

The problem of intellectual stagnation

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Excerpt:

In his talk, the Maulana explains how intellectual stagnation sets in within nations and communities thereby necessitating the need for a radical operation. Taking the example of Turkey and sharing the experiences from his recent visit, the Maulana clarifies how the widely held conception of Ataturk being the enemy of Islam is incorrect. In the case of Turkey, Ataturk became the catalyst to bring about the radical operation which was required to give new life to Turkish community. He further asserts that efforts should be in the direction of making people intellectually awakened and to develop in them the ability to think and discern.

Referring to Islamic history, he expounds that several such examples can be traced where radical operation took place for breaking the prevalent conditioning of individuals or nations. Be it the Battle of Uhud, or clashes between Banu Umayya and Banu Abbas, the radical operations paved way for changing the pro-war mentality of the Arabs to pro-peace mentality and consequently re-engineering individual minds.

The Lesson:

Intellectual stagnation is a natural phenomenon, which takes place after passing away of some time. This stagnation cannot be broken through counselling, it needs a shock treatment, which is the only way to arouse re-thinking.

Introduction

I visited Turkey in the first week of May. During this journey I learnt and reflected on several issues. One of these items of realisation was the phenomenon of intellectual stagnation.

I have witnessed the era when Turkey was very famous throughout the Muslim world. I was born in 1925 and during that time, Mustafa Kemal Ataturk (1881-1938) was very actively working in Turkey. The year he passed away was the year in which I took admission in a *Madrassa* (seminary). The news of his death had reached everywhere – he was mentioned in newspapers and discussed in conversations. He was not mentioned in positive light anywhere and as a result of hearing so many negative items about him I had conceived a negative image of Turkey in my mind.

However, after my recent journey, I realised that this negative image of Turkey, as was envisaged in the entire Muslim world was entirely false and hypothetical. The reason for this lack of understanding is intellectual stagnation that the entire Muslim world is trapped in.

As a result of my recent experiences, I am planning to write a book entitled *Turkey Rediscovered*. The observations I had during this visit are unknown to the Muslims. Muslims live in India without knowing what India is just as those who live in this colony, Nizamuddin, do not know what Nizamuddin is, and those living in America don't know what America is.

The thought process of Muslims

The thinking of Muslims has become totally biased. A news headline in today's Urdu daily read: *America mein shariat-e-islami par pabandi* (curb on Islamic Shariah in America). In my opinion, this news item is meaningless. Those who subscribe to such ideas do not understand that America is a secular country and they have nothing to do with Shariah. People read such news items and become negative for America. They even fail to understand that Shariah system cannot be achieved in a country like America.

As per my assessment, this is the phenomenon of intellectual stagnation. The present-day Muslims form an opinion simply on the basis of what they hear and what they read in the newspapers. I would like to add here that the opposite of intellectual stagnation is intellectual awakening. It is the capability of thinking and discovering things yourself, that is, what one thinks is an outcome of self-discovery. According to my experience all Muslims, even those who are educated, lack the precious ability to engage in discovering facts of life on their own.

About Turkey

It has long been popularised that Turkey is the ‘sick man of Europe’. I too was of the conception that Turkey would be a backward country and as such I had a much underestimated understanding of everything related to Turkey, including the Turkish airlines through which we had to travel. But my opinion was due to change, drastically.

Once onboard, I realised that the Turkish Airlines had very high standards. Later, as we touched down at the Istanbul airport, I came to know that there exists at the Airport, an entire department dedicated to ferrying the travellers. I travel in a wheelchair and for this purpose, I was assigned a dedicated staff member and was royally escorted. The Airport matched international standards in all aspects.

My experiences made me realise that the image of Turkey being the ‘sick man of Europe’ was a self-styled image. Even though people travel to Turkey, they are unable to transform the image of Turkey in their minds and continue to consider it as backward and underdeveloped.

In the context of Turkey, a common topic of discussion is the era when Ataturk came to power. He was a dictator and instituted several reforms. Muslims think that some of his most notorious reforms comprised – conversion of mosques into museums, abolishment of Arabic *azaan*, replacement of the Turkish dress with European outfit, and use of the Roman script for Turkish as against the Arabic script in which it was written earlier. However, perspective-changing realisations were in store for me.

