Conversion to Islam in South Asia: Problems in Analysis

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From the earliest times, South Asia* has been a scene of invasion. It is a long tale of incursion, conquest, settlement, and then assimilation. The Greeks, Sakas, and Eushanas forced their way in as dominant groups and established kingdoms and dynasties, only to be assimilated by what Dr. Spear called "the Hindu sponge." The push by Muslims into the sub-continent was by well-worn routes and to a familiar pattern of conquest and rule, first of Sind and the Punjab, then of the Gangetic Plain, and, finally, of almost the whole of South Asia.

Conquest and settlement were not followed by assimilation, however. Muslims retained a separate identity and their numbers, proportionate and absolute, grew until today a quarter of all Muslims in the world are to be found in South Asia. In 1975, they formed some 97 percent of the population of Pakistan, 85 percent of that of Bangladesh, and 13 percent of that of India.[1]

But these Muslims come from different roots and origins, they speak different languages, and their understanding and practice of Islam differs according to their educational and social background and to their regional and geographical setting. Many of them are of Arab, Afghan, Mughal and Persian descent, but the majority of them are descendants of South Asian converts to Islam.[2]

The spread and expansion of Islam and its acceptance by such large groups of people of a variety of ethnic, historical, and cultural backgrounds and

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*In the context of this paper, South Asia refers to Bangladesh, India and Pakistan.

[1]*The World Muslim Gazetteer*, Karachi, 1975.

[2]On the controversy regarding immigrants vs. converts from low classes, see M. A. Rahim, *Social and Cultural History of Bengal, (1201-1576)*, vol. 1, Karachi, n.d., pp. 35-71. Also see K. Fazl-i-Rabbi, *The Origins of the Musalmans of Bengal*, (Calcutta, 1895), p. 113 and P. Hardy, "Conversion to Islam in South Asia," in *Conversion to Islam*, (ed.) Nehemiah Levtzion, ed. (New York, 1979), pp. 74-75. Rafiuddin Ahmed has also discussed the issue. See R. Ahmad, *The Bengal Muslims, 1871-1906: A Quest For Identity*, (Delhi, 1981), pp. 1-20.

across a range of diverse geographical areas can scarcely be the outcome of any simple uniform process. Conversion to Islam is thus a challenging and absorbing subject for research. Yet it has attracted the attention of scholars only since the last decade of the nineteenth century.[3]

What follows does not claim to be more than a preliminary and rather hurriedly prepared survey of the main theories about conversion to Islam propounded by Asian and Western scholars. The dearth of source material presents difficulties as "medieval Islam" produced no missionaries, bishops, baptismal rites, or other indicators of conversion that could be conveniently recorded by the Muslim chronicler.[4] Hopefully the subject will be a spur to the detailed review and analysis of sources, modern and medieval, which the subject both deserves and requires.

The fact that conversion in South Asia was a subject which demanded investigation followed from the administrative needs and practices of the British government of India in the later nineteenth century[5] and from the religious experiences and structures of the Christian West. It was the need to survey and map the resources of the Raj which led to the holding of censuses, effective from 1871 onward, and the writing of provincial and district gazetteers from about the same date. The codification of law, the recording of custom and revenue settlement, the process of enumeration, and the classification and analysis of information about Muslims had three effects. First it made the size and numerical importance of the Muslim element in South Asia startlingly apparent, it demonstrated the social diversity of its components, and it drew attention to the very varied degree of acceptance and understanding of orthodox Islam among those who professed to be Muslims when questioned by census officials. Once it was clear that a majority of South Asian Muslims must be converts[6] rather than immigrants, then European writers could begin to ask how conversion had been effected and what meaning should be given to the process.

To European Christians, Muslims had long been seen as both temporal and religious enemies. Crusades had been launched against Muslims for the rescue of holy places, long campaigns of reconquest were waged on the Iberian peninsula, and desperate defensive battles were fought across Hungary and to the very walls of Vienna. Theologically, as in popular myth, the natural relationship between Christian and Muslim seemed to be one of war. Within Christendom itself, violence had been the ready instrument employed by rulers

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[3]Hardy, pp. 68-99.

[4]Richard W. Bulliet, *Conversion to Islam in the Medieval Period: An Essay in Quantitative History*, London, 1979, p. 4.

[5]Hardy, pp. 68-70.

[6]E. Balfour, *The Encyclopedia of India and of Eastern and Southern Asia, Commercial, Industrial and Scientific*, vol. II, (London, 1885), pp. 79-80.

ever since the Reformation to impose sectarian conversion upon the subjects in their states. Likewise, the missionary effort sustained at great cost by Spain and Portugal in their overseas empires had included threat and compulsion alongside preaching of the gospel as appropriate aids to conversion. The Western understanding of Islam had thus been formed "amid inherited prejudice and suspicion,"[7] and writers on conversion in South Asia had been ready to impute to Muslims an attitude of acceptance concerning the use of force which Christians had themselves displayed. So Voltaire would emphasize that the Prophet (ṢAAS) had spread Islam by his "courage and arms,"[8] and Gibbon rudely observed that the "roving Arabs were allured by the standard of religion and plunder."[9] Not only with respect to conversion, but also in all aspects of Islamic religion, writes Norman Daniel, "facts were exaggerated, sometimes out of little or nothing, and were often distorted almost beyond recognition; sound information was regularly discarded for unsound." The purpose was to attack the Islamic claim to be the true revelation of God. Some writers "sought authentic information, in order to annihilate Islam."[10]

The European also brought to his perception of conversion in South Asia his own cultural attitudes toward a missionary effort. These were based upon the existence of a hierarchically organized *Church*, closely tied to the system of the state, which saw conversion as a call and duty and mission work as something to be organized, first through the preaching orders and then through a wing of the *Church* itself. The Jesuit letters from their mission fields, recounting converts won and martyrdoms attained, were printed in all the languages of Europe.[11] And, if the Protestant colonial powers shirked their duty, sectarian efforts raised the funds, found the men, and publicized the results of Protestant missionary work in South Asia and beyond.[12] Though the counting of convert heads seemed a major concern of all missionary bodies, emphasis upon conversion and upon the individual change of heart was also increasingly present. It was natural, therefore, that Western writers concerned with conversion to Islam in South Asia should have offered explanations that were based upon the notion of force exercised by the state or of directed missionary effort by priest, preacher or mystic and that they would have seen conversion in religious rather than in social terms.[13] Initially, South Asian

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[7]N. Daniel, *Islam and the West: The Making of an Image*, (Edinburgh, 1980) (reprint), p. 265.

[8]Ibid., p. 290.

[9]Quoted in ibid., p. 291.

[10]Ibid., pp. 244-45.

[11]J. Corrcia-Afonso, *Jesuit Letters and Indian History*, (Bombay, 1965).

[12]K. S. Latourette, *History of the Expansion of Christianity*, (London, 1947) (7 vols.).

[13]Richard Bulliet emphasizes the role of social conversion, which he sees as a conversion involving movement from one religiously defined social community to another. See Bulliet, p. 33.

writers, too, tended to operate within these thought patterns. Much present-day writing is devoted, therefore, to the reevaluation of these early approaches and to a broadening of the question by seeing conversion in its social and economic setting.

