

South Africa

My Experiences and Reminiscences

-Maulana Mohammad Manzoor Nomani

The Maulana visited South Africa in 1972 at the invitation of friends. A description of his visit to South Africa was later published in Al-Furqan.

Africa is a vast continent, or, rather, a world in itself, with a number of countries and a variety of governments. Another significant thing about this continent is that it contains the largest number of Muslim countries. I was told that about two hundred languages are spoken in Africa, of which fourteen or fifteen have a script while the rest are merely dialects or regional lingoes.

The Union of South Africa is not only the most developed and prosperous county of the continent but also a land without a parallel in more than one respect. With an area of 4,72,000 sq. miles, I was told, it is a bit larger than the undivided Pakistan while its population is about two crores only. Its land is fertile and fruits of finer quality abound, some of which are also exported. Among the agricultural produce, sugarcane occupies the leading place which is raised twice a year. The sugarcane crop is ready within six months and can be reared all the year round. I myself saw the crop being sown at one place and almost ready or being cut for transportation to the mills at another. I was told that the sugar mills in the country run all the twelve months without any layoff.

The country has cooler summers and colder winters, that is, the climate is never intolerably hot but the winter is bitterly cold. During the months of June and July, when we have the hot weather in India, in Transvaal, where I happened to be during that period, the weather was typically cold like that in our own country at the end of December and January. The mosques and houses were warmed by heaters. By the middle of May there is heavy snowfall which makes driving difficult.

In general, the relief is diversified and there are few large areas of fiat land. The region, as a whole, consists of mountain ridges, with a crust of thick earth lying over rocks which is extremely fertile. The view of standing sugarcane crop over the ridges, looking like a green carpet, is magnificent. Agriculture has been mechanised. The sugarcane fields are irrigated through power driven showers which look like rains.

The country, besides being extremely fertile, has extensive mineral deposits, the more important being gold and iron. I was told that sixty per cent of the gold mined all over the world, comes from South Africa. As a result, the country is prosperous and, at least in the cities, one cannot find any trace of want and poverty. The thriving condition of the country can be judged from the fact that the main metropolis of the country, Johannesburg, which has a population of about 12 lakhs, has more than three lakh cars. It means that every third or fourth man has got a car. Musa Saith, a friend from Bombay who was with me, told me about a car that it would cost three lakh rupees in India. The far-flung rocky parts of the country are connected by an extensive network of roads which are metalled and well-maintained. The roads being smooth the journey by road does not produce any fatigue.

Out of the total population of two crores, about half, or a little more, are Negroes, the aboriginal inhabitants of the land. They are backward, educationally, culturally and economically. A few of them have now acquired higher education and are qualified doctors, engineers and lawyers. They are trying to arouse national consciousness among their people which may have far-reaching consequences. But, on the whole, the Negroes are far behind others. Such of them who dwell around urban centres work in the factories or farms, the mainstay of others is small-scale cultivation or tending of flocks. They normally rear large flocks of cows, goats and sheep for which extensive forest areas have been earmarked. Meat is cheap and abundant. I was told that chicken meat is cheaper than that of the cows, goats or sheep because of large-scale poultry farming. The poultry is reared, by advanced technique and special diet, within six weeks. Water buffalo is not found in South Africa.

The Europeans, numbering about '10 lakhs, form the largest minority of the country, and are a composite race of Dutch and Englishmen. About three hundred years ago, in the middle of the seventeenth century, the Dutch founded their colonies in this country and developed it.

Thereafter Englishmen captured the land which ended in a truce in the twentieth century, after repeated encounters between the two colonizing people. Now they have merged themselves into an Afrikaan (Afrikaner) nation and are unitedly ruling over the country. They are not like the erstwhile British rulers of India who always regarded England as their motherland. The Afrikaans consider this country as their national homeland and have nothing to do with the

countries of their origin.

South Africa has a democratic and parliamentary system of Government but the franchise is limited to the white races only. People belonging to the Negroid or Indian races are not allowed to participate in the elections, however educated or wealthy they may be.

