DISCOURSES OF ISLAM ON *JĀHILIYYAH*:

A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS BETWEEN ABU AL-A'LA MAUDUDI AND SAYYID QUTUB

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Abstract: The word *jāhiliyyah* usually occurs in Arabic literature, yet a deep and systematic study is unavailable on the eminent concept to date. The major theme of controversy in the literature is its meaning. The word is usually referred to the Arabian Peninsula prior to the arrival of Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him). Analyzing