The notion of force as a major element in the conversion of Indians to Islam may be illustrated by the comments of W. W. Hunter, who observed that "the whole conception of Islam is that of a church either actively militant or conclusively triumphant– forcibly converting the world, or ruling the stiff-necked unbeliever with a rod of iron."[14] The myth of force was given historical credibility by men like Ibbetson, compiler and author of the 1881 Census Report. He admits his limitation but nonetheless proceeds to generalize:

> I cannot pretend to speak with any authority on the subject, as I am in no way learned in Indian history; but I state the impression which the study of Elliot's *Mahomedan Historians* has left upon my mind.[15]

The exact dating of the advance of Islam which occurred in the Punjab might not be determinable, he said, but he felt sure that "the despatch of so many thousands of infidels to a bottomless pit" had been an important factor.[16] On the basis of oral evidence, he was able to conclude that large-scale conversion in the eastern districts of the Punjab took place in the times of Aurangzeb, "by far the most fanatical and bigoted" of the Mughal emperors. It was the centralized system of the Mughals, placing Muslim governors in authority instead of Hindus, which had greatly facilitated "the systematic persecution of the infidels which was instituted by Aurangzeb." He quotes cases, citing the ancestor of a Muslim village community member who became a Muslim in order to save his property and other ancestors who were taken prisoners or hostages, circumcised, and converted against their wills. So, according to Ibbetson, conversion was either "forcible or made under pressure of the fear of confiscation."[17]

With the inaccuracies or improbabilities of Ibbetson's views we are not here concerned (The Punjab had had its Muslim governors even in Sultanate days); what is significant is his use of sources. One source was the "official" histories collected by Elliot. These Ibbetson uses both selectively and literally, without any of that understanding of underlying purpose which Hardy

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[14]*Imperial Gazetteer of India*, vol. II, (London, 1881), p. 18, quoted in Hardy, p. 76.

[15]D. C. J. Ibbetson, *Report, Census of the Punjab 1881*, (Calcutta, 1883), Vol. I, pt. VI, p. 142, n.1.16.

[16]Ibid., p. 142, paras 274-76.

[17]Ibid.

has urged.[18] The orthodox ideal image reflected in Barni's *Fatāwa-ī-Jahandarī* is thus accepted as reality. Further, the oral traditions encountered by Ibbetson and many other enumerators of censuses and authors of gazetteers were doubtless as uncritically handled. Many Indian authors, notably J. N. Sarkar, Ishwari Prasad, and S. R. Sharma, have attributed the spread of Islam more to forcible conversion than to any other factors.[19] One of the most extreme examples is provided, however, by the Muslim author Syed Muhammad Latif, an Extra-Judicial Commissioner, who prayed in his preface, "Long live our Gracious Queen, the Empress of India," and then proceeded to out-Ibbetson Ibbetson with his vision of violence:

> Muhammad propagated his religion by the sword. "The sword," said he, "is the key of Paradise and Hell. A drop of blood shed in the cause of God, a night spent in arms, is of more avail to the Faithful than two months of fasting and prayer. Whoever falls in battle is forgiven his sins; in the day of judgment, his wounds shall be resplendent as vermilion and odoriferous as musk; and the loss of his limbs shall be replaced with wings of angels and cherubim. He who perished in a holy war went straight to Heaven.[20]

Quite early, however, dissenting voices were heard. Discounting force as having played very little or no part in the conversionary process, Arnold in his *The Preaching of Islam* observed:

> How little was effected toward the spread of Islam by violence on the part of the Muhammadan rulers may be judged from the fact that even in the centers of Muhammadan power, such as Delhi and Agra, the Muhammadans in modern times in the former district hardly exceeded one-tenth and in the latter they did not form one-fourth of the population.[21]

Though Muslims were the dominant power in South Asia from the twelfth to the mid-eighteenth century, first in the north and north east and next in the south until, at the peak of their power, Muslim authority extended to

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[18]Hardy, p. 99.

[19]Sharma refers to the proselytizing zeal of the Muslims "reaching the point of fanaticism." See S. R. Sharma, "Styles of Conversion in Major Religions in India," *Journal of Social Research*, vol. no. XI, 2, September 1968, pp. 141-49.

[20]S. M. Latif, *History of the Punjab from the Remotest Antiquity to the Present Times*, (Calcutta, 1891), pp. 1-2.

[21]T. W. Arnold, *The Preaching of Islam*, (Lahore, 1961) (reprint), p. 265.

almost the whole sub-continent, yet South Asia never became a Muslim region in population or in ethos. Murray Titus noted that so far as "the conversion of India as a whole is concerned, Islam signally failed. In no other country save China, where her arms and missionaries have gone, has she accomplished so little in proportion to the total population. India may have more Muslims than any other country, but India is not a Muslim country."[22] Rizvi points out that even such a celebrated conversion by force as that attributed to Mahmud of Ghazni remained a fact only as long as the Ghaznavid threat was still at hand, after which many "converts" apostatized despite many difficulties and humiliations placed in their way.[23] But force was not seen as applicable in the Indian situation, even by those in a position to wield it. This might be attributed to the tolerant attitude of the Muslim rulers, the rigid social and religious organization of the Hindus under the domination of the priestly class,[24] the indifferent or lukewarm attitude of Muslim elites toward the conversion of the Hindus, or the difficulties encountered in ruling a foreign country with an overwhelming population professing a faith different from that professed by the rulers. When Ahmad Chap denounced Jalal-ud-din Khalji, for his slack policy towards the Hindus, Jalal-ud-din acknowledged the impossibility of restraining idolatory and the limitations upon his temporal power:

> Every day the Hindus, who are the greatest enemies of God and of the religion of His chosen Prophet, pass beneath our palace, beating drums and blowing conches . . . and worship idols and give currency to the laws of Heathenism and Polytheism under our very nose . . . Shame to our sovereignty and to our claim of protection of religion, that we allow the preachers to mention our name in their Friday sermons . . . as protectors of religion and falsely call us the defender of Islam and during our reign the enemies of God and of the religion of His Prophet in our capital lead their lives with thousands of pride [*sic*] . . . and openly and publicly worship idols . . . .[25]
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> It must also be asked whether the failure to impose Islam should not be attributed to Islam's being a missionary religion only in a limited sense; the spread and propagation of Islam is not its

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[22]M. Titus, *The Religious Quest of India: Indian Islam—A Religious History of Islam in India*, (Mysore, 1930), pp. 6-7.

[23]S. A. A. Rizvi, "Islamic Proselystisation *sic* Seventh to Sixteenth Centuries," in *Religion in South Asia*, C. A. Oddie, ed, (Delhi, 1977), pp. 16-17.

[24]M. Titus, pp. 7-8.

[25]Barni, *Tarikh-i-Feroz Shahi*, p. 127, quoted in S. M. Husain, "Ahl-al Dhimma in the Sultanate of Delhi 1206-1320," *Studies in Islam*, vol. IV, January 1967, p. 40.

goal, although *Da'wa*, the call to Islam, is certainly a duty.[26] The Qur'an says:

They impress on thee
As a favor that they
Have embraced Islam,
Say, "Count not your Islam
As a favor upon me:
Nay, God has conferred
A favor upon you
That he has guided you
To the Faith, if ye
Be true and sincere.[27]

It is indeed Islam's mission to create conditions whereby God's sovereignty is established and where an Islamic environment is upheld by elevating the customs of Islam, applying the Shari'ah, and enjoining what is good and prohibiting what is forbidden. But the establishment of political power by Muslims and the enforcement of the laws of its religion only encourage the establishment of a certain bias, a certain preference in favor of Islam and of Muslims; they do not entitle Muslims to force non-Muslims to become Muslims.[28] The call to Islam is through gentle and considerate teaching for the Qur'an says:

Invite (all) to the Way
Of thy Lord with wisdom
And beautiful preaching;
And argue with them
In ways that are best
And most gracious:
For thy Lord knoweth best,
Who have strayed from His Path,

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[26]S. A. Maududi, *D'awat-i-Islami aur us ke Mutalabat*, (Lahore, 1970), p. 37.

