

Reclaiming fame and glory of the Muslim world

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DURING the Golden Age of Islam (750-1258), Muslims were in the forefront in conquering knowledge through scientific research, exploration and expeditions. In their pursuit of mastering new knowledge and technology, Muslims were prepared and open to the idea of learning all that is positive from the earlier civilisations. As such, they borrowed ideas from the Indians, Persians and Greeks as a way of enriching their own civilisation.

Adopt, adapt and assimilate or integrate was the approach used by early Muslim scholars in taking knowledge from those outside the Islamic faith. This meticulous and selective approach in taking ideas from others and adapting those ideas without contradicting the Islamic metaphysical framework (aqa'id) in a way enriched the Islamic civilisation.

At the zenith of the Islamic civilisation, Muslim scholars became great authorities in the areas of medicine, philosophy, mathematics, chemistry, astronomy, botany, physical and social sciences. The booming scientific research and exploration works that took place in the many centres in the Middle East attracted Europeans to learn from the Muslims.

It has been acknowledged by many Western authorities that the scientific works done in Baghdad and Cordova (Muslim Spain) in a way inspired and gave the impetus to the Renaissance scholars to be scientific and critical thinkers.

This scenario in the Muslim World changed with the fall of Baghdad in 1258. This era is very important to remember in the Muslim annals as it marked the decline of Islamic civilisation and intellectualism. The fall of Baghdad created a chain reaction, as it triggered the fall of the Islamic empires, one after another. This tragic condition left the Muslims in a pathetic condition, hardly able to regain the prestigious position that they once held on the world stage.

Since the fall of Baghdad, Muslims were constantly bombarded with challenges in maintaining their faith, culture and heritage. The era between the fall of Baghdad and the European colonisation of Muslim lands in the 18th and 19th centuries kept the Muslim scholars occupied in their own polemics in the area of Islamic jurisprudence. The internal conflicts within the ummah also to a certain extent prevented the Muslims from making any significant contribution towards scientific discovery, particularly during the great Industrial Revolution that happened in the West. The disagreements between Muslim scholars hindered them from moving forward in their political and social life. The Shia-Sunni problem in the Islamic world is still an unresolved issue till today.

At the time when the Muslim scholars showed signs of intellectual lethargy due to disunity European scholars who had benefitted a great deal from earlier research done by Muslims managed to advance many steps ahead in the areas of science and research, leaving the Muslim world lagging behind.

The Muslims who earlier did many pioneering works in the field of science and invention either produced little or showed no progress at all. Concurrent to the era of European scientific discovery was the era of European occupation of the Muslim territories. Colonisation also brought the feeling of defeatism to some quarters within the Islamic Ummah. This resulted in them abandoning the worldly aspect of their lives and find solace in matters related to spirituality.

In modern times, the effect of Western colonisation and later globalisation has caused a huge educational and technological gap in the Muslim countries as compared to the West. At the moment, though all Muslim countries are liberated and some are even bestowed with rich natural resources, many find it hard to be on par with the advanced nations of the world.

One of the reasons for such a situation is the failure of the leaders to allocate sufficient funds for scientific research. In realising the phenomenon of marginalisation of science at the expense of spirituality, prominent Muslims like Al-Afghani (1838-1897), Muhammad 'Abduh (1849-1905) and Muhammad Iqbal (1877-1938) made the clarion call to the Muslim ummah by stating that the message of the Quran is not only spiritual but also scientific.

Iqbal in his observation of the world noticed that Zikr (spirituality) was pretty much alive in the East, particularly within the Muslim communities, and Fikr (knowledge and scientific investigations) was overly embraced by the people in the West at the expense of rejecting religion and God.

For him the Quran is the revealed book of Allah and the universe is the open book of Allah. In Iqbal's view, in order for the Muslims to be dynamic, prolific, creative and innovative in the modern world, they have to merge the Zikr and Fikr found in the Quran.

The scenario in the Muslim world shows that the Muslims have not moved very far from the conditions they were in during the time they were subjugated by the Western colonial powers. The riches in many Muslim countries in the form of petrodollars given by Allah is not put to good use in bringing sustainable development by employing science and technology.

Many oil rich countries in the Muslim world use billions of dollars for the purchase of huge armaments from the West not only for national defence purposes but at times to be used to suppress and oppress their own citizens.

The situation in the Middle East seems to be more serious than any other part of the world, as it has been subjected to constant political upheaval as a result of internal weaknesses and external interferences. It is ironic to state that though the Muslims control the riches of the world in the form of oil and gas, they are still lagging behind other communities, in many sectors of life.

There also exist great disparities between the rich and poor Muslim countries. At the moment, the ummah is bleeding as it has been torn apart by sectarian wars, and wars caused by external military intervention. The disunity among Muslim countries

is more serious than ever before, and Muslims have been labelled by the Western media as terrorists, fundamentalists and a whole lot of other obscure names.

Pockets of migrant Muslim populations who are living in many European cities have been ostracised for being alien to the prevalent culture in those countries. Due to the lack of infrastructure such as scientific research centres, scientists and scholars in the Muslim world migrate to European countries for their advancement in their areas of specialisation. This brain drain further hinders progress and development in many Muslim countries.

In realising this situation, governments in the Muslim countries should try to stem this loss by giving these professionals not only attractive incentives but also by investing in much needed physical infrastructure.

Having such facilities will allow Muslim countries to practise “brain retention” and stop their young and talented citizens from migrating to the West. Islamic centres for learning also should not only concentrate on the revealed knowledge but also establish faculties for study and research in the areas of human and natural sciences.

The study of science should be given equal emphasis at all levels of schooling in the Muslim world. It is hoped that by making these necessary changes, the Muslims would be able to bring back their past glory and fame.

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