

Muslim Intellectual Deficit: Reasons and Remedies

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Reviewed by

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History of nations is witness to the fact that people's march on the path of progress, development, and prosperity has not always been smooth. Rise and fall of nations has always been a cherished field of study, not only for historians but also for sociologists, psychologists, and anthropologists together. The theory of 'rise and fall of nations' was, as is well known, propounded by the famous Muslim historian-sociologist Ibn Khadun. In the early modern period, Shah Waliullah Dehalwi, in his illustrious *Hujjat Allah al-Balighah*, attempted to discover the principles about the emergence, growth, and glory of human societies. Edward Gibbon's *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* provides detailed accounts vis-à-vis the decline and fall of this empire.

The glory of Muslim civilization has also been of tremendous interest to many reputed scholars. Its emergence from the 'Desert', its multi-continental expansion, consolidation and (then) becoming the hub of arts, crafts, philosophy, scientific inquiry and, above all, the confluence of cultures has also been accorded great value by the scholars. Obviously, its decline and fall also didn't go unnoticed to the keen eye of observers. So, volumes have been written on this special theme.

To this treasure-house of scholarship a new book was added in March 2018, when *Muslim Intellectual Deficit: Reasons and Remedies* was published by *Idara Matbu'at-e-Talaba, J&K*—the publishing wing of *Islami Jami'at-e-Talaba* (IJT: the student's wing of *Jamaat-e-Islami*). Written by Dr Tauseef Ahmad Parray, a budding Kashmiri scholar of international acclaim, the book basically documents the reasons behind the intellectual stagnation of the Muslims in the contemporary era in spite of their glorious past vis-à-vis intellectualism and rationality.

The book is preceded by a 'Foreword' (pp. 7-9) by Dr Muhammad Razi Ul Islam Nadwi (*Secretary, Tasneefi Academy, Jama'at-i-Islami Hind, New Delhi, & Assistant Editor, Tahqeeqat-e-Islami, Aligarh*), wherein he lays emphasis on the position of the book in the literature on 'rise and fall of Muslims', and puts forth that "a number of Muslim intellectuals, in many eras, have attempted to look into, and analyse, the causes and factors that were responsible for the Muslim intellectual decay. The present work is a serious and substantial effort, attempting to find an answer to the same (perturbing) question." (pp. 7-8).

It begins with the “Introduction” (pp. 15-19) in which the author has highlighted the theme of the work through different titles of the Qur’an which include *Furqan*, *Zikr*, *Hikmah*, *Nur*, etc. These titles, in fact, don’t serve just mere titles but actually signify the Qur’anic stand vis-à-vis knowledge (pp. 16-17). This section should have been given a thorough treatment, however.

The author has next highlighted the “Islamic Concept of Knowledge (*‘Ilm*)” (pp. 21-26) in which the ‘existence of God’ serves not only as ‘the greatest Reality’ of the cosmos but it is also the corner stone of the edifice of Knowledge (*‘Ilm*) as such. It is not surprising that almost one-eighth of the Qur’an (750 verses) inspires us to “study, explore nature, calculate different phenomena, survey the history of peoples” (p. 23) etc. This chapter has also been cut short by the learned author. It seems that a ‘quantum jump’ has been made here without mentioning the Prophet’s (SAW) approach vis-à-vis knowledge (*‘ilm*).

One of the main chapters of the work is “Muslim Intellectual Contribution in the Golden Age” (pp. 27-32). This is the “real scientific age of the Islamic culture” and it could be compared to the “Russian and French Revolutions of the West” (p. 27). This epoch begins with the Abbasid Revolution (750 CE) with *Bayt-ul Hikmah* (the House of Wisdom) and the Translation Movement (p. 28) as its sublime manifestations. The creative activity and the spirit of inquiry of this period have been prototypically comparable to the scientific revolution of the 16th and 17th centuries. Baghdad and Spain turned out to be the main centres of culture and civilization throughout the world. And it was from Baghdad, Syria, Cordova and Sicily that this scientific culture penetrated to the west. The author, on the authority of Ziauddin Sardar, says that Libraries, Universities, Hospitals and Observatories—which are all related to inquiry and experimentation—marked the distinction of this era of Muslim glory (see, p. 30).

Although the author has talked about the ‘Fall of Baghdad (1258)’ and the ‘Fall of Spain (1492)’, besides certain other reasons as the ‘beginning of the end’ of this ‘Golden Era’ in this chapter, this has, however, been fully explored in the chapter entitled “What Went Wrong and Where” (pp. 33-45). Sack of Baghdad at the hands of Mongols in 1258 and the Christian Reconquista of Spain in 1492 are normally considered as the main reasons of the Muslim intellectual downfall. However, there is no denying the fact that there had been some deep-rooted causes behind this decline and stagnation which go much beyond 1258.

