



Follow the Prophet to be a Muslim

HASHEM Ali lives in a rented flat at Myem-singh Road along with his beautiful wife and two children. In an ominous night of January 18th, 1990, he was awakened from his slumber by what appeared to be a ear-shattering gun-fire, followed by blue and red and a heart-piercing screaming and rumbling. When he opened his door to face a well-lit corridor, Hashem Ali saw two boys coming out of the nearby flat and were running away. One of them fired a shot to no particular target, dreadful Hashem closed his door, but not before he positively recognised one of them: a son of his business associate.

Police came in the early morning to endive the murder of his neighbour, asked Hashem Ali if he knew anything about the incident; Hashem Ali pleaded ignorance! Riding a rickshaw, Mrs. Shahana was proceeding towards the mall for stopping from Dhanmondi area. A fast moving noisy motorcycle carrying two young stopped the rickshaw, one of them got down from the back seat of the bike, brandishing a full nine-inch heavy and short knife, and without warning jerked away her necklace and snatched away her vanity bag. Mrs. Shahana pleaded with the boy to return her papers inside the bag, compliance of which proved to be as futile as stopping a tide of the sea. In a desperate flicker of the moment, he gazed at the driver, to her utter shock she knew him - the president of the same road that Mrs. Shahana lived in!

She dared not report the matter to police; she was mortally afraid of the consequences; she knew too well! Prophet Hazrat Mohammad (Peace be on him) was born in a society that was something with ever-erupting, volcano of vices and conditions that shockingly struck him like an arrow in the heart. He rebelled; from within himself a sense of nostalgia gripped him. He was determined to fight back the vicious society, whenever new-born daughters were buried alive; people used to kill people with complete impunity; drunkenness and rape were rampant and unabating; there was only one law - and that was might was right.

The Prophet (Peace be on him) refused to acquiesce; he

willed himself to repel the vices, anti-social processes; and bring about discipline and human-standard. But, how could he do it? Losing his parents at an early age; being a burden to his uncle Abu Taleb; no form of formal education - what could be he do?

But he did. He refused to be Hashem Ali, or Mrs. Shahana. He stood up - accepted the adverse social challenge; he decided to take the risk. He mastered an unimaginable courage - the courage to fight a lonely, desperate battle to unshackle the ignorant yet vicious, murderous people from the bondage of unthinkable degradation of humanity. Hashem Ali and Mrs. Shahana feared the inconveniences of going to police and court; the prophet staked his life for rendering succour to the leaderless, faithless sub-human society. Except perhaps Christ, no other prophet had undergone to such extent an of immeasurable pain to establish God, truth and justice in the society he lived. Jesus Christ tried the same, but, in a manner that did not tally with Prophet Mohammed's method, intelligence and skill. The combination of tact and muscle gave credence to a standard of diplomatic acumen that is even today unprecedented in nature. Jesus Christ struggled and prayed for the betterment of his society, but, ended up being crucified and lost his life. Hazrat Mohammed (peace be on him) not only lived and took resort to spiritualism, he took up in his hands the mundane method of reality; fought with a sword; and won the crusade.

No other prophet except perhaps Lord Buddha, even attached so much importance to education and learning. Then, again, Lord Buddha attached more importance to Nirvana, self-purification, which is of course, quite important. However, Lord Buddha did not profess about a social awareness in mass manner. He attached more importance to individualism; he had no pre-conception for overall social transformation through both practical and formal education. "Go as far China for learning".

The ink of a learned man is holier than the blood of a martyr. These instructions are in-

by Iqbal Ansari Khan

deed self-evident that manifest a wisdom unthinkable fifteen hundred years ago!

There was not a single side he left unexplored. Conjugal life, even the type of food beneficial or harmful, did not evade his attention. Sugar is a prime subject of discussion today: The Holly Prophet, despite his own taste for it, advised a young boy not to take much of it, but such advice was bestowed not before he performed it himself. He gave up sugar himself first - then offered the advice. That goes to show that one must refrain oneself from proffering advice, unless the advice offering individual does the same. There was to be no double-standards.

