

Islamic History in Medieval Times

A Methodical Study

By Professor Emeritus Dr A K M Yaqub Ali

Introduction

History is an important discipline of humanities - study. It is coeval with the creation of man and the world as well. It portrays before us the realistic aspects of human society since the very embryo of its existence. Starting from the individual life of human race history traverses through the various tiers of social evolutions and changes in transcending times to reach the ultimate goal of expanding over the global expanse. In spite of the variegated upheavals the study of history cannot be sliced off from the main stream of upcoming events for the interest of human existence. Without much debate on the definition and objectives of history it aims at tabulating the events that occur in man's life either individual or corporate in relation to society and environs he lives in. The main objective of the study of history is to find out the truth from the heap of materials clustered around an occasion or on any point of thematic problems of human race. But practically in many cases the facts are distorted and the truth remains hidden from the notice of the seekers. The historians with their unprejudiced mind could play fair role in scanning the diverse and conflicting materials of any event to reach the point of truth or at least to be near of it. Not being sure of expected results the inquisitive man searches out the answer of his

queries in the events that roll in day to day's life. It is, therefore, reasonable to say that the study of history is a prerequisite for the multidimensional developments of human species in society.

Subject Outline

With these few words I would like to welcome you to the subject of discourse on Islamic History in Medieval Times : A Methodical Study. To dive deep into the main theme of the topic it is to be pointed out that Islamic History along with Culture was introduced first in Calcutta University as an independent discipline of study in the late thirties of the 20th century under the colonial rule of the sub-continent. It is neither an offshoot nor an insignificant branch of history, rather it is a self contained discipline of study like the that of Ancient Indian History & Culture introduced in Calcutta University. Following the track in subsequent times Islamic History & Culture with separate entity was introduced in a good number of Universities of Bangladesh and Pakistan.

Studied not from religious but from historical point of view it is opined that Islam had its start with the advent of Prophet Muhammad (sm) at Makkah of the *Jaziratul Arab* or the Arabian peninsula in the later half of the sixth century of the Christian era. It is, therefore, assumed that henceforth Islamic history with all concomitants went on expanding to reach this present state of advancement. During the life-time of the Prophet spread of Islam was confined within Arabian peninsula. But after his demise during the time of the *Khilafat-i-Rashidah* with the conquest of the two mighty empires i.e. the Byzantine and the Sassanian Islam spread over a vast tract of land in Asia and Africa well known for the glorious civilization of the past. Under the dynastic rule of the

Umayyads (661-750 C.E.) the wave of conquest expanded to the north-west part of the Indian sub-continent in the east and to Andalus or Spain of Europe in the west. The credit goes to the Arabs for this tremendous expansion. This long period starting from the Prophet's time and ending in the year 750 C.E. may be regarded as the first phase in the history of Islam in respect of the territorial expansion, the politico-hierarchical setup and the cultural assimilation of diverse racial origin of the contemporaneous people. In the name of the Caliphate under the dynastic rule of the Umayyads the Arab domination was noticeable in all spheres of society and administration. The *Arabicization* policy of Abdul Malik b. Marwan (685-705 C.E.) resulted in making Arabic as the court language with all steps for its flourishing and in stabilizing the Umayyad rule all over their conquered land on that line. The government was unitary in form and monarchical in character on the traits of the Byzantine monarchs. The *dhimmi*s in general and the *mawali* in particular having been denied of their due share in the society and state, were disgruntled to the Umayyad rule. To stem the tide of their misrule the Abbasid Movement originated, and with the support of the *mawali*, particularly the Persian neo Muslims the Abbasids could succeed in bringing fall to the Umayyad dynastic rule in 750 C.E.

