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Civilizations- like species- evolve over time; though unlike biological evolution, the time span is much shorter, of the order of a few centuries, and more importantly the selection pressures for a civilization’s evolution come-chiefly- from within itself, rather than from nature. A comparison of the states of two civilizations in the modern period would therefore rely on historical continuity- answers to be sought in the course of evolution of the West and the East. The simplified question of what makes A better than B, warrants an explanation that looks at how a certain factor sets B into regression while A is characterized by the very lack of that factor crucial factor. Ibn Khuldun discusses the notion of social solidarity in his Muqaddama and declares that “no society can achieve anything—conquer an empire or even survive—unless there is internal consensus about its aims… and ultimate goals.” (Stone) Taking this idea further, I will examine in this paper the breakdown of those forces in Muslim society that characterize a progressive civilization. In my opinion, the drift away from an all-embracing, pluralistic attitude- brought about by the rise of certain economic and political forces in the society, as well as conservative schools of thought in the Muslim epistemology- is the chief factor that spiraled the decline of Muslim civilization; whereas the Western society found ways to circumvent such an attitude. Having its roots in the days of 9th century Caliphate, the build-up of an increasingly utilitarian Muslim society in the post-colonial epoch sheds light on the convoluted path of evolution that this civilization took.

This paper will adopt a three-pronged approach in its examination of the aforementioned path: first analyzing the particular features of Muslim history that had a tangible role in molding the political set-up into a society that was hardly conducive to inquiry-oriented learning; secondly an elaboration of how the Western civilization developed to counter similar regressive forces, and lastly, examples from the modern world- particularly Pakistan- to illustrate historical continuity as well as the further aggravation of intellectual intolerance in the post-colonial era.

Let me first explain what I mean by the ‘pluralistic attitude’ towards learning in the historical context. Before the rise of Muslim science, all important discourses of science in antiquity were written in Greek and as it is pointed out in *The History of Science in Western Civilization* Roman aristocrats found these works irrelevant and ignored them by not making any organized effort to translate them into Latin. (Williams and Steffens,1979,170). Muslims, on the other hand, adopted a different attitude upon encountering ancient science. In order to consolidate their empire, the Arab conquerors laid a great deal of emphasis on the assimilation of this knowledge as is reflected in the wide-scale translation of ancient works and establishment of learning institutions like the Bait ul Hikmah( House of wisdom). The noticeable fact is that ancient knowledge was not being turned down as pagan and detestable, and as Hoodhbouy writes “ The monumental task of translating and systemizing the works of Greek science … was carried out by scholars who were, for the most part, non-Muslims…” (Hoodbhoy,1991,108)It was this wave of tolerant intellectual pursuit that allowed the Arab scholars to expand on what was handed down to them and build an eclectic legacy of knowledge that was later to serve as the stepping-stone for European revival from the Dark ages- “Arab geographers appreciated the skill of their Greek predecessors but felt free to correct them when later observations proved the earlier ones false.” (Williams and Steffens,1979,176) Thus, there existed a realization amongst the early Muslim scientists that knowledge, irrespective of its sources, needs to be explored without any intellectual bias. It was exactly the opposite: the seepage of bias towards the nature and sources of secular knowledge that harmed the cause of Muslim learning later.

The development of gradual aversion to learning in Muslim society has its roots in the very culture that initiated the development of science, especially the sources of its patronage. As Hoodbhoy recognizes, “ the translation effort would have been impossible without the full support and encouragement of the Muslim ruling elites…the court of Caliph received sages and scholars of all creeds as dignitaries” (Hoodbhoy)(108). The Caliph’s patronage led to the emergence of an intellectual elite class who made little effort to engage with the masses and even expressed contempt and fear of the ignorant (Hoodbhoy,1991,113). Not only that, but the science itself in those days, largely consisted of abstract theoretical deliberations of the philosophers without any major technological or economic applications that could fundamentally leave a mark on the society. The impact was that not only the Muslim civilization failed to move towards the creation of significant economic surplus- a factor that I will return to in detail later- but also erected a dangerous class barrier between the educated and the masses, quite similar to the barriers in a modern bourgeois culture. Marx and Engels identified the idealism that results after the separation of the knowledge of the natural and the knowledge of the social world, in such a hierarchical culture (Rose and Rose,1976,7) . In such a culture, it is indeed hard to establish the credibility of science with the common-folk as a useful tool of human development. As Andre Goz puts it in the *Political Economy of Science:*

“Science can cease to be a bourgeois culture only if it is not only put at the service of the people, but becomes the people’s own science, which means that science will be transformed in the process of its appropriation by the people. Indeed, as it is, science can never become… science for the people; you cannot make a compartmentalized and professionalized elite culture into the people’s own…” (Rose and Rose,1976,71)