[27]*Qur'an*, 49:17. Abdullah Yousuf Ali interprets the verse thus: 'Islam in itself is a precious privilege. By accepting it we confer no favour on its preacher or on any community. If the acceptance is from the heart, it is a great favour done to those who accept that the Light of God has entered their hearts and they have received guidance." *The Glorious Qur'an*, translation and commentary by Abdallah Yousuf Ali, 1973, p. 1408.

[28]*Maqalat-i-Sir Sayyid*, compiled by Maulana Muhammad Isma'il Panipati, (Lahore, 1963), vol. 15, pp. 434-37. Sir Sayyid's article, "Kiya Islam zabardasti aur jabr se phela? aur kiya Anhazrat ne din-i-haq ki isha'at talwar se ki," contains valuable information on the alleged use of force in the spread of Islam, pp. 412-512.

And who receive guidance.[29]

Moreover, Islam's doctrine of *dhimmah* provides for the acceptance of and association with those non-Muslims who are monotheists but who may not believe in the Prophethood of Muhammad (ṢAAS). Under this doctrine it is not, therefore, incumbent that the world be brought to a total Islam, though occasionally some Muslim rulers and 'ulama thought that it was their duty to present the option of death or Islam to the non-Muslims. But the impracticability of such a proposition was very soon realized.[30] And even when a ruler was more inclined to try force, the 'ulama might themselves restrain him. When Sikandar Lodi was acting as his father's deputy in Delhi, he proposed that when the Hindus assembled at Kurukshetra for their holy bath, they should be attacked and the tank and temple held in veneration by them should be desecrated. However, he was advised to consult the 'ulama. An assembly of theologians was called. It chose *Malik al 'ulama* Mian Abdullah of Ajodhan, who gave the *fatwa* that, as the temple was an ancient one and the bath had been allowed by previous Muslim rulers, it was wrong and contrary to law to interfere with either of them. The prince was enraged and, charging the *'ālim* with supporting idolators, threatened to proceed by first killing him and then carrying out his plans against the Hindus. Mian Abdullah spiritedly told him that he had taken into account the likely consequences of his opinion when "he came to a tyrant."[31]

The truth is that Muslim political domination in South Asia was possible just because there was no attempt to convert large numbers of the population either through force or through persecution. This would have antagonized a populace already resentful. It was by the association with the local political elites—the rajas, the zamindars, and the chiefs—rather than by confrontation with them that Muslim rule in South Asia was sustained. Muslim rulers encouraged the local chiefs to act as intermediaries and to associate themselves freely with the government in different positions of authority. It was essential for the Muslims to maintain a position of military strength, but it was also in their interest to encourage and preserve the rural chiefs, though in subordinate positions, so as to ensure the day-to-day running of government. The policy which the rulers followed was based, it might be said, on reconciliation of the reconcilable and suppression of the irreconcilable; the goodwill of the ruled was essential to the retention of Muslim political power and authority. "A liberal policy toward the local non-Muslim population aided

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[29]*Qur'an*, 16:125.

[30]K. A. Nizami, *Some Aspects of Religion and Politics in India During the Thirteenth Century* (Delhi, 1978) (reprint), pp. 160-61.

[31]A. B. Pandey, *The First Afghan Empire in India (1451-1526)*, Calcutta, n.d., pp. 248-49.

the consolidation of Muslim rule."[32] Had Muslim rulers required these intermediaries to renounce their religion and accept Islam, this could only have weakened Muslim rule, for it was through the ties of kinship and caste, and ritual association with temples, shrines and deities, that such intermediaries bolstered their own authority. The history of Mughal relations with the Rajputs and Marathas is a study of such accommodation; what happened when intermediaries fell away has been most tellingly analyzed in Richard's study of the Mughals in Golkonda.[33]

The naked exercise of force to secure conversion must have occurred occasionally in the process of conquest. But conquest and the consolidation of political power and authority were more important in creating conditions favorable to the development of the process of conversion, as Bausani has emphasized.[34] Some scholars have emphasized the prospects of political and economic advantages as important elements in that process.[35] Some tribal chiefs were converted by Muslim rulers, though many of those who accepted Islam for greed, honor, or position, are said to have apostatized. [36]Bakhtiyar Khalji thus converted the head of the Meg tribe of Assam, and 'Alā'al Dīn Khalji, the Barwars.[37] According to K. S. Lal, Feroz Shah Tughluq encouraged his infidel subjects to embrace Islam by exempting them from the payment of *jizyah*.[38] Some Hindu prisoners of war were also converted by Firoz Shah;[39] some slaves became Muslims in the hope of receiving better treatment by accepting Islam.[40] British census report compilers reported a few cases of conversion either to succeed to an ancestral estate[41] or to save some family property from confiscation.[42] But all these factors could have only a marginal effect on the growth of Muslim population. S. R. Sharma, in the lists supplied to us of Hindus converted to Islam, records only some 120 cases in the entire region of Aurangzeb, stretching over 50 years. The lists include a number of Qanungos, chaudhuris, a few chiefs, and others.[43] Of the converts, says Sharma, "very few, if any, seem to have changed their

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[32]Levtzion.

[33]J. F. Richards, *Mughal Administration in Golconda*, (Oxford, 1975).

[34]A. Bausani, "Can Monotheism Be Taught? (Further Considerations on the Typology of Monotheism)," *Numen* vol. X, 1963., pp. 174-75, 185.

[35]Rizvi, pp. 18-19.

[36]Ibid.

[37]Ibid.

[38]K. S. Lal, *Growth of Muslim Population in Medieval India*, Delhi, 1973, p. 161. Also see Rizvi, pp. 20-21.

[39]Rizvi, pp. 18-19.

[40]Hardy, p. 96.

[41]H. H. Risley, *Census of India*, 1901, vol. I, *India*, pt. I-*Report*, Calcutta, 1903, p. 385.

[42]Arnold, p. 269.

[43]S. R. Sharma, *The Religious Policy of the Mughal Emperors*, Calcutta, 1940, pp. 181-86.

faith for religious reasons. Desire to escape civil disabilities, or worse, to acquire material benefits formed the motive force in most cases."[44] But conversion through prospects of political advantages and material gains could be an inducement only for a few of the elites, rather than for the vast mass of the rural population. It may be, though, that the conversion of politically-important elites could have induced lower sections of the population to accept conversion too: a process described by Forrester as the "downward filtration theory."[45]

Some British reporters lay emphasis on various social reasons for conversion. Cases were reported of change of religion in order to marry those with whom some Hindus had fallen in love. But the "love and lust motive" did not add more than a handful of entrants to the fold of Islam.[46] There were those who, for having eaten meat or food given by Muslims, were excommunicated and changed their religion. But, perhaps, these factors could have not added more than a trickle to the growth of the Muslim population.[47] For Western commentators, the most potent source of conversion was force–"plunder and slaughter," as described by Titus.

