

Muslim Contribution to History writing during the Medieval Times: (An Overview)

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Abstract: Islam is a revealed religion and its principles are universal and permanent. These guide and fashion life in all ages and times. Islamic History and Historiography is the science which informs us about our heritage, which makes us conscious of links with past; which makes aware of origin; and which provides us with a sense of direction for the future. The Qur'an played a great historical role in the historical consciousness of the Muslims and because of the historical consciousness of Muslims, historiography was approached by the Muslims with utmost care and sincerity. The Muslims considered themselves to be the great custodians and transmitters of the knowledge and facts that could not be altered. They produced a vast literature of history of considerable merit at a time when even among the civilized people there was not much flair for historiography. Thus, it were the Muslims who gave new orientation to the historical thinking and writing with a greater depth and dimensions. The histories written by the Muslim historians were characterized by accuracy, scientific assembling of facts and their objective approach. Islam has given a galaxy of historians to the world such as al-Tabari, Ibn Khaldun, Baladhuri, al-Masudi and Ibn Ishaq, they all have an everlasting and towering contribution in the development of Muslim historiography during the medieval times. The present paper highlights the very concept of History in Islam. It also highlights the history-consciousness of the Muslims by highlighting their contributions to the science of historiography.

Key-words: Historiography, Muslim Historians and science of History.

Introduction

The word *Tarikh*, History, is derived from the root word 'arkh'ⁱ, which means fixing the period of an eventⁱⁱ. Classic Arabic historiographers define the term as 'Knowledge pertaining to a country, customs and manners of a people, remains of the people of yore, as well as an account of the actions of those alive'ⁱⁱⁱ. In the words of Abd al-Rahman al-Sakhawi (RA), a famous historian, History is "an art dealing with anecdotes according to the sequence of their chronology"^{iv}. It acts as a discipline of knowledge "which informs us about our heritage; which makes us conscious of our links with past; which makes us aware of our origin; and which provides us with a sense of direction for the future"^v.

The Arabs could have little conception of history before the advent of Islam. They even lacked a proper epic, and were people with no consciousness of history. It is, therefore, more likely that Muslims developed a sense of history from Prophet Muhammad's (SAAS) mission and the holy Qur'an brings to the light the account of nations, their misdeeds and their destruction as a result of their misdoings:

"There is, in their stories, instruction for men endowed with understanding it is not a tale invented, but a confirmation of what went before it,-- a detailed exposition of all things, and a guide and a mercy to any such as believe".^{vi}

"See they not how many of those before them we did destroy?—Generations We had established on the earth, in strength such as We have not given to

you—for whom We poured out rain from skies in abundance. And gave streams flowing beneath their (feet): yet for their sins We destroy them, and raised in their wake."^{vii}

"Do they not travel through the earth, and see what was the end of those before them? They were superior them in strength; they tilled the soil and populated it in greater numbers than these have done. There came to them their messengers with clear (signs), (which they rejected, to their own destruction): it was not Allah who wronged them but they wronged their own souls."^{viii}

"Do they do not travel through the earth, and see what was the end of those before them,--though they were superior to them in strength? Nor is Allah to be frustrated by anything whatever in the heavens or on earth: for He is all-knowing, all-powerful, if Allah were to punish men according to what they deserve, He would not leave on the back of the (earth) a single living creature: but He gives them respite for a stated term: when their term expires, verily Allah has in His sight all His servants."^{ix}

Thus Islam claims to work in the context of history. A remarkable testimony to the historical sense of the Muslims is their success in preserving the text of the Quran.^x

Another aspect of history consciousness of the Muslims is their concern to preserve, in letter and spirit, the sayings, of the Prophet Muhammad (SAAS) and to create a vast literature to cover the daily actions of the Prophet Muhammad (SAAS).

This speaks of the serious concern of the Muslims to have things recorded in the annals of history.

The rise of the Prophet Muhammad (SAAS), his consolidation of the Arabs ranks into a single nation and its subsequent impact. On human civilization represents one of the greatest events in the history of the mankind in general and that of the Muslims in particular.^{xi} So long as the immediate disciples of the Prophet Muhammad (SAAS) and companions were alive, this was a simple matter, but as time elapsed it was considered increasingly necessary to collect all information about him.^{xii} Where the believers could not find clear guidance from the Quran or where there was dispute in the interpretation of its text, the best authority could be the Prophet's sayings and actions (Ahadith). Thus there grew up the tradition of collecting the ahadith.^{xiii} These writings comprised the first historic literature in Arabia.^{xiv} The scholars put their best efforts to collect the ahadith of the Prophet Muhammad (SAAS) from the Sahaba (RAA), Taabaieen (RA) and successive generations.