The negative effect that such a compartmentalized society has on the development of science is, that the system fails to stand-up to those forces that seek to over-throw it; because such forces always garner support of the intellectually alienated masses. This was indeed the case with the Muslim scientists as the orthodoxy rose in their face to condemn their pursuits as heretical. Pervez Hoodboy has elaborated at length the battle between the anti-scientific Muslim orthodoxy and the distinguished Muslim philosophers of the Abbasid period. The orthodoxy reflected the very opposite of a liberal attitude towards inquisitive learning that had earlier inspired Muslim scholars, and rather laid emphasis on strictly limiting the scope of knowledge to a conservative interpretation of religious doctrines. In the words of Al-Ghazzali: “How many men have embarked on these sciences and harmed themselves, and would have been better off in religion had they not done so.” (Williams and Steffens,1979,178) It was not any intrinsic appeal of the orthodox argument but the mere fact that it reached out to the ordinary people that led to the eventual triumph of mysticism. Bobi Jo Innamrato Williams puts it this way:

“Ghazali was able to address the highest of society as well as the most uneducated. He could speak the language of the elite and the ghetto without hesitation. He realized how much information could be handled by the masses, seeing that too much is not a good thing. Being able to bridge the gap in the levels of the entire Islamic community allowed him to reach many more people. Sufism became available to everyone, regardless of the level of education. Ghazali had made mysticism available, understandable and easy to follow” (Innamorato)

Once the orthodoxy’s indoctrination had reached the courts of the Caliph, it further employed radical symbolic measures such as public flogging of scholars and the burning of their books. The scientists and philosophers- especially when confronted by state-apparatus bent upon persecuting them- had little to offer in defense because of their very nature of intellectual elitism. Again Andre Goz assertion about a class-based intellectual elitism holds true: “They could enter into conflict with the rest of their class but they could not break out of bourgeois culture. Nor could they go over to working class; they were- and still are- separated from the working class by a cultural gulf” (Rose and Rose,1976,63)(The reference to a bourgeois culture is merely to act as a parallel here; Muslim society was far from capitalist in that age. )

The seepage of the aforementioned biased ideologies that condemned secular knowledge into the court of the Caliph rendered a kind of death-blow to Muslim science from which it is yet to recover. This is because, it is easier for intellectual ideas to flourish that reach the ruling elite from the ordinary people; promulgation of a social and cultural order from the top without having roots in the masses, is equally harder- and that is exactly what happened. The ‘top-down’ approach of the rationalists proved to be much slower than the ‘bottom-up’ strategy of the orthodox. And once backwardness is incorporated into state ideals, the public automatically falls prey to it. Marx and Engels quite aptly elaborate this effect in *German Ideology* in the following words:

“The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas; i.e. the class which is the ruling material force of society, is, at the same time, its ruling intellectual force. The class which has the means of material production at its disposal has control at the same time over the means of mental production, so that thereby, generally speaking, the ideas of those who lack the means of mental production are subject to it.” (Marx and Engels,1932,39)

Deeply inter-twined with the above-mentioned socio-political scenarios is the issue of economic surplus, which Ibn Khuldun argues is one of the key determinants in the rise and fall of nations (Saoud). He also indicated centuries before Adam Smith, the fact that specialization is the major source of economic surplus (Smith,1925,313) . This is exactly what the tendency towards elitism and the later conservative social order amongst the Muslims was not conducive to. As mentioned previously, the philosophical deliberations of the Muslim scholars in the Abbasid period had little or no role in bringing about any major technological innovations in the Muslim society. The economy remained generally extractive where the urban dwellers lived on the production of peasants in the villages. With no specialization in crafts and lack of industrial technology (that was to play a significant role in the Western transformation from a feudal to a capitalist society), the material modes of production effectively came to a stand-still in the Muslim civilization. Add to it the stagnation in intellectual thought brought about by the rise of orthodoxy and the result was a strictly closed-minded utilitarian society where scientific endeavors were regarded as irrelevant because they did not produce anything worthy of consumption. This situation was a clear illustration of Marx and Engels view that “the mode of production of material life conditions the social, political and intellectual life process in general. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but… their social being that determines their consciousness.” (Marx and Engels, 1859,Preface)

Thus, the halt in the evolution of material modes of production, leading to a fall in economic surplus in a highly utilitarian society leaves little room for development of any intellectual activity; and as Ibn Khuldun argues, such a system instead, forces people to fight for mere existence causing them to “return to the life of beasts” (Mahdi)

The question arises then, were similar factors not evident in Medieval Europe; and if the answer is yes, how was the Western civilization able to evade the backward forces that the Muslims could not? The answer is given in part, by Pearce Williams and Henry Steffens in their book *History of Science in Western civilization* in the following words:

“For every Bernard de Clair Vaux who was adamant in his view that faith was above reason and that the path of reason could lead to perdition rather than Paradise, there was a Peter Abelard who insisted that reason was the proper guide to Truth” (Williams and Steffens,1979,218).