If forcible conversion were one major explanatory theme among early historians and writers, then Arnold, in his *The Preaching of Islam*, 1896, made the peaceful persuasion of the Sufis another. On the basis of material collected from district gazetteers and census reports, he propounded and popularized the view that the large-scale conversions of Hindus to Islam in South Asia were the result of the preaching and activities of the Sufis,[48] who were the bearers of an image of spirituality, religiousness, and piety in the countryside as well as in town. The theory of "teaching and persuasion of peaceful missionaries," put forward so forcefully and convincingly by Arnold,[49] continued to be accepted by Muslim authors as well as by others. The picture which emerged in the course of years, was that Muslim converters

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[44]Ibid., p. 165. It is interesting to note that Muslims were being converted to Hinduism. Often Muslim girls were married to Hindus and converted. So widespread was the incidence of conversion that when Shah Jahan declared such marriages unlawful, more than 4,000 such women were discovered. On further investigation, some seventy cases were retrieved from Gujarat and four hundred from the Punjab. Two Muslim nobles, Mirza Saheb and Mirza Haider, were among those converted to Hinduism. Muslims were also converted to Sikhism. The author of *Dabistan-i-Mazahib* reported that not a Muslim was left between Kirtarpur and the frontier of Tibet and Kohat who had not been converted. See Sharma, pp. 103, 106.

[45]Duncan B. Forrester, "The Depressed Classes and Conversion to Christianity, 1860-1960," quoted in G. A. Oddie, p. 7.

[46]E. A. Gait, *Census of India*, 1901, vol. VI, *The Lower Provinces of Bengal and their Feudatories*, pt. I, *The Report*, Calcutta, 1902, appendix II, X-XIX. Also see Hardy, p. 96.

[47]*Census of India*, 1901, vol. 1, pp. 86-87.

[48]Arnold, p. 265. Also see M. Mujeeb, *Indian Muslims*, London, 1967, p. 22.

[49]Arnold, p. 257.

were not men of war brandishing the sword but were men of peace who preached the love of God and the harbingers and carriers of Islam to the Indians. For Muhammad Nazim, it was the preacher who furthered the cause of Islam and won votaries, not the conquering Mahmud.[50] For Habibullah, the Sufi was the link between Islam and Hinduism, the one to whom Islam owed its largest number of converts.[51] For I. H. Qureishi and M. Mujeeb, the Sufi played a pivotal role in the spread of Islam.[52] For Aziz Ahmad, Islam in South Asia owed a great deal to "the quiet, unobtrusive labors of a preacher."[53] But among Muslim historians and writers, S. M. Ikram was perhaps the first to put forward the view that the Sufis, although they played a significant role in the conversionary process to Islam, were not missionaries in any Western sense, their methods and approach being very different from those of present-day missionaries. Unlike the Jesuits or the Baptists, they had not reserved themselves for the *ishā'ah* (propagation) of Islam but for its *tawsī'* (spread).[54] Yet, Ikram writes that the *mashāykh* did teach Hindus and Muslims the message of a higher spiritual life. As a result, the *kuffār* (infidels) were attracted toward Islam and, at the same time, the ordinary Muslim, toward a life free from vice.[55] Thus, Hardy has concluded that in Ikram's view, "Sufis were much happier when they helped one who was already a Muslim to become a better Muslim than when they saw a non-Muslim become a Muslim."[56] But Ikram, in his analysis, seems more jubilant at the conversion of non-Muslims to Islam than is suggested by Hardy. With considerable glee, he describes the conversion of a large number of tribes in the Punjab at the hands of Baba Farid Ganjshakar.[57] To the Suhrawardy Sufis, he gives the credit of carrying out *tablīgh* (giving the message) with great enthusiasm for, according to Ikram, they "beat the drum of Islam effectively by spreading it with great zeal and vigour."[58] Referring to the role of Shaykh Bahā 'al Dīn Zakarīya, Ikram observes that, after listening to the sermon of the Shaykh, a very large number of Hindus, including merchants and chiefs in Sind and Multan, accepted Islam.[59] Even according to Ikram's

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[50]M. Nazim, *The Life and Times of Mahmud of Ghazna*, Cambridge, 1931, p. 6.

[51]A. B. M. Habibullah, *The Foundation of Muslim Rule in India*, Lahore 1945, p. 282. Also see Hardy, p. 89.

[52]I. H. Qureishi, *The Muslim Community of the Indo-Pakistan Subcontinent*,(610, 1947), Gravenhage, 1962, p. 74. Also see Mujeeb, p. 22.

[53]Aziz Ahmad, *Studies in the Islamic Culture in the Indian Environment*.

[54]S. M. Ikram *Ab-i-Kausar*, Lahore, 1968 (seventh printing), pp. 190-191, Hardy, p. 90. I prefer "spread" for *ish't* and "propagation" for *taws*.

[55]Ikram, pp. 190-91.

[56]Hardy, p. 90.

[57]Ikram, p. 222.

[58]Ibid. p. 254.

[59]Ibid. pp. 256-57.

evidence, therefore, it becomes clear that the Sufis seemed equally happy when they saw a non-Muslim become a Muslim. They performed two functions: first, to convert non-Muslims to Islam and, second, to make the converted Muslim a better Muslim. Shaykh Abū Isḥāq Gazroani appears in that role:

> "It is recorded that 24,000 people became Muslims at the hands of the Shaykh and approximately 100,000 Muslims repented in the presence of the shaykh and entered the circle of the devotion to the shaykh or became his disciples."[60]

Khwaja Mo'inud-din Ajmeri's achievements for spreading Islam are recorded thus:

> A very large number of famous *kuffār* (unbelievers) were honored with the grace of faith because of the blessing of the shaikh. Those who did not embrace Islam offered unsolicited (sic) gifts and presents to his noble presence. Those *kuffār* (unbelievers) who live in that area come every year and place their heads on the dust of that lofty threshold and that full moon of the sky of *mashikhat* (spiritual leadership) and hand over substantial sums of money to the attendants of the sacred tomb and render service.[61]

But the theory that the conversion of Hindus to Islam was the work of the sufis has not only been questioned but discounted. Bausani is critical of the authors who regard the sufis as the missionaries of Islam. He writes that the Truth *haqq* of Islam is not, or not chiefly, a theoretical truth, but also and prevalently, law and customs felt as given by God, and obviously cannot be spread through personal persuasion, but only through the physical conquest of the region to be converted.[62]

He elaborates this by emphasizing that the ethic of primary monotheism, like that of Islam, "is an ethic of power and will"[63] which cannot be taught but only more or less violently imposed.[64] He writes that the Qur'anic verse *la ikrāh fi al dīn*, regarded as a Magna Carta of religious toleration by Muslim commentators, should be "interpreted as a recommendation regarding violent

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[60]*Khazina-al-asfiyah*, quoted in Ikram, ibid., p. 192.
[61]*Siyār al-ārifin*, 13., quoted in Ikram, ibid., p. 203.
[62]Bausani, p. 174.
[63]Ibid., p. 169.
[64]Ibid., p. 175.

or annoying personal proselitism." According to him, the "missionary impulse" is rather a modern phenomenon. He even refers to Iqbal as having shown aversion to Muslim missionaries, as in his poem "Ba muballighi Islam dar Firangistan"[65] and concludes that mass conversions of Hindus resulted through the "assumption of power by a Muslim elite" and not through the preaching of the Sufis, though he admits that conversion was often "perfectioned" subsequently by the influence of the Sufis.[66] Bausani concludes that most of the conversions referred to by Arnold and Ikram took place in areas already under Muslim rule.[67]

Other scholars have also strongly questioned the attribution to the Sufis of the role of converters to Islam mainly because it has been based on literary evidence which, according to them, lacks credibility. Arnold's work has been specially mentioned in this connection as having been based on sources which cannot be relied upon. The main sources on which Arnold had built up his hypothesis of the preaching of Islam were the British gazetteers and the census reports compiled from oral traditions. The problem of gazetteers, Bruce Lawrence points out, is one of threefold biases: an emphasis "on the bizarre features of the native groups whose religious or social practices were being discredited," the gathering of data primarily for the use of tax assessment, and, finally, the gazetteers' imputation of "a missionary role and conversionary intent to earlier foreign conquerors of the subcontinent."[68] The false imputation, with which both Lawrence and Eaton agree, reflects the "mood of Protestant Christianity in the late nineteenth century"[69] rather than that of medieval Islam. Furthermore, oral tradition should not be overemphasized because evidence of this kind is bound to have become distorted in the course of time.

