

Expansion of Sciences During the Koshanid Period

Abdul Hai Habibi

Throughout history those countries which are entities and have politically defined territorial limits have been the venue of a whole gamut of events. Doubtlessly these countries have contracted and expanded. The basic factors responsible for such expansions and contractions were always economic and political.

Every event could be considered the effect of a manifold causes with history narrating the story of what has happened. But in every nidus of events, anywhere in the world, two basic elements, the land and the people, with which history is intimately linked, stand out supreme.

If we think that history is the product of these two elements, then disputes among different people as to who is to bequeath historical achievements would have been resolved. The frontiers of every country, in the course of history, have expanded and shrunk, so that at present times, because of historical factors and the interaction of events, they have come to have politically fixed limits. Therefore, all events that have, in the past, occurred in a certain country are the legacy of the people inhabiting it.

If a nation is going to write a history of its own it should be written with the present territorial limits of the country in view. But, as many historical events have origins in more than one country, and have produced results affecting lands beyond the confines of their origin, the causes and results of political, cultural and social phenomena cannot be confined to the present day borders of any single country.

Thus, in order to ensure continuity in his research, the historian is entitled to weigh and appraise past events and their causes in the countries bordering his native land. Neighboring countries, under the influence of the same political, military and intellectual trends, are apt to have a common destiny. Moreover, neighboring people influence each other culturally and socially, with their ideas intermingling with those of others. This has resulted in the establishment of identical cultural patterns, resulting in understanding and commonness of interests in several adjoining countries.

The history of Afghanistan, just before the advent of Islam, deals with greater Khorasan and the countries bordering it. In pre-Islamic era this land was the breeding place or a roundabout of civilizations and cultures, thought and arts.

The famous English historian, Toynbee, in his book, *Between the Oxus and Jumna*, says: "Afghanistan has been the link between southwest Asia, the Indo-Pakistan

subcontinent, Central Asia and Eastern Asia...Afghanistan has been a highway for migrating people and for expanding civilizations and religions, and it has been a key point in the structure of empires.”

The examples of Afghanistan’s role as a focal point in each of these aspects are so numerous that an exhaustive catalogue would fill a volume and would quite overload a chapter. From this scholarly analysis of Toynbee we can make out that for thousands of years Afghanistan was instrumental in spreading to the lands bordering it, that is, India, Transoxiana and Central Asia, its own legacy and that which it had absorbed from outside.

Likewise Afghanistan’s civilization assimilated, as its basic elements and a variety of alien patterns, transforming it according to her own natural and economic trends and giving it a special Khorasanian and Afghan flavor.

Excavation of the temple of Kanishka the great (circa 160 A.D.) at Surkh Kotal recently has produced evidence that the Koshanids were influenced by the older Greco-Bhuddic culture of Afghanistan. At the same time the Koshanids had been subject to the influence of the ancient creed of Afghanistan, Zoroastrianism. With regards to the genesis of the tough culture and arts of the people of Afghanistan the Koshanid period could be considered as a ‘special era’. From the later years of the 4th century A.D. the temples contained relics belonging to creeds such as Buddhism, sun-worship, and fire-worship.

Buddhist remains have been found in the Khowath temple of Wardak, and relics of sun-worship in the temple of Baghlan, beside statues and idols of kings. These discoveries have prompted archeologists to express the opinion that idols of kings were put in these temples for worshipping. The uncovering of statues of Kanishka from the Surkh Kotal temple of Baghlan has led to further confirmation of this view.

In an old Persian manuscript of unknown origin, it has been stated that there was a temple near the Bamian gate of the old city of Ghazni, in which the idol of the great grandfather of the Loyak of Ghazni had been placed. When Muslim iconoclasts arrived there for the first time, the last king of the Loyaks put this idol in a silver coffin and interred it in a grave in the yard of the temple which was later converted to a mosque by the Muslims.

Even though this last statement is biased, yet it fits in excellently with the discovery of the Koshanid statues in the Mahadizh temple of Baghlan. Several other evidences, which confirm the aforementioned claim, are also at hand.

The first is that Hiuen Tsang, in May 630 A.D., in his description of Kapisa says: “to the south of Kapisa on the Aruna mountains is located the temple of Spirit of Heaven, Suna. People worship it and every year princes and peasants from near and far, come to attend the festival held in its honor. They bring with them gold and silver, horses and sheep and precious articles to offer the holy spirit.”

The Suna of Hiuen Tsang is, without any doubt, the same temple of Zoon described by Bilarzari. after 656 CE. This temple was captured by Abdul Rahman Samra, who smashed the idol of Zoon, which was made of pure gold and had eyes of ruby. According to Arab lexicographers the word Zoon means idol and idol temple. The word has usage in Arabic literature.