Education, enlightenment and social justice were paramount visions that the Prophet had uppermost in mind.

"Check if your neighbour has eaten before you take your meal". He has also said I would not wonder if Karl Mark borrowed the concept from him fourteen hundred years later. The difference being, Karl

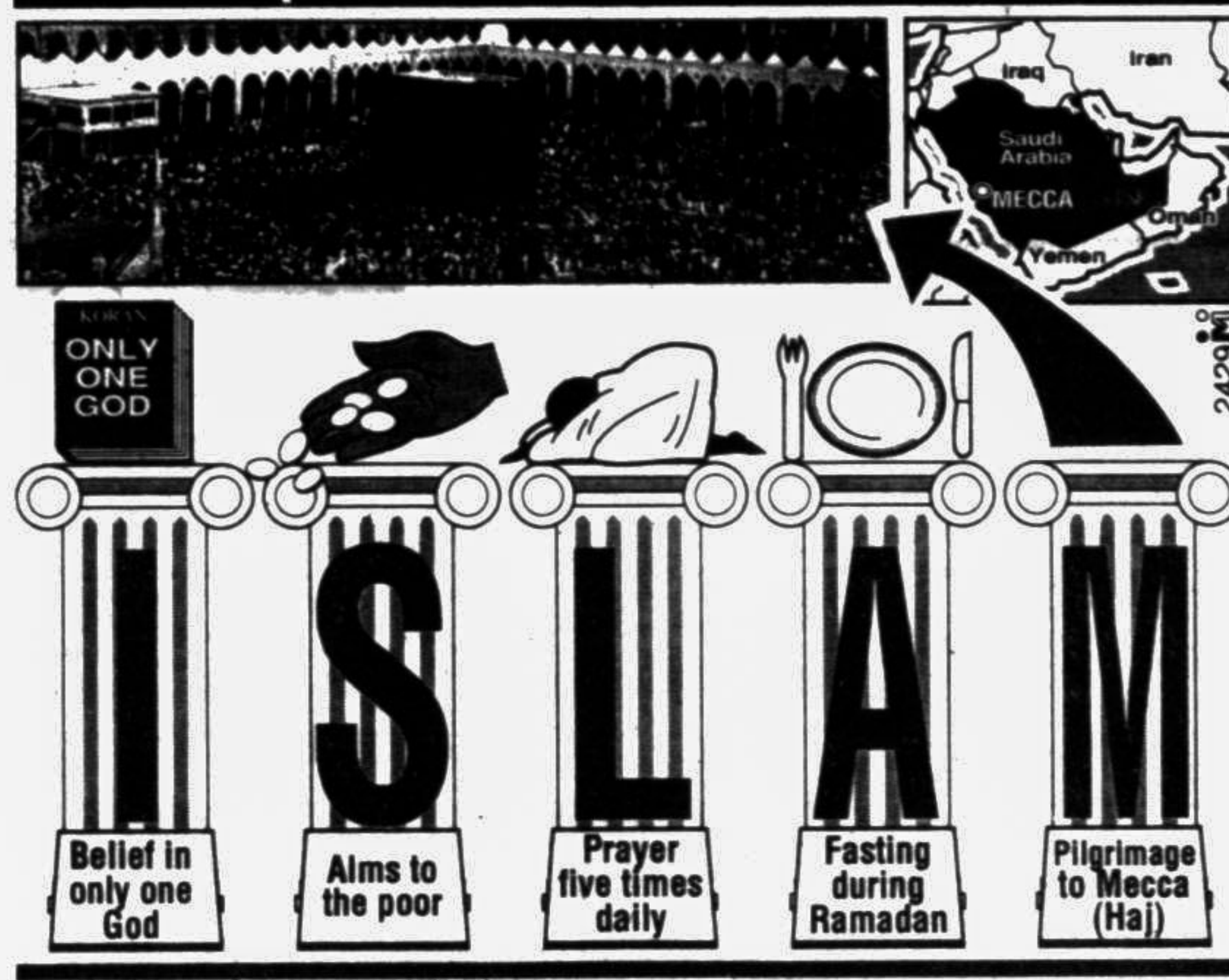
Marx proved a "failed-god"; Hazrat Mohammed (peace be on him) left an ever lasting universal truth.