For instance, while I was in the hotel in Turkey, I heard at the usual times of prayer, the sound of Arabic *azaan* coming from a mosque situated outside our hotel. This *azaan* was same as the one I had heard everywhere else. Likewise, I visited the headquarters of *Zaman* – the major, high-circulation daily newspaper of Turkey – for an interview. Inside the premises, was a grand mosque where several people were offering their prayers. There was a *Qari* (one who recites the Quran), who was reading the Quran in Arabic. I wondered if I was in a different country! The Turkey that I had in my mind was where apparently, Ataturk had scrapped the Namaz in Arabic. But that country was very different from what I had thought it to be!

Developments in Turkey

Contrary to general perception, Turkey is a very developed. In fact, it is the most developed country in the Muslim world. There is no oil in Turkey, yet it is self-sufficient. This is largely due to its industries; it sells its products in Europe. It is very strange that Muslims are unaware of all these developments. I once read in a newspaper that backwardness had been impressed upon the Indian Muslims. On reading this, I thought if backwardness was impressed upon you, why did you let it be impressed upon you, in the very first place? If you allowed backwardness to be inflicted on you, then you have no right to live.

Ataturk is often painted in very negative light throughout Muslim world. It is said that he was the enemy of Islam and more so, was not a Muslim but a Jew! But my visit changed my views. Ataturk's stringent reforms were actually aimed at ending the intellectual stagnation of Turkish Muslims. It must be understood that for bringing about such a change, a radical operation is required, without which nothing can be achieved. The meaning of radical operation can be understood by the following lines of a poem by Jalaluddin Rumi's mathnawi read: *ek imarat ko phir se banana hota hai to usko tod dete hain* (A building has to be demolished in order to construct it anew).

Every community develops stagnation, and then a reformer is needed who can help the community overcome it. If the community doesn't accept this reformer it will continue to remain stagnated.

Another of Ataturk's reforms that earned him a lot of infamy was his decree of replacing the Arabic script with a version of the Latin alphabet. It was considered to be a wrong step. But when I analyse his decision, I think it was right. It must be clearly understood that no script in itself is holy. The Arabic script is not a holy script; it is same as every other script. The benefit of Ataturk's changing the script into Roman from Arabic was that in the age of computer entire Turkish language could be computerized. Urdu language for example, continues to be very backward in this regard, because the Urdu script is not Roman, while the script of the computer is Roman. As a result of this script reform, Turkey progressed tremendously in the age of computerization.

Another phenomenon that characterized the age of Ataturk's rule was openness, which helped in rapid development. Earlier, in the period of Caliphate, there was a Caliph called Sultan Abdülhamid II (d. 1919). He was the first Sultan to introduce steamship from Europe. As these ships were about to set sail, the ulama said that before they are brought to the oceans, their steam (*bukhara*) should be removed (*khatm-e-bukhara*). At the time a Turkish officer, Jamil Sidqi Al-zahawi (d. 1936) who had studied in Europe and was aware of the modern thought, resented saying that ships travel through steam and not through the laws written in Bukhari. Ataturk brought openness in Turkey, and therefore, today its industry is of the same standard as of Europe.

In the conference organized in Turkey, representatives of 60 Muslim countries were invited. I realized during my stay that Turkey would have continued to live in the age of backwardness had Ataturk not brought about radical reforms. This was not a phenomenon of Ataturk, but a *sunnat* of God (*sunnatulllah*). Phenomena of this nature have occurred numerous times in the Muslim history.

Other examples of radical reforms in Muslim history

The following verse of the Quran refers to the occasion of Battle of Uhud where 70 *Sahaba* (Companions) were killed:

God is not one to leave the believers in the state wherein you are unless He has separated the impure from the pure. (3:179)

The above verse means that God will certainly separate the pure from the impure through radical operation. In this verse, the word used to denote 'impure' is *khabith*, and the word used to denote 'pure' is *tayyab*. Both *khabith* (evil) and *tayyab* (pure) are not used in the context of Islamic Shariah or to evaluate one's faith or sincerity (*aqeedah* and *ikhlas*). Rather these terms actually give a depiction of the state of mind or thinking of man. The above verse therefore refers to *khabith* or impure thinking. In other words, it means that those who are stagnant in their thought process will be made active through a radical process of change. Let me explain this in the reference of the Battle of Uhud.

