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A Critical Appraisal of al-Tabari's Contribution to Muslim Historiography

The third century of Muslim Era which saw the golden prime of the Abbasids was one of the most fertile period of Islamic learning. To whichever field we turn our attention we find standard works composed and we see scores of celebrated scholars serving the noble cause of knowledge. So great and copious was their literary activity, that even in an advanced age like ours a student of history and literature, while studying their lives and activities is thrown into a state of astonishment. It is told that Abu Ja'far Muhammad bin Jarir, whom we are going to discuss here, proposed to dictate a historical work to his students : the number of leaves which he at first proposed to cover was 30,000, as the students held that life would not be long enough for the composition of such a work he reduced the number to one tenth, 3000 leaves which corresponds fairly with the bulk of the work in the editions of Leyden and Cairo. This composition left him time for a work of similar bulk on Qur'anic Tafsir, which also is said to be one tenth of the amount originally contemplated. For the forty years of his later life the average amount which he wrote was forty leaves a day ; those who divided the leaves which he had covered by the days of his life from the cradle to the grave found that he had written fourteen leaves for each days of his existence.¹

Almost all the subsequent writers, while writing about Muslim history and Muslim scholars have given Ibn Jarir a very high place in their works. Some of the sources which have been consulted while preparing this article are : Ibn al-Nadim², Ibn-Khallikan³,

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1. Khatib, *Tarikh Baghdad*, ii, 163 ; Yaqut, *Mu'jam al-Udaba*, xviii, 44.

2. *Fihrist*, pp 326-28.

3. *Wafayat al-Ayan*, ii, 29-30.

than higher education. The former touches the general economic condition of the masses which form the backbone of a community, the latter only a few individuals who happen to possess more than average intellectual energy. The charity of the wealthier classes among us must be so organised as to afford opportunities of a cheap technical education to the children of the community. But industrial and commercial training alone is not sufficient. In economic competition the ethical factor plays an equally important part. The virtues of thrift, mutual trust, honesty, punctuality and co-operation are as much valuable economic assets as Professional skill. How many economic under-takings have failed in India through want of mutual trust and a proper spirit of co-operation. If we want to turn out good working men, good shopkeepers, good artisans and above all good citizens, we must first make them good Muslims.

careful study of the general economic situation in India and the causes which have brought it about. How much of this situation is due to the larger economic forces that are working in the modern world, how much to the historical antecedents, customs, prejudices and ethical shortcomings of the people of this land, how much, if at all, to the policy of the Government these are the questions which, in preference to other questions, must occupy his brains. The problem will, of course, have to be approached in a broad impartial non-sectarian spirit ; since the economic forces affect all communities alike. The ever-increasing land-revenue, the importation of foreign drink into country, the rise of prices, whether it is due to a wrong currency policy or the establishment of free-trade between an agricultural country and a manufacturing country, or to any other cause—these things affect the economic condition of Hindus, Muslim, Sikhs and Parsees all alike, and loudly proclaim that the public workers of all the various communities can, at least, meet on the common ground of economic discussion. The Muslim public worker, however has hitherto concentrated almost all his energies on the point of securing our due share in Government Service. The effort is certainly laudable, and he must continue to work until we have achieved our object. But he must remember that Government-service, as a field for the production of wealth, is extremely limited. It offers prospects of economic elevation only to a few individuals ; the general health of a community depends largely on its economic independence. There is no doubt that a few individuals in the higher branches of Government-service give a tone of honour and self-respect to the whole community ; but it is equally true that there are other spheres of economic activity which are equally important and more profitable. The process of change and adjustment to an economic ideal is certainly painful to a people whose tradition have been in the main, military, yet, in view of the change that is coming over the communities of Asia, principally through the economic energy of western nations, the ordeal must be gone through besides working for the removal of economic disabilities, if any, we must have a system of technical education which is, in my opinion, even more important,

is the principal, function of the woman. All subjects which have a tendency to de-womanise and to de-muslimise her must be carefully excluded from her education. But our educationists are still groping in the dark. They have not yet been able to prescribe a definite course of study for our girls ; and some of them are, unfortunately, too much dazzled by the glamour of western ideals to realise the difference between Islam which constructs nationality out of a purely abstract idea, i.e., religion, and westernism which builds nationality on an objective basis i.e. country.

