

# MUSLIM IMMIGRANT WORKERS IN EUROPE

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# Muslim immigrant workers in Europe

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'Migrant worker' is not a new phenomenon in Europe. What is however new is the extent of manpower movement during the last decade and consequently in qualitative dimensions of this quantitative development.

According to conservative estimates the net inflow of immigrant workers in Western Europe up to 1971 was eight million persons. The total inflow, after taking into account the number of dependents living with the immigrant workers, was estimated at about 9 million. This represents about 7 per cent of the total labour force in the recipient countries and about 10 per cent of that in their countries of origin. According to a UN estimate, the number of immigrants in Europe will total more than twelve million by 1980.

The Institute National d'Etudes Demographiques of Paris on the other hand suggest that the number of immigrants by 1980 would be around twenty-two million. The figure in 1975 could be between eleven and twelve million.

Most of these immigrants are male, roughly between 55 to 80 per cent with possibly 60 per cent in the 18-35 age group. Although an overwhelming majority of the immigrant workers is married, only about one third of them have their families with them. The number of immigrant workers' children was estimated at over 1.2 million in 1968. The figures in 1975 could be around two million.

However 'staggering' the statistics may be, the real issues involved are primarily socio-cultural and deserve to be examined thoroughly.

The Governments concerned and a number of international organisations particularly the ILO, the Council of Europe and the UNESCO are taking serious interest in the problems of immigrant workers. The Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe held in Helsinki in July, 1975 has also shown some awareness of the social and economic aspects of the problem. A careful perusal of the recommendations of these international agencies\* and the steps taken by national Governments and organisations

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show that although increasing efforts are being made to remove or at least reduce the more obnoxious aspects of economic discrimination against immigrant workers, the socio-cultural, the religious and the politico-legal aspects of the problem have not been thoroughly and sympathetically examined. The efforts made so far touch only the fringe of the problem; its heart remains more or less untouched. For we think that the real problem is not merely of economic amenities or of greater contributions from the Resettlement Fund, although in their own right these are important and whatever is being done in this respect is significant and encouraging. The real problem is of socio-cultural attitudes and modes of behaviour and this is the level at which it deserves to be examined. And it is in this context that the real mind and the tensions and agonies of the Muslim community in Europe can be understood.

Although there have been sizeable pockets of Muslim populations in certain parts of Europe ever since the advent of Muslim era in Spain, the contemporary Islamic presence in Western Europe is to a large extent a product of the mass movement of manpower from certain Muslim countries. With a population of about six million in Western and Central Europe and a total population of about 24 million in the whole of Europe including European Russia, Islam is the second largest religion in Europe. Of the immigrant labour roughly forty per cent belong to the Islamic faith.

Islam is not simply a religion in a limited sense of the word. It is a complete way of life that tries to organise the personal and collective life of its adherents in the light of the values and principles given through Divine revelation. The Muslim Culture is a value oriented culture and the Muslim community derives its identity from its religion. That is why religion is not regarded merely as a personal affair. It fashions the psycho-social attitude and behaviour patterns of the people: their food, dress, marriage and family life, social relations, economic dealings, political sympathies etc. are deeply influenced by their religious norms. The attention that has been paid to religio-cultural aspects of the immigrant population leaves much to be desired. From the Western perspective this aspect is not that important, as far as the society and its institutions are concerned. From the viewpoint of a Muslim this is of crucial importance. Lack of fuller appreciation of differences in the two perspective lies at the root of many a tension that underpin the Muslim situation.

There is also some lack of clarity at the conceptual level,

particularly in two respects.

First is immigrant labour a temporary phenomenon or does it represent a much more lasting movement of population? In the initial phases the issue was simply glossed over; the economic need for imported labour was too pressing to allow serious reflection on these questions. Once immigrant labour became a part of the System, all efforts were not directed at establishing a new equilibrium in the Society, with immigrant labour as one of the co-partners and co-participants. One section presented the thesis that imported labour constitutes an anti-body and a reversal of the trend should be engineered to free the Western society from this element of intrusion. A new strategy for the migration of capital to labour-surplus countries was proposed in order to obviate the need for the migration of workers from Labour-surplus to labour deficient areas. The recessionary trends in the Western economy, however temporary, strengthened this approach. Not only new immigration was curbed with a heavy hand and 'clandestine' immigration which was connived at and fully utilized over the years began to be hunted and driven back to the countries of origin or to other parts of Europe those who had immigrated legally or had settled were invited to return back. Whatever be the nice words that are used to camouflage the reality of this policy of de-immigration, the issue must be faced squarely. The Western countries have a right to rethink their immigration policies for the future, but those who have come to these countries, have settled here and have contributed immensely towards building these societies have a right to stay here permanently. After all most of the present population of Europe is itself a product of 'older' immigration. For all practical purposes a reversal of history is not possible and if any effort is made to achieve that, it is bound to become counter-productive. As such we feel this fact should be accepted at all levels that the immigrant labour is here to stay. Efforts should be directed, not at deporting them, but at developing a new and healthy equation.