For thousands of years, people lived by the motto, 'war for war' (*alharb anfalul harb*). They thought that the problem of war could be solved through war alone. When Islam arose in Arabia, it introduced a new age in history, one where the motto became 'peace is a greater power than war and problems should be solved through peace' (*assilm anfalul harb*).

Islam had to change the pro-war trend prevalent in history. The minds of people including the Companions were conditioned in war mentality. The Companions were modest believers but a radical operation was required to break their conditioning. God gave a demonstration in the Battle of Uhud that even if the person is a Companion of the Prophet, a radical operation is required in order to bring about a great change.

Before the Battle of Uhud, when it became known that the Meccans were approaching to launch an offensive, the young companions opined that they should go out of Medina and defend themselves. The Prophet and other senior companions did not want to go out of Medina; they wanted to stay inside and defend themselves. But because of the zeal of the younger companions, the Prophet relented.

The Battle of Uhud therefore, took place at Uhud, a mountain near Medina. In this Battle, seventy companions were killed. This was a radical operation. God wanted to change the conditioning of companions and turn it from a pro-war (*alharb anafalul harb*) mentality to a pro-peace (*assilm anfalul harb*) mentality. A conditioning that has happened over a long period of time requires a shock treatment. Battle of Uhud was a shock treatment for the companions, as they witnessed the death of seventy companions. The result of the Battle was not favourable for any of the parties. This incident arose the re-thinking within companions. As a result three years after the Battle of Uhud (fought in 3AH), the peace agreement in the form of Treaty of Hudaibiyyah came into force (6 A.H). This peace treaty entailed unilateral acceptance of the conditions of the other party. This first-of-its-kind peace treaty had no precedence in known history. It came into being only after the shock treatment at Uhud. After the experience at Uhud, the companions became mentally prepared to take peace as their course.

Miracle of peace

After the peace agreement, Islam started spreading with great speed. Earlier the Muslims met the Meccans in the battlefield (*maidan-e-jang*), now they started engaging in conversation (*maidan-e-guftugu*). Thus, Islam started spreading rapidly and within two years Meccan came into the fold of Islam without any military operation.

To break a centuries-long conditioning, a shock treatment was essential. The word *khabith* in the above verse is not a matter of Shariah, rather it is *khabith* thinking which is referred to in the verse; the *khabith* thinking was “war for war”. The translation of the verse is that God will certainly separate the impure from the pure. It is from the perspective of thinking, and not of *aqeedah* (faith) and *ikhlaas* (modesty). Earlier people believed that if the opposite party has a pro- military mindset, they too will have to respond by violent means. But the Quran taught man to “make peace in return for war”. The verse reads:

Strive with the utmost strenuousness by means of this [Quran, 25:52]

The term '*jihad-e-kabir*' in the above verse refers to an ideological struggle. It means that instead of killing, believers should make those who fight with them, as their companions. This was a very revolutionary idea that had never been thought of in the entire history.

Process of radical reforms

Several examples similar to Ataturk's radical operation can be traced throughout history. Battle of Uhud was one such instance which led to re-thinking in the minds of companions and made them understand that peace should be returned for war instead of returning war for war.

During caliphate, Caliph Uthman was killed and clashes took place between Ali and Muawiyah. The result of these clashes brought about re-thinking because of which stability ensued for a long time. Similarly, the clash between Banu Umayya and Banu Abbas was also a radical operation, the result of which was that Baghdad and Cairo turned into intellectual centres. Muslims concentrated on increasing their knowledge and not clashing with others. Then, in Spain when the Muslim rule came to an end, scholars from there went to neighbouring Africa and helped in propagating Islam.

It is a natural phenomenon that after passing away of some time, intellectual stagnation set in within a community. This stagnation cannot be broken through counselling, it needs a shock treatment, which is the only way to arouse re-thinking,

The art of discovering

There are two ways to learn. One way is to accept what is being told and the other is to undertake self-discovery. For example, when I came for the lecture today, I understood the meaning of the following verse of the Quran:

And sufficient was God for the believers in battle (33:25)

This verse is understood in limited sense. People restrict its meaning to the Battles of *Ahzab* (5 AH) and *Uhud* (3 AH), they do not strive to discover deeper meaning.