It is not only the British gazetteers who come under criticism. Also strongly questioned is the evidence based on *malfūẓāt* and *tadhkīrāt*, which also assign a missionary role to the Sufi and support the image of the Sufi as one mainly responsible for conversion to Islam. Probably the first to challenge Arnold's thesis was Professor Muhammad Habib, who wrote:

> The wholesale conversions attributed to the Muslim mystics of this period are found in latter day fabrications only and these works must be totally discarded. The Muslim mystics did not bother about

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[65]Ibid., p. 176.

[66]Ibid., p. 185.

[67]Ibid., n.52.

[68]Bruce B. Lawrence, "Early Indo-Muslim Saints and Conversion," in *Islam in Asia*, Y. Friedmann, ed., vol. I, *South Asia*, Jerusalem, 1984, pp. 120-21.

[69]Richard M. Eaton, "Sufi Folk Literature and the Expansion of Indian Islam," *History of Religions*, vol. I, no. 2, November 1974, p. 127.

> conversion; it was no part of their duty. Muslim mysticism in those days was a post-graduate discipline-a discipline exclusively for Mussalmans who had completed their study of the theological and other sciences.[70]

Professor Habib, by one stroke of the pen, thus dismisses the role of the sufi in the conversionary process. The popular *malfūẓāt* attributed to Shaykhs Mo'in-ud-din Ajmeri, Qutbud-din Bakhtiar Kaki, Faridud-din of Ajodhan, and Nizamud-din Auliya, and crediting the Sufis with conversion are dismissed by Habib as pure fabrications. "Not a single case," he writes, "of conversion or attempted conversion by a mystic Shaykh is recorded in our reliable annals."[71]

Like Professor Habib, though without referring to him, Bruce Lawrence in his article "Early Indo-Muslim Saints and Conversion" challenges the myth of the role of the Sufis—a role worked out on the basis of *malfūẓāt* and *tadhkīrāt*, some genuine, others spurious, and all highly exaggerated. However, Lawrence asserts that the early *malfūẓāt* and *tadhkīrāt* do not present the Sufis as active missionaries or as converters to Islam, though "a few instances of conversion" of individuals are recorded.[72] The authors of the early *malfūẓāt* "imputed a latitudinarian outlook to the major Sufi masters." Likewise, the literature covering the fifteenth to nineteenth centuries gives legendary accounts of mass conversions and abounds in anecdotes about the miraculous powers of the Sufis, none of which can be relied upon. Thus, Lawrence concludes, the role of the Shaykh "in the conversionary process is almost impossible to establish on firm historical grounds." The earliest literature lacks information of any mass caste groupings' flocking to the Sufi *khanqahs*. While

> the later literature speaks of encounters between the Shaykhs and Hindus, often resulting in wholesale conversions, the stereotyped nature of these stories suggests that they are retroactive depictions of hypothetical events. Finally, oral traditions, probably centuries old but difficult to trace, were reported by British investigators in the modern period; they alone attest to the conversionary power of the Shaykhs among non-elite members of the Indo-Muslim society.[73]

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[70]Elliot and Dowson, *History of India As Told By Its Historians*, vol. II, (Aligarh, 1952), See Introduction by Mohammad Habib, pp. 57-58.

[71]Ibid.

[72]Lawrence, p. 110.

[73]Ibid., p. 126.

Another criticism is that the Sufi philosophy, being of an "elitist" nature, could hardly appeal to the common man. Eaton, who expounds this view, doubts if an "essentially esoteric mystical tradition might have filtered down to commoners in some sort of comprehensible and appealing form."[74] Moreover, many of the Sufis attached to the courts in Bijapur had little interest in ordinary Muslims, let alone conversion of the Hindus.[75] And yet, in the end, Eaton does not dismiss the Sufi influence among the non-Muslim population of South Asia. In his view, the most important element in the "acculturation among non-elite groups in Deccan society" was the circulation of the Sufi folk literature which "invaded rural households and gradually gained an established place amidst the eclectic religious life of the rural Deccan."[76] The folk poetry was specially popular among women who sang *lurinama* (lullabies) to their children and who also listened to *chakki namas* and *charkhanamas* sung by their mothers.[77] Whereas Lawrence dismisses the Sufi literature as an unreliable source, Eaton perhaps rather unconvincingly places his emphasis on the role of Sufi folk literature in the "expansion of Islam in the Deccan." But if the Sufis had no conversionary role, as asserted by Lawrence and Eaton, how was it possible that the folk literature, known mainly to women, used and sung by them and not yet fully and thoroughly identified by Eaton, played such a vital part in committing people to a *pir* and eventually to Islamic precepts?

Eaton's second argument is that account must also be taken of the supposed supernatural powers of the Sufis, which, in his opinion, attracted lower caste non-Muslims who were even able to enter the outer and inner circles of the Sufis.[78] He also emphasizes the role of the *dargāh*/tomb of the Sufi/*pir* for many votaries, most of them women, who believed that the *barakah* of the Sufi could be transmitted beyond the tomb. These *dargāhs* attracted the "non-elite women living on the fringes of Hindu society" as offering them religious refuge from various worldly concerns.[79] In this way, the *dargāhs* may also have made an important contribution to the spread of Islam. But Eaton has previously emphasized the "elitist" nature of Sufi philosophy as not capable of filtering down to the commoners. How, then, could the lower caste non-Muslims and those too mainly the women, most probably all of them illiterate, enter the inner and outer circles of the Sufis? Moreover, Eaton's information is based on 17th century *malfūẓāt* already dismissed by both Lawrence and Eaton as of doubtful historical authenticity. As for the non-elite women's

[74]Eaton, "Sufi Folk Literature," p. 118.

[75]Richard M. Eaton, *Sufis of Bijapur pp. 1300-1700*, Wisconsin, 1972, p. 149.

[76]Eaton, "Sufi Folk Literature, pp. 126-27.

[77]Ibid.

[78]He bases his account on a 17th Century *malfūzā, Maqsūd al murād*, ibid, p. 125., n.31.

[79]Ibid., p. 126.

devotion to the *dargāhs* and their eventual conversion thereby, Eaton himself admits that he is merely speculating[80] though—as Ricklefs has argued in relation to Java—readiness to tap all available sources of supernatural power is a feature of many societies.[81]

Eaton's presentation of the theory of conversion is like a drama without any actors. The pivotal role of the Sufi has been pushed to the background; the complex web of folk literature and the tomb seem rather impersonal, rather too remote to have been such important agents of conversion. It is true that the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries gave birth to literature praising the lives and activities of the Sufis and recording the conversion anecdotes and miracles. In these anecdotes, the Sufi is not presented as a pedagogue, nor as a preacher, but rather as a miracle worker, a dispenser of boons, a healer, an apportioner of consolation. His image is of one blessed with *barakah*, great spiritual efficacy, able to bring relief to those who approach him or his tomb. Thus, the image of the Sufi is one who can solve the problems, and relieve people of their day-to-day anxieties. Some saints appear as protectors against tigers, against snakes, against calamities; others, for having helped in the expansion of cultivation or for bringing down rain.[82] "Indian Islam," observes Trimingham, "seems to have been a holy-man Islam. These (Sufi) migrants in the Hindu environment acquired an aura of holiness, and it was this which attracted Indians to them rather than formal Islam."[83]

It was not only dead saints who could confer favor and perform miracles. To the Sayyids of Pipli Sayyadan near Girot (Shahpur District) was attributed the power of curing the bite of a mad dog. A pious man in Shahwala near Uttera was known as *vatta bhann* (stone-breaker) because he could crush stones in his hand. When a saint had, by austerity or miraculous power, gained a popular reputation of this kind, it often descended not only to his tomb but to his sons and grandsons, who were revered as *pirs*. These *pirs*,[84] as custodians and descendants of the shrines, often had large followings. With hundreds of thousands of shrines spread all over South Asia,[85] the *pirs* must have also acted as carriers of Islam to their non-Muslim followers. In Hodgson's view, "the most influential preachers may have been *pirs* of the lesser *ṭarīqahs*, humbly working out among the people, more often than those of the great *ṭarīqahs*, though these latter had to claim conversions also. Such lesser preachers, free of the tacit supervision of the upper classes, could

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[80]Ibid.