With the fall of the Umayyads the Abbasids under the halo of the Caliphate came to power in 750 and it continued till the year 1258 C.E. when the heathen Mongol hoard under the leadership of Halaku Khan devastated Baghdad and captured the seat of the Caliphate. This long span of time more than five hundred years is regarded as the second phase in the history of Islam. Though the Persian elements were largely introduced in the state and society, yet its international character was of high order. More attention was given to the flourishing of culture in its multidimensional aspects than to the expansion of

the territorial jurisdiction. Statecraft took a new turn and the central authority (the caliph) as *de jure* sovereign took positive step to grant autonomous power to the provincial heads and to the sultans of various sundry dynasties that sprang up in the east and west of the Abbasid Caliphate. The rulers of this dynasty in general encouraged the education to flourish and the technological advancement to continue throughout their conquered territories. The *Dar al-Tarjmah* of al - Mansur (754-775), the *Bayt al-Hikmah* of al- Mamun (813-833), the Madrasah al-Nizamiyyah founded by Nizamul Mulk Tusi (in 1065-67) and Astronomical Observatory near Shamasiiyyah gate, all in Baghdad, are cases in point. The study of humanities, science and technology in totality reached the zenith under the Abbasids. Retaining Arabic as the court language, the Persian as well as other indigenous languages received patronization at the hand of the rulers for flourishing. The *Alif Lailah wa Lailah* compiled under the caliph Harun ur Rashid (786-806) bears testimony to the cultivation of romantic Arabic literature in one hand and to portraying the life-style of various shades of people in other.

Pertinently it is to be pointed out here that history-writing in methodical way made great stride during the Abbasid period. Starting from biographical sketch it brought under its canvas the regional, national, universal and such other fields pertinent to the study of man in society. *Siratu Rasulillah* of Ibn Ishaq (704-768) in biographical history, *Tarikhu Baghdad* of Khatib al-Baghdadi (1002-1071) and *Tarikhu Dhimashq* of Ibn Asakir (1105-1175) in regional history, *Futuh al-Buldan* of al-Baladhuri (d. 892) in ummah's history and *Tarikh al-Umam wa al-Muluk* of al-Tabari (838-923) in universal history are examples to put for the above subjects. Materials for conquest, consolidation, statecraft, urbanization, demography, ethnicity and climates etc. could be sought in these encyclopedic works of the scholars. al-Masudi (d. 956), considered to be the

Herodotus of the Arabs, in the monumental work *Muruj al-Dhahab wa Ma'adin al-Jawhar* has revealed his master-mind in the analytical approach of historical study covering a vast expanse of human habitation. However, from these citations it suffices to say that the history-writing and the study of history occupied a key point in the prolific attainments of the Muslims under the Abbasids. Though Persian study was encouraged under the Abbasids, yet all public and private records were written in Arabic, and the history-writing was not excluded from this track. Though of later time *Kital al-Ibar*, the monumental work of Ibn Khaldun (1332-1406) produced in Arabic, in the Magharib needs mentioning, particularly for its *al-Muqaddimah* which expounds various theories on the study of history and also on the sociological interpretation of historical phenomena. On the assessment of *al-Muqaddimah* famous historian Arnold Toynbee remarks "The greatest work of its kind that has ever been created by any mind in any time or place."

On the fall of the Abbasids in 1258 the Mongol Ilkhans had their rule spread over Persia, and in the place of Arabic Persian was made the court language. In the successive dynastic rules of the Timurids (1369-1506) and the Safavids (1502-1736) besides being the court language Persian was richly studied all over the territorial expanse of Persia. History-writing in Persian got much impetus from all corners. *Jami al-Tawarikh* of Rashid al-Din (1247-1318) and *Rawdat al-Safa* of Mir Khand (d. 1498) could be cited as well reputed historical works of the time in Persian. The ascendancy of the Central Asian Turks to the power-politics of the time in question is considered the third phase in the history of Islam. The Uthmania Turks (the Ottoman Turks) established their authority in Asia Minor i.e. Turkey and under the nomenclature of Ottoman empire (1300-1924) expanded their sway over a vast land of Asia, Africa and Europe. During this long span of time tremendous development was made in

art, architecture and in all branches of humanities and technological studies besides the science of statecraft. History-writing and the archival records were done in Turkish language. On the other hand the Persianized Turks of Central Asian origin under various tribal affiliations entered the Indian sub-continent since the 13th century C.E. and established dynastic rules over this land. Persian was adopted as court language and history-writing along with the archival records kept speed in that language.