I shall now proceed to offer a few remarks on the improvement of the general condition of the masses of our community. And in this connection the first point of importance is the economic condition of the average Muslim. I am sure nobody will deny that the economic condition of the average Muslim is extremely deplorable. His small wage, dirty house, and under-fed children are a matter of common observation in the towns where the population is mostly Muslim. Pass through a Muslim street in Lahore ; what do you find : And old silent gloomy street whose mournful quiet is relieved by the shrieks of ill-clad bony children, or by the subdued entreaties of an old woman in Pardah spreading out her skinny hand for alms. This is not all. Inside these unhappy dwelling there are hundreds of men and women whose fathers have seen better days, but who are now compelled to starve without ever opening their lips for appeals (for) charity. It is really this poverty of the lower strata of our community and not the Pardah system, as our young protagonists of social reform some times contend, that is re-acting on the general physique of our community. Besides this class there is the absolutely incapable who bring into the world children as incapable as himself, and by surrendering himself to laziness and crime spreads the contagion of these vices to others. Have we ever given a thought to these aspects of the social problem ? Have we ever realised that the duty of our Anjumans and Leagues is to work for the elevation of the masses and not to push up the individuals ? The most important problem before the Muslim public worker is how to improve the economic conditions of his community. It is his duty to make a

doing incalculable harm, and creating extremely intricate social problems. Nor is the higher education of women likely to lead to any desirable consequences in so far, at least, as the birth rate of a community is concerned. Experience has already shown that the economic emancipation of women in the west has not, as was expected, materially extended the production of wealth. On the other hand it has a tendency to break up the Physical life of Society. Now I am ready to recognise that the evolution of a society by resident forces alone is an impossibility in modern times. The almost total annihilation of space and time has produced a close contact among the various communities of the world, a contact which is likely to affect the natural orbit of some and to prove disastrous to others. What the larger economic, social and political forces that are now working in the world will bring about, nobody can foretell; but we must remember that while it is advisable, and even necessary for a healthy social change, to assimilate the elements of an alien culture, a hasty injudicious jump to alien institutions may lead to most abrupt structural disturbances in the body-social. There is an element of Universality in the culture of a people; their social and political institutions on the other hand, are more individual. They are determined by their peculiar tradition and life-history, and cannot be easily adopted by a community having a different tradition and life-history. Considering, then the peculiar nature of our community, the teaching of Islam, and the revelations of Physiology, and Biology on the subject, it is clear that the Muslim women should continue to occupy the position in society which Islam has allotted to her. And the position which has been allotted to her must determine the nature of her education. I have tried to show above that the solidarity of our community rests on our hold on the religion and culture of Islam. The woman is the principal depositary of the religious idea. In the interests of a continuous national life, therefore, it is extremely necessary to give her, in the first place, a sound religious education. That must, however, be supplemented by a general knowledge of Muslim-History, Domestic economy, and Hygiene. This will enable her to give a degree of intellectual companionship to her husband, and successfully to do the duties of motherhood which, in my opinion,