The white men have two political parties. One was dominated by the Englishmen and the other by the Dutch. Not long ago, the party controlled by the Englishmen was in power but of late the other party of the Dutch has taken the reins of Government in its hands. The reason of it, as I was told, is that formerly Englishmen formed a majority among the whites but the rate of increase in their population fell owing to licentiousness. Now the Dutch form 58 per cent of the population of white men. This containing a good moral for those favouring free living and birth control.

The third sizeable segment of the population consists of the mixed race, somewhat analogous to what we know as Anglo-Indians in this country. They are the people who had their mother or father belonging to the two different races, white or black. They are called the coloured people and number 20 lakhs.

The fourth section of the population, smaller in number than the first three, comes of Indian stock. About three-fourths of them are Hindus. One and a quarter century back their forefathers were brought from South India to work as labourers in farms and factories. They too have severed all connections with their motherland. Government service is their chief occupation although some have entered into business without, however, making much head way into that field. One-fourth of the Indians are Muslims who had come from Gujarat and Kathiawar as petty businessmen. They have now, the grace of God, a roaring trade and occupy the position next only to white men in the commercial life of the country.

Racial discrimination is especially hurtful to the persons like me who belong to a democratic country. As already stated the Negroes, Indians and the coloured people do not enjoy any political rights. The Railways have separate compartments for the whites and non-whites and so are the buses plying in the cities. Even the windows for sale of railway tickets, the benches on the platforms and parks, gates for exit and entry into the railway stations, schools and colleges and hospitals have been segregated for the whites and others. Separate laws are enacted for the people' belonging to different races. Now, even the habitations and bazars are being set apart for the Europeans and non-Europeans. People inhabiting a particular locality for as many

as fifty years are being served with notice to vacate it on the ground that the area has been earmarked for the white men.

Similarly the Europeans living in a predominantly non-white locality which has been set apart for the latter, are being asked to shift to the areas reserved for the white people. This policy has created a special problem for the Muslim. What will happen to the mosques in areas now earmarked for the Europeans? The Government is not insisting on their demolition and is willing to let them remain in their present condition but who would go to offer prayers in such mosque!

The country is divided into four provinces. The first is Transvaal with its capital to Johannesburg, which is the biggest city of the country. The second one is Natal with Durban as its capital. The third is Cape Province whose capital, Cape Town, is also the capital of the country. The Parliament meets here. With a pleasant climate and rich in scenic beauty, Cape Town can be classed among the best and most beautiful cities of the world. The fourth province is Orange Free State which has very few Muslims. I did not, therefore, go to that province. A greater part of the Muslim population lives in Natal and Transvaal. I spent most of the time, about 40 days in going round these two provinces and spent only three days in Cape Town. I also visited Port Elizabeth, a city in Cape Province, for a day only. On the insistence of some friends I visited the local zoological garden where I saw huge fishes of the size of our buffaloes. They seem to have been endowed with intelligence too since they performed certain feats like the monkeys. Verily, God has granted wondrous capabilities to His creations.

The Muslims in Transvaal and Natal are generally Gujeratis who still speak Gujerati in their homes. Few can read and write Urdu, but barring the small children all of them understand Urdu. I delivered my speeches in Natal and Transvaal in Urdu and, I was told, everybody understood them. In Cape Town, however, people seldom understand Urdu and, therefore, my speeches there had to be translated into English. During my visit to Cape Town I was accompanied by Maulana Mohammad Yunus, a graduate of Durul Uloom, Deoband, who used to render my speeches verbatim into English. So far as I could judge he was well versed both in English and Arabic for he could promptly translate the Arabic passages from the Quran and the Traditions quoted by me in my speeches.

Cape Town is at a considerable distance -about a thousand miles-from Durban and Johannesburg both. Therefore I had to make the trip to that city by aero plane to see a friend, Sulaiman Jafar. Actually, I undertook the journey to Cape Town only to see him although I knew that few people understood Urdu in Cape Province, and Sulaiman Jafar, too, was not acquainted with the language. His is an interesting story.

