Contesting Criteria: Colonial British Scaling of Indo-Muslim Civilization

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Introduction: Statement of Problem

The largest sum of material contributed to the study of lndo-Muslim civilization during the colonial period was produced by the British.[1] The postmodern vision of the world about the Indian Muslims is thus naturally based, by and large, on the sources, themes, theories, techniques, approaches and the contexts developed by them, rendering the study and analysis of the British evaluation of the Indian Muslims a necessary prerequisite for understanding the background of their present image. The British evaluated the Indian Muslim civilization on multiple scales which varied, contrasted or contested with each other due to the conflict of criteria adopted for the formation of these scales. The same sort of variance, contrast and contest is visible in the process and practice of placement of Indian Muslims to a position, level or point on the scales devised for that purpose. The British practice involved some practical and policy considerations[2] and the difference of scales and levels was owing to the conflict of criteria, which seems to have been the core of administrative, intellectual and academic debates then prevalent in British India as well as in the Great Britain. The purpose of this paper is to explore some of the major contesting criteria in this perspective.

Civilization is one standard level on the scales devised to evaluate a society or group of humans, in the light of its contribution to the history

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1 Robert Crane, *History of India: Its Study and Interpretation,* Washington, 1958, p.1.

2 See for details, John Tosh, *The Pursuit of History: Aims, Methods and New Directions in the Study of Modern History*, London, 1999, *passim*.

of mankind.[3] Although the main focus of the paper shall remain on assigning the Indo-Muslim civilization a level on the scales, yet the purpose cannot be achieved without understanding the difference among the scales. Therefore, the differing scales shall be seen in this context without considering them as a focal point of the paper. In this context, the word "scaling" will be applied to the process and assignment of a place to a civilization on the levels of a scale developed for the measurement of the status of societies. In the British context, the contest of criteria and difference of scales are supposed to be based on their European experiences which were tested in the social, political and cultural situation of India and found great strength from the policy debates on Indian issues then going on in India as well as in the Great Britain.

Famous French historian Lucien Febvre, exploring the origin of the concept of civilization, explains it as a standard level on the scales developed for the evaluation of societies against savagery and barbarianism.[4] However, he integrates the concept of civilization and understanding of the concept of civilization with the late eighteenth century concept and understanding of history, with a fast expanding context of the territories of the subject.[5] Although, based on the facts of political and imperial importance, history had begun to be seen in terms of contribution of a state and society to the issues of public and social importance and to the behavioural and institutional developments in the society. In the same way, G.P. Gooch traces the concept of "the history of civilization" to the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century concept of history[6] which was the product of a sense of historicism, through which every development was being seen with a sense of evolutionary totality of things historical from its beginning to current form with a voyage in time to the future prophecy.[7] So, the history of civilization and scaling of civilization emerge in the perspective of evaluation of society for future purposes of determining the level of

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3 Lucien Febvre, "Civilization: Evolution of a Word and a Group of Ideas", in Peter Burke, ed., *A New Kind of History from the Writings of Febvre*, tr., K. Folca, London, 1973, p.225.

4 *Ibid*., p.225.

5 Lucien Febvre, "A New Kind of History" in Peter Burke, *op.cit*., p.27.

6 G.P. Gooch, *History and Historians in the Nineteenth Century*, Boston, 1968, pp.523-42.

7 The term historicism has been applied to an attitude of perceiving things in historical context. The concept has been considered a byproduct of the late eighteenth and the early nineteenth century romanticism. See for critical details, Karl Popper, *Poverty of Historicism*, London, 1986.

allegiance and loyalty to and influence of one civilization in its relations with other civilizations.

As the modern concept of history and concept of civilization both belong to the late eighteenth and the early nineteenth century socio-political, cultural, intellectual and policy debates, applied to and testified in the Indian situation, therefore, posterior debate of current discussion focuses on the British scales used for the evaluation of Indo-Muslim civilization and the contest of evaluation criteria for the placement of the Indian Muslims in the British colonial historiography during the same period.

Two basic approaches to understand the evolution and nature of human society seem to be determining the criteria as well as the purposes for the scaling of Indo-Muslim civilization. First, the concept of the progress of Mankind as a whole from the beginning of human society to the current age which may be called 'historical progressivism', focusing on the contribution of varied temporal and geographical civilizations of human race in history. Second, comparison of the progress of a particular civilization with other contemporary civilizations in temporal and geographical context.[8]

In this perspective, the criteria for scaling seem to be determined on geo-cultural, temporal, and religious grounds, and the term "Indo-Muslim" seems to present a compound of all three dimensions. However, these approaches indicate underlying themes of contest among different schools of thought. None of the themes seems self-expressive and need to be explored in terms of its relations with other themes or with tautological or ontological terminology working behind the formation of these themes and scales.