may, at any time lose its individuality in the individuality of any of the surrounding communities that may happen to possess a greater vitality than itself. But there is, perhaps, a still more important reason for the necessity of a Muslim University in India. You know that the ethical training of the masses of our community is principally in the hands of a very inefficient class of *Moulvies* or public preachers the range of whose knowledge of Muslim History and Literature is extremely limited. A modern public teacher of morality and religion must be familiar with the great truths of History, Economics and Sociology besides being thoroughly conversant with the literature and thought of his own community. Such public teachers are the great need of the times. The Nadwa, the Aligarh College, the theological Seminary of Dewband, and other institutions of a similar type, working independently of one another, cannot meet this pressing demand. All these scattered educational forces should be organised into a central institution of a large purpose which may afford opportunities not only for the development of special abilities, but may also create the necessary type of culture for the modern Indian Muslim. A purely western ideal of education will be dangerous to the life of our community if it is to continue in an essentially Muslim community. It is, therefore, absolutely necessary to construct a fresh educational ideal in which the elements of Muslim culture must find a prominent place, and past and the present come in a happy union. The construction of such an ideal is not an easy task ; it requires a large imagination, a keen perception of the tendencies of modern times, and a complete grasp of the meaning of Muslim History and religion.

Before leaving this point I think I ought to say a few words on the education of the Muslim woman. This is not a place to discuss the ideal of womanhood in Islam. I must however, frankly admit that I am not an advocate of absolute equality between man and woman. It appears that Nature has allotted different functions to them, and a right performance of these functions is equally indispensable for the health and prosperity of the human family. The so called "emancipation of the western woman" necessitated by western individualism, and the peculiar economic situation produced by an unhealthy competition, is an experiment, in my opinion, likely to fail, not without

and that if the present state of affairs is permitted to continue for another twenty years the Muslim spirit which is now kept alive by a few representatives of the old Muslim culture, will entirely disappear from the life of our community. Those who laid it down as a fundamental principle that the education of the Muslim child must begin with the study of the Quran—no matter whether he understands it or not—were certainly much more sensible of the nature of our community than we claim to be. Economic considerations alone ought not to determine our activity as a people, the preservation of the unity of the community, the continuous national life is a far higher ideal than the service of merely immediate ends. To me a Muslim of scanty means who possesses a really Muslim character is a much more valuable national asset than a high-salaried, free-thinking graduate with whom Islam, far from being a working principle of life, is merely a convenient policy in order to secure a greater share in the leaves and fishes of the country. These remarks need not lead you to think that I mean to condemn western culture. Every student of Muslim history must recognise that it was the west which originally shaped the course of our intellectual activity. In the sphere of pure thought we are still perhaps more Greek than Arab or Persian ; Yet nobody can deny that we possess a unique culture of our own, which no modern Muslim system of education can afford to ignore without running the risk of denationalising those whose good it aims at securing. It is indeed a happy sign that the idea of a Muslim University has dawned upon us. Considering the nature of our community the necessity of such an institution cannot be doubted, provided it is conducted on strictly Islamic lines. No community can afford to break entirely with its past and it is more emphatically true in the case of our community whose collective tradition alone constitutes the principle of its vitality. The Muslim must of course keep pace with the progress of modern ideas ; but his culture must, in the main, remain muslim in character and it is clear that such a thing cannot be attained without a teaching university of our own. If you produce youngmen the groundwork of whose culture is not muslim, you will not be bring up a Muslim community, you will be creating a totally new community which having no strong principle of cohesion

specimen of character whose intellectual life has absolutely no background of Muslim culture without which, in my opinion he is only half a muslim or even less than that provided his purely secular education has left his religious belief unshaken. He has been allowed, I am afraid, to assimilate western habits of thought to an alarming extent, a constant study of western literature, to the entire neglect of the collective experience of his own community, has, I must frankly say, thoroughly demuslimised his mental life. No community, I say without any fear of contradiction, has produced so very noble types of character as our own: yet our youngman who is deplorably ignorant of the life-history of his own community has to go to the great personalities of western history for admiration and guidance. Intellectually he is a slave to the west, and consequently his soul is lacking in that healthy egoism which comes from a study of ones own history and classics. In our educational enterprise we have hardly realised the truth, which experience is now forcing upon us, that an undivided devotion to an alien culture is a kind of imperceptible conversion to that culture, a conversion which may involve much more serious consequences than conversion to a new religion. No Muslim writer has expressed this truth more pointedly than the poet Akhbar who, after surveying the present intellectual life of the Muslim Youngman, cries out in despair :