The other issue relates to the future position of the immigrants in the society and culture of the West. Three strategies seem to have emerged viz:-

(a) **Exploitation** Immigrant labour is looked as a new slave labour — low wages, lack of economic and other safeguards, absence of security of stay, legally living in 'no man's land', at least second class workers and second class citizens with the sword of Damocles of expulsion hanging on their heads.\*

(b) **Assimilation**: If the immigrants have to stay, they must be assimilated in the local culture. This means that they must dissolve their

and change their life-style to conform to the values and traditions of the western culture. This, in a way, is the cultural counter-part of the economic and political strategy of exploitation. To the overwhelming majority of the immigrants, themselves, this looks like a form of cultural imperialism. This is particularly abhorring to the Muslims who possess a distinct culture and whose contribution to world civilization is no less than any of the major cultures.

(c) **Integration**: More liberal elements of the Western society suggest a strategy of integration which, for all practical purposes, means partial conformism with some scope for diversity in sub-cultures. 'The aim is not to assimilate immigrants' said Mr. Edgar Faure, 'but to integrate them as effectively as possible into our society. While we may wish them to take our part, they must preserve their own.'<sup>8</sup> The confusion and the consequent tension is clearly brought out by the conflicting demands of 'taking our part' and 'preserving their own'. Shorn of all courteous trappings this means: change your life-style and we may tolerate you. Some liberal elements have tried to give a different connotation to the concept — they do suggest the idea of plurality of cultures and religions.<sup>9</sup>

This is the theoretical position. As far as the practice is concerned, elements from all the three strategies are being pursued by different persons and institutions and this lies at the root of the predicament of the immigrant communities. The first two strategies are in direct opposition to the basic human values and even from the viewpoint of practical politics are bound to be counter-productive. The third strategy suffers from lack of clarity. All the implications of the two variants of it have not been fully articulated. The conformist variant is not only confusing, it has the potential of being used by the extremists as just another form of the strategy of assimilation. The other variant — cultural plurality — is still an undeveloped and untried concept.

The basic problem with the western democracy is that it has been developed as primarily a political system. The idea of cultural and social democracy is still undeveloped. The modern society cannot afford to remain culturally monolithic. Developments in the field of technology, communication, international interdependence, population movements, world commerce, tourism etc. are forcing upon us the ideal of multi-cultural and multi-religious society. One of the major failings of nationalism has been its identification of culture with a geographic or linguistic entity. Non-conformity with that culture engendered intolerance and drift

towards regionalism and separatism. Political dissent is accepted as normal, but variety in cultures is regarded as an aberration if not apostasy. We must rethink and remould our future vision of the society we want to create. We would submit that the entire perspective would change if we are prepared to welcome the ideal of a multi-cultural and multi-religious society, with a number of cultures and traditions co-existing and co-prospering. If democracy is prepared to develop its social and cultural dimensions, the world would become a better place to live in.

The idea of a multi-cultural society is not an abstract idea. It would mean basic reorientation of our psycho-social attitudes. The question of religious and cultural rights and obligations would have to be examined and the implications of this concept for different areas of living properly developed. The change would not only be attitudinal but also institutional. Education and public policy will have to play an important part in translating this vision into reality.

It is here that the Muslim experience could be relevant to all of us. Islam is not tied to any geographic region or any historic tradition. It has tried to establish human society based on universal values. It has on the one hand produced an ideological community of those who accept its ideals, values and principles and on the other establish a multi-cultural society wherein cultural and religious integrity of all other individuals and communities has been accommodated within the total social framework. Plurality of cultural traditions has been accepted as normal and opportunities for their growth and healthy cross-fertilization provided for. This is not merely an idea but a historical reality. It may be a worthwhile idea to examine this experience more sympathetically and to see how the modern man can wriggle himself out of the strait-jacket of national cultures by moving towards the vision of a multi-cultural and multi-religious society.