From the following it is evident that the idol of Zoon was present in the Sunagir temple of Zamindawar. A marble statue of Surya, the sun god, was also found during excavations carried out at Kotal-e Khairkhana, 12 miles north of Kabul. Hacking has identified this temple with the temple of Surya.

Vestiges of the appellation of Surya are found in the names of the royal Suri dynasty of Ghor and the Suri and Suriakhel Afghan tribes. The presence of the name of the sun god, Surya, in the name of royal Suris of Ghor has caused its sanctity to be transferred to this family.

The name of the Rozi tribe, living to the north of present day Herat, and of Rozabad or Surabad, a historical city of Khorasan, to which the famous exposition of the Koran in Dari, Surabidi, also belonged, have all been derived from that historical etymological root. According to Christensen Surya was the Aryan sun god.

Our second confirmation is that in the beginning of the Islamic era there were several Shahbahars in Afghanistan. The word Shahbahar is still extant in the names Shebar, Shaibar and Khaibar. Its altered form Bahar has been derived from Wahara of Sanskrit. In Persian literature this word had the meaning of temple and idol temple.

The author Al-Yakobi in Albuldan describes the burning of the idol in Shahbahar temple of Kabul at the hands of Ibrahim bin Jibriel in 790 CE. Another author, Abdul Hai Gardezi, has also mentioned Shahbahar of Kabul during the same year.

Hieun Tsang visited the royal temple of Shahbahar in Kapisa to the north of Kabul in 630 CE. In his book he says that the Halo of Grandeur (ancient symbol of divine grandeur of the Monarchs of Ballah) shines on its stupa from the fall of night till the break of day. Therefore we can assert that the word Shahbahar is an exponent of a creed in which the idols and statues of kings were placed in these temples side by side

with the statues of Buddha, the sacred fire and the idols of the god, Surya.

And lastly in the stone inscription of Baghlan of around 160 CE the words XOADE and XOADEO have been used to mean an emperor. The coins of the Kabul Shah kings carry the word KHUDUWAYAKA as the name of a Kabul Shah, who reigned during the 7th century CE. The same word exists in the names of dynasties such as Gozankhudah, Samankhudah, and Bukharakhudah, as chronicled by Arab historians and geographers, like Ibn Khurdazba, Tabari and Yaqubi. In later times Firdausi also mentions Kabul Khudai and Zabul Khudai in his Shahanama.

In ancient and pre-Islamic Afghanistan the word Khudai stood for god-king and was used along with the names of kings; but after conversion to Islam and the adoption of the doctrine of unity by the people, this word was reserved for the one and only God. Instead the word shah, having the form of shad in the old Dari inscription of Baghlan, was used for king.

From ancient Arian tales and literary works, of which the Shahanamas in Pahlavi and Dari are examples, it could be inferred that the old ethos of Balkh, in sacred fire, Surya worship, Buddhism and the remnants of Greek tradition merged together with the king-worship of Paishdadian Aryans to produce a special brand of religion and thought in the Koshanid era. It is for this reason that students of the arts and crafts of this era, like Monsieur Foucher and Herman Goetz, consider the Koshanid school of arts as the special work and creation of this land, occupying a place between the Indian school of art and the Achaemenian school. This is true; because the art of the Koshanid period, rising and falling before the beginning of Islam, was entirely mothered by this land. It has many peculiarities which distinguish it from the artistic trends to the east and west.

The designs engraved on the idols of Gandahara (present day Kandahar), because of their artistic value, were considered to be a symbol of beauty and elegance by the Dari poets of Afghanistan. If all the references made to this subject in Dari literature are gleamed together, they might well fill a booklet, but here a few couplets will suffice.

A couplet from Sanai:

A creator ought to be omniscient and self-existent,
To produce by his art, the idols of Kandahar.

While eulogizing Sultan Mahmud Farukhi says:

The idol of Kandahar has no sugar lips,
Your sugar lips are the idols of Kandahar.

According to Toynbee, Gandaharan art along with the stupa-building tradition of

Kanishka and his successors, penetrated the heart of the Indian sub-continent and has left a deep imprint on Dari literature in the Islamic period.

From the perspective of religion, art, politics and administration Afghanistan, just before the advent of Islam, was, as in the past, peculiar to itself. Despite the fact that in that age, 7th century CE, it did not have a firmly established centrality, and was divided into numerous principalities, yet the torch of knowledge and civilization shone, though weakly, in every direction.

In the second half of the 7th Century Islam reached Khorasan and spread to Seistan and the heart of Afghanistan though no written record of the internal condition of Afghanistan at that time exist. Yet the works of later Arab writers and historiographers reveal many interesting and significant aspects of life then, telling us that Afghanistan possessed a strong culture and a fairly high level of thought. In order to prove this assertion we will resort to citing some facts.