شیخ مرحوم کا قول اب مجھے یاد آتا ہے
دل بدل جائیں گے تعلم بدل جانے سے

We now see that the fears of the «شیخ مرحوم»—the representative of the essentially Muslim culture who waged a bitter controversy with the late Sir Sayyed Ahmed Khan on the question of Western Education—were not quite groundless. Need I say that our educational product is a standing testimony to the grain of truth contained in the Shaikh Marhum's contention? Gentlemen, I hope you will excuse me for these straightforward remarks. Having been in close touch with the student-life of to-day for the last ten or twelve years, and teaching a subject closely related to religion, I think I have got some claim to be heard on this point. It has been my painful experience that the Muslim Student, ignorant of the social, ethical and political ideals that have dominated the mind of his community, is spiritually dead;

tive, but the task is enormous, and I confess it is beyond my power to undertake it. I shall, therefore, have to confine my observations to the work that we have done in India, and here too I do not pretend to give you any exhaustive treatment of the various problems now confronting us. I shall consider only two points—Education and the Improvement of the general condition of the masses.

During the last fifty years or so, the work of Education has absorbed almost all our energies. It is not improper to ask whether we have been following any definite educational ideal, or only working for immediate ends without giving a thought to the future. What kind of men have we turned out? And is the quality of the output calculated to secure a continuous life of such a peculiarly constructed community as our own? The answer to these questions has been already indicated. The students of Psychology among you know very well that the personal identity of the individual mind depends upon the orderly succession of its mental states. When the continuity of the stream of individual consciousness is disturbed there results psychical ill health which may, in course of time, lead on to a final dissolution of vital forces. The same is the case with the life of the social mind whose continuity is dependent on the orderly transmission of its collective experience from generation to generation. The objects of education is to secure this orderly transmission and thus to give a unity of self-consciousness or personal identity to the social mind. It is a deliberate effort to bring about an organic relation between the individual and the body-politic to which he belongs. The various portions of the collective tradition so transmitted by education, permeate the entire social mind, and become objects of clear consciousness in the minds of a few individuals only whose life and thought become specialised for the various purposes of the community. The legal, historical and literary traditions of a community for instances, are definitely present to the consciousness of its lawyers, historians and literary writers, though the community as a whole is only vaguely conscious of them. Now I wish you to look at and judge the value of our educational achievement from this standpoint. In the modern Muslim youngman we have produced a

need of such a type of character is loudly proclaimed by a great poetic voice. In his lighthearted humour Maulana Akbar of Allahabad, aptly called the tongue of the times, conceals a keen perception of the nature of the forces that are at present working in the Muslim Community. Do not be misled by the half-serious tone of his utterances ; he keeps his tears veiled in youthful laughter, and will not admit you into his workshop until you come with a keener glance to examine his wares. So deeply related are the currents of thought and emotion in a homogeneous community that if one portion reveals a certain organic craving the material to satisfy that craving is almost simultaneously produced by the other.

Let me now proceed a step further. In the foregoing discussion I have tried to establish three propositions :

1. That the religious idea constitutes the life-principle of the Muslim Community. In order to maintain the health and vigour of such a community the development of all dissenting forces in it must be carefully watched and a rapid influx of foreign elements must be checked or permitted to enter into the social fabric very slowly, so that it may not bring on a collapse by making too great a demand on the assimilation powers of the social organism.

2. Secondly : the mental outfit of the individual belonging to the Muslim community must be mainly formed out of the material which the intellectual energy of his forefathers has produced, so that he may be made to feel the continuity of the present with the past and the future.

3. Thirdly : that he must possess a particular type of character which I have described as the Muslim type.

It is my object now to examine the value of the work that we have done in the various spheres of activity. Now a thoroughgoing criticism of the work of the Muslim world in the sphere of Politics, Religion, Literature and thought, Education, Journalism, Industry, Trade and Commerce will require several volumes. The events which are now happening in the Muslim World are extremely significant and a searching examination of them would be exceedingly instruc-