

What went wrong with the Muslim world

Islam Dawn 7/1/05

By Syed Mohibullah Shah

IN THE post-9/11 world, the state and society in Muslim countries have come under intense scrutiny all over the world. Much has been said and done and much more is expected in the coming years as millions in this, and possibly the next, generation are going to be affected one way or another.

But more than what anyone else may say or do, however, it is important how the Muslim ummah understands and analyzes its situation and works to pull itself out of its predicament.

'What went wrong' has been a lament repeatedly heard from Morocco to Indonesia as the countries of the crescent went on losing their economic prosperity and political independence since the eighteenth century. The soul-searching produced many answers over the years — substantive as well as superficial ones — and yet 'what went wrong' has not been righted. Now the anger and frustrations of increasing numbers is spilling across the borders of some countries and giving new dimension and urgency to the age-old question.

So let us reframe the issue and ask: what is wrong with the mathematics of the Islamic fraternity when 57 countries (1.3 billion people) with trillions of dollars of their funds invested all over the world, possessing one half of the world's energy reserves, and occupying the strategic cross-roads between the East and the West, do not provide even respectable levels of basic

military for centuries — to all their citizens.

This still remains the critical weakness of the institutional mosaic of economic and political governance prevalent in most of the ummah. But it also remains the root cause of its continuing backwardness.

The Ottomans empire, Mughal India (and China) were the largest economies in the world in the late eighteenth century as the Industrial Revolution was unfolding in Europe. These empires ruled large populations, controlled vast tracts of territory and owned fertile lands and rich mineral wealth. None of these could save them from the onslaught of the newly acquired capabilities which the Industrial Revolution had created in the hands of the people of even the small states of Europe.

The world GDP which took 1,000 years to double in the pre-industrial revolution days, now doubled in 100 years during 1800, and quadrupled during 1900. Asia, which in the pre-industrial age produced over 50

therefore, no superficial labels attached to it. It was neither a miracle of faith nor a product of any religious or racial dogma; as Japan went on to prove. The knowledge acquired through the Renaissance made very important contribution but Industrial Revolution did not unfold in Italy. The Reformation helped to liberate minds from the clutches of the clergy, but again, the Industrial Revolution did not materialize in Germany where the Reformation began.

Although it arrived on the wings of scientific discoveries and inventions, the revolution was not all science and technology either. As important as education, skills and inventions are, they cannot turn themselves into sources of wealth and power unless the people have the incentive to use these. Above all, and this is the essence of the argument the Industrial Revolution was heralded by the empowerment of the people — by the reforms in governance which opened the doors of opportunities to all and unleashed the cre-

ative energies of the people to transform their societies.

It was not a coincidence that England was the birthplace of the Industrial Revolution. It started there because England led other European nations in legal, economic and political reforms that liberated people from their mediaeval bonds, opened opportunities to all, led them to adopt economic and political self-governance and protected them with the rule of law.

Empowered by these reforms in the governance of their societies, even small European states

In our age and time, Japan, Korea, Singapore, and now Dubai, have proved how wealth and value can be created even when a country is poorly endowed in terms of natural resources. Singapore does not have even its own water to drink and yet it created assets where none existed — through the quality of its human resources.

needs for their people? No

member of the OIC ranks among the top 30 countries in HDI in the world, and most rank among the bottom 100 countries.

Of course, it was not always like that. The wealth and power as well as the scholarship from Baghdad to Cordoba to Cairo to Isfahan to Istanbul were dominant facts of life for centuries in Europe and Asia and need not be recounted here. But this lasted during the medieval age. It has been a downward journey since then, as most of the efforts have revolved round the symptoms rather than the root cause of 'what went wrong'.

What turned the tables against the Muslim ummah more than any other single factor was the Industrial Revolution as it went on multiplying their capabilities and creating new sources of wealth and power the Europeans over the non-industrialized world. The countries of the Crescent missed on the industrial revolution, lost its economic prosperity as well as political power. More than two hundred years later, many are still nowhere near digging themselves out of the deep hole of medievalism in this age of globalization.