But, when I came to deliver this lecture today, I saw people sitting with computers all around. Some were typing, others were trying to stream the lecture live, yet others were sitting in America and other parts of the world with their computers to listen to the lecture. At this sight, I thought: ‘And sufficient is God for the believers in dawah.’ God wanted this mission to be computerized and so God created a team of people who were proficient with the use of computers. This is an example of self-discovery. If you limit the meaning of the above verse to war, you will discover nothing, but if you extend it, you’ll realize God’s blessings. This is creative *imaan* or intellectual awakening, in other words.

It must therefore be understood that stagnation always sets in, and it must be brought to an end, which was what Ataturk did. Stagnation cannot be broken through counselling and preaching. Ataturk was inspired to end this stagnation and develop rethinking among his people, as a result today Turkey is almost 100% literate; possesses world-class infrastructure; has a brilliant culture etc. One of the Turkish thinkers, Fethullah Gulen, has opened up thousands of standard schools, colleges, hospitals and many other institutions: he and his followers have raised an entire infrastructure. Had Ataturk not brought about change by ending the stagnation, nothing of this kind would have happened. Only after Ataturk performed the radical operation could people like Fethullah Gulen get an opportunity to do their work. When such radical operations are carried out, some negative issues inevitably emerge as a by-product.

Since the past hundred years, Turkey had been enveloped in the curtain of darkness. A member of CPS, Sadia Khan told me that one of her professors remarked that every Muslim country needs an ‘Ataturk’, who can carry out such radical operation. Another incident which Zakwan Sb narrated confirmed the remark of the professor. A man called Zaidi, who now lives in Sweden, works in the ship industry. Once while he was sailing on a ship, it got wrecked. However, he managed to sail on with the help of a piece of the broken ship, and reached the Turkish coast. He spent some months in Turkey. He said after his return from there that Turkey is the most alive nation (*jaandar qaum*) in the entire Muslim world, and if any big work is to happen, it will begin from Turkey. I also experienced this observation made by Mr. Zaidi.

My experience in Turkey

At the conference, sixty representatives from various Muslim countries were invited. I had thought that I would be an unknown figure there. However, some of my books have been translated in Turkish and even before I left, they had disseminated it among the people. Also, at the symposium, I was given the prime role: I delivered the inaugural speech, and it received tremendous appreciation from all. The organizers said: “Your speech was the first and the last, you were the hero of the conference.” There were speakers from the Arab world and even from within Turkey, but they appreciated my speech. Such remarks can come only from a living community.

One of the things I said at the conference was that great dawah work is destined to happen from Turkey, as it is a bridge between East and West. Several tourists visit the place, which means that *madu* itself is coming to the *dayee*. So, if you are in Turkey, you can spread your word to the entire world, as people from all over the world come there. But people do not have the concept of dawah. All that is known about Turkey is that a mad man, Ataturk, destroyed everything there. But this is wrong, Islam is still alive there. We had no negative experience anywhere. In the modern age a dawah explosion is required, and it will happen from Turkey. The book *Turkey Rediscovered*, which I am planning to write, will have these ideas in detail.

Conclusion

Radical operation is required for individuals, communities as well as nations for breaking the stagnation, which sets in them. Once a man tried to commit suicide, but was saved somehow and then the shock of almost experiencing death turned him into a hero. A tumultuous experience is like a shock for an individual, which results in the emergence of a new personality. Same is the case with nations.

Big change comes through a storm, not without it. What Ataturk did is an example of law of nature, that is, no change comes without shock treatment.

People in Turkey are educated and have a taste for reading and as such the Turkish newspaper *Zaman* sells 1 million copies daily. No other Muslim country reports such high sale. *Zaman* is in accordance with the standards of modern journalism.

Everything in Turkey is of European standard. Contrary to this, Muslims in other countries did not progress because they developed negativity and hatred for the West, which cultivated ghetto mentality and hampered growth. Turkey on the other hand was engaged in tourism, business, and interaction with the western world, which led to emergence of new ideas and thoughts. This is what made Turkey come up to western standards.