The Muhaddithun (traditionists) introduced in unparalleled technique, Jarah wa Ta'dil (Science of declaring a Hadith valid or invalid) while compiling the ahadith. We do not find any evidence of this kind being employed in preserving the historical data either among the pagan Arabs or among the more civilized peoples of the neighbouring countries.^{xv}

Thus the Muslims brought the highest standards of objectivity into their writings and showed great enthusiasm for the discovery of true facts. Though the debt that history owes to the efforts of Muslim writers is generally recognized by Orientalists,^{xvi} yet the consciousness of the value and significance of Muslim contribution is rare among western historians. It would not be an exaggeration to say that historiography is a Muslim science. "The development of modern historical writing seems to have gained considerably in speed and substance through the utilization of Muslim literature which enabled the western historians from the seventeenth century on, to see a large section of the world through foreign eyes. The Muslim historiography helped indirectly to shape the present day historical thinking."^{xvii}

Muslim Contribution to History writing and Historiography

The Qur'an played a great historical role in the historical consciousness of the Muslims and because of the historical consciousness of Muslims; historiography was approached by them with utmost care and sincerity. They considered themselves to be the custodians and transmitters of facts that could not be altered. They produced a vast literature of considerable merit at a time when even among the civilized peoples there was not much flair for historiography^{xviii}. Thus it were

Muslims who gave new orientation to historical thinking and writing with a greater depth and dimensions. The histories written by Muslim authors were characterized by accuracy, scientific assembling of facts, and their objective approach^{xix}. Muslim period produced a galaxy of historians. We shall, however, try in the limited space available to discuss some of the prominent historians as Baladhuri, al-Tabari, al-Masudi, Ibn al-Athir, yaqubi, ibn Khalikan and Ibn Khaldun. They all have an everlasting contribution in the development of Muslim historiography.

Al-Baladhuri (RA)

Abu Jafar Ahmad bin Yahya bin Jabir al-Baladhuri (d 279/829)^{xx} wrote a continuous history. He wrote a history woven around the Arab aristocracy, thus indicating where the emphasis lay and giving full emphasis to an Arab social idea^{xxi}. His renowned work *Futuh al-Buldan*^{xxii} is a record of the Islamic conquests^{xxiii}. It expresses a central mission of Islam and meets a juristic and administrative need^{xxiv}. In this work each section usually gives some details about the subsequent history of the country. The details have been gathered from the local authorities. Besides obtaining this local information, which was no doubt trustworthy to a great extent, he also made use of the works of earlier researchers, such as Waqidi through Muhammad bi Sa'd, his secretary and the author of the *Tabaqat*^{xxv}. After Arabia the description of Syria, Mesopotamia, Armenia, Egypt, North Africa, Spain, certain Mediterranean Islands, Nuba, Iraq, Persia and India is found in the work.^{xxvi}

Another work of Baladhuri originally in forty volumes, is his *'Ansab al-Ashraf*^{xxvii} which is not a continuous history but a collection of narratives dealing with particular events^{xxviii}. He enriched the Muslim historiography with the bulk of historical literature found in *Ansab al-Ashraf*^{xxix}.

al-Tabari(RA)

Abu Jafar Muhammad bin Jabir al-Tabari (839-923 C E) is a celebrated and renowned Muslim historian. His vast historical repository has remained to us an immortal monument of his extensive scientific activity which has been written in the early fourth (tenth) century and is the first work in the annalistic form written by a Muslim that has come down to us. Tabari's greatness as a matter of fact is recognized in all quarters because of his accuracy and great diligence in collecting data and giving them the form of authentic history^{xxx}. Tabari's renowned and most important works bears the title of *Tarikh al-Rusul Wal-Muluk* (the history of the Prophets and the Kings). While commenting on this renowned history al-Masudi says, "It excels all other works in brilliance and substance as it includes all different kinds of historical information, comprises a great variety of memorable data and contains all sorts of knowledge. It is an extremely useful work"^{xxxi}.