History of India during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century was mostly written by the high level officials of the British East India Company or by their critics who primarily addressed the administrative problems of British East India Company in the context of their future prospects. Therefore, the issue of British scaling of Muslim India is being approached with the question what was the base of the difference of scales and on which grounds the British intellectuals, all attached to the East India Company services and all amateur rather than professional or academic historians, through publications, mainly in English, were articulating their views for the contest with the opposite

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8   Both these aspects have too many ontological and tautological conceptual intricacies to be the subject matter of current discussion.

blocks of officials on the constituents of civilization and its scales as exemplified through history.[9]

The British Scaling of Indo-Muslim Civilization

The modern concept of scaling of civilization seems to be emerging out of the eighteenth century theory of progressivism [10] which was formulized by Condorcet on the concept of continuous development of human society.[11] The medieval outlook was deterministic and world was viewed in terms of religious poles: one always right and other or others always wrong. It was strongly dominated by a context of the culture of crusades between the Muslims and the Christians, which was the criterion for the scaling of the then contemporary human societies.[12] In this perspective, India was considered a part of Muslim geo-religious community of non-believers and heretics.[13]

The enlightenment shifted the focus of intellectual pursuits to man, matter and mental[14] with comparative approach, in analytical way and on a method of diversification and classification of human cultures. Earlier, enlightenment intellectuals had focused on the understanding of the world in geographical and racial terms[15] which seem to have promoted a divided view of the then contemporary world into the poles of West and East. Occident and Orient, Europe and Asia, and civilized and uncivilized by the rise of colonialism.[16] As during this period Europe was

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9   One example of study on a similar pattern is Avril A. Powell's 'Modernist Muslim Responses to Christian Critiques of Islamic Culture, Civilization and History in Northern India' in Judith M. Brown and Robert Eric Frykenberg, eds., *Christian Cultural Interaction and India's Religious Tradition*, London, 2002, pp.61-91.

10   Progressivism is a term applied to behaviour of seeking an evolution in society and finding some sort of advancement and contribution by every posterior or modem development in human society.

11   The concept was theorized by Condorcet, the author of *Sketch of a Historical Picture of the Progress of Mind*, tr., J. Barraclough, London, 1955.

12   See for details, Baha ed Din, *The Life of Saladin*, London, 1897.

13   The Muslims were considered a world community of believers with one political centre which was focused by the crusaders. Therefore, pre-Mughal Christian records make no reference to Indian Muslims. Concentration remains either on the creedal debates or on Abbasids or Ottoman empires. See for details, Glory E. Dharmaraj, *Christianity and Islam: A Missiological Encounter,* Delhi, 1999.

14   The concept is the focal point of James Mill's *Analysis of the Phenomena of Mind*, London, 1868.

15   See, for example, writings of the period, especially of Sir William Jones, *The Works*, 12 vols., London, 1807.

16   See Harold Nicolson, *The Age of Reason 1700-1789*, London, 1968. Also see Lawrence Goldman, 'The Origins of British "Social Science": Political Economy,

passing through a transition in all walks of life while the 'East' was still possessed of its 'splendours', therefore India was considered a rich and civilized land. However, people were being recognized on geographical, religious or racial basis, on the scale of political dominance. In this perspective, India was considered a synonym for 'Mughal India' with its Muslim identity. With the growth of the concept of people, culture and civilization as a result of the late eighteenth century romanticism and historicism, Hinduism began to come into focus and, in later developments, political India seems to have been differentiated from the cultural India. Thus, the Muslim India lost its enlightened place in 'Europe's Conscience'.[17] The Muslims as a foreign political elite have been seen in terms of their relations with the Hindus since that time. Therefore, the scaling of Muslim India and its criteria seem a byproduct of the British scaling of Hinduism and its criteria and the Indian Muslims are seen in comparison with the Hindus and the Christian and the British.

The British have scaled the status of Indo-Muslim society on the early nineteenth century concept of civilization and understanding of Indo-Muslim history. Dominant scales appear to be divided into two poles "civilized" and "uncivilized" or five poles, savages, barbarians, uncivilized, semi-civilized and civilized. Generally, the first three units of the five ladder scales have been used in one bracket. Only one historian, namely James Mill, uses the term 'semi-civilized'. However, the division of 'civilized' and 'uncivilized' is commonly applied by a plenty of writers, both historians and otherwise.