Since Turkey is a part of Europe, it receives influences from the West. Other areas in the Muslim world which advocate separation from the West are backward. Backwardness is thus not impressed upon anyone; rather it is something which one takes on oneself. For example, Pakistan separated from India and is now a ghetto. It should have remained as a part of India, utilized opportunities and would have progressed with the nation. Turkey did not become a ghetto, they accepted influence from Europe and therefore the development in Europe can also be seen in Turkey, unlike in any other Muslim country. Such change requires immense struggle and radical operation on a large scale.

Towards the end, I would say that we must clear our mind of biased thinking, only then will we be able to develop our thinking ability. Muslim world became biased against Ataturk's actions and couldn't understand the cause of Turkey's progress. What Ataturk did was a radical phase, then progress and development followed. It must be remembered that there is no beginning unless stagnation breaks. This is the law of nature, mentioned in the Quran (3:179). It refers to the phenomenon that stagnation paves way for radical change so that a new emergence can be made possible. Ataturk didn't carry out this operation because he was inspired by this verse. But when I think of Ataturk's phenomena, I realise that his work was of the same category as the principle mentioned in the above verse. Ataturk lived in an age when Turkey was in its decline phase. On seeing this, a concern arose in him to end the stagnation of his country, and for this purpose he undertook an operation. And, the shape that this operation took is corroborated by the above verse of the Quran.

Questions and Answers

Q1. Why are Muslims concerned about *Ihya-e-khilafat* (revival of caliphate) instead of being concerned for *Ihya-e-ummat* (revival of community)?

A1. In my opinion *Ihya-e-khilafat* is an innovation (*bidat*) and not sunnat. This thought developed when Muslims had formed a political empire. The words used in Hadith for revival are *tajdid* or *ihya*, which refer to the revival of religion. *Ihya* refers to revival of the spirit when only form remains. Revival of caliphate is a self-styled notion, which developed during the Abbasid period, a period which came after the golden period of Islam (after *qurun mashhud laha bilkhair*.) Issues like *khilafat*, which emerged after the authentic period of Islam, necessitate a critical analysis and must not be subscribed to without scrutiny. During the time of the first four caliphs, who are regarded as the Pious Caliphs, people did not even address them as “caliph”, they were only called *Amirul mominin*.

Q2. What should be the point of beginning of one’s work when there is degeneration?

A2. Mosques and Madrassas (Islamic seminaries) are mere structures; they do not represent the spirit. Beginning is made by reviving the spirit, reactivating the mind, and reengineering it. It must be remembered that beginning cannot be external. When the structures are lacking in spirit, the first task will have to be to work towards reviving this spirit and only after that can we embark on the task of working towards regeneration.

Q3. How should we save the upcoming generations from widespread evil?

A3. Parents play the key role in destroying their own children. They provide easy money, which is the root cause of all evils. Parents cannot blame anyone else because they are responsible themselves.

Q4. Was there reengineering of minds in Turkey, after the shock treatment of Ataturk?

A4. It happened partially through reformers and thinkers such as Fethullah Gulen and Said Nursi. But their ideology was not very powerful, that’s why it did not happen completely.

Q5. People are obsessed with *khilafat*, can it be translated into reality?

A5. The religion of Muslims today is derived from history. It is history which has become an obstruction between Muslims and Quranic teachings. The idea of establishing *khilafat* is not only impossible, it is preposterous. It is not remotely close to rationale and must be rejected *prima facie*.

Q6. What should be the way of undertaking a radical operation for Indian Muslims?

A6. Radical operation cannot be undertaken like this - it seeks political power. We can only undertake hammering, which is what I do. Without this, there can be no change in the minds of people, and hence no re-thinking will happen. Language of hammering is also the language of the Quran and Hadith. It is not my invention. Very strong language is used in the Quran, because otherwise intellectual stagnation cannot break.

Q7. What is your take on the Arab spring?

A7. I believe that it is Arab anarchy, nothing more. There is no base for it; it is only a reaction. Dictatorship was present in these countries since long. However, now they have risen and are standing against their dictators. So, it is a matter of reaction. No positive result can be brought about through reaction.

It must be understood that there is a process which must be followed. First, people must be educated, institutions should be established and journalism should be encouraged. This would prepare people's minds and they would change the way they think. Only when all these stages have taken place can a political change reap positive results. Mere anarchy/ coup cannot lead to any positive result. Americans have coined the term 'Arab spring', thinking that it will bring democracy, but no such thing will come, except anarchy. We need a base for bringing in democracy.