

Objectives of Knowledge: Reflections from the teachings of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH)

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Abstract

The experts of philosophy of science always tend to determine and define the objectives of knowledge in order to facilitate the process of its dispensing. The Islamic view point in this respect in general, and the teachings found in the Prophetic model in particular thus become a matter of great importance as Islam attaches remarkable significance to knowledge and considers it the key to human development. The increasing focus on implementing objectives of knowledge as a part of policy making further aggravates the need of highlighting its relevance to basic Islamic teachings. The present study aims to bring forth two important discourses; concept of knowledge, its inception and objectives as conceived from Prophetic teachings and objectives of knowledge as found in the Prophetic examples.

Key Words: Knowledge, Education, Sirah, Prophetic teachings, Objectives of Education

The word 'ilm has been defined by a wide range of definitions; for instance, it has been said that 'ilm implies to those imprints which incur in human intellect as a result of contemplation and observation. Moreover it may also denote the known/established outcome of human perception. In another context 'ilm could also refer to the relationship between its beholder and the object itself. This dynamic relationship thus, strengthens the scope of knowledge itself.¹

According to al Jurjāni, 'ilm refers to a stout belief which conforms upon certainty. Moreover it may also apply to an insightful understanding of something.² The author of Mirqāt considers that 'ilm pertains to a beam of light emerging from the beacon of Prophet Muhammad's wisdom in a believer's heart.³

Knowledge is primarily meant to humans to the significant core of things and more so it is meant to eventually lead them towards the absolute reality, i.e. a dauntless recognition of his Creator and Sustainer. Any piece of knowledge shortening or failing to achieve this notion thus is not applicable to be termed as 'ilm in an Islamic understanding.

The first revelation 'Read in the name of your Lord'⁴ also signifies the fact that mere reading and writing devoid of Divine remembrance cannot be considered synonyms

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with knowledge; rather it has been named after sheer ignorance. The verse shows that human beings who are created from a very humble origin can rise to the epoch of height through learning. The Prophet of Islam emphasized the significance of acquiring divinely guided knowledge and considered it inevitable. In a ḥadīth cited in Sunan Abī Dāwūd the Messenger of Allah said:

“‘Ilm is composed of three parts, the absolute verse, the stout manner and straight obligation (deduced from consensus and analogical wisdom of ummah)⁵, which refers to a knowledge based on Qur’an and Sunnah.”

In another ḥadīth the Messenger of Allah said:

“Indeed there lays some ignorance in knowledge⁶, which means that some forms of knowledge can be destructive and could contain deformities.”

One of the conspicuous features of knowledge according to Islamic scholars is its certainty and absoluteness, a firm conviction which cannot be shattered by doubt. The point of difference with western philosophers in this regard is that they conceive the sources of knowledge being physical senses and reason only. The Muslim philosophers tend to believe that transmission of ‘ilm takes places through senses (i.e. Touch, smell, hearing, taste, intuition, etc.). But in addition to reason/ intellect, it has to remain authenticated by divine source.

Theory of Objectives of Knowledge and prophetic tradition:

There are many instances found in the Prophetic traditions where the Messenger of Allah emphasized the need of objectivity while acquiring knowledge and considered any piece of knowledge devoid of objective as destructive and fatal. In a ḥadīth mentioned in Sunan Ibn Māja he said;

“Ask Allah for beneficial knowledge and refrain from asking unnecessary and non-beneficial questions.”⁷

This saying of Prophet further expounds the concept of knowledge presented in Qur’an where Allah has strictly condemned the prevalent practice of the children of Israel of asking irrelevant and unnecessary questions. Qur’an also used the parable of donkey carrying large scale of weight of books on their backs but unable to internalize the contents of knowledge, for those scholars of Jews who did not acknowledge the Prophet hood of Allah’s last messenger. Often, Prophet Muhammad himself has been reported to roam about in the circles of studies established in his mosque in Medina and warn his students where the objectivity of knowledge being felt deficient.

