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ISLAMIZATION IN PAKISTAN

A View from the Countryside

Richard Kurin

From reading the Pakistani newspapers, watching television, and listening to the pronouncements of government officials, one gets the impression that Islamization is a major goal of Pakistani society and that there is a broad consensus concerning its relevance and desirability. Islamization is a popular topic in Pakistan—the subject of speeches, books, articles, conversations, and even programs at the U.S. Information Service American Centers. Where it is found, critical analysis of the present government-sponsored “Islamization” program is focused on three central questions. First, how relevant is “Islamization” to various segments of Pakistani society beyond those of officialdom and such organizations as the Jamaat-i-Islam? Second, what does “Islamization” mean and how is the issue of varying interpretations and modes of interpretation to be resolved? And finally, how is “Islamization” to apply to specific issues and policies, such as national development, women’s rights, and scientific education?

To be sure, there is considerable debate in each of these areas. Polar positions are easily characterized. For some there is agreement and enthusiastic support by everyone for Islamization, while for others Islamization is a fraud, a tool used by a dictatorial regime. For some Islamization is self-evident and has a single meaning held by everyone in the Muslim community, while for others Islamization is a vague concept with different communities and sects holding different and often contradictory interpretations of what it entails. For some Islamization means putting all women in *purdah* (i.e., formally separating them from the world of men), promul-

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gating religious modes of education, and strictly adhering to *shariat* law (Islamic legal code), while for others Islamization means expanding gender role equality, pursuing scientific knowledge, and applying traditional moral principles to fit contemporary circumstances.

While such differences abound, it is clear that Islamization, at least at the level of national discourse, is a core symbol for the presentation of products and issues. How else to explain the current vogue of Islamic clothing, Islamic soft drinks, Islamic economics, Islamic medicine, Islamic television, and that favorite, the Islamic bomb. Issues associated with women's roles, education, development, and national identity preceded the Zia ul-Haq regime. Yet in current discourse such issues have been redefined and reconceptualized, calling upon Islamic terms and concepts, Islamic sources and bases of legitimacy for their resolution.

But what about Islamization in rural areas where the government is more distant, newspapers unread, and televisions few and far between? Is Islamization even relevant, let alone an idiom for debate? What does Islamization mean in the countryside? And with what issues is it articulated?

Pakistan's villages constitute the home of the vast majority of the country's population. And yet the voices of villagers are either unavailable to or ignored by both Pakistani elites and foreign scholars who tend to be urban centered. Government officials, the media, and Pakistani scholars tend to be quite prescriptive rather than descriptive so that empirical research for social analysis is often neglected. As a result, rural perspectives are neither articulated nor well publicized.

In this article I report on several events and perceptions extant in a village in the newly organized Okara District of Punjab. I studied this village intensively from 1977 to 1978, revisited it in 1979, and returned there in the summer of 1983 for follow-up work. I will not argue that what I found is typical of all Pakistani villages—such a claim would be indefensible. What I have to offer are perspectives from various villagers and how such perspectives relate to national Islamization policy.

The village, Chakpur, was founded 50 years ago as part of a canal colony. Ethnically there are two main groups, one primarily engaged in agriculture, the other as *seipis* or village service people. In 1979, the population of Chakpur was about 1400; in 1983 it was about 1650. Village lands amount to about 1,100 acres of generally sandy soil irrigated mainly by tubewells first installed in the Ayub era. The main crops are wheat and rice, sugar cane, and cotton. Agricultural modernization is evidenced in widespread, though tempered, use of new seeds and chemical fertilizers. There is usually a surplus of both grains and cash crops, and this is usually marketed in nearby mills and government collection centers. The village,

founded upon the *pattidari* (shareholder) land tenure system, is dominated by descendants of 24 original shareholders. These families constitute about one-third of all villagers. While *seipis*—cobblers, barbers, carpenters, and others—are dependent upon these families for their livelihood, there are not great discrepancies in wealth within the village.

Chakpur is not isolated from places and events surrounding it. A new metaled road has been built to replace the dirt path that connects the village to the main county road. More people are working in nearby towns, although the number is still small. Several villagers have gone to Lahore, 100 miles and five hours away, to search for employment. Since my previous visit in 1979, the village had been electrified. Many villagers have radios and keep abreast of provincial and national developments. Two villagers have journeyed abroad to work as laborers in the Middle East.