About two and a half years back he went through my book «What Islam Is? (English rendering of Islam Kya Hai). After reading the book he felt such a bitter remorse for his past-a life spent in folly and transgression-that he decided to migrate to Medina. He requested the Government of Saudi Arabia to allow him to settle in that country, but when his request was turned down, he made his way to India. After spending some time at different places he came down to Lucknow. There he got himself admitted in the class of Hifz-i-Quran at the Darul Uloom Nadwatul Ulema. He had to stay there with other students in a room which did not have even an electric fan during the summer season. He had also to take the same simple and coarse food as allowed to other students. He went away for Haj during the last Ramazan from Lucknow and, thereafter, returned to Cape Town a few days before I went to South Africa. I stayed with him at Cape Town but I was amazed to see that this man who had cheerfully borne all those hardships for the sake of learning the teachings of Islam had a palatial house perhaps more furnished than the Governors of the States could afford in India. He runs a hotel in Cape Town for whose premises he is paying a monthly rent equivalent to five thousand rupees in Indian currency. I have related his story in some detail here so that others may also take lesson from it.

As I have stated elsewhere, I spent most of time in Natal and Transvaal provinces where a majority of the Muslims of that country reside. I found a large number of them performing prayers regularly which keeps the mosques packed with the believers. Most of the women, too, perform prayers and also recite Quran every morning. There are even people who keep beards and spend a lot by way of charity. They take care to impart religious education to their children and some even send their sons to India or Pakistan for acquiring higher education in the religious institutions there.

All these things reflect their attachment to religion but, at the same time, their culture and family life closely resembles the western way of life. There are only a few families which observe purdah, others allow their wives and daughters to run their shops. Nobody who sees the women can ever think that these people would have any regard for religion. Some of the friends there regretfully told that this way of life has brought to fore some serious evils-even shameful in certain cases. Thanks God that I found certain well-meaning and sincere people seriously worried about this state of affairs. I also saw some people who are, after coming into contact with the Tablighi Jamaat, reintroducing purdah among the womenfolk although they had earlier been going out unveiled and working as salesgirls in the shops. I saw a few women wearing Burqa which appeared so strange in a westernised society.

The problem has an economic aspect, too, as I was told by some friends. If the women were precluded from attending to the family business, they would have to engage salesmen, accountants, etc., for their shops who would have to be paid not less than a sum equal to about

rupees two thousand per month. Obviously, besides being an unbearable financial burden, the owners would also have to guard against any possible defalcation of the sale-proceeds. Really, they deserve to be congratulated who have had the courage to ask their women to observe purdah despite this disadvantage. May God bless them and recompense them with a goodly reward.

Another social evil I noticed among the South African Muslims, especially those who have cut themselves adrift from religion, was that they are normally extravagant, squandering their money in riotous living.

A certain person spent a huge amount, about rupees twenty thousand in Indian currency, on the birthday of his cat! But, even those who are religious-minded are lavish in spending on food and dress, and more so on the construction and decoration of their houses. I learnt that certain persons had spent as much as fifty thousand or a lakh of pounds on the construction of their houses. A South African pound has a par value of twenty Indian rupees. So is the case with the mosques which are got constructed at considerable cost. A mosque in Lady Smith, a city in Natal Province, was built at a cost of several lakh pounds. A fine mosque that it undoubtedly is, people come to see it from far off places, but it would have been better if forty or fifty mosques were built with the money spent on it.

I might mention here that in every mosque they provide a number of gowns for the use of those who come to offer prayers clad in Western dress. Such persons put on these gowns over the dresses they are wearing. The arrangements made for performing ablution in the mosques is also praise-worthy. Sometimes people living at a distance from the mosques come there by cars for offering prayers. Now, the municipal authorities have made byelaws which permit the construction of a new mosque only if space is also available for car-parking.

