

COMMENT

Technology Hijacks Hajj

THE blessed month of Dhul Hijja is upon us and over two million Muslims will be preparing to perform the Hajj. The pilgrimage to Makka is one of the central pillars of Islam and Muslims through the centuries have performed the Hajj in great numbers. However, the number of pilgrims has rocketed over the last twenty years, and has now reached unmanageable levels.

The quantum jump in the numbers performing Hajj is directly related to the advent of the aeroplane as a rapid means of mass transit. Whereas, a round trip by camel/steamer/bus/train took an average of three months or more, the Hajj can now be performed in a matter of days. The journey has also become relatively safer and cheaper. More and more Muslims thus feel that they are able to discharge their obligation of performing the Hajj once in their lifetime.

This intervention of technology, resulting in a massive increase in the number of pilgrims, has also had a profound impact on the Hajj itself. In the first place it has led to the imposition of quotas by many countries. Thus in countries like Pakistan, Iran and Turkey one has to wait for many years before being allowed to perform the Hajj. The traditional criterion of personal ability to perform the Hajj is now increasingly supplemented by the need to secure a place in the queue.

At the actual location of the holy places in Makka and Medina, the influx of pilgrims has coincided with flow of abundant oil wealth. The Saudia, have thus been inundated with grandiose schemes to manage the meteoric rise in pilgrim numbers. The solutions have come from consultants born and bred in the western technological milieu. As a result over the last ten years the *Haramain* have been gradually converted to glorified "football stadia", and their surroundings are increasingly dominated by grotesque fly-overs and ugly sky scrapers.

Even the application of this technology is biased in favour of the car-owning populace, and traditional bazaar structures have given way to wide-lane autobahns in the centres of Makka and Medina. To crown things, five-star hotels have appeared within the vicinity of *Masjid Al-Haraam* in Makka and the Prophet's Mosque in Medina. In consequence, the Hajj which has traditionally been seen as a ritual reminiscent of the Day of Judgement, when all will be equal, and which is symbolised by pilgrims clad in only two pieces of white cloth on the plains of Arafat, has begun to reflect the class and wealth distinctions entrenched in every society.

Thus, we have the jet-setting wealthy Muslims performing the Hajj from the comforts of their five-star hotels, and constantly trampling on the relatively old Muslims from the poorer countries who always seem to be relegated to the most uncomfortable corners. The pressure of numbers and the demands of the wealthy combine to rob the Hajj of a great deal of its spiritual content. Perhaps the problem can be compared to the introduction of the factory system in a society. This brings with it a distinct way of social and political organisation. Failure to adjust in the requisite way is a sure recipe for constant turmoil and upheavals. In a like manner, the introduction of technology in the Hajj environment, implies transformations in the whole process of Hajj. Transplanted technology brings with it alien societal and organisational values. These are slowly converting the Hajj from a profound spiritual experience into a battle for survival in massive concrete jungles.

All the key questions relating to the impact of technology on Muslim societies are neatly encapsulated in the sorry state of the Hajj. The need for a radically different technology which has internalised the values of Muslim societies has seldom been more powerfully illustrated.

M Iqbal Asaria