Perceptions of Islamization with regard to rural areas are interesting in that they coincide with the general image of rural-urban contrasts. To many of Pakistan's literate urbanites, villagers are regarded as *jangli*—savage, illiterate, and unsophisticated. This may be reflected in perceptions of their religious beliefs and practices—so that villagers are represented as being superstitious, susceptible to the influence of fraudulent *pirs* (spiritual leaders), ignorant of Islamic law and theology, and prone to practice customs of Hindu origin. A second image also exists, somewhat contrary to the first. In this representation the villager is seen as a *siddha sada*—a simple and straightforward person. Translated into religious behavior, villagers may be represented as pure and wholesome, steadfast committed believers who follow the way of Islam with full faith, vigor, and trust.

These two images offer contrasting views—as seen by urban eyes—of Islamization and its relationship to the rural population. In the former, the goals of Islamization may be construed as the education, civilization, and rationalization of uncontrolled and misdirected rural society. Islamization, as a rural policy, means bringing the city—the *ulema* (Islamic scholars, the *madarsa* (religious school), Islamic publications, etc.—to the village. In the latter view, Islamization may be seen to have quite a different goal. It may be seen as an attempt to purify society by bringing the simplicity of, the faith in, and the commitment of Islam as found in villages to the cities. In Chakpur, both these themes find expression in events occurring since 1978.

When I lived in Chakpur in 1978, I had ample opportunity to observe and discuss various practices and attitudes related to Islam. Indeed, it was difficult not to do so, for upon my arrival, the village Sayyed (descendant of the Prophet), in an effort to convert me, had the mosque loudspeaker redirected toward the hut I occupied opposite the mosque. At that time the mosque was a rather simple one-room building, with a facade in a style

quite popular in the area. It had an open veranda, and electricity for the loudspeaker and single light bulb. It was the only place in the village, save for a cotton gin and the tubewells, that was electrified. The loudspeaker was used for the *azan* (call to prayer) and for public announcements. In addition, just about every morning before dawn, the Sayyed would deliver a stirring sermon in the direction of sleepy villagers. With his voice booming over the loudspeaker, sometimes for hours on end, he would exhort villagers to follow the ways of Islam and the prophet. The sermons were generally in Urdu, less frequently in Punjabi, which is the only language most villagers speak. They were also liberally laced with readings from Qur'an and with commentaries in Arabic and Persian, making them very difficult to understand. Coming from a well-known family in the district, this Sayyed, who was also a *pir* and had several *murids* (disciples) in the village, saw his attempt to promulgate the Islamic way of life as his duty. Indeed, the sermonizing was done on a directive from his own *pir*.

The Sayyed was quite frustrated by the lack of response to his exhortations on the part of villagers. He regarded most of them as people without a *qanoon* (law)—people who would lie, cheat, steal, and do all sorts of immoral things to each other. For their part, Chakpuris respected the Sayyed and regarded him as a literate man of noble descent. He practiced *desi tibb* (indigenous medicine) and for his treatments many of the villagers were thankful. If a group of men was playing cards (even if not for money), they would stop playing and sometimes put away the cards at the approach of the Sayyed in deference to his belief that what they were doing was gambling, and hence sinful. Still, in small get-togethers or in private conversation he would often be the subject of mild chiding—he was regarded as someone who would get too worked up over his duties and make too big a deal over things that did not matter.

The village *maulvi* (learned teacher) found himself in a similar position. Unlike the Sayyed who had his own small landholding (albeit in another village), the *maulvi* was technically a village *seipi*, dependent upon the allocation of produce from village lands set aside for the purpose of supporting him and his family. The *maulvi* was expected to teach village boys to read the Qur'an, attend to daily prayers, conduct Eid sacrifices, and do all those types of things *maulvis* are supposed to do to insure that actions directed toward Allah were properly undertaken. Or, as villagers put it, "to do all the Allah stuff" (Allah Allah *karo*). During my stay in 1978, the *maulvi* was being criticized for not being attentive to his duties. Some villagers noted a pattern of lateness for prayers, others thought he was not doing a very good job in his teaching, and so on. The *maulvi* was not seen as an arbiter or judge of village conflicts. In one incident—a disagreement over the proper treatment of a landlord's hired hand—my suggestion that the

principal and clan leaders consult the *maulvi* was laughed at. The *maulvi*'s knowledge of *shariat* law was deemed irrelevant for most of what was important in village life—disputes and issues having to do with land, women, and wealth.

Another specialist in the village was an elderly widow who taught some of the village girls how to read the Qur'an. While the *maulvi* had eight to twelve boys to teach and essentially was being paid for his services, the widow instructed a smaller group of four or five girls on her own. During my stay in Chakpur, there was no major village event which came to my attention in which she performed a key role based either upon her knowledge of Islam or her role as a teacher.