Tabari's work is constructed in an entirely different principle. His work shows a definite departure from the ancient form, although in details of style ancient influences are still alive, especially in those parts of the work which deal with pre-Islamic history and the beginning of Islam. What makes his work especially valuable for the purpose of scientific research is the manner in which he imparts the events recorded. "Probably, we are to regard Tabari as performing for history a task similar to what Bukhari and Muslim did for traditions"^{xxxii}. Al-Tabari's work not only contains mere historical narratives but also imparts the documents authenticating the events^{xxxiii}. This is the real merit and value of his great historical work for science^{xxxiv}. For this reason al-Tabari has been justly called "The father of Arab history"^{xxxv}. Al-Tabari was a true and real historian as he wrote history without any motives and did not try to shape it according to particular interests and objects^{xxxvi}.

Al-Masudi (RA)

Al-Masudi's renowned work is his "*Muruj al-Dhahab Wa madin'ul Jawahir*"^{xxxvii}, in which the story of the creation of the world is followed by a physical description of the earth^{xxxviii}. Briefly speaking, the '*Kitab Muruj al-Dhahab*' abbreviated al-Masudi's major work^{xxxix}. While the *Kitab al-Tanbih Wal-Ishraf* contains al-Masudi's whole historical series on much smaller scale^{xl}.

Ibn al-Athir (RA)

Ibn-Athir (1160-1234 C E) whose universal history *al-Kamil Fi al-Tarikh*^{xli} (The perfect work on history) in twelve volumes^{xlii} is one of the greatest productions of Arabic historiography and was known to the West before that of al-Tabari. The first volume of Ibn al-Athir's Kamil is mostly concerned with the beginning of historical works in Islam^{xliii} and with the creation of the universe^{xliv}. Ibn al-Athir also compiled a book on the lives of seven thousand five hundred companions of the Prophet(SAAS), entitled *Asad al- Ghabah* (The Lions of the Forest)^{xlv}.

Al-Yaqubi (RA)

Ahmad bin Ali bin Yaqub bin Jafar binWahb bin Wadih al-Yaqubi, commonly known as al-Yaqubi (d 897 C E) collected material for historical work through the extensive travels^{xlvi}. His outstanding work '*Kitab al- Buldan*' was written in 891 C E. It provides details about numerous places^{xlvii}. His famous work was an outstanding contribution to several aspects of geography including regional description, physical geography and environmental factors^{xlviii}.

Ibn Khalikan (RA)

Among the numerous compositions of biography and history we can have no hesitation in awarding the place of honour to *Wafiyat al- Ayan* or 'Obituaries of Eminent Men' by Shamas al-din Ibn Khalikan (1211-1282 C E)^{xlix}. It is a comprehensive selection of eminent figures in all fields of activity in all parts of the Islamic world^l. The merits of the book have been fully recognized by the author's countrymen as well as by European scholars:

"It is composed in simple and elegant language, it is extremely accurate, and it contains an astonishing quantity of miscellaneous historical and literary information, not directly catalogued but conveyed in the most pleasing fashion by anecdotes and excerpts which illustrate every department of Muslim life."^{li}

Ibn Khaldun (RA)

Wali al- din Abd al -Rahaman bin Muhammad bin Muhammad bin Abi Bakr Muhammad Bin Hasan (1332-1406 C E), commonly known as Ibn Khaldun, a prominent Muslim historian, sociologist and philosopher of fourteenth century. He is primarily known for his '*Muqaddima*' and '*Kitab al-Ibr*'. He considered history a science worthy of study. He wrote history in the light of a new method of explanation and reasoning. He opens his prolegomena inquiring into the value of history and its kinds, and the errors into which the historians fall in recording annals and events, whether dictated by purpose and partially or inadvertently and from ignorance of the laws of sociology, want of precision and investigation in estimating the possible and impossible^{lii}. Ibn Khaldun has a special style of exposition and expression. His prolegomena is distinguished for the brilliance of its literary style which is at the same time characterized by simplicity and harmony^{liii}.

Conclusion

The Muslim historians and historiographers were able to expand the scope of history and historiography from mere recording of facts to a repository of political, administrative and cultural experiences and made fruitful efforts in the analytical fields as well. Though the debt that the history and historiography owes to the efforts of Muslim writers is generally recognized by the Orientalists, yet the consciousness of the value and significance of Muslim contribution in the field of historiography is rare among the Western historians.

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