After the war, and at the time of signing the treaty with the Qureish, he signed his name as "Mohammad the Messenger of God", to which the Qureish leaders objected; arguing that if Mohammad proclaimed himself as "Messenger of God", then for what was the treaty in aid of? The flexible diplomat, then himself, cut off the "Messenger of God" for his title and simply signed Mohammad; such a step shows that people must not be all egoists; one must know how to amend oneself; be adjustable, see the light beyond the present moment.

But, his best example was his last known utterance: honesty. While he was very ill and taken to the mosque (Kaba), he told his followers that he was going to die. At this, the "sahabans" were shocked; and asked him that since he was the "Messenger of God", how could he die? The prophet forced a smile a bit, and said,

that he was as good a man as anybody else. All his life he proclaimed himself as the "Messenger of God", but, when the moment of truth arose, he was honest enough to uphold the truth. He was the greatest of all revolutionaries that history has ever recorded. You can be clever for the ultimate betterment, but truth must be have its way some time or later. There has not been too many honest leaders in our country, I believe. Yet we could follow the footprints of our prophet, it is extremely possible to have dedicated leadership in the society, full of double standards, in the face of reality, challenge the insurmountable, face the sea of trouble, and yet remain unalarmed; and above all, never avoid the truth, was the distinctive life style of our great prophet. Without following these traits, one can wonder, if, as claimed, one is a true Muslim. Mere birth from Muslim parents does not make one a Muslim. One has to be a Muslim by deeds, actions and behaviour - mere parentage has no particular significance.

The five pillars of Islam



THE most striking feature of Islamic historical writing or tarikh is its sheer volume. Only a small part of it has so far been published and new texts are continually being discovered. From the second half of the first century of the Hegira (late seventh century AD) to the thirteenth century (nineteenth century AD) the writing of Islamic history continued almost without a break wherever the Islamic faith was professed. The language used was primarily Arabic, but there were also writings in Persian, Turkish and Malay. Although essentially written by Muslims, it also attracted Christian authors, especially in Egypt and Syria.

A second important feature of Islamic historiography is its very great diversity. It comprises forms and genres ranging from vast universal or general histories and monographs to annals, dynastic and genealogical tables or lists divided

into tabaqat (classes), as well as biographical dictionaries and local histories. It also covers many fields: religious, political, administrative and social life; scientific, literary and artistic activities; schools of thought and ideological trends; travel, the topography of cities, monuments; natural disasters, famines, epidemics.....

The historians who worked in this tradition were also curious about non-Islamic civilizations, western and northern Europe, India, China, the Far East and Africa. They were interested in any information relating to man, his relations with his social and cultural environment and his relations with God. Ibn Khaldun noted that they wrote just as much for the "crowds" and for "simple folk" as for "kings" and "the great". This view of history as universal in scope and



the attempt to reach a wide audience prefigured modern approaches to the subject.

A grasp of time

A further point of similarity with modern historiography lay in the importance attached very early on to time and to chronology. From the first to the fourth century of the Hegira (seventh-tenth century AD) a vast amount of knowledge about time was amassed in Islamic culture. Drawing on earlier Arab tradition, it incorporated Persian, Indian, Greek and Egyptian material and also leaned on the work of astronomers and geographers. The masterly conspectus achieved by al-Biruni in the first half of the fifth/eleventh century is impressive for its tone of objectivity. It represents the most extensive and most rigorous survey of knowledge about time that we possess up to the modern era.

Muslim historians benefited greatly from this knowledge. From the second/eighth century onwards in gradually became common practice to give dates, to follow a chronological order and to provide tables. For most of the facts reported by historians it became a virtually absolute rule to note the year, month and day when they occurred. This contrasts with medieval historiography in the West where it was not until the eleventh century AD that a unified chronological system began to be widely accepted and where, as late as the fourteenth century, the chronology

by Abdesselam Cheddadi

of the main historical events was still uncertain.