The Muslims want to live in Europe, as they want all other human beings to live in all parts of the world, as equal members of the society. They are conscious of the fact that they are in a minority in most of the countries of Europe and would always keep in view the limitations imposed by quantitative factors. But it would be tragedy to confuse human issues with the logistics of numbers. Even one human being is as important as the entire human race.<sup>10</sup>

Muslims are an ideological community and want to live like that. There are certain regional variations but they too are a part of their universal matrix which is

characterised by unity in diversity. The basic problem they confront is lack of proper understanding of this character of theirs. The concept of a multi-cultural society has the potential to accommodate this variety in Europe and in the rest of the world.

Now we would like to sum up the problems that are faced by the immigrant workers in general and would also refer to the specific problems that confront the Muslims. In a presentation like this, there has to be some abstraction and generalization but it must not be assumed that all these problems are faced by the immigrants everywhere. Conditions are different in different places and one statement will hold good only as a general statement and as a point of reference for local situations. In Part A, we would be touching upon those problems and issues in respect of which there is some consciousness at the national and international levels and some serious efforts are being made to solve them.<sup>11</sup> In Part B, we would be raising issues which remain somewhat neglected.

#### PART A

##### (a) General

(i) Immigrants in Europe should no longer be treated as a temporary phenomenon and efforts should be made to settle them permanently. Those who want to go back to their countries of origin may be helped but no one should be directly or indirectly forced to return.

(ii) Temporary mass movements of workers should be avoided. Future immigration policy must keep this principle in view that if labour is being acquired from abroad, it must have the right to bring its family and to settle in the country if it so decides. There should be proper differentiation between jobs of a temporary nature and those which are permanent. The latter should not be filled with temporary workers.

(iii) The existing 'illegal' immigrants should be absorbed in a dignified way but illegal traffic in labour must be prohibited and dealt with much more severely. The trafficker should be punished much more heavily and not the victim.

##### (b) Legal

(i) All Governments should ratify ILO Convention 143 of 1975.

(ii) Law in respect of entry, stay, expulsion and return after staying abroad should be revised to ensure:

\*\* Equality of treatment and elimination of discrimination.

\*\* Dignified and humane treatment to all.

\*\* Fulfilment of the due process of law in all matters, particularly the provision for judicial review of administrative decisions.

\*\* Protection against political

or other victimization.

(iii) Labour should be acquired only on the basis of properly executed contracts and the labourers in particular and the community and the Government in general should be informed about different aspects of the contract and the conditions they will have to face. It should be the legal responsibility of the employer to do this.

(iv) Residence permits should automatically be issued to those who hold work permits. This too should extend job and employer mobility to those who have stayed for a reasonable period, say two years.

(v) Immigrants should enjoy all fundamental rights. The law about aliens should be reformulated.

(vi) Prohibition of discrimination on the basis of race, colour or nationality and all other forms of xenophobia, and creation of proper agencies to enforce this.

(vii) Those cultural and religious rights which call for legislation or adoption of a new attitude in common law cases should be thrashed out and dialogue opened on these issues.

##### (c) Economic

(i) Intergration of the immigrant worker into the trade which may have to undergo some structural change and harmonization of the relationships between the two. The idea of specialist trade union services for immigrant workers for a certain period may also be examined.

(ii) Discrimination in wages, conditions of work, categories of work, and other conditions to be completely eliminated.

(iii) Immigrant families should enjoy all those benefits which are available to others.

##### (d) Political

(i) The absorption of the immigrants into the political life of the society. They must not permanently live in a political no-man's land.

#### PART B

##### Socio-Cultural

(i) To prepare a charter of cultural and religious rights and obligations.

(ii) All facilities to enable the immigrants to preserve their culture, language and values. They must learn the language/languages of the country they now live in, but they must be helped to preserve their own language and teach that to their children.

(iii) Immigrants should have reasonable access to the mass media and other educational facilities to preserve their culture.

(iv) Educational system should accept the fact of cultural and religious plurality and tailor educational programme to serve this objective. For instance, the local community should have a

better understanding of Islam — of Islam as the Muslims believe it, and not just a repetition of distortions and misrepresentations that has been going on for centuries. Immigrants' religion and culture should be treated as an 'insider' by the educational system and the mass media and not as an 'outcast'. This should mean a thorough revision of educational programmes, curricula, text-books etc. as also in teachers training courses.

(v) Special assistance courses be given to immigrants to tide over the housing problem.

(vi) Facilities should be provided for the establishment of Mosques, schools for religious education, centres for social and community activities. In this respect, the financial limitations of these emerging communities and the difficulties created by inflation should be sympathetically considered and assistance provided for these activities from social services and special funds.

(vii) Islam should be recognised as one of the official religions. In all those countries where a part of tax revenue is made available for religious activities, Muslims should also receive a share on the basis of their contribution.