According to a narration found in al-Jāmi’ of Tirmidhi that once the Prophet heard that an argument was taking place between people in respect with divine decree and fate. He came out of his apartment while his face was a blazed in anger and he strictly asked people to refrain from discussion on one such topic saying:

“Many earlier nations were destroyed of arguing on the same subject”⁸

Another ḥadīth reported in Shāmā’il al-Tirmidhi states;

“A man came to the Messenger of Allah, asking him to shower upon him some sublime treasure of knowledge’, the Messenger of Allah asked him if he

already has firm ground of essentials of knowledge which he intends to flourish more through sublime points?' He said yes to the extend Allah has willed to bestow upon me' The Prophet said 'Have you known Allah?' The man said 'Yes, to the extent of my limited scope', The Prophet then asked, 'Have you known the death?' The man said, 'Yes, to some extent'. The Messenger of Allah, thereby said 'Go implement these two and give them their due right then seek for sublime treasures later'⁹

Knowledge does not mean a mere collection of information, indulgence in intellectual debates and fanciful arguments and seeking esthetic pleasure. It rather connotes greater objectives leading to its implications in the form of one's actions and practical deeds. The Messenger of Allah used to seek refuge from any piece of knowledge devoid of action.

Objectives of Knowledge: Benefactions from Prophetic Model:

Upon reflecting on Sirah of the Prophet of Islam, a wide range of dynamic objectives can be traced. Few of them will be discussed here:

Uniformity of the objectives of Knowledge:

The primary purpose and outcome of Prophet hood is spread of knowledge. The word 'nabi' has been derived from 'naba' which means, to deliver the information and bring forth knowledge. Qur'an states the mission statement being assigned to the Prophet of Islam as:

”يَتْلُوا عَلَيْهِمْ آيَاتِهِ وَيُزَكِّيهِمْ وَيُعَلِّمُهُمُ الْكِتَابَ وَالْحِكْمَةَ وَإِنْ كَانُوا مِنْ قَبْلُ لَفِي ضَلَالٍ مُبِينٍ“¹⁰

This is indeed a versatile approach to the objectivity of knowledge where the role of communication has been uniquely designed and integrated. It consequently, remains applicable to all times and circumstances where character building, spiritual uplift and personality development have been used as elementary traits.

Any system of education comprising of these four elements (open access to knowledge to broaden the horizon, refinement of creative skills and foresight, exaltation of wisdom and intellect and cultivation of higher moral values) will ensure raising of a more mature and responsible breed and will aware individuals and societies.

Overview of objectives of knowledge found in the Sirah:

1. Refining perfect morality and balanced growth of total personality:

Modern theories of education came up with their objectives revolving around the concept of acquiring education for the sake of information and career seeking, but – unfortunately- the core element of Prophetic teachings has been completely overlooked, which aims to focus on upheaval of human intellect on one hand and makes sure the refinement of his spiritual statues as well. The wisdom of East, Iqbal, deeply influenced from the Islamic Objectives of Knowledge, states it as:

تجلیات کلیم و وارداتِ کلیم وہ علم بے بصری جس میں ہمکنار نہی

That knowledge, which in its essences shortens Moses's spark and Luqman's wisdom, certainly lacks in enlightenment

Iqbal's thought gives us a message that the prevalent educational system yields but a flimsily culture and mundane approach to life, producing a generation with abnormal values and moral corruption. They might glitter superficially but their insights spark no glow. Their tongues speak in extempore tone but at hearts they have gone dumb.

Those sharp eyes, smartly clad in English/ colonized Kohl alas are not good enough to shed tears

پرکار و سخن ساز ہے نم ناک نہیں ہے جو آنکھ ہے سرمہ افراگ سے روشن

Iqbal believes that too much emphasis on material benefit as a part of educational system ruins its values of moral uplift and orientation of hereafter.

زخون لاله آں سوڑ کہن برد نوا از سینہ مرغ چمن برد
کہ ناں در کف نداد و جاں زتن برد بایں مکتب بایں دانش چہ نازی

While the perfection of Prophetic teaching model sublimates itself in refined teachings as mentioned in a ḥadīth;

“A wise person is one whose wisdom benefits him and he strives for the betterment of hereafter.”¹¹

The material benefit of education as an outcome has not been denied either. The Prophet himself said;

“One who struggles hard for making a living for his dependents is just like a striver in Allah's path.”¹²

The flourish in money, its circulation and upheaval have been greatly emphasized in Prophetic teachings but restricting the scope of acquiring knowledge to this is being condemned. The virtues of kindness, compassion and humility ensure perfection of morality in individuals and society and that is why it has been emphasized. The Messenger of Allah said;

“He is not a believer, who eats on full stomach and his neighbor starves”¹³

2. Enveloping national and international Muslim scenario:

Another important objective defined by the Prophet of Allah is a comprehensive approach towards acquiring knowledge with a focused awareness of need and requirement of Ummah on micro and macro levels so that experts could be produced for all walks of life. The Messenger of Allah himself, made sure to train people in diverse skills and professions. Qur'an also points on capacity building and individual growth. The Prophet generalized this practice in the following various forms:

Emphasis on Foreign languages:

Although the modes of education were confined to the learning of Qur'an, aḥādīth and related sciences in the reign of Prophet of Allah but sometimes he would be approached by foreign delegates and letters. These letters would contain non Arabic languages and Prophet would use to seek assistance from Jews and other learned people for translation. Many a times a situation would require secrecy so in order to keep the

matters confidential; the Prophet commanded one of his companions Zayd b. Thābit to learn foreign languages. Zayd mentions in a narration;

“The Messenger of Allah asked me; “I keep receiving letters in foreign languages and I wish to keep them confidential so could you learn reading and writing of Hebrew? Or in another narration, “Could you learn reading and writing of Syrianatic”? And I said yes. Then I learned that language in the course of fifteen days”.¹⁴

Preparing scholars of various languages:

Historians say that Zayd b. Thābit did not learn Hebrew and Syrianatic only. He was further trained to learn Persian, Roman, Egyptian and African languages. He used to serve as translator to Prophet Muhammad, was assigned to write the revelation and remained in charge of writing letters on behalf of Prophet in foreign languages to Jews and others.

It has also been reported that another companion of the Prophet Abdullah b. Zubayr also learned many foreign languages. He used to converse with his foreigner slaves in their mother tongues.

Training expert/ specialized teachers:

In order to facilitate process of education, the Prophet of Allah assigned special teachers for teaching of different disciplines of knowledge. For instance, he used to send student to Ubay b. Ka'b to learn sciences of Qirā'āt (Various modes of Qur'anic recitation) and to Zayd b. Thābit for inheritance laws.

Training of War:

During the period of Medina, Muslims were engaged in various war activities for their defense and spread of Islam. The messenger of Allah used to give special attention to physical training of war and self-defense. Children were made to be trained in skills like arrow throwing, Spotting and swimming. Riding was made a regular completion exercise and war rehearsals used to be carried out too.

Uniformity of Knowledge:

A mere glance into human history magnifies the fact that the Prophetic mission brought by Muhammad (PBUH) remains synonymous to a revolution of knowledge and civilization. He introduced a well-balanced and practical module which neither supported the trend of pure exclusion and isolation nor the fashion of absolute atheism and materialistic approach. The objective of prophetic revolution was to bring forth a unique and comprehensive pattern of knowledge where a blend of exalted human values ranging from God's consciousness and moral uplift to the essentials of human rights could be ensured. He motivated his companions to explore new discourses of knowledge, bring forth inventions and promote new discoveries.

Introducing these dynamic principles, the Prophetic model of knowledge remains applicable for all times and circumstances. Unlike the conservative approach of Catholicism during the period of its dark ages, this state of the art model does not feel threatened by new scientific discoveries, rather it feels pleasure at broadening its

horizons through continuous process of learning and mutual give and take, in the light of advice of Messenger of Allah, stating:

“Wisdom is a lost treasure of a believer.”¹⁵

Purification of intellect and building perfect character:

Healthy construction of human intellect and its purification has been an important goal of Prophetic teachings. He made sure the learning of appropriate and useful knowledge which can facilitate sound thought process. Seeking knowledge of astronomy, magic, soothsaying and any other practice claiming to hold sacred and unseen was made strictly prohibited because they contain assumptions and false notion. Arabs were indulged in various superstitions and irrational beliefs. He optimized their ideas by saying:

"No contagious disease is conveyed without Allah's permission. Nor is there any bad omen from birds nor is there any bad omen in the month of safar."¹⁶

He also mentioned that the fake practice automatically deemed that a bird comes out of the skull of the deceased contains no truth.

On the other hand he himself presented various model patterns of learning and grooming. The system thus produced the most responsible and conscious individuals who served the humanity rising it from amidst of ignorance to the epic of civilization.

Welfare of Humanity:

A major goal of acquiring knowledge is welfare of humanity. Any avenue of education leading towards destruction and harm has been condemned and the Prophet himself sought refuge from it.

