

Cultural pluralism and science

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The question of lack of development of science in contemporary Muslim societies needs to be examined courageously and with a degree of detachment. A good number of Muslim intellectuals and scientists examine the issue as historical evolution of Muslim intellectual heritage and theology. This approach often misdirects their analysis. Ethnocentrism, drive for cultural self-assertion in face of cultural domination by other societies, universal tendency to hold 'others' responsible for one's problems, frequent use of conspiracy theory and lack of determination to look inwardly to understand their predicament introduce strong element of subjectivity in their approach.

Few Muslim intellectuals examine scientific backwardness of their societies in a broad theoretical framework and comparative historical perspective identifying the universal conditions in which science flourishes, gets stifled or declines. The disciplines of sociology of science has identified a number of conditions conducive for the development of science including the following.

- Cultural pluralism in a society;
- Rise in level of differentiation between different spheres of culture;
- Existence of a specific set of values;
- A certain level of economic development enabling a society to meet its minimum survival needs and spare resources for development of science;
- A political system that supports cultural differentiation and at least does not suppress cultural creativity through political and ideological repression;
- Absence of powerful and hierarchically organised clergy;
- Emergence of a well organised community of scientists with relative autonomy and freedom from the state and other social and cultural controls;
- An international power structure which does not lock societies into relations of cultural dependency making dependent societies scientifically sterile.

The science is both a methodology of knowing certain aspects of reality through falsification of alternative hypothesis derived from theories through rigorous observation and experimentation and an intellectual culture. An important element of this culture is that the scientific community institutionalises scepticism, dissent and innovation expecting its practitioners to continuously question the validity of existing knowledge and not to accept any proposition without examining it in the light of reason and evidence. Some scientists, like adherents of any other normative system, occasionally fail to live up to these expectations but that does not change the basic ethos of science.

Cultural differentiation and pluralism are necessary though not sufficient conditions for the development of culture of science and science itself. The close relationship between culture of science and cultural differentiation and pluralism is obvious. The culture of science cannot take roots in societies which impose cultural homogeneity and protect from enquiry and doubt important questions concerning nature and life with the blanket of sanctity. Positive cultural differentiation enables different fields of intellectual activities such as religion, ethics, philosophy, science, arts etc., to

evolve their own standards. Though they interact, none of them is able to impose its norms on the other with the help of state or any other institution or organised group. Cultural pluralism confers legitimacy on autonomy of each field of intellectual enquiry and on their different approaches extending them to the right of coexistence.

Nurturing the development of cultural pluralism has been a major challenge for human race and no society at any stage of human history has been successful in fully institutionalising it. Even the contemporary modern-industrial societies which have achieved a relatively higher level of cultural pluralism have occasionally experienced regression as the rise of fascism in Germany and McCarthy era in USA indicate.

Most contemporary Muslim societies have yet to accept the value of cultural pluralism. In some countries cultural pluralism have suffered deadly blows: Zia's Pakistan and contemporary Iran are examples. The explanation of this lies in the nature and composition of their power structures. With certain variations militaries, traditional monarchs, organised clergy, feudal and tribal elite dominate Muslim states and societies. Individually or jointly they resist and suppress cultural pluralism and development of science as both weaken and subvert the traditional world view on which their power rests.

One significant factor which stifles cultural pluralism and development of science is the role and perception of Muslim theologians particularly when they are in a position to influence or shape state policies. Though their perceptions and attitudes toward pluralism and science have varied at different times, they have often rejected them with the argument that divine knowledge, of which they are repositories, is enough for the guidance of Muslims and they need no other knowledge particularly of the type that encourages questioning and scepticism and thus subverts faith. Historically, most of the major Muslim theologians have struggled to subordinate such knowledge to theology. Whenever they succeeded, scientific development in Muslim societies declined.

So powerful has been the hold of theologian on Muslim thought that even non-theologian Muslim thinkers have found it difficult to concede an autonomous status to science. Scientifically inclined Ibn-el-Khaldun, known for his major contributions to philosophy of history and development of sociology, regarded "excessive indulgence in subsidiary sciences as waste of time and life and a meaningless pursuit of irrelevance." Sir Syed, the most ardent advocate of science in the sub-continent defended science on the theological argument that it ultimately strengthens religious faith. Iqbal though recognised the need for differentiation between science and theology by saying that "religion is not physics or chemistry seeking an explanation of nature in terms of causation...", yet in his poetry which is much more influential than his philosophical thinking he elevated Ishq (love, passion) over reason and rationality thus weakening indirectly his plea for cultural pluralism and differentiation.