[81]M. C. Ricklefs, "Six Centuries of Islamization in Java," pp. 100-128, in Levtzion.

[82]Most of the gazetteers and census reports contain these anecdotes. See *Gazetteer of Gurdaspur District* 1891-1892, n.d., p. 63. Also see *Baluchistan Census Report*, 1911, p. 68.

[83]J. S. Trimingham, *The Sufi Orders of Islam*, (Oxford, 1971), p. 22.

[84]*Shahpur District Gazetteer 1917*, Lahore, 1918, pp. 127-28.

[85]In Shahpur alone there were some twenty shrines.

be especially open to encouraging those elements that were looking to a rise in their social status."[86]

That the Sufis were interested in the acceptance of Islamic doctrines and tenets by non-Muslims and in the call to Islam goes without doubt. But they believed that unless the observances and practices of Islam could be reflected in one's own life, it was futile to ask others to accept them. The approach and the methods of the Sufis in regard to conversion were different from those adopted by other converters, or the 'ulama, as was emphasized by Shaykh Nizamud-din Auliya:

> Whatever call to Islam is given by the 'ulama through tongue, the *mashaikhs* do it through action.[87]

It was, therefore, in stages and through a slow and gradual process that the Sufis, especially in Chishtis, attracted non-Muslims to Islam. They believed that if a Hindu was attracted by their company or that of their disciples and asked about *dhikr*, etc., he should be given the necessary instruction without expecting him to become a Muslim.[88] For them, the first stage was to create conditions whereby Hindus and Muslims were friendly to each other. Then those who showed an inclination or who reposed trust in the Sufi should be instructed in *dhikr* and the discipline of *murāgbah* (contemplation) because *dhikr* itself, on account of its *khaṣṣīyah* (inherent power), would attract them to the fold of Islam.[89] A full dose of Islamic tenets, all at once, would have been too strong for the Hindus to swallow.[90] Accordingly, Shaykh Nizamud-din Auliya observed that it was essential to have a mild approach in matters of *dīn*. Human nature cannot accept too many restrictions of tenets and observances all at once. When inviting a people to accept Islam, it is against human psychology to expect them to observe all the *aḥkamāt* (laws) of *Shari'ah*.[91] Thus, conversion was not a sudden change of "heart and mind," but, rather, a gradual, imperfect process of Islamization through impregnation of a society with Islamic concepts, ideas, and ethos.[92] This impregnation

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[86]Marshall G. S. Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam. The Expansion of Islam in the Middle Periods*, (London, 1974), pp. 557-58.

[87]Nizam-ud-din Auliya quoted in K. A. Nizami, *Tarikh-i-Mashaikh-i-Chisht*, (Karachi, 1983), vol. I, pp. 385-86.

[88]Ibid.

[89]Shah Kalimaljah Dehalvi, *Maktabat-i-Kalimi*, 74, quoted in ibid., p. 387.

[90]Maududi, pp. 37-38.

[91]Nizam-ud-din Auliya, quoted in Nizami, *Tarikhi-i-Mashaikh-i-Chisht*, p. 387.

[92]Maududi, pp. 36-38. The Holy Prophet is said to have instructed that while inviting *ahl al kitāb* to Islam, first invite them to recite the *kalimah*, then tell them about the obligatory prayers, then about *sadaqah* (alms giving). See Nizami, p. 387.

was certainly the work of the Sufis and was, perhaps, more effective than mere "acculturation" of the non-elites, as suggested by Eaton.[93] The Sufis, especially the Chishtis, living unostentatious, austere, and self-abnegating lives while right in the midst of the people and in active contact with them, could hardly fail to influence them. "Unless the saints of a *silsilah*," writes Professor Nizami, "identified themselves with the problems and worries of the people, as well as their hopes and their aspirations – they floated in a vacuum and failed to strike roots into the soil."[94] Reports of the piety and humanity of the saints spread by word of mouth like wild flower scent in a forest. Who could withhold admiration from a man who gave away to the poor all the offerings received by him while living himself at starvation level and sleeping with a staff as his pillow on a cot, only partly covered because the blanket was of inadequate length; a man who would live on wild fruits and berries but would not accept state land grants; a man who would not retire to pray unless he had met and solaced everyone who came with his problems to him?[95] Slowly and gradually, the piety and the devotion of the Sufis began to attract wider groups of people. Mystical "fraternities" began to emerge. "This must have been," writes Professor Schimmel, "a response to an inner need of the community that was not being met spiritually by the scholasticism of orthodox theologians; people craved a more intimate and personal relationship with God. . ."[96] This "inner need" must have received a measure of satisfaction, a fulfillment, some contentment, at the hands of the Sufis. Otherwise, how can we explain the high veneration and regard in which the Sufis were held, even by the Hindus?

The Sufis owed their first allegiance to Islam. It was through Islam and from their own personal experience of the one great Reality that they found spiritual contentment and peace. It was for Islam that some of them led a life of austerity, denying themselves the comforts of life. It was only natural that they felt happy if non-Muslims became Muslims, and still ¼happier if Muslims became better Muslims. It was not their way to strive for conversions, going about from village to village, preaching and converting, but the very strong and unbroken tradition among tribes living in and around Pak-Pattan and claiming to have been converted to Islam by Baba Farid cannot be lightly set aside.[97] The deep, powerful, spiritual attraction emanating from his *kaccha* house proved to be an irresistible force; even long after his death, the charisma and *barakah* of the shaykh continued to work and

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[93]Ibid, p. 14.

[94]Nizami, *Religion and Politics in India During the Thirteenth Century*, p. 178.

[95]Nizami, *Life of Shaikh Farij-ad-Din Ganj-i-shakar* (Aligarh, 1955), p. 41.

[96]A. Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*, (North Carolina, 1978), p. 231.