Dissemination of Knowledge:

One aspect of the communication of social welfare thrives through dispensing of Knowledge. During the Farewell Pilgrimage sermon, the Prophet declared it clearly by saying;

"Those present shall pass this message away to those who are absent"¹⁷

He further warned:

“Whoever hides knowledge, Allah will brand him with the branding iron from the Hellfire.”¹⁸

The superiority given to human beings over all other creations is due to the responsibility of delivering divine guidance to every nook and corner of this world. The epoch of this nobility is Prophet-hood when Qur’an states;

“I am here to convey onto you the message of my Lord”¹⁹

Pointing towards the objective of divine message, the Qur’an states:

“The Messenger’s duty is but conveying clearly”²⁰

The Messenger of Allah took pleasure in his role to be espoused as of a teacher by saying:

“Indeed I have been sent as a teacher”²¹

Seeking inspiration from his pattern we are bound to expand his message to the whole world in order to ensure a sustainable peace and progress in the global society.

Endnotes:

- ¹ Such definitions of 'ilm are found with scholars of logic and philosophy. See for instance SherKoti, Muhammad 'Imād al Dīn, *Al Mirqāt wa sharḥuhu al Mir'āt* (Lahore: Maktabat al Quddus) 3
 - ² Al Jurjāni, 'Ali b. Muhammad b. 'Ali. *Al- Ta'rīfāt* (Beirut: Dār Kitāb al 'Arabi, 1405), 1/199
 - ³ العلم نور في قلب المؤمن مقتبس من مصابيح مشكاة النبوة من الأقوال المحمدية والأفعال الحمديّة والأحوال المحمودية يهتدى به إلى الله وصفاته وأفعاله وأحكامه
- Mullah Ali al-Qāri, *Mirqāt al Mafūtiḥ Sharḥ Mishkāt al Maṣābiḥ*, Dār al Fikr, Beirut, 2002, Kitāb al 'ilm: 280/1
- ⁴ Al Qur'an 96:1
 - ⁵ Azīmābādi, Muḥammad Shams al-Ḥaq. 'Awn al Ma'būd Sharḥ Sunan Abī Dāwūd (Beirut: Dār al Kutub al 'Ilmiyyah), 8/66
 - ⁶ Sunan Abī Dawūd, Kitāb al Adab, bāb mā jā'a fi al shi'r, Ḥadīth 5002.
 - ⁷ Sunan Ibn Māja, Kitāb al Duā', bāb mā ta'awwadha minhu rasūl al-Allah
 - ⁸ Al Tirmidhi, Muḥammad b. 'Īsā, al-Sunan, Maktabat Muṣṭafā al bābi, Egypt, 1975) 443/4, Ḥadīth: 2133.
 - ⁹ Ibn -i-Baṭṭāl, 'Ali b. Khalaf, Sharḥ Ṣaḥīḥ al Bukhāri, Maktabat al Rushd, Saudia, 2003):136/1.
 - ¹⁰ Al Qur'an 164:3.
 - ¹¹ Sunan al Tirmidhi, Ibid. Abwāb Ṣifat al Qiyāma, Ḥadīth: 2459.
 - ¹² Bayhaqī, Aḥmad b. al-Ḥusayn, al Sunan al Kubrā, Dār al kutub al 'Ilmiyya, Beirut, 2003) 43/9
 - ¹³ Ibn Abī Shayba, Abu Bakr, al Muṣannaf fī 'l- aḥādīth wal āthār, Maktabat al Rushd, Riyadh, 1409): 164/6
 - ¹⁴ Ibn Kathīr, al Sirah al Nabawiyya, Dār al Ma'rifah, Beirut, 1971):176/3.
 - ¹⁵ Ibn al Athīr, Majd al-Dīn al Jazari, Jāmi' al uṣūl fī aḥādīth al rasūl, (maktabata al Ḥalwāni), ḥarf al-'ayn ,al-kitāb al awwal, al 'ilm: 8/8
 - ¹⁶ Ibid. 7/634
 - ¹⁷ al Bukhāri, al Jāmi' al Ṣaḥīḥ, Kitāb al Jumu'a, bāb khuṭba ayyām minā (Dār Ṭarīq al Najāt) 4/332
 - ¹⁸ al-Nisābūri, al-Ḥākim, Abū 'Abdullah. al Mustadrak 'alā al-Ṣaḥīḥayn (Beirut: Daār al Kutub al-'Ilmiyya, 1990) 1/ 182
 - ¹⁹ The Qur'an 7:62
 - ²⁰ The Qur'an 29:18
 - ²¹ Al-Bukhāri, al-Jāmi' al-Ṣaḥīḥ, Kitāb al Jumu'a, bāb khuṭba ayyām minā (DārṬarīq al Najāt) 4/332