Originality and limitations

The originality, but also the limitations of Islamic historiography lie in its conception of historical information (khabar). Khabar means the fact, the event, as incorporated into discourse, related in a "story". The historian does not deal in raw facts. He starts from a given which is the story as reported by written or oral tradition, or by a living witness (who may be the historian himself). His most important task is therefore to authenticate or validate stories by subjecting accounts and channels of transmission to critical scrutiny. The historian does not seek to discover or establish facts but to gather, classify and organize information while making sure of its validity. The intrinsic truth of stories was a relatively minor concern until Ibn Khaldun, who based historical criticism on knowledge of the laws of 'umran (the human order, society).

Bound to accept traditional sources, often down to the finest detail, the historian could incorporate them into a wide variety of genres or organize them at will within more or less voluminous compilations, but he could not formulate them in his own way, reconstruct them or recast them according to his own perspective.

In Islamic historiography then, the past is not recon-

structed as it was by some Greek historians, nor is there any theological history as there was in the Christian Middle Ages. This accounts for its widely acknowledged impartiality and also for its stationary conception of time, which contains in itself no potential for change or progress but simply gives external order to a sequence of events. It was Ibn Khaldun again who, in considering the emergency, evolution and decline of vast human groups such as the Arabs, Berbers, Persians and the Rum (Greeks, Romans and Byzantines) added a new dimension to this vision.

Three major periods

The first major period of Islamic historiography, which extends up to the third century of the Hegira, is crowned by at Tabari's chronicle Tarikh ar-Rusul wa al-Muluk (History of Prophets and Kings). A calendar based on the Hegira soon came to be adopted generally. The isnad method, whereby the names of those who transmitted information from generation to generation are cited, was first developed for the purposes of the religious sciences and then applied to the biography of the Prophet, to stories of the Muslim conquests and gradually to all kinds of stories.

The earliest historical writing appeared and sometimes crystallized in a number of genres, including maghazi and sirat (the biography and deeds of the Prophet), futuh (Muslim conquests), ahadith

The Grand Flowering of a New Civilisation

by Waheedul Haque

FOR hundreds of millions of people today is a very special day... And also for many of the rest of the mankind. This is the day a leader of man was born who hasn't had a matching presence ever since. Many thought of Karl Marx becoming a close second but then he was no leader at all - that philosopher-ideologue who believed in and led a life of activism but didn't quite command a multitude. Lenin was one who came close in his many faceted achievement as both a leader and a thinker but then in only seventy years after his death he, in his own native land and among his own people has largely been proved a true messenger of a god that failed - and brought down from his lofty perch. This happens while for more than fourteen hundred years the life and the teachings of an humble acion of an Arab clan continues to influence close on to a billion people and as time passes the crowd keeps on getting thicker. The days of proselytizing through the lure of privileges and the fear of the sword are long gone - and still Muhammad (SM), the messenger of one and only God, continues gaining in attention and importance.

If that is most gratifying to notice on the birthday as well as the day of demise of the last and the best of God's prophets, the indifferent material and spiritual situation of the progeny of those that flocked around him and put faith in his words and deeds and founded and flourished a new world civilisation, cannot but sadden us.

There may be hosts of reasons for that - rise of industrialism, colonialism and imperialism with the western nations making the most of the technological, social and political transmutation on the global scale. The reasons may have had more to do with national and historical, economic and sociological developments rather than elements and influences of religious import. But one can as well look in the factors leading to the loss of a people's claim some dwindling of the morals and ideals that over centuries of time sustain a

society and, rather than holding it back, prod it forward. Now that politics is getting a higher berth in the thoughts and actions of those bent on basing all social entities on religion and forging a modern day chimera called the 'ummah' the Muslim-majority states keep on foundering endlessly. One may not be far too wrong to find in this a gross absence of the sense of realism and pragmatism with which - completely devoid of unreasoning and irrational dogma - the orphan child of Abdullah and Amina, protected to his adulthood by an absolutely impoverished uncle, Abu Taleb, led to the clanish and tribal Arabs first to a nationhood and then on to a great bridge-builder between the classical and the modern civilisations - and itself a civiliser of the West. It was the Prophet's followers who kept the flame of learning and the sciences burning during all of the dark medieval age.