Other religious specialists deeply affecting village life were *pirs*. In 1978, just about every adult male had a *pir*. *Pirs* might serve as spiritual guides to their followers, and at the minimum, provide for the identification of villagers with one or another spiritual brotherhood. Villagers hosted the visits of several Gilani and Bukhari *pirs*, and these were marked with music, feasting, and sermonizing. Several villagers were also quite active in visiting the various *khanqahs* (gatherings) of *pirs*, as well as making visits to the more famous *darbars* (shrines) of Baba Farid in Pakpattan, Datta Ganj Baksh in Lahore, and Qadiri in Multan. Accompanying villagers on some of these excursions, I found that these trips sometimes provided entertainment and allowed for some sightseeing and adventure, and at others they offered the opportunity for spiritual enhancement and deeply moving experiences.

The villagers unquestionably identified themselves as Muslims. Over 93% of them had Muslim names as opposed to secular Punjabi names. Regarding various practices indicative of Muslim behavior, village patterns presented a mixed bag. Of the whole population, perhaps four or five would generally say *namaz* (prayers) five times a day. *Zakat* (alms) and *sadaqqa* (gifts) were given by a few—albeit landowners, often on Eid. Occasionally, such contributions—when intended for a publicly stated purpose—would be announced over the mosque loudspeaker. *Bakri eid* sacrifices were celebrated with relish and many families would join together in cosponsoring the sacrifice of a water buffalo or a sheep. While I was not present in the village for Ramadan, interview data indicate that in 1978 less than a handful of villagers kept the fast for the full month and most adults fasted for perhaps five to ten days. And at that time, no villager had performed *hajj*, the pilgrimage to Mecca.

What has Islamization meant in Chakpur? The Zia regime assumed control in 1977 during my stay there. Have the attitudes and practices of villagers changed? Is an Islamic order more evident? Based on observa-

tions and interviews in Chakpur over a three month period in the summer of 1983, a rough assessment is possible.

As far as saying *namaz*, keeping the fast, and reading the Qur'an, the number of villagers involved does not seem to have changed. The *azan* still sounds out over village lands, but still only a handful of people join for prayers at the mosque. Neither in homes nor in field huts (*deras*) is there evidence of participation in prayer outside the mosque. Fasting during Ramadan is still taken by all I talked to as an ennobling but a difficult act, especially when undertaken during harsh summer weather by people who must carry on with their usual work. While many said they would like to fast, they also said that conditions make it impossible to do so without jeopardizing their life and health. Interestingly, no one, either in 1978 or in 1983, questioned the legitimacy of the fast itself nor its beneficial effects. These two points—the legitimacy of certain acts and the circumstantial difficulties of their enactment—are commonly found in Chakpuri attitudes toward the performance of actions deemed “Islamic.” Another pillar of Islam, performance of *hajj* or *umra* (pilgrimages), still has not been undertaken by any villager although several presumably had the chance to do so.

The central government institution of *shariat* law has yet to affect villagers in a direct way. *Hudood* ordinances (providing for punishments for specific crimes), discussed by villagers, have yet to be applied to any of the villagers themselves. Generally, Chakpuris have been quite reluctant to adjudicate conflicts through the court system. Seeking the police, using lawyers, and being called before the court cause all sorts of intrusions most Chakpuris regard as undesirable. Conflict resolution among villagers most often is handled informally through clan leaders, *biradari* (brotherhood) heads, and in public argument. Using the courts is a last resort, done when the local machinery has itself broken down. This happened during my first stay in the village, when a murder was committed. Still, even relatively severe conflicts may fail to reach the courts. For example, one villager having a long-term affair with the wife of a fellow clansman was continually upbraided by delegations of influential intermediaries, but was never the subject of an official police complaint—even though he freely acknowledged the affair.

This last case has provided a focus for many in discussing the *hudood* ordinances. There are perhaps as many as a dozen fairly well-known long-term adulterous affairs in progress in Chakpur. Villagers generally regard themselves, and particularly women, as very hot people with strong sexual urges and desires. To many, the ordinances concerning adultery and fornication are overly harsh considering the state of human nature and the prevailing temperaments of Chakpuris. Given the “uncontrollable” nature of such urges and desires, it is difficult for many to understand the severity of

the punishment. Besides, many say, sexual affairs are enjoyable, and certainly provide, at least for many village men, a focus of much storytelling and joke-making.

As far as village specialists go, Islamization has not appeared to have affected the status of those dealing with religious belief and action in the village. The *maulvi* is still the subject of criticism, and he has not gained any arbitration or assessment powers in the village. Questions of compensation for work, punishments for indiscretions, etc., are done without recourse to the *maulvi*'s advice, and certainly without explicit reference to any Qur'anic source.