Colonial rule over Muslim societies created a framework for cultural differentiation and pluralism but it was an imposed framework lacking the true spirit of pluralism. Moreover, it created a serious split between the theologians and the new and

somewhat secularly inclined intelligentsia linked with colonial rule. Claiming to be the only true interpreters of religion and branding the new intelligentsia as a creature of colonialism, theologians attempted to impose on them its traditional perspective. The attempt, though did not always succeed, left the new intelligentsia with a sense of alienation and raising doubts about its cultural authenticity. Consequently colonialism created pluralism and cultural differentiation did not secure legitimacy necessary for development of science. The struggle of anti-colonial movements, which in a considerable number of Muslim countries was supported by both modern intelligentsia and theologians, did not create genuine pluralism either, as evident from post-independence development. Where the two groups were in opposing camps as in the struggle for Pakistan, this only deepened their mutual antipathy.

Burdened with colonial and pre-colonial legacy and confronted with complex problems of nation and state building, economic development and modernisation, the post-colonial Muslim societies either did not realise the importance of fostering cultural pluralism for the development of science or lacked the capacity and freedom to do so. Probably both factors operated.

Failure of most of contemporary Muslim states and Muslim societies to make a successful developmental breakthrough has led to social anomie, cultural confusion, and political instability. The penetration of externally induced or exogenous science and scientific mode of thinking by subjecting their social systems, world view, and cultural heritage to critical scrutiny has shaken their traditional faith and thus aggravated their problems.

Some sections of these societies seek to remedy this situation through religious revivalism. The revivalists are in a sense modernists who use modern technology and methods of organisation, spread their ideology through modern and effective techniques of indoctrination, use political and social pressure for securing religious conformity, and create an intense religious fervour and intellectual xenophobia stifling both cultural pluralism and science. Where they succeed in capturing state power, which most of the revivalist organisation seek to do, they use state power to eradicate cultural pluralism putting an effective break on the growth of science.

Cultural differentiation and pluralism, in a concrete form, affect the development of science by enabling the scientists to become a scientific community, acquire certain degree of autonomy from the state and other institutions and pursue their professional work without visible or invisible pressure from theologians and other strata of society. In most Muslim societies, such communities have not yet emerged and in a few they have they are weak and amorphous and work nervously under the watching theological eyes.

This predicament of Muslim intellectuals and the nascent scientific community has influenced their professional orientation and led some of them to seek fusion of science and religion rather differentiation between them. Some confuse the Qur'aanic stress on reflection as a means of strengthening faith in unity of God and the open-ended scientific enquiry questioning all verities including the existence of God. They also contend that religious fervour could accelerate development of science without offering the necessary em-

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empirical proof that periods of religious fervour in Muslim history were also the periods of flourishing of science or that a religiously motivated Muslim scientist is more productive and creative than the one lacking such fervour. Some also attempt to Islamise science believing that within the framework of Western civilisation it has gone astray. However they do not Islamise science which demonstrably excels the normal science.

The development of science in Muslim societies is also affected by a crisis of cultural identity which Muslim intellectuals and scientists experience as they get drawn into the orbit of global intellectual community and get caught into the cross currents of emerging multi culturalism. They face the dilemma of remaining simultaneously loyal to their cultural heritage and the larger global scientific community.

The dilemma is made more difficult for lack of truly scientific outlook in the elements of global scientific community. It is particularly acute for some of the Muslim intellectuals and scientists settled in Western countries where their host societies inhospitable to their cultural identity, they react by rejecting the knowledge, occasionally questioning the concept of science.

The restrictive intellectual environment in the scientific community, inequitable reversal of the low place of scientists in the society, lack of structure to support one's professional work, fear of fatawas and the wrath of the revivalists movements leave the scientists in Muslim societies with three unenviable options — Join the orthodoxy and revivalists extolling the superiority of Muslim cultural heritage without deeply and objectively scrutinising it, a seek fusion of religion and science. — Timidly withdraw into their scientific shells and let the prevailing conditions determine the direction of their scientific pursuits rather than struggle to create environments conducive for their work. — Leave the country.

All the three responses negatively affect the development of science and scientific creativity in Muslim societies.

The genuine need of Muslims intellectuals and scientists for a scientific identity, their drive for cultural assertion and renaissance, for breaking the domination of the societies on knowledge and culture could lead them on two different paths. One path of glorification of past achievements in science from religion or alternative crutches of science to fortify faith, and the other Islamisation of science question the universality of West-dominated science. This path is unlikely to help them develop science in their societies to achieve the goals they seek with the help of science. Alternatively, they can accept the useful methodology of acquiring certain knowledge and technology, own it as a heritage of humankind to which Muslims have also made significant contributions, imbibe its ethos, work on the creation of socio-cultural conditions in their societies which can help them make significant contributions to science and thus universalise it. This will be a more effective and productive way of correcting the faults and weaknesses of presumably Western sciences than just idly criticising them or wishing to Islamise them.