Can we not in Bangladesh hark back to the ways our dear Prophet took for raising his people - and in fact all of mankind where Islam travelled - out of inertia of superstition and backwardness, internecine violence and intolerance. Whereas, basing on the principle of 'Ikhwanul Muslimin', he expressly denied a follower's right to take his daily bread while his neighbour starved - we have very ably built a society of half-fed people with a scattering of a microscopic minority that squanders more than it consumes. Shall we on this auspicious day specially remind ourselves of the great tenets of Islam as propounded by the Prophet: Peace and tolerance, equality and economic justice? What else does Bangladesh need to come out of its present holes?

What distinguished the rise of Islam among the rise of very many other peoples? First, it was not merely the rise of one people but of a whole world of peoples. Which is better described as, secondly and more importantly, the rise of a supra-national civilisation. This was a flowering as important and as far-reaching in influ-

ence as happened in dynastic Egypt and classical Greece and Buddhist-Puranic India and Sin-and-Tang China.

The latest arrival in world civilisations, however, took place on a vastly greater scale involving, as we said, dozens of different peoples and their cultures. Diversity rather than classical homogeneity distinguished the new civilisation. And the main reason it succeeded was the emphasis it put on supra-national learning and knowledge that was one for all mankind and on the synthesis with native cultures of the many converted societies rather than assimilating them into nothingness.

That emphasis on knowledge and learning which included the sciences as well - otherwise Ibn Sina and Al-Beruni, Khayyam and Khawarizmi wouldn't have been possible nor would there be that father of sociology and historiography and perhaps even historical materialism - Ibn Khaldun - came from the Prophet himself.

Bangladeshis are, in contrast, wallowing in ignorance and superstition, flowing as an aftermath of colonial exploitation and nurtured and promoted by the self-proclaimed servants of Islam in toupees and beards and flowing garbs. The whole of our education system has, impaired beyond any repair by cutting it up one-half going to dissemination of uncritical acceptance of dogma and thus making those that imbibe it enemies of knowledge and science, progress and tolerance.

That Islam flowered as nothing before or after had owed much to its power to let local cultures flourish and bedeck the Islamic civilisation the best of their gems. Three hundred years of relentless ethnic oppression by the Arabs on the ancient and civilised Persians failed to Arabise Persia excepting changing the latter's script - a fact so forcefully celebrated by Firdausi of Tus in his Shahnama. But Persia or the present-day Iran - and not Arabia - became and remained the focal point of Islamic philosophy and learning - almost a fountainhead of Islamic thoughts for at least 12 centuries.

Unfortunately for us Bengalees, we failed to take one cue from either Iran or Indonesia. The reason for that lay in mean ways of divisive politics and neither in religion nor in society. Islam here was reduced into a tool for communal hatred and grinding one's political axe.

On this day of our Prophet's auspicious birth let us eschew our practised ways of reducing and even ridiculing Islam and start on the ways of how Islam would contribute to the salvaging of our society from ignorant egotism and selfishness and lead on to sacrifices for the society and tolerance of all kind. The key to that should be to recognise and appreciate Islam not only as the religion as the fundamentalist makes of it, but a civilisation flourishing in diversity as the humanist would see it.

The history of cities developed into a major genre. Many works were produced, the best known of which is al-Khatib al-Baghdadi's History of Baghdad. Biographical dictionaries relating to religious and intellectual life became more sophisticated and more numerous. They include lists of poets and other specialists, directories of scholars belonging to different juridico-religious schools, catalogues of writers and lives of saints. In the various regions of the Islamic empire a thriving historiographical tradition thus took root.

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