Even in the dark ages, despite the strong Christian opposition to classical learning, several Greek fathers were aware of the “political necessity to convert the pagans and defend the faith against pagan philosophers” (Williams and Steffens,1979,216). There was an early recognition that “principles of inquiry and speculation” were to be sought in secular literature by theologians like Gregory of Nazianus who attempted to place classical science within a Christian framework (Williams and Steffens,1979,217). The twelfth century saw the serious encounter of the Latin West with Islam and by this time the Church itself had become an increasingly complex organization that was seeking ways to deal with the new wave of Arab knowledge that was pouring in. And unlike, Muslim civilization that had slowly began to lose respect for all foreign knowledge, out of Western orthodox world appeared an institutional response in the form of universities that “assimilated and purified the new knowledge” (Williams and Steffens,1979,223). The University of Oxford is a product of this age, out of which emerged the earliest champions of experimental science in Europe like Roger Bacon- whose refusal to conform to the Church’s doctrine produced a legacy of pioneers like Johannes Kepler and Copernicus. Hence, the very institutes that were supposed to assist the Church in consolidation of its authority also produced the seeds of its downfall- a familiar rule of history.

This rising tendency towards inquisition in the society was also complimented by a surge in technological breakthroughs- a crucial factor that was missing from the Muslim civilization when it was at its zenith in science and philosophy. These breakthroughs largely owe to the fact that science or any form of systematic knowledge was not practiced as the norm of a selective elite. This allowed ordinary school teachers, instrument-makers, miners and industrial workers to contribute to the needs of an emerging capitalist society- an example is that of James Watt’s invention of steam engine and George Stephenson’s development of the railway system, neither of the two being far removed from the working class of Britain in 18th and 19th centuries. Moreover, the transition from the feudal to the capitalist modes of production, had the effect of imprinting in the Western society’s mind, the notion of science as a tool of raising living standards; leading the West to actively pursue indigenous development of technology making it impact the lives of the masses as much as possible. Even today, when theoretical and applied science have progressed so much as to appear incomprehensible to those not familiar with professional jargon, there is a constant effort on part of the Western scientific community to overcome the semantic barrier by the publication in large amounts of ‘Popular Science’ literature and documentaries, that does succeed to some extent in making science appear less of a bourgeois practice.

Unfortunately, this is the key feature missing from the modern post-colonial Muslim societies that have become highly utilitarian owing to the economic structure and education system. Pakistan itself became a market for manufactured goods from its very inception as Dr. Abdus Salam puts it: “Of indigenous science and technology- or indeed of any technological manpower development- there was neither need, nor appreciation, nor any role for it. Any technology we needed, we bought” (Salam, 1989,91). This has further boiled down to the present stage where there is a total lack of commitment and realization on part of our society that science can be applied to national economic problems. Far from that realization, Pakistan instead harbors a utilitarian generation which does not see any profession, without immediate pay-off in the form of employment (such as a doctor or an engineer) with respect. Scientists are instead seen as a class of ‘foreign-educated academics’ because their work does not have much to do with the consumption-oriented society. This distancing of the scientists from the masses is one of the major reasons why the majority of the society is still steeped in superstition and orthodox dogma. Carl Sagan’s words that “we have embraced the products of science but not its method” (Sagan, 1980)quite aptly describe the state of our society, which under the façade of dependent-industrialization is in fact moving further away from the mind-set of inquiry and questioning. It is quite similar to the “alienation of labor and its intellectual deskilling” that is brought about as a result of capitalist mode of production according to Bose. Hence, the importance of material sources of production and the role they play in the intellectual motivation of a society into adopting a pluralistic approach towards learning and knowledge cannot be over-emphasized. In Professor Rustow’s words:

“A nation’s take-off into sustained growth awaits not only the build-up of social overhead capital- capital invested in communication networks, schools, technical institutes- it not only awaits a surge of technological development in agriculture and industry, but it also needs the emergence to political power of a group prepared to regard modernization of the economy as a serious high order political business” (Salam, Technology and Pakistan's attackn on Poverty,1989,79)

In conclusion, I have sought to demonstrate through this paper how economic and political forces come into play in two distinct societies, under the umbrella of intellectual, social and religious tolerance. In the Muslim civilization, a tendency towards seeking rigidity in religion and an attempt to forge it as a monolithic set of instructions- incapable of absorbing external knowledge or evolving in response to society’s needs- set into motion a cascade of economic and political factors that brought stagnation as far as the development of science was concerned. On the other hand, the West was able to counter these forces primarily through an intellectual and inquisitive drive, and a willingness to adopt knowledge based on experiment rather than dogmatic beliefs, present more or less uniformly in all classes of the society- thereby setting a stagnant civilization into progressive motion. History has shown that for any headway to be made in any field of knowledge, its acquisition has to be accompanied by patient assimilation- a process that might demand moving a step further from tradition. Much is to be learnt from the example of Amir Khusro, who changed Urdu language of 14th century altogether in order to facilitate the learning of Music; perhaps a similar transformation in the ideals and dogmatic traditions of modern Muslim society is required to advance the cause of science.

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