The Turko-Afghan rule of Delhi Sultanate consisting of Mamluk, Khalji, Tughlaq, Sayyid, Suri and Lodi started at the beginning of the 13th century and ended in 1526 with the foundation of Mughal dynasty by Zahir al-Din Muhammad Babar. Thenceforth the Mughal rule continued over the subcontinent till the year 1858 (though theoretically) when the British Crown took over the power with the banishment of Bahadur Shah II, the last scion of the Mughal dynasty to Rangoon. Persian was the court language of both the Sultanate and Mughal dynastic rules in this sub-continent. Though they differed in some points of their administrative policies yet the country flourished in her multidimensional aspects with great stride. Art, architecture and urbanization progressed unabated. Historiography shedding light on panegyric, politico-hierarchical and socio-cultural aspects of the dynastic rules of both the streams thrived to the height. *Tabaqat-i-Nasiri* of Minhaj Siraj, *Tarikh-i-Firuz Shahi* of Zia al-Din Barani and another of the same name by Shams Siraj Afif, *Futuh al-Salatin* of Abdul Malik Isami, *Tarikh-i-Mubarak Shahi* of Yahya b. Ahmad Sirhindi etc. under the Sultanate rule and *Tuzuk-i-Babari*, *Humayun Namah* of Gulbadan Begum, *Akbar Namah & Ain-i-Akbari* of Abul Fazl Allami, *Tabaqat-i-Akbari* of Nizam al Din Ahmad Bakhshi, *Muntakhab al-Tawarikh* of Abdul Qadir Badauni, *Tuzuk-i-Jahangir*, *Badsha Namah* of Abdul Hamid Lahori under the Mughals are cases in point.

Bengal sometimes equated with Eastern India in medieval times formed the nucleus of hierarchical, socio-cultural and politico-economic advancements in the territorial expanse of the Muslim rule in this sub-continent. It gets its corroboration from the epigraphic source where its synonymous Arabic word *mulk ush Sharq* was applied to the Lakhnawati kingdom i.e. Bengal in the early phase of the foundation of Muslim rule in this area. Even the governorship of Bengal was considered to be a lucrative assignment of the sultans of Delhi to the competing officials till the establishment of Independent Sultanate by Shams al-Din Ilyas Shah (1338-1359) with the conquest of three well-defined administrative units of Lakhnawati, Satgaon and Sonargaon in about 1352. The sultans of Delhi had always a covetous eye to the occupation of the territorial jurisdiction of Bengal (consisting of modern Bangladesh and West Bengal of India) since she emerged as an Independent Sultanate. However, starting from the conquest of Lakhnawati in 1204 till its occupation by the Mughal emperor Akbar in 1576 Bengal had been an affluent country. Urbanization spread over her territorial expanse as capital cities mint-towns, emporiums of trade and commerce and also religious sanctuaries and other minor organizations. Agricultural and industrial products mitigating the need of the people were exportable to the neighbouring countries, and the people in general lived with communal harmony. Architectural edifices of various types with a synthesis of Transoxian and indigenous elements grew up in the capital cities and other important places of the country. Besides Persian, the state language other local languages especially the Bengali language and literature were patronized to flourish by the sultans and their deputies in the period in question. The Jami Mosques and the institutions of learning that sprung up in the various parts of the country testify to the rulers' aptitude for the dissemination of knowledge and learning among the people of the contemporary time. Pertinently it is to be

mentioned here that except a few chronicles written in Delhi like *Tabaqat-i-Nasiri* of Minhaj Siraj due to the paucity of written historical works of the contemporaneous time the study of the history of medieval Bengal in its multidimensional aspects depends greatly on the hagiological literature, the ballads of old Bengali literature, and on the coins and epigraphs of the period in question. But really it is a good tiding for us that the hurdles that stood on the way of the study of medieval Bengal are no more due to the extensive and intensive research in her multidimensional aspects.

Concluding remarks

It is admitted, and there is no room of doubt, that Islamic History & Culture as a self contained and independent discipline has stirred the attention of the students of higher learning to choose it as the subject of their study. It is evident from the discussion cited above that in their hey days i.e. in the medieval times the Muslims contributed richly to each branch and point of human civilization, and there is wide scope to study each of the branches vertically and to a greater depth. To study the medieval history of Islam or to carry research on it one is to keep in view the following points in consideration.