[97]Nizami. *Life and Times*, p. 107.

influence the people. Certainly, the Sufis showed the way; they set an example; they became the models of what Islam stood for. They had touched the hearts of the people, and the next step was in many cases conversion. The intermediary of conversion might well be somebody else. But the train of psychic and mental change was set into motion by the great early mystics. In a major way, they were instrumental in the acceptance of Islam amongst non-Muslims.[98]

Even the most ardent and vigorous propagandists would not have succeeded in the call to Islam had it not been for the egalitarian and humanistic concept and practice of Islam and the simple doctrines of its faith. As against the complex web of caste restrictions and disabilities and the "oppressive social conditions" imposed by Hinduism on certain sections of its followers, in Islam there was no "hereditary sacerdotalism" of the priest,[99] no rigid distinction of caste, and no exclusion of its members from worship.[100] The Hindu and the Muslim lived side by side in the village, in the *qasha* and in the town. The presence of the Muslim neighbor and the practice by him of his faith must have created a certain doubt, a certain question mark, and a certain dissatisfaction at least among some Hindus who belonged to a faith in theory and yet, in practice, were not entitled to its full membership. Moreover, Islam with its doctrines that all men are equal in the sight of God must have presented far greater attractions to those who were either outcasts or suffering discrimination. Islam offered both a legal and social expression of equality despite K. M. Ashraf's observation that "with his conversion to Islam, the average Muslim did not change his old environment, which was deeply influenced by caste distinctions and general social exclusiveness."[101] In fact, the convert to Islam escaped from the sense of degradation previously experienced by him. He would "no longer be scorned as a social leper; the mosque would be open to him; the Mullah would perform his religious ceremonies, and when he died, he would be accorded a decent burial."[102] It was because of these advantages that "very many ancestors of the Bengal Muhammadans voluntarily gave their adhesion to Islam."[103] A contemporary observer, not friendly to Islam, made the following observations:

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[98]The same can be said about Baba Farid's two predecessors, Shaikh Mu'in-ud-din Ajmeri and Shaikh Qutb-ud-din Bakhtiyar Kazki, and his two successors, Shaikh Nizamud-din Auliya and Shaikh Nasir-ud-din Chirag.

[99]*Census of India*, 1881, Report, vol. III, (Calcutta, 1883), pp. vii-ix.

[100]Imtiaz Ahmad and other anthropologists disagree with the contention. See M. K. Siddiqui, "Caste among the Muslims of Calcutta," in Imtiaz Ahmad, ed. *Caste and Social Stratification among Muslims in South Asia*, (Delhi, 1973).

[101]K. M. Ashraf, "Life and Conditions of the People of Hindustan (1200-1550)," quoted in Hardy, p. 89.

[102]*Census of India*, 1901, vol. I, p. 384.

[103]Ibid., p. 385.

> We have ourselves seen outcasts *sic* from Hinduism—men in whom the weight of social prejudice had stamped out all that should distinguish men—who became Mahommedans and became at the same time self-assertive, courageous, and independent citizens.[104]

And yet it was repeatedly observed by the compilers of the gazetteers and census reports that the convert to Islam was a Muslim but in name, that he retained a very large admixture of Hindu practices, and that he followed Hindu rituals not only on festive occasions but also in his day-to-day life. Some of the converted Muslim tribes even retained Hindu Brahmans "to conduct their marriages . . . only adding the Muhammadan ritual as a legal precaution." Some converts even secretly retained idols in their homes.[105] Thus, according to British analysts, "conversion was seldom due to conviction," for the Muslim convert observed "the feasts of both religions and the fasts of neither."[106] On the basis of such reports, Ibbetson concluded that the only change which conversion brought was that the Muslim convert "shaved his scalp lock and the upper edge of his moustache, repeated the Muslim creed in the mosque, and added the Muslim to the Hindu wedding ceremony."[106] Therefore, for Ibbetson, "Change of religion in India means a change of community within which the convert may claim fellowship rather than of conduct and inner life."[107] Ibbetson's assertion is not convincing for, though the change of fellowship was immediate, the change of inner life and beliefs was gradual but certain. The initiation of a convert into the Islamic community and creed is a simple process. It comes about by the declaration of the *shahādah*: there is no god but God and Muhammad is his Prophet. It is this, points out Bausani, "the legal, voluntaryist aspect of the *shahādah*, that counts more than its theologico-dogmatic contents, and the voluntaryist's sincerity may well be present even in one who does not clearly understand its theological implications."[108] It is, therefore, by declaration of the *shahādah* that the convert changes his old fellowship for the membership of a new communion that is essentially spiritual and social in character. It is true that, after conversion, a Muslim, while offering his congregational prayers, could do no more than "imitate the movements" of his "better informed neighbor,"[109] and that he was not able to observe all that was required of him. But he still remained a Muslim, though—according to some—a bad Muslim.

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[104] *The Spectator*, 15 October 1887.
[105] *Census of India*, 1881, vol. III, p. XX.
[106] Ibbetson, vol. I, Calcutta, p. 178.
[107] Ibid. Also see Hardy,.
[108] Bausani, p. 194.
[109] *Census of India, 1901*, p. 375.

There is another factor which escapes the notice of non-Muslim scholars. In congregational prayers like those held on Fridays, *'Id al fiṭr* or *'Id al aḍha*, the usual *nīyah* (intention) which a Muslim undertakes is that he is offering the prayer with his face towards the Ka'bah and behind the Imam. He, therefore, conveniently leaves all his shortcomings, as noticed by Ibbetson, to be accounted for by the Imam. Thus, in the earlier stage, when a Hindu became a Muslim, all that he could do was, perhaps, recite the *shahādah* or offer his prayers, though in an unsatisfactory way. He was probably like the Muslim child in England or Europe, in certain Muslim homes, who can do no more than recite the creed (and that, too, with difficulty) and, therefore, needs follow-up lessons.

These follow-up lessons were provided by the village *mullah*. It was perhaps because of him that, in the Assam valley, "any Muhammadan peasant, when asked, will be able to repeat a few *surahs* of prayer in Arabic with a pronunciation of surprising accuracy, though his explanations of their supposed meaning are often ingeniously wide of the mark."[110] Gradually, one notices a great deal of improvement in the observances of religious practices. Referring to the Muslims of Attock, the gazetteer of 1907 noted:

> They practice circumcision, repeat the *kalima*, or profession of faith, marry by *nikah*, bury their dead, and regard Mecca and Medina as holy places of pilgrimage. The pious pray regularly in the mosques, keep the fast in Ramzan, and give away part of their income in charity, but the ordinary agriculturist is very lax in these observances and is ignorant of the tenets and principles of the religion he professes. The people are, however, thoroughly convinced of the truth of their own creed, though they are by no means intolerant and fanatical.[111]

The 'ulama were the carriers of knowledge in Islamic tenets and precepts. According to Professor Nizami, even before 1857, and after the decline of Mughal power, the 'ulama, scholars and the mystics pursued their academic and religious interests enthusiastically. The *madāris* and the *khangahs* of Delhi were flourishing centers for students and seekers of knowledge on religious and other subjects.[112] The 'ulama were not oblivious to the new challenges posed by the change of political circumstances, the introduction of Western knowledge and civilization, and, especially, the proselytizing propaganda and activities of the Christian missionaries. They took up the challenge in defending

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[110]Gait, vol. I, Shillong, 1892, p. 53.

[111]*Attock District Gazetteer 1907*, vol. XXIXA, (Lahore, 1909), p. 102.

[112]Nizami, *Tarikhi Maqalat*, Delhi, 1966, pp. 210-57.