(viii) Facilities be provided for Muslim prayers in factories, offices, schools and other work places. Similarly, Muslim religious holidays should be accepted by the Government and other statutory agencies as optional holidays for Muslims.

(ix) Muslim family life is unique in many respects and its preservation and proper development in the western environment is one of the challenges that confront the Muslims. The role of the Muslim woman in this respect is extremely important. Family reunion, cultural contacts with the wider families back home, recognition for the Muslim family law, and development of the family as a bastion of Muslim life represent major dimensions of this problem. The host community must not expect Muslim women to imitate the western woman in all her dealings. Instead, there should be a better appreciation of our different values and a respect for each others ways and cultures.

(x) Acceptance and graceful accommodation of Muslim etiquette and manners in respect of food, drinking, dress, social relations, club life etc. are also important. All this calls for reorientation of attitudes and acceptance of cultural plurality as the norm for the future.

This paper aims neither at an indictment of any group or country, nor a special pleading on the part of a certain community. Its purpose is to raise certain issues and articulate the thinking as also the problems, fears and aspirations of the Muslim community. There are two

options open to us all: either we start a serious dialogue between different sections of the society on problems that confront us and in respect of which some people feel to be the aggrieved party, and as such explore avenues of peaceful and dignified solution, or we just neglect the real issues and let the tensions not only aggravate but seek outlets for eruption. The writer believes that every challenge constitutes an opportunity to break new grounds and make new contributions. Europe stands today at the threshold of such an opportunity. Let us hope that our response to this challenge would be creative and that the present predicament would lead to the inauguration of an era of social and cultural democracy.

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1 Hume, Ian M. "Migrant Workers in Europe", *Finance and Development* (A Quarterly

Publication of the I.M.F. and The World Bank Group), Vol. 10, No. 1 March, 1973, p.3. As these estimates do not take into account illegal immigration and other sources of under-counting the actual number is expected to be larger than this.

2. "Pan European Conference of Migrant Workers, Beekbergen, 21-24 November, 1974: Statement of the Preparatory Committee", *Race and Class* XV1, 2, p.207.

3. Council of Europe: Population and Vocational Training Division RS 252 (74), 22 April, 1975, Strasbourg, p.14.

4. See ILO: the Migration for Employment Convention and Recommendation, 1949; the Protection of Migrant Workers (Underdeveloped Countries), Recommendation 1955; Migrant Workers (Supplementary Revisions) Convention 1975; and Recommendation 151 of 24 June 75. See also the Council of Europe: RS 252 (74) 249 (74) and Ad-hoc Conference on Education of Migrants. CME/HF-M (74) V.

5. See: Ahmed, Khurshid "Islam and Muslims in Europe Today" *Impact International*, London, 28 February-13 March

1975 p.8-10.

6. "Pan-European Conference of Migrant Workers *Race and Class*, XVI, 2 1974 pp 207-211. Report of the Economic Commission of special NGO Committee on Human Rights, Conference Sept. 1975 (Mimeo).

7. It is not merely the racist fringe which advocates this policy. It creeps in a number of more adroit forms even in some official pronouncements. "... it will also be necessary to promote the *assimilation* of these foreigners and facilitate the *naturalization* of foreign children brought up in Switzerland. To achieve this assimilation it is necessary for the Swiss population to try and understand the special mentality of immigrants for immigrants to be willing to adjust to our way of life and social institutions..." Report of the Federal Council of the Federal Assembly on the broad outlines of governmental policy during the 1971-75 legislature. Emphasis in the original. Quoted from *Council of Europe Ad hoc Conference on the Education of Migrants: Country Reports*, CME/HF-M (74) V, Nov. 1974, p.220.

8. Edgar Faure, in a statement at the Conference of European Ministers of Labour in Rome (Nov., 1972) quoted in Council of Europe, RS 252 (74) p.14.

9. Roy Jenkins, the Labour Home Secretary of the United Kingdom, is one of those persons who have, at least theoretically, advanced this view. The Belgium Government's statement in CME/HF-M (74) V *op.cit.* also comes very near to this idea: Integration is cooperation between the receiving community and immigrant communities so that each of them may develop its own values, promoting closer relations for the pursuit of common objectives' (p.24).

10. The Quran brings this principle to focus when it says that killing a single human being wrongfully is tantamount to killing the entire human race. See al-Quran, 5.32.

11. See: Council of Europe, RS252(74) April, '74 and RS 249(74), October, 1974; ILO Convention 141 (1975) and Recommendation 151 (1975) and Special NGO Committee on Human Rights, Final Resolution of the Meeting held in Geneva, September, 1975.

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