First, one should have clear conception about the primary and secondary sources for the topic chosen. The primary sources consist of archaeological finds and contemporary written materials of different types. Based on these primary sources what are deduced and put in record may be called the secondary sources. In this connection it is to be mentioned that in handling the primary sources one must be conversant with Arabic and Persian as the case fits. Secondly, one should have the requisite knowledge of the scanning method

in picking up the kernel from the heap of the materials like the *dirayat wa riyawat*, *jarah wa qadah* and the *asma al-rijal* or *isnad* in Arabic research methodology. The Persian research methodology follows the track. In addition as the case fits, English and another European language related to the subject of study should be learnt to enrich the research. Thirdly, a researcher in the subject of his choice has to keep in mind five steps for getting positive results viz. i. choosing the topic, ii. collecting information, iii. evaluating materials, iv. organizing ideas and v. writing the paper or dissertation. If these steps are not ardently cared for, the expected results of the research may not be achieved. Fourthly, without utilizing the primary sources no research work either research paper or dissertation could claim its originality, rather such type of work is nothing but report. Fifthly, the utilization of the archaeological sources like the numismatic and epigraphs in the research of the medieval history of Islam especially the history of medieval Bengal is deemed necessary. Sixthly, in the modern technological development materials for the research could be procured from the Internet and website. But one should be very cautious in their use so that erroneous information must not creep in the subject of contention. Lastly, the students in general and the researchers in particular of all disciplines should be very careful as to the practice of plagiarism in the production of papers, books and dissertations.

Sources Consulted

Arabic & Persian works (Text or Translation)

- | | |
|---------------|--|
| Ibn Khallikan | <i>Wafiat al-A'yan</i> . Cairo A.H. 1299/1882 C.E. |
| Ibn Ishaq | <i>Siratu Rasulillah</i> . Eng. Tr. A Guillaume <i>The Life of Muhammad</i> . London 1968. |

- Ibn Khaldun *Kitab al-Ibar & Muqaddimah*. Eng. Tr. F. Rosenthal. London 1958.
- al-Baladhuri *Futuh al-Buldan*. Cairo 1319 A.H. / 1901 C.E.
- al-Musudi *Muruj al-Dhahab wa Ma'adin al-Jawhar*. Paris 1861-76. Beirut 1965.
- al-Tabari *Tarikh al-Umam wa al-Muluk*. Cairo 1358 A.H. / 1939 C.E.
- Afif *Tarikh-i-Firuz Shahi*. Calcutta, 1890.
- Abul Fazl Allami *Akbar Namah* (vol.II). Eng. Tr. H. Beveridge. Calcutta 1912.
- Barani *Tarikh-i-Firuz Shahi*. Text ed. Sayyid Ahmad Khan. Calcutta 1862.
- Minhaj Siraj *Tabaqat-i-Nasiri*. vol.I Text ed. Abdul Hai Habibi. Kabul 1963; Eng. Tr. Major Raverty. London 1881.

English works

- P.K. Hitti *History of the Arabs*. London 1968.
- George E. Kirk *A Short History of the Middle East*. London 1961.
- J. Wellhausen *The Arab Kingdom and its Fall*. Khayat Beirut 1963.
- William Muir *The Caliphate : Its Rise, Decline and Fall*. Khayats Beirut 1963.
- B. Lewis & P.M. Holt (ed.) *Historians of the Middle East*. London 1964.
- F. Rosenthal *History of Muslim Historiography*. Leiden 1952.
- H. Elliot & W. Dowson *The History of India as told by its own Historians*. 8 vols. London 1867.
- K.A. Nizami *On History and Historians of Medieval India*. New Delhi 1983.
- Stanely Lanepoole *Coins and Medals : Their place in History & Art*. Chicago 1968.
- A. Karim *Social History of the Muslims in Bengal (down 1538)*. Dacca 1959.
- M.R. Tarafdar *Husain Shahi Bengal*. Dacca 1965.
- A K M Yaqub Ali *Aspects of Society and Culture of the Varendra, 1200-1576*. Rajshahi 1998.
- Md. Akhtaruzzaman *Society and Urbanization in Medieval Bengal*. Dhaka 2009.
- Audrey J. Roth *The Research Paper-Process, Form and Content*. 5th edition. California 1986.

<http://www.bmri.org.uk>

Kate L. Turanbian *A Manual for Writers of Term Papers, Theses and Dissertations*. 5th edition. Chicago 1987.