Islam against the attacks of such missionaries as Karl Gottlieb Pfander and J. T. Thompson of the Baptist Missionary Society. The years 1833-1857 were the period of "active Muslim hostility to the preaching of Christianity," when learned Muslims took upon themselves to "counter the activities of the Protestant missionaries in their midst by writing letters, books, and newspaper articles in defence of Islam."[113]

If the 'ulama defended Islam against Christian attacks, they also carried out a movement to purify Islam of its syncretic and idolatorous borrowings. The pioneers of this reformation were 'ulama like Shah Wali Allah, Shah Abdul Aziz, Syed Ahmad of Rai Barelli, Shah Ismail, the leaders of the Faraizi movement, Haji Shari'at Ullah, and numerous other preachers. The 'ulama initiated a movement with a twofold mission: on the one hand, they expounded the pristine form of Islam; on the other, they carried out proselytizing activities. They traveled long distances while instructing people to abandon idolatorous practices. Their activities were, perhaps, more organized and widespread in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries than ever before. As a result, "every village of which Musalmans own any considerable portion has its mosque, often of the adobe, while all the grosser and more open idolatries have been discontinued."[114] In Bengal, the lower classes were most attracted by their preaching. Elsewhere, too, the response was positive:

> In cities, almost every mosque has its school where boys are taught the rudiments of their faith, and the smaller villages in rural tracts are regularly visited by itinerant Maulvis.[115]

These activities were not restricted to any particular region. From one end to the other, the maulvis were busy:

> Recently, religious teachers have become more numerous among them; and some Meos now keep the Ramzan fast, build village mosques, say their prayers, and their wives wear trowsers instead of the Hindu petticoat—all signs of a religious revival.[116]

The *Madāris* of Dacca, Chittagong, Calcutta and Rajshahi produced hundreds of students each year. These, after completing their Islamic education, adopted the profession of mullahs. "There is not a village," was reported from

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[113]A. A. Powell, "Muslim Reaction to Missionary Activity in Agra," in *Indian Society and the Beginning of Modernization* c. 1830-1850, C. H. Philips and M. D. Wainwright, eds., London, 1976, pp. 141-57.

[114]Ibbetson, 1881, p. 142, para. 276.

[115]*Census of India*, 1901, vol. I, pt. 1, p. 373.

[116]*Census of India*, 18, p. xx. The extract is from Channing's report on Gurgon.

Bengal, "inhabited by Muhammadans which is not periodically visited by the preachers and maulvis." As volunteers in the cause of Islam, they went from village to village and were welcomed to address the inhabitants. "The Hindus generally attend such assemblies and listen to the preachers. The doctrines of Islam are simple enough for everybody to understand, and some of the Hindus, who appreciate the good lessons and probably those who have not many relatives to induce them to hang back, renounce Hinduism and embrace Islam."[117] The preachers brought about astonishing results in converting Hindus to Islam in Bengal. Their work, it was reported, was "the chief cause of the gradual increase of the Muhammadan population."[118] Conversions on a large scale were also reported from other parts of South Asia. Sayyid Ahmad of Rai Barelli is said to have converted a large number of people.[119] During his stay in Calcutta, Maulana 'Abdul Hai delivered sermons as a result of which 10 to 15 Hindus embraced Islam every day.[120] Between 1901 and 1911, no fewer than 40,000 non-Muslims were reported to have embraced Islam in the Punjab because of the activities of the maulvis.[121] In South India, 45,000 Cherumans entered the fold of Islam between 1871 and 1881.[122] In the decade ending in 1911, there was an increase of 14 percent among the Mapillas alone as a result of conversion. Muslim organizations like the Minnat-al-Islam Sabha and Jami'at-i-Tabligh-al-Islam were actively engaged in conversion work.[123] In these conversions, the 'ulama and the maulvis played a leading role. The change of religion from Hinduism to Islam is attributed to the simple tenets of Islam and to its concept of equality and brotherhood. Islam "appealed to the people, and it derived the great mass of its converts from the poor. It brought in a higher conception of God, and a nobler idea of brotherhood of man. It offered to the teeming low castes . . . who had sat for ages abject on the outermost pale of Hindu community, a free entrance into a new social organization."[124]

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[117] *Census of India*, 1901, vol. VI, *The Lower Provinces of Bengal and Their Feudatories*, pt. 1 (extracts from District Reports regarding causes of Conversion to Muhammadanism), Appendix II, pp. x-xix. Conversions were reported from Midnapore, 24-Parganas, Jessore, Dinajpur, Jalpaigur, Tippera, Noakhali, Muzaffarpur, Darbhanga, Champaran, Monghyr, Hoogly and other districts. The conversion of Brahmans and Kayasthas was also reported from certain districts. Among other causes, the preaching by the maulvis was an important factor in the conversionary process.

[118] Ibid.

[119] Ja'far Thanesari, *Sawaneh-i-Ahmadi*, Ambala, 1914 (2d ed). p. 72.

[120] *Sirat-i-Sayyid Ahmad Shahid*, pp. 232-233. Also see Ghulam Rasul Mehr, *Sayyid Ahmad Shahid*, Lahore, vol. I, p. 217.

[121] Titus, pp. 50-51.

[122] Ibid.

[123] Ibid.

[124] W.W. Hunter, quoted in Arnold, p. 283.

The spread of Islam in South Asia was the result of a combination of factors. Its acceptance by non-Muslims cannot be attributed to the use of force or the "proselytizing sword." The prospects of political advancement and greed for position and power could win but nominal adherents. Conversion in order to escape the imposition of *jizyah* or the confiscation of property could only bring a handful of wealthy or upper-class converts. The exercise of political authority by the Muslims was certainly an advantage, but no logical relationship can be established between the exercise or longevity of Muslim political power and the growth of Muslim population in various regions of South Asia. It appears that medieval South Asia, according to the available evidence, was rather lukewarm toward conversion; the Muslim rulers did not show much enthusiasm in attempting to convert people. It can be argued that the popular understanding of Islam, its "monotheistic and unitarian position"—a "single Creator-god, to be worshipped by each person for himself on the basis of revelation that had been given to a famous prophet whom millions already acknowledged . . . [made it] at once intelligible and plausible."[125] But this, too, cannot have been an overriding factor. The role of the Sufis in creating an Islamic ethos and attracting people toward Islam by their piety and high ideals was certainly an important element in the growth of the votaries to Islam, though this has also been strongly challenged. But it is likely that Islam gained its largest number of adherents in the nineteenth century. The natural rate of growth—an accelerated birth rate—was an important factor.[126] So was the conversion carried out by the 'ulama. But the call to Islam was, in itself, a powerful incentive which drew the convert from an idolatrous system to the inner spiritual fulfilment of a religion which gave each person a better status than had been previously enjoyed. Dr. Robert A. Hume, a committed Christian, observed:

> The religious history of India shows that, though considerable numbers of Hindus from the uneducated and lower classes became Mohammedans, the greatest service of Islam was not to make converts but, without intention, to inspire some devout and

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[125]Hodgson, p. 535.

[126]The increase in the Muslim population was attributed to widow re-marriage among them, lower rate of infant mortality, better Muslim diet and physique, the prolificness of their women, and the marriage of a large proportion of women of child bearing age. Between 1881 and 1931, there was an increase of 55% in the Muslim population as against approximately 25% among Hindus. See *Census of India,* 1931, p. 390, para. 171. Also see M.A. Rahim, *Social and Cultural History of Bengal*, vol. 1, pp. 57-64. Also see G.A. Oddie (ed). *op. cit.*, Appendix A, India: (Population by Religion (1881-1971) pp. 190-193., & N.V. Sovani, *The Population Problem in India: A Regional Approach*, Poona, 1942.

thoughtful Hindus to see the fundamental truth of monotheism and to invite new reforming movements.[127]

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[127]R.A. Rume, *An Interpretation of India's Religious History*, (London, 1911), p. 193. Also see Xavier De Planhol, *The World of Islam*, (French ed., 1957, English Translation, 1959), (London, Third printing, 1976), Chapter III, (Geographical Factors in the Expansion of Islam), pp. 101-125. Hodgson does not agree with Planhol's theory of the association of Islamic expansion with the Arid Zone. See Hodgson, *op. cit.*, p. 541, fn. 1.