On geographical level, India has been considered one civilization from the remote antiquity to the modern times[18] which was divided into Ancient and Modern periods in view of its changing geography during the late eighteenth century.[19] However,

Natural Science and Statistics, 1830-1835', *The Historical Journal*, Vol.26, No.3, (Sep., 1983), pp.587-616.

17   Kate Teltscher, *India: Inscribed European aid British Writings on India 1600-1800,* New Delhi, 1995. The phrase as a term is the title of the third chapter.

18   The best example of the approach can be seen in Crawfurd's *History of the Indian Archipelago*, London, 1820.

19   See, for example, Thomas Maurice's *Indian Antiquities or Dissertation Relative to the Ancient Geographical Divisions, the Pure System of Primeval Theology, the Grand Code of Civil Laws, The Original Form of Government and the Various and Profound Literature of Hindostan, Compared Throughout with the Religion, Law Government and Literature of Persia, Egypt and Greece. The whole Intended as Introduction to the History of Hindostan upon a Comprehensive Scale*, 7 vols., London, 1793-1800.

the British began to replace this scheme on the religious basis with the periods of dominance of Hindu, Muslim and Christian civilization in India.[20] The Christian civilization has been dubbed as "British" in order to secularize and nationalize history.[21] This division seems to be creating a new point of 'medieval period' to differentiate between the two claimants of modernity, Muslims and the British. The British became the sole modernists and Muslims seem to be placed on the ladder of 'medieval'. By the coinage of the term 'medieval', the history of the Muslim dominance seems to be separated from the scaling point of 'modernity'. However, these concepts do not prove to be temporal scales. This temporal division of history and civilization has been approached through normative qualitative scales with prominent ladders of "civilized" and " uncivilized", former always for the West and latter always for the "other", with the practice of addition of 'semi-civilized', 'barbarian', 'savages' and 'far behind the savages'.

The same practice of sealing has given birth to all the modem scales for the determination of the levels of civilization, especially developed and underdeveloped and non-developed. The secularized and nationalized temporal scale of ancient, medieval and modem has become permanent since the formation of scale. 'Civilized', 'semi-civilized' and 'uncivilized' seem to be replaced by the 'developed', 'underdeveloped' and 'non-developed' to so called quantitative, technological and economic scale.

These concepts, from the late eighteenth century to the mid-twentieth century, are synthesized by Toynbee in his great work, *A Study of History,* as historical levels of civilization.[22] However, handling of this wide range of criteria and scaling is not possible in one short article. Therefore, we would confine ourselves to the discussion regarding the dominant and leading criteria and scaling trends of Indo-Muslim civilization defined on territorial, religious, historical and ideological grounds, mostly by the British as the imperial masters of India, since the late eighteenth century.

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20   See, J.C. Marshman, *The History of India from Remote Antiquity to the Accession of the Mughal Dynasty*, *Compiled for the use of Schools,* Calcutta, 1842.

21   *Ibid*., *The History of India From the Earliest Period to the Close of Lard Dalhousie's Administration*, London, 1863.

22   Arnold J. Toynbee, *A Study of History*, 12 vols., London, 1979.

Contesting Criteria

This scaling can be considered the result of a contest of criteria to promote and prove a view valid and authentic or to develop a view on methodological basis to contribute in the contemporary Indo-European intellectual discourse which was tinged with imperial-administrative issues. The medieval outlook was religious. Enlightenment changed the trends with contemporary rational thought. However, these trends continued to follow the unilateral themes for the understanding of human civilization. By the end of the eighteenth century, rational practice evolved a number of criteria and there began a contest among these latter to promote the intellectual activity and to influence the government policies.

One common theme has been the "empire" as the model for the study and evaluation of the civilization in contemporary context since the enlightenment.[23] As the Muslims had established an empire in India, the Indian Muslims were considered "civilized" in this contest. This enlightened concept had a rational, institutional and man-centred approach to contemporary history which have been challenged by the view that mythology, literature and antiquity indicate a level of civilization without which the progress of a society can never be measured. The British romanticists such as Sir William Jones,[24] H.T. Colebrooke,[25] James Forbes,[26] N. Halhed,[27] William Robertson,[28] Wilkins[29] and the most of the early members of the Asiatic Society of Bengal[30] developed the scale to measure the status of a civilization on the basis of the state of its literature, antiquity and mythology and

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23   See Edward Gibbon, *The History Of The Decline And Fall Of The Roman Empire,* 7 vols., London, 1778 and Robert Orme, *History of the Military Transactions of the British Nation in Indostan from the Year of MDCCXLV*, London, 1763.