The Industrial Revolution was more than merely handling of machines. It was not a one time affair but a continuing process.

The essence of the Industrial Revolution lay in establishing the fundamental fact that knowledge is power and that wealth and power can be created by the application of knowledge. While the agricultural and mineral resources of a country may be finite, there are no limits to the creative energies of the people and hence no limits to the wealth and power that can be produced by them.

This was the quantum leap that distinguished European nations from their mediaeval counterparts (Ottomans, Mughals and others) and established their supremacy over the bigger and richer non-European nations whose mediaeval frameworks lacked this vital quality.

Most Muslim countries are still reluctant to take this quantum leap and open up the pursuit of economic and political power — hitherto the plaything of royalty, the nobility and the

per cent of the world GDP saw its share shrink to only 20 per cent in the industrial age. While many Asian countries have now successfully entered the age of industrialization, much of the ummah still presents a picture from the Neolithic age.

By design or ignorance, however, industrialization has been mislabelled and wrapped in controversy. Called westernization, modernization, Europeanization, Americanization or whatever else, it has been pushed into cultural and religious controversies and its core issues have been confused.

Forgetting the message, the debate in many Muslim countries has often been over the messengers. Some reacted with wholesale rejection of everything foreign on nationalistic or religious grounds. Some sought refuge in past glories refusing to address the new challenges.

An equally superficial reaction came from those who believed the secret of the West's success lay outwardly appearances — dress, custom, food habits and so forth — and not in educational, economic and political reforms and work ethics. They embraced the outward appearances and went on modernizing/westernizing their society without industrializing it.

But it is to the credit of the Japanese that they first understood that it was the powers unleashed by industrialization which were behind European domination, and Japan went on to develop the most successful Asian response to the challenge. They were also the first non-European nation to realize that the essence of industrialization lay in enhancing the capabilities of their people, and that this could not be accomplished without reforming governance and incorporating people into the economic and political processes.

Spurred by the Meiji reformation (1867), Japan undertook reforms in education, science and technology, economy and the democratization of its polity. They kept their kimonos, and went on to become a world power twice — before the First World War and again, within a generation span of the Second World War.

The Industrial Revolution had

went on to control and colonize much bigger and richer nations in the world because of the enhanced quality of their human resources, organizational skills, technological capabilities, work ethics, and popular support through participation in the economic and political enterprises of their countries.

But industrialization is not a permit raj, nor the distribution of spoils of power among friends and the family. It was people's power that was the driving force behind the Industrial Revolution and that created the critical mass. Once this critical mass is reached, countries can be rich and powerful even when they do not have much to show in terms of the Neolithic assets of agrarian and mineral resources.

In our age and time, Japan, Korea, Singapore, and now Dubai, have proved how wealth and value can be created even when a country is poorly endowed in terms of natural resources. As Singapore's former prime minister Lee Kwan Yew, told the writer, "Singapore does not have even its own water to drink and yet it created assets where none existed" — through the quality of its human resources — and went on to join any list of the top ten countries in the world along with Japan.

But creating the critical mass of quality human resources continues to be a persistent problem with most Muslim countries. Talking about the development of human resources is an important to the ummah. The UN Arab Human Development Report (2002) has described the Middle East as "more rich than developed". A recent (2004) survey of the Middle East, where over 66 per cent of the population is under 30 years, found that 40 per cent of this youthful lot of the oil rich region is unemployed.

The position of the rest of the ummah is even worse as most of the rest could be classified as "neither rich nor developed." But rich or poor, the ummah has essentially remained a mass of countries stuck in Neolithic times, living off the sale of what God has given them in the shape of agrarian or natural resources, with little to show by way of creating value through the application of knowledge.

Email: smshah@alum.mit.edu