First, Hiuen Tsang around 630 CE had on many occasions paid visits to the courts of the rulers of this land and studied the way they administered their domain. He mentions the existence of an organized system of administration, revenues, paid soldiery, judges, other government officials, irregular paid troops, and duties on the use of roads and bridges. The Chinese pilgrim divides the royal duties into four categories: first, attending to the affairs of the state and conducting sacrifices; second, helping people and paying the ministers and functionaries of the government; third, encouraging and rationalizing able and accomplished individuals; fourth, giving alms and doing good to the clergy. This account by Hieun Tsang reveals that at that time the old culture and administration setup of the Koshanids still survived, and state affairs were conducted in an organized manner.

Second, the rulers of this land, having inherited an ancient culture and tradition, had independent views of their own regarding kingship and statesmanship. For instance, in 737 CE, when Asad bin Abdullah ruled over Khorasan, a farmer from Herat went to the court of Balkh and presented precious gifts to the ruler. In an address, on the occasion, the farmer said: "God bless the Amir, we from Agam were for a period of 400 years without a heavenly book to guide us, or a prophet to convey to us the message of the Almighty; but we were able to become masters of the world with these qualities: endurance, wisdom, dignity; and anyone who having these dispositions went anywhere, God bestowed success upon him." The rustic of Herat said that these qualities are the qualities of kings. When Asad heard his wise words he called him the noblest farmer of

Khorasan.

Third, Al-Baladhuri, around 883 CE, in *Futuh-al-Buldan* has made remarks about Ratbel, the administrator of Zabulistan. Ratbel was a contemporary of Sulaiman bin Abdul Malik (714 CE) and Yasid bin Mudrik bin Muhalab, the ruler of Seistan. Baladhuri says: "He preferred fulfilment of one's promise, dignity, severity and toughness in statesmanship to outward civility."

He once asked his contemporary Arabs: "what happened to those men who were lean and dark-complexioned, whose countenance spoke of punctuality in prayers and who came to us wearing shoes made of leaves." Ratbel said, "though you are more handsome and graceful, they were more loyal than you are and were forceful in their attack." In this dialogue Ratbel's deep inclination toward the first Muslims who were virtuous, simple, possessed a higher moral character, toughness and steadfastness can be observed. He admired the first Muslim conquerors for their high moral qualities, but has criticized his contemporaries for their inability to rule efficiently.

Fourth, in Khorasan of that day Zoroastrians also possessed a developed culture and were famous for their integrity and high level of thinking. The Muslim rulers have time and again benefited from their advice.

During the reign of Marwan al-Hakim-e Awami, after 683 CE Seistan had a learned ruler, Abdul Aziz bin Abdullah bin Amer, during whose rule lived Rustam bin Mehr-e Hurmuzad-e Majoos, a theologian from Seistan who was famous for his erudition. The Arab ruler said to him, "the narrators of the land have wise sayings, tell us some." Rustam spoke to him on morals, statesmanship and education in these words: "the friendship of the unwise, if based on pretense, is not meaningful, and his devotion is only hypocrisy. He seeks his good in the ill of others. Friendship between two people can be long-lasting only when there are no calumnations involved. The wise are always strong, but only as long as ambition has not overcome them. The king's affairs and those of his kingdom could be correct only when his ministers are fair and honest."

Fifth, the people of Afghanistan, in the period just before Islam, were familiar with all the sciences of their time. According to Al-Beruni in the last days of the Ratbel dynasty of Zabulistan, Ratbel had sent an astrologer to the court of Haroon. The same interest in the sciences is observed up to 625 CE in the court of the Kabulshah. Al-Beruni says that Ograbuth, the teacher and guardian of Anandpal son of Jaipala, the last Kabulshah, had authored the book, *Shikhat Parat*, in astronomy.

The cities of Khorasan had large libraries where scholars were busy in research.

Ibn-e Taifur Khorasani in Tarikh-e Baghdad says: “from the time of Yazdgard, Merv had a large library.” Utabi, the famous poet of the Abassid times, who had gone to Merv to copy the books used to say, “words are ours but concepts are theirs.” According to Carl Brockelmann, Ibadi has visited the countries of Agam three times and saw the libraries of Merv and Neshapur and read the books there.

Once the people of Afghanistan and the neighboring lands possessed a brilliant civilization. Throughout history they have produced civilizations, cultures and artistic styles peculiar to themselves. The historical evidence cited above is one good testimony to that ancient legacy. It was this creative and artistic talent of the people which enabled them to take an active part in the making and spread of Islamic civilization, and master abstract disciplines, such as history, literature, Tafsir (explaining the meaning of the Quran), Hadith (words and actions of Prophet Mohammad) and Fiqa (Islamic jurisprudence) and sciences such as mathematics, astronomy, physics, geometry and medicine. In this way they spread their knowledge and Arab and Khorasani culture all over the Indian sub-continent.