The Muslims of South Africa being eager, as stated earlier, to impart religious education to their children, have devised two systems for the purpose. Some educational institutions have the same curriculum as taught in Government schools but one period is earmarked in them for the teaching of the Quran and theology. This is allowed by the Government but theology has to be taught in the official language, that is, English and Afrikaans.¹ I was told that "What Islam is? and "Islamic Faith and Practice" the English versions of my two books in Urdu, are used for the teaching of theology. ²

The Muslim organisations running such schools have to bear the expenditure on the teaching of

2. From the next academic year the two books are proposed to be taught as text-books in higher classes.

The classes are held in the rooms of the upper storey while the shops and rooms on the ground floor have been rented out to meet the expenses of the Madarsa. If my estimate is correct, the monthly expenditure of this Madarsa should be equivalent to about 15 to 20 thousand rupees. Several hundred boys and girls there are taught Quran and theology, through the medium of Urdu, after their normal school hours.

Another notable Madarsa, perhaps the biggest in South Africa, is Al-Ma' ahad-il Islami. One of my friends and class-mates in Darul-Uloom Deoband, was Maulana Mohammad Musa Mian. Although quite young and coming of a well-to-do family, he led a simple, pious and chaste life. He died about ten years back in South Africa. I had then written an obituary note about his death in the Al-Furqan. His father, Haji Musa Mian, belonging to Dhabil in Surat, had migrated to South Africa about a hundred years back. There he started his business almost without any capital but he was able to earn lakhs of rupees before he left this world. However, when his sons had grown up he told them that he had emigrated to that country without any capital but God had enabled him to earn a lot. He also expressed his wish to present himself before his Lord empty-handed, as he had gone there, by spending every shell of his earnings in the way of God. He proposed that his sons took over his business after fixing a price and made the payment to him in installments out of the profits earned by them. All of his sons accepted the proposal and purchased the total assets and liabilities of their father's firm for forty thousand pounds. In this way, the whole of this amount was utilized by Haji Musa Mian in establishing the Madarsa Al-Ma'ahad-il Islami. I paid a visit to this Madarsa which is a unique institution. So long as my late friend, Maulana Muhammad Musa, was alive he used to look after the institution but after his death, his eldest son, Maulana Ibrahim Mian, has taken over the management in his hands. The family of the founder of this Madarsa lives close to the school and is known in the locality as Mian family. God has endowed its members with religious zeal as well as made them well situated in respect of worldly gains.

My late friend Maulana Musa Mian, and his father, Haji Musa Mian, have their graves nearby. I utilized the opportunity to visit their graves and pray for the peace of their souls.

I have not yet mentioned the efforts made by Tablighi Jama'at in enkindling the spirit of religious zeal among the Muslim population of South Africa. The Jama'at is quite popular there and its members are regarded as sincere missionaries of Islam. I saw a good number of people who

have raised themselves in piety and purity of spirit by taking active part in the Jama'at. The present atmosphere of religiousness and larger congregations in the mosques are attributed to the selfless missionary work of the members of Tablighi Jama'at during the past four or five years. I reached Johannesburg on the 8th of April when a countrywide gathering of the Jama'at had come to a close just a week before. My friends who had invited me wanted that I should reach Johannesburg in time to participate in the gathering but I was late because of certain legal and technical difficulties. The missionary parties dispatched after the gathering to various parts of the country were busy in their work when I reached South Africa. One such party going from India and another from England met me in one city or the other which I happened to visit during my tour of the country. I could see that they were received with courtesy and respect by the local population.

A few persons also complained to me about the behaviour of certain persons engaged in the missionary work of Tablighi Jama'at. I would suggest these friends to go through a recent work of Hazrat Maulana Muhammad Zakaria which would help them to avoid such mistakes in future.

In the middle of July last a similar gathering of Tablighi Jama'at was held in England in which people from all over the world had participated. While I was in South Africa I learnt that about seventy persons had already given their consent to go to England and spend a few months in the missionary work. Later on, I came to know that more than a hundred persons had chartered a plane to go to England via Hejaz in order to visit the holy places in Mecca and Medina before attending the gathering.

