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‘Muslim’ vs ‘Islamic’

By Jan-e-Alam Khaki

WHEN writing about the history of Muslims or history of issues related to Muslim societies, there is nowadays a tendency to call this entire area of study ‘Islamic’ without much thought as to the use of this important epithet.

For example, in modern times, particularly in the Indian subcontinent, there is a strong tendency to call all Muslim histories ‘Islamic history’. Noted scholars have contested this subtle subversion leading to radicalisation or to an attitude that is characterised by exclusivist tendencies.

Interestingly enough, when classical historians wrote histories, they tended to use more neutral titles than ‘Islamic’ or even ‘Muslim’ in their history texts.

For example, the pioneering historian Ibn Ishaq termed his history book Kitabul Magazi al-Nabawiyya (The Book of Wars of the Prophet PBUH) without the use of the word ‘Islami’ or ‘Muslim’.

Similarly, take the example of Al Baladhuri’s Ta’reekh al-Buldaan. It translates as ‘The conquests of cities’ not ‘The Islamic conquests of cities’. These and many other examples of history texts tend to demonstrate that historians were very careful about how to title their works and showed great care in making these decisions.

However, in contemporary times, particularly in the Indian subcontinent, there has developed a tendency to show all caliphs and sultans, governors and generals as ‘Islamic’ heroes. This leads us to ask: what exactly is the difference between calling something/somebody Islamic or Muslim? And how does this make a difference?

Islamic denotes something/ somebody as mandated by Islam or having Islamic credentials to reflect Islamic character. The word Muslim, on the other hand, denotes an individual who happens to be a Muslim. It does not show what that individual did that was Islamic.

What this does is that it allows historians and scientists to be relatively free to discuss, examine and judge that person’s acts of commission and omission. When a strong epithet of Islamic is added to a concept or a person, it immediately exalts the entity to a ‘sacred’ status and makes it

difficult if not impossible to examine it/him/her critically, using or applying the conventions of historical analysis/critical discourse analysis.

Interestingly enough, now this epithet (Islamic) is being used with so many personalities or concepts that practically anything done by a Muslim 'hero' or a ruler becomes sanctified and he/she becomes infallible. This appears quite contrary to the historical epochs that we call formative.

Even the common man or woman would question the caliph(s) about the truthfulness or otherwise of their actions. We see a different practice there. In earlier times, they used more natural, non-judgmental, non-religious and neutral terms to denote and describe the important personalities of their age or what they did.

Many notable writers have argued that by having a tendency to refer to acts by Muslims as Islamic justifies what they did and sanctions the act in religious terms, which creates many historical and intellectual problems.

Also, it is argued that this approach has tended to develop myths about history and historical personalities. Often, this tendency leads to an approach of 'everything being perfect'. What then happens is that a set of myths are developed around a set of propositions or personalities that shroud and conceal the truth.

Particularly, history as a science of study of the past becomes a casualty because the study of history in such approaches then becomes more or less theology, or even may turn out to be devotional literature, having no characteristics of history.

This tends to lead to a loss of status for history, leading to loss of trust in the writer. History, among other things, is all about examining, critically analysing and studying the events or personalities of the past in a scientific way.

It is, therefore, no surprise that many of the scholarly students of history at advanced levels of their training tend to prefer more 'serious' historical literature mostly written in the academically advanced countries rather than in developing countries.

Exceptions apart, many history books written in Muslim countries, including Pakistan, methodologically, structurally, and content-wise leave much to be desired.

Some history books are even sprinkled with curses and abuses for personalities whom the writers did not like or approve of. Such is the sad story of some of the writers of our history in many Muslim societies.

One reason why this tendency seems to have developed is that history is approached as a tool to justify sectarian or ideological positions and defame others. The purpose is not finding the truth in history but using history to justify theological positions based on their assumptions and interpretations of history, which might be called 'theologised' or 'ideologised' histories.

Many other nations also tend to do this in the name of nation-building, which may be called nationalised histories. As opposed to this phenomenon, one can find versions of history written by many Muslim writers who have tried to investigate history from a more objective position trying to draw so-called scientific conclusions.

One such marvellous example is that of Ibn Khaldun. Today, Ibn Khaldun is seen as a shining example of this trend where he tries to study history not as theology, but as a science, an objective study of history without attaching any epithet.

In sum, writers should use the terms 'Islamic' or 'Muslim' discerningly which can prevent standardisation of everything Muslims do or don't do in a particular society at a particular time and in a particular context.

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