The village Sayyed is still frustrated. In his words, the other villagers are still like animals—*janglis* without manners, knowledge, or propriety. He still delivers his sermons to a sleeping audience, and continues to exhort them to wake up and behave like good Muslims. While he is still chided for his intensity and serious demeanor, he is nonetheless respected. As is quite common in Pakistan, attitudes toward *mullahs* (learned men) are often ambivalent, and the Sayyed in Chakpur seems to exemplify this. Villagers still play cards and loud music, to his consternation, and temper their behavior upon his approach.

The widow mentioned earlier has gained in status more than anyone else under the new regime. She was selected to the district council as the women's representative, and because of her position, the village has been targeted for various development efforts. Her council selection was the result of several factors: she had been left in control of a good deal of land, she had fairly powerful relatives, she was a postmenopausal female, and she did have a reputation for piety and service. While the new regime has provided the means for her rise to power, she might have done just as well under any other; the particular Islamization platform may have had little to do with her selection. A platform favoring women's rights or moral leadership, or even a popular election, may have produced the same result.

There are three issues in Chakpur that have assumed some prominence and provide a focus for many of the thoughts about Islamization in the village—the banning of opium, the imposition of *ushr*, and the expansion of the village mosque.

The opium ban. Several of the villagers were life-long users of opium and hashish. Soon after coming to power, Zia closed previously licensed opium shops and thus cut the legitimate supply to consumers. While in some parts of the country, particularly urban areas and the frontier, addicts may have had continued access, the ban hit village addicts particularly hard. The government did provide for an interim period during which village addicts could receive a medicinal substitute from an authorized hospital or clinic. But for Chakpuri addicts, the distance they had to

travel and the lack of satisfaction they received from the substitute mitigated the possible effectiveness of the program. Of the several addicts in the village, two were relatively well-off landowners. While their addiction was not something held up as an object of pride, neither was it something that invited the scorn or moral umbrage of their neighbors. After the ban, villagers had a chance to see its effect upon their neighbors. People who had been addicted to opium for 20 or 30 years did not do well in a cold-turkey withdrawal. Villagers were aware of their suffering, and many empathized with their plight. One former addict died within several months of the ban. Others survived. One survivor notes that he has endured and conquered his addiction, but he does not feel redeemed. By no means does he feel his experience made him more moral, a better Muslim, or anything of the sort. He did it because he had to. Other former addicts adapted to the ban; many continue to use less powerful but locally available drugs. Generally, village consensus seems to be that forcing people to do something and causing pain to those in difficult circumstances does not necessarily cause moral uplift and a rejuvenation of religious feeling. In short, forcing abstinence was painful and did not have any moral implications for village addicts.

The imposition of ushr. Zia's regime imposed payment of *ushr* (agricultural tithe) upon various classes of landlords. In Chakpur, the assessment of *ushr* was to take place during the spring 1983 wheat harvest, but as of the summer still had not been finalized. Plans in the works would have called for the taxing of people who heretofore had legitimately avoided taxes.

Prior to the institution of *ushr*, gift giving for charity and village projects was done on a fairly informal basis under the control of *biradari* and clan leaders. If there was money to raise, the worthiness of the project would be assessed by various *maliks* (leaders)—generally landowning leaders of families, *pattis*, and clans. Under their approval, an effort would be launched to solicit funds, or in some cases labor, from other villagers. Appeals and donations might be announced over the loudspeaker. While pressures to give would exist, they would be largely of a face to face, personal nature. Cooperation, competition, and considerations of pride, honor, jealousy, and service might be invoked in such voluntary circumstances.

The Zia regime's imposition of *zakat* on bank accounts and *ushr* on agricultural produce was widely resented by villagers for several reasons. For one, it was taken to be just another tax that would raise the expenses of an already marginal agricultural production enterprise. Second, the results of such contributions or the projects to benefit from them were not clear. Villagers did not want to pay for unspecified services or projects. Third,

the tax was imposed by the regime, was therefore not voluntary, and, villagers argue, it would hardly be paid from a feeling of performing one's Islamic duty. The use of compulsion to evoke charity and elicit contributions was not something the villagers regarded as in accord with the nobler aspirations of Islam.

