstances on the troubled political landscape has enabled them to emerge as one of the most vibrant minority communities in the world. They have instituted infrastructure facilitating the observance of the religious obligations. The success in the future will depend on how the present generation emulates the legacy of earlier generations in responding to modern challenges.

Moulana Ebrahim I Bham is Secretary General, Council of Muslim Theologians, Johannesburg, South Africa

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