The mother tongue of the South African Muslims being English they have a wider scope for spreading the message of God in Europe and many other English speaking countries.

I delivered my last speech a day before returning to India in Johannesburg on the 20th May before a large and select gathering. I made an impassioned appeal to my listeners that since God has showered His blessings on them they should make up their minds to dedicate one of their sons, who is the most capable and intelligent amongst them, for the service of God and His faith. The boys so selected should be given special education for working as missionaries of Islam in the western countries. I told them to look after their business and commerce and train their other sons to help them in their affairs, but let one of their sons be well provided, free from the cares of the world, to serve the religion of God. I mentioned Maulana Muhammad Musa Mian who had dedicated his life for the cause of faith while his other brothers managed the family business. Now his son, Maulana Ibrahim Mian, is devoting himself to the Madarsa while his brothers and partners in business have taken upon themselves the responsibility of looking after the commercial affairs of Maulana Ibrahim Mian. There are a few other families in Durban

also who do likewise to enable one of their partners to devote himself whole-heartedly to the cause of Islam.

I specially requested Maulana Abdul Haq Umarji of Durban to get out of his business by entrusting it to the care of his partners in order to serve the cause of religion. He is a capable man and much good can be expected of him. May God make this task easy for him.

I would like to mention here an incident relating to the Tablighi Jama' at. Once I was going by car from Johannesburg to Lodi Port accompanied by my host, Haji Musa Budhania. In the way I joined the congregation of Zuhr in a roadside mosque. After the prayers I was introduced to a man, Muhammad Adil by name, whose flowing beard and dress suggested that he was a fresh arrival from an institution like Mazahirul-Uloom, Saharanpur. I was, however, told that he was an expert diamond-cutter getting a handsome pay. He used to wear western dress, like others, and did not know Urdu at all. Somehow he came into contact with a party of the Tablighi Jama' at; they told him about the way of life ordained by God, and retribution in the Hereafter, and invited him to go out on a preaching mission for four months. He applied for four months' leave and did not conceal the purpose for which he wanted it. The leave was granted and he came over to Nizamuddin in Delhi. When he went back after four months, he had changed completely, in dress and appearance both. His colleagues in the factory, however, refused to work with him unless he agreed to be clean-shaved again and turned up for work in the usual western dress. Muhammad Adil bluntly refused to comply with their demand and told the proprietor, who happened to be a Jew, that he would not change himself, come what may. He even told the proprietor to terminate his services if he thought that the demand of his fellow workers was just. Muhammad Adil also demanded that he would be going out for three days in every month and forty days in a year with the missionary parties but would not claim any pay for the leave availed by him for the purpose. The owner of his firm was so impressed by his sincerity that he told other workers to leave his firm if they did not want to work with Mohammad Adil who could in no case be compelled to change his dress. Muhammad Adil has now learnt to speak Urdu and his Jew proprietor is reported to have a greater regard for him than he had earlier. May God keep him steadfast in the way of religion!

I have already made a mention of the policy of segregation followed by the Government of South Africa which is, in any case, to end in failure one day, but it would be unjust not to mention some of its praiseworthy achievements. I was told that bribery, dishonesty and nepotism are unknown in South Africa. The State employees perform their duties without fear or favour, with a full sense of responsibility, and their attitude is always sympathetic towards the people in difficulty. Nobody ever complains against the officials as people are wont to do in our country. The Government allows its citizens to send out a fixed amount of money to their relatives in other countries.

There is no restriction whatsoever on the Muslims going out for Haj. A man can perform the Haj as many times as he likes and take with him one thousand pounds, besides the money required for transport. In special cases Government allows even more foreign exchange to the Hajjis.

Inspite of the dissipation and free living of the white people, they still have great regard for the people who are firm in their faith and follow the path of religion.

Al-Furqan's English Digest - 1974