24   William Jones, *The Works*, *op.cit.*

25   H.T. Colebrooke, *Miscellaneous Essays*, ed., T.E. Colebrooke, London, 1873.

26   James Forbes, *Oriental Memoirs*, 4 vols., Lahore, 1978.

27   William Robertson, *The Works of William Robertson*, London, 1817.

28   Charles Wilkins, *The Bhagvat-Geeta*, London, 1785.

29   William Jones, *The Works,* Vol.XII, p.434.

30   See, for details, O.P. Kejariwal, *The Asiatic Society of Bengal and the Discovery of India's Past*, New Delhi, 1988.

focused on either one of the three, or all three in an integrated form. In their efforts to find the centre of the origin of human civilization, the romanticists focused on the antiquity which linked them with the ancient mythology. Or, they were much impressed by the 'explicitly fantastic imagination' [31] and logic of the fables and fiction of literature which did not mismatch with the diversified expressions, and explorations of their contemporary travellers. Considering the 'pleasure' as the ultimate purpose of human effort, the romanticists saw the literature and mythology as the origin of human civilization and the most common source of 'pleasure'. The religious viability of mythology declared the myths 'sacred or divine.' [32] Simultaneously, they saw all three symbols in their relations with geography. Their belief in the concept of diversity of cultures in the world developed an understanding of the existence of a number of civilizations at a time. However, all this can best be analyzed keeping in view the fact that the ancient Greco-Roman institutions, mythology and literature had become a permanent part of British thought and thinking, who had idealized them as Classical. Therefore, the enlightened rational concepts were looked upon as a challenge to the romance of classics and the romanticists contested the enlightened views in this context. This approach, however, entailed very prominent implications in colonial perspective.

The concepts of the diversity of human cultures and the antiquarian mythological literature as the origin and foundation of human civilization, most prominently observed in the works of Jones, brought all ancient societies to the same focus of civilizations. Therefore, the romanticists thought that Indian administration should be based on indigenous cultural or religious norms and the colonized people should be treated as civilized. They, however, related the people, culture and civilization with geography and distinguished between the 'colonial' and the 'colonized' civilizations. In doing so, they considered the radical impact of 'colonial' civilization over the colonized as harmful for

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31   M.C. Lemon, *Philosophy of History*, London, 2003, p.16.

32   *Ibid.*

colonial purposes and chose to idealize the interactionary mutual influence.

For them Islam was not an ancient religion as compared to the Arab mythology and literature, though it had aborted the ancient Arabic literature[33] and had thereby developed a civilization, not at the same level as the Greece or Roman civilizations. Rather, it had destroyed the ancient civilization. Therefore, on the one hand, the Indian Muslims do not appear to them to have developed a viable civilization. They were not Indian then.[34] They were rather looked at as a part of the tradition of Muslim imperialism and colonialism, irrespective of being ancient, mythological, literate, or modern. This view was contested by the utilitarian philosophers. They criticized the romantic antiquarian-mythological-literary criteria, romantic understanding of classical world and relations among the classical civilizations and application of romantic criteria to the Indian and Indo-Muslim society.

The utilitarians revived the enlightened rational approach. They were of the view that as the ancient civilizations had no factual records of their history and ancient mythology and literature were the record of fables, superstitions and baseless imagination, which could not be relied on as history. Even the savage people had their own mythology and literature and most of the religions were based on fables, superstitions and mythology.[35] Therefore, it could not be a viable criterion for evaluating a society as a civilization. In contrast to this romantic criteria, the utilitarians laid more emphasis on the historical, institutional, constitutional, democratic as well as rational and philosophical sides of a society, as the criteria for the determination of its status as a civilized society. According to them the record of past events or history of a society was enough to keep it connected with the current times and preserve its institutional structure against mythology and literature. They believed that reason and philosophy were the two basic elements emerging from the record of history which could only

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33   William Jones, *op.cit*.

34   See, for example, the two theme, in Thomas Maurice, *op.cit.*

35   James Mill, *Essays*, London, 1828 and *History of British India*, 9 vols., ed., H.H. Wilson, London, 1840-1848, Vol.II, pp.100-110.

distinguish between fables, superstitions, myths and facts and present an institutional perspective for the evaluation of a society as civilization. Therefore, for the utilitarians, the importance of the achievements of the classical world did not lie in the fields of literature and mythology, but in the field of history and philosophy. So, the ancient classical Greeks and Romans were classified as civilized, but not the ancient Indians. They were savages.[36] Since the Indian Muslims had developed viable institutions which were based on religion, and not on philosophy, they were considered far behind the level of a classical civilization. However, they were not considered savages. Thus, as far as the utilitarians were concerned, the Muslims and Indian Muslims were semi-civilized.[37] In this context, the utilitarians opposed the indigenous basis of administration and policies. As they firmly believed in a universal system of norms, values and civilization, they thought that the purpose of colonization was to make the 'colonized', 'civilized' through the radical application of universal British institutions and spread of Western philosophy.[38]

