CHAPTER 11

The South African Indian Muslim Community and Its Role in Responding to International Disasters

S. Khan, A.K. Gabralla and A.F.M. Ebrahim

Introduction

Muslims in South Africa constitute a heterogeneous group with diverse socio-historical backgrounds. As a community it reflects the same diversity that characterises the rest of the South African population. Each of these groups has different historical contexts that draw on their normative and value systems from the universal principles of Islam. Muslims of Indian extraction may be classified into two distinct groupings. The first being those from the sub-continent of India who were lured by the British colonialisms from 1860 onwards to work on the sugar plantations of the Natal colony as indentured labourers (Ramphal 1985: 109; Meer 1980: 1). These Muslims came from Malabar, on the west coast of South India and Hyderabad in the south. Around this time, a second group of Muslims classified as the passenger group followed their indentured counterparts. They were mainly Sunni Vhoras from Surat and Memons from Kathiawad and Kutch. Their history and origin vary from that of the indentured Muslims. The passenger Muslims comprised predominantly the merchant class Indians and referred to by the colonialists as “Arabs” because of their distinct code of dress. As traders they enjoyed certain privileges from their colonialist masters, since they were free citizens of the British Empire. They were excluded from the full application of the Indian Immigration Law (Sulliman 1997: 108).

The so-called “Arab” merchants of Durban supplied merchandise to many of the stores owned by their relatives or village contacts in the smaller towns of the Colony. They penetrated many of the remote areas of the country and rendered commercial services to communities around them (Sulliman 1997: 109). The presence of transport networks, the railway, and the rapidly developing mining industry attracted this group of Muslims to the Transvaal. Small businesses were then set up in the city of Johannesburg including outlying towns such as Pietersburg, Nelspruit, Potgietersrus and Volksrust (Nadvi 1988: 149). Despite the diverse historical backgrounds of Muslims of Indian origin in South Africa and their ideological, cultural and linguistic differences, the community has continued to thrive, making a distinct presence in the country especially in the Provinces of KwaZulu-Natal and Gauteng.
In the field of philanthropy Muslims of Indian extraction made an indelible contribution to various aspects of community life both within and outside of their community. This in part is due to the institution of charity being a basic article of faith and every Muslim who owns surplus wealth is compelled to contribute two and half percent of their income towards the upliftment of the community amidst other forms of charities. These religiously ordained forms of charity were used to establish different forms of community infrastructure (mosques, cemeteries, orphanages, old age homes, community centres, educational institutes, schools and charitable institutions). The more affluent Muslims of Indian origin, being better endowed through business and commercial interests contributed a larger share in respect of Islamically ordained charities as compared to their indentured counterparts. Given the underdevelopment caused by colonialism and apartheid the, need for Islamic forms of charity helped to establish a sense of community. Under apartheid and the implementation of the Group Areas Act, large sections of the indentured Indian Muslims were relocated to state owned housing estates with little or no community infrastructure and this dealt a major blow in the form in which religiously ordained charities were directed and utilized. The more affluent Muslims of Indian extraction who relocated to racially defined suburbs were able to recover from the devastating effects of such dislocation in a shorter space of time as compared to their indentured counterparts who were dumped into sterile, mono-functional and mono-lithic townships. Until today, many within this grouping has not fully recovered from this devastating effect of relocation and resettlement although as at 1997 a total of 1328 community based, religious and social welfare organisations served the Muslim community as a whole (Khan 2011).

However, in the post-apartheid era, after four decades of international isolation, South Africa has entered the global stage as an important nation state. This changed the philanthropic landscape within the Indian Muslim community who had seen the opportunity to make a philanthropic contribution beyond the borders of South Africa. It is against this context that this chapter profiles the Gift of the Givers Foundation as an international disaster relief organisation that has come to be widely supported both within and outside of the community including the state. Its origin however, is within the Indian Muslim diasporic community. In order to place the origin, nature and organisational structure of Gift of the Givers Foundation in perspective, it is important to provide a brief conceptual framework on the nature and role of FBOS from an international perspective, so that some comparison on its modus operandi can be drawn.

This chapter is informed by a number of methodological approaches and sources of information. The profile of the Gift of the Givers Foundation was