Villagers pointed with pride to the voluntary contributions they had made to the village welfare before such tax laws were imposed, and they thought of such contributions as more in accordance with Islamic ways. To be effective, Islam must be voluntary, not forced, argued villagers. They also argued that *zakat* and *ushr* can work in a society that is Islamic, with a government that is just, and a citizenry that does its duty; but, they said, Pakistani society is not Islamic, government officials not always just, and citizens not always sincere and worthy. Rather, in an unIslamic society, it is the misappropriation of funds, government beyond the villagers' control, incomprehensible and nonaccessible institutions, and a world of bribes and scams that color Chakpuri visions of the world beyond the village. *Zakat* and *ushr* are likely to be misappropriated in such a system, various people are liable to misuse and steal funds, the wrong people might get the benefits of the contributions. And wealthy people would be likely to escape having to pay. In short, the implementation of a fair, honest, and moral system was perceived as an impossibility in the context of present day Pakistan.

The mosque expansion project. While villagers tend to be very skeptical of government "Islamization," they are not skeptical about Islam. Islam is a continuing source of legitimation for Chakpuris. Islam is their knowledge of the natural world, it is the code of their customs, it is the moral principles parents attempt to teach their children. If something is thought to be good or moral, it is judged to be part of Islam. If something is thought to be correct, right, or true about the natural order of things, it is taken to be part of Islam. All of this is irrespective of what is in the Qur'an, or commentaries, or *hadith* (oral tradition of the Prophet) or *fiqh* (legal rulings) or *sunnat* (moral rules based on the Prophet's life). Islam for Chakpuris is not a specific set of particular laws about such matters as punishment, inheritance, economics, or statecraft. It is not the specifics that color the *maulvi's* knowledge or the Sayyed's sermons. For in these specifics, Chakpuris find all sorts of ambiguities and contradictions which they attempt to work around—inheritance for daughters, observing fasts, saying daily prayers, etc. Islam rather is a symbol of the good, the correct, the moral, and the right. When one is a good man in village parlance, one is by definition a good Muslim. Indeed, Islam is the only symbol of morality, justice, and truth. Appeals to man-made codes, constitutions, or institutions, or to some appreciation of human nature do not provide

satisfactory bases of legitimacy in Chakpur. On this, there is strong village-wide consensus, for in identifying themselves as Muslims they express their legitimacy as a human community endowed with the graces of Allah.

The unity of the village, and its goodness, are expressed through the mosque. Nearly all villagers have donated money, labor, or materials for its maintenance. Between 1978 and 1983, the village mosque was more than doubled in size. Villagers paid for and worked to build a large addition and a beautiful handcrafted minaret. Chakpuris are proud of their effort. It indicates that they are good people, able to work as a cooperative and brotherly community of Muslims. They could have collectively invested money, time, labor, and materials in productive enterprises or equipment—livestock, a village tractor, spraying equipment, etc.—or in consumer goods—a television set, modern baths, a refrigerator. But they did not. Such goods tend to be those owned by and transmitted through families. Investment in the mosque transcends such products and particularistic family ties. The mosque serves as the objectification of a mere universal spiritual unity that makes the village a community.

Conclusion

Chakpuri villagers, for several reasons, do not see themselves as participants in the present explicit governmental Islamization effort. First, they do not identify with government efforts in general; the government has always been viewed from a distance with a good deal of misapprehension and suspicion. At present the Islamization effort, like previous efforts, is an imposed program, and it is not understandable to many. It is impractical. It ignores the circumstances and realities of village life, and for that matter, a rural view of human nature and Pakistani society. Second, in a very fundamental way, Chakpuris do not accept the assumptions the present regime is making about the relationship between the government and Islam. For the government, Pakistan is a nation of Muslims and therefore “should” be an Islamic state. For Chakpuris, Pakistan as a land for Muslims means a nation in which Muslims, as people, are in control. It means that they, as Muslims, have protected rights to their lands, their livelihood, and their families. Pakistan, as a nation of *mullahs*, or scholars, or ideologues would be quite impractical in Chakpuri terms—just as the Sayyed, the *maulvi*, and even the revered *pirs* are not central, in specific ways, to practical village affairs. The present government’s policies and naive pronouncements and expectations are just too ideological and too abstract for Chakpuris.

This is not to say that Chakpuris are un- or non-Islamic. They view themselves as Islamic, but in different terms. They did not have to expand

the mosque and incur substantial expenses. They support the village *maulvi*, respect the Sayyed, and adore their *pirs*. They are Islamic essentially in the way they define themselves as part of a larger human community that is indeed moral. Clearly in terms of international events, vocal and articulate Chakpuris assert their "Muslimness" when speaking of India, the Middle East, U.S. policy, Israel, the Islamic bomb, and so on. Islam is an expression of identity, an idiom of morality, and a source of legitimacy. It is viewed as a core symbol, not as a theology, a philosophy, or a body of practices, moral injunctions, or legal doctrines, and certainly not as a social order promulgated by the current government.