The romantics and the utilitarians, both these criteria were in marked contrast with the concepts of revealed religion, life hereafter and religious metaphysics. Therefore, the religionists focused on the concept of salvation after death, ignoring the material side of the civilization. For them, the development of the modern world, especially of Europe was the product of Christian religion and the western civilization was in fact the Christian civilization.[39] Therefore, Christian scripture and the concept of salvation were their sole and universal criterion for the scaling of the status of any civilization. Any society devoid of Christian religion was liable to be governed by the earlier criterion applied to the 'non-civilized world'.[40] However, historians have always been

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36 James Mill, *History of British India,* ed., H.H. Wilson, Vol.I, *passim*.

37 *Ibid*., Vol.II, pp.424-28.

38 *Ibid*., *passim*.

39 See, for example, the basic theme of Thomas Babington Macaulay, *History of England*, London, 1856 and J.D. Cunningham, *History of the Sikhs*, London, 1849.

40 See, Charles Grant, *Observations on the State of Society Among The Asiatic Subjects of Great Britain, Particularly with Respect to Morals and on the Means of Improving it*, London, 1813 and Henry Martyn, *Memoirs of the Rev. Henry Martyn*, London, 1819.

attempting to synthesize these criteria for determining the minimum level of civilization on the basis of mythology and maximum to philosophy, and most recently, to technology. Mountstuart Elphinstone seems to be assimilating religious and geo-cultural criteria in one and declares the Indian Muslims the inheritors of a civilization, without demarcating the concept of difference between "civilization" and "nation" His concept of Indo-Muslim civilization appears to be based on an assimilation of religious, cultural, geographical as well as historical criteria in the context of the theory of progress and development.[41]

Conclusion

The British scaling of Indo-Muslim civilization during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century seems subject to the then prevailing intellectual, political and colonial interests and policies. However, it seems to be very vague, inflexible and varying very sharply from writer to writer due to the difference of criteria working behind the formation of scales and the process of scaling. The scales and criteria seem to be emerging out of a contest among different schools of thought, especially romanticists, utilitarians and missionaries. However, major part of it appeared to be the result of a dialectics between the romanticists and the utilitarians. The process of scaling had a number of constant underlying geo-cultural assumptions with implicit normative and qualitative criteria, measurement of which has always been subjective and the same trend seems to be dominating the British scaling. Going by this principle, the Indian Muslims are placed on every level of the scales, from savages to civilized. However, as the Hindus have been placed by the romanticists on the level of 'highly civilized', the Indian Muslims have been considered foreigners and imperial rulers and thus never been placed on this level.

The scaling had a lasting impact on the British treatment of the Indian Muslims, politically, socially, culturally, and economically. They were treated gently and their culture favourably when considered 'civilized' and were treated harshly and their culture suppressed when considered 'savages', 'barbarians' or 'uncivilized' or 'semi-civilized' by the writers and policy maker

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41   Mountstuart Elphinstone, *History of India,* 2 vols., London, 1841.

who were determining the level, and as a matter of policy attempts were frequently made to 'make the Muslims civilized'. This theme still seems to be current in world politics.

The era and the issue seem to be providing a foundation to the later European schemes developed for the understanding of history and civilization. The classification of history of civilization on the scale of' Ancient, Medieval, Modern or Hindu, Muslim and Christian or British became very common in the recent past. The same contest of criteria seems to be visible in the thoughts of Spengler,[42] Max Weber,[43] Lord Acton,[44] Croace[45] and Collingwood.[46]

Toynbee also attempted to synthesize all the dominant criteria and scales on the basis of literature, religion, philosophy and empire, assimilating all themes of classification and scaling of civilization. His approach begins with barbarians and ends with the rise of a universal religion in the future, assimilating Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity and Islam. In his scheme of things, Indian Muslims have no place of their own; they are treated as an alien intermixture of Hindu and Muslim civilizations.[47]

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42   Oswald Spangler, *The Decline of the West*, London, 1968.

43   Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism,* New York, 1968.

44   J.E.E.D. Acton, *Essays in Religion, Politics and Morality (Selected Writings of Lord Acton*) 3 vols., Indianapolis, 1988.

45   B. Croace, *History as the Story of Liberty*, London, 1941.

46   See for a view of the historians, G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History,* revised edition, London, 1994.

47   Arnold J. Toynbee, *op.cit*., Vol.XII, appendices.