It has been opined that the *Nizamiyyah* system of education ushered in by Nizamul Mulk Tusi (1018-92) who focussed on religious education (p. 33). This (over)emphasis on religious education distracted the Muslims from paying any heed to scientific learning which in turn resulted in the bifurcation of knowledge into “worldly and religious” which in actuality had been inclusive and holistic. As the *Nizamiyyah* model was followed uncritically, the division of knowledge (worldly and other-worldly) continued unabated in different forms and its manifestations are still existent. That is why the contemporary scholars like Sayyid Abul Ala Maududi, Sayyid Abul Hasan ‘Ali

Nadwi, Isma'il Raji al-Faruqi, etc. (see, pp. 37-41) raised their concerns against this division and bifurcation. This bifurcation still exists in the form of *qadeem* (old) vs *jadeed* (new) and Islamic vs Western.

And when the spirit of inquiry withered (pp. 42), *taqlid* (following others' opinions uncritically) became a general norm thereby closing the doors of *ijtihad* (striving to derive suitable solutions by reasoning). Here it is pertinent to note that the Prophet (SAW) had taught his Companions, especially those who were made governors, to solve problems by employing reason in consonance with Qur'an and Sunnah. It is not surprising then that Shah Waliullah is of the opinion that Muslims didn't follow a particular school of thought up to 4th century A.H. That is Muslims did *ijtihad* instead of *taqlid*. And it is this *ijtihad* which Allama Iqbal batted for so vociferously in the contemporary era.

Consequently thought was divorced from action. Thus the 'leader' who used to be a 'thinker' in his own right in the yester years was now reduced a 'political skeleton' sans any real decisive power and initiative. Gone were the days when a Muslim used to be a polymath—combining and integrating different dimensions of knowledge (*Ilm*) to make it an organic whole.

The situation was further aggravated by the colonial imperialism (1700-1950) when nothing original could be produced on the part of the Muslims except the reaction to and rebuttal of the west thereby trying to find compatibility between 'Islam and West' and 'Reason and Revelation' (p. 43). Here it is worth mentioning that the 'Compatibility or Reconciliation of Reason and Revelation' has always been a hot debate among scholars and it is not new.

This situation of the Muslim world, however, didn't end with the onset of the post-colonial era. The author has highlighted this fact in the chapter "Challenges to the Muslim World in the Post-Colonial Era: 1950 onwards" (pp. 46-51). Muslims at this point of time were facing the dual challenge of restructuring of governance and responding to modernity. Muslim societies became either democracies or monarchies with respect to governance and "adopted western style of academic infrastructure without methodology and objectivity". Thus technology was "brought not created" (p. 47). Muslims in spite of remaining attached to their scientific heritage were deluged by inferiority complex. So, they 'discovered' was "scientific miracles in the Qur'an" (p. 47). As such, it was a "*marz badhta gaya joon joon dawa ki*" situation for the Muslims.

In chapter "Other Side of the Coin" (pp. 52-55) the author has counted different other reasons responsible for the furtherance of Muslims' Intellectual Deficit. These are: Shi'ah-Sunni division, divergent schools of thought, different political ideologies and lack of belongingness to the *Ummah*. Brain drain, incompetence in English, lack of innovative methods of education, financial constraints and authoritarianism (pp. 53-54) are some other reasons that have hindered the Muslims' intellectual progress.

Being a regular contributor to different reputed institutes and societies, the author has listed some of these and their modus operandi in the chapter "Some

Exemplary Research Institutions/ Centres of Muslims” (pp. 56-57) located USA, UK, Canada, Turkey, Malaysia, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and the Sub-Continent (India and Pakistan). From Pakistan, the three (3) Research Centres/ Institutes mentioned in this book are: *Islamic Research Institute (IRI)*; *Institute of Policy Studies (IPS)*, *Iqbal International Institute for Research & Dialogue (IRD)*—all based in Islamabad.

Lastly, the author has given a 6-point ‘remedial’ formula (pp. 98-100) on “Remedies, Solutions and the (Possible) Way Out”, which, in verbatim, is as follows:

1. Addressing the lack of proper platforms
2. Initiatives to be taken at community level to establish good academic platforms (Research Institute Centres)
3. Proper training to be given to young researchers
4. Creating a suitable environment for Academic Engagements
5. Adopting courses for enhancing writing skills in Higher Education Institutions and giving proper training of same at lower levels and
6. Overcoming the absence/ lack of the conception of ‘Belonging to the *Ummah*’ and/ or the lack of spirit of contributing towards the welfare of one’s own community/ society.

Though published from J&K, and a slim book of around 110 pages, Dr Parray’s ‘*Muslim Intellectual Deficit*’ has the capacity to ‘ignite’ the “sensitive Muslim minds” — and it has been dedicated to them by the author. It is worthy to quote here this statement from one of the Endorsements (Prof. Abdur Raheem Kidwai, *Aligarh Muslim University*, India): in this book, the author “critically examines the factors which account for the decline and stagnation in the Muslim intellectual tradition. ... This engaging work is destined to benefit many. More importantly, it will generate soul searching and introspection”.

The book, in sum, is a welcome addition to the literature on ‘rise and fall’ of Muslims, with many unique features. It is a must read for everyone interesting in knowing what, and where, went wrong with the Muslims that they faced ‘*Intellectual Deficit*’.