B A 2nd Semester (Honours)

Paper-Social Formation and Cultural Patterns of the Medieval World

Unit- : Societies in Central Islamic Lands

Topic-Urbanization and Trade in Islamic lands

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There was a significant increase in urbanization during medieval period in Central Islamic lands, due to numerous scientific advances in fields such as agriculture, hygiene, sanitation, astronomy, medicine and engineering. This also resulted in rising middle class population.  
            The head of the family was given the position of authority of his household, although the qadi, or judge was able to resolve and negotiate differences in issues of disagreement in families. The two senior representatives of municipal authority were the qadi and muhtasib, who held the responsibilities of many issues, including quality of water, maintenance of city streets, containing outbreaks of disease, supervising  the markets and prompt burial of the death.  
            Another aspect of Islamic urban life was waqf, a religious charity directly dealing with the qadi and the religious leaders. Through donations, the waqf owned many of the public baths and factories, using revenue to fund education, and to provide irrigation for orchards outside the city. This system was introduced in Eastern Europe by Ottoman Turks.  
            Taxes were also levied on an unmarried man until he was wed. non-Muslims were required to pay the Jizya, an administrative tax on non Muslims analogous to zakat (a Muslim only tax). The Jizya was applied only to young and able bodied adult males and exempted non-Muslims from military service. The Muslim state would then be responsible for the administration and security of the non-Muslims.  
             
**Trade and Commerce**  
             Trade and commerce played an important role in the early Islamic land, had trade network with the places like China, Africa and Europe. Islamic leaders used taxes from wealthy merchants to build and maintain public works such as schools, hospitals, dams and bridges.  
             The main Islamic coins were the dinar (a gold coin) and the dihram (a silver coin). However large transaction were often carried out on paper using letters of credit called "suftaja". These letters were much easier to carry on long trade routes than heavy coins.  
   
**Goods for trade**  
            Islamic merchants dealt in a wide variety of trade goods including sugar, salt, textiles, spices, gold and horses.  
             
**Trade Routes**  
             Muslim trade routes extended throughout much of Europe, Northern Africa, and Asia. These trade routes were both by sea and land (including famous Silk Route). Major trade cities including Mecca, Medina, Constantinople, Baghdad, Morocco, Cairo, and Cordoba.    
             In the case where trade routes was over land, merchants travelled in large groups called caravans. Caravans were almost like travelling cities including everything from doctors and entertainers to armed guards and translators. They provide protection for the merchants and their good s.  
 **The Silk Road and Overland Routes**  
               The Silk Road from reached from Mediterranean to China which became increasingly wealthy since the arrival of Islam. While many people focus on Islam spreading throughout the Middle East and North Africa and Spain, it was for Silk route Islam was expanded far into Central Asia. In fact many of the Muslim communities in China today are directly descended from the people in important trading towns on the Eastern end of the Silk Road.  
               Silk was traded along the routes and soon Middle Eastern cities like Baghdad Aleppo became for their silk market. Along with silk new invention and ideas of China came back. As a result metalworkers in Syria were able to combine Middle Eastern and Chinese techniques to make Damascus steel, a very hard and sharp metal useful for swords. Paper and gunpowder also arrived Middle East from China. via Silk Road.

Not only the Silk Route used for overland, the Muslim merchants took advantage of spreading Islam at the same time. In fact so many people converted to Islam in West Africa for those Muslim merchants. Muslim merchants travelled into west Africa for new foods and salt which was extremely hard to come by in the rest of the Muslim world.  
               The expanse of the Islamic traders had a direct result on the spread of Islam religion. Traders brought their religion to West Africa where Islam quickly spread throughout the region. Areas in the fareast such as Malaysia and Indonesia also become Muslim through traders and Islamic Sufis. Over times large Muslim population grow in other region including India, China and Spain.

Islamic coins have been found b archaeologist as far away as Sweden, Britain and China. Merchants were respected in Islamic world. The prophet Muhammad came from a merchant family. The slave trade was a large part of economy. Some slave were prisoners captured during the Islamic conquests, while others were purchased in slave markets in northern and western Africa. The vast expense of Islamic trade allowed for the cultural exchange of art, science, food and clothing throughout Asia, Africa and Europe. The Quran guided many of the principals of Islamic merchants requiring them to deal fairly with one another and to not charge interest on loan.

 Reference-

Social Formation and Cultural Patterns of the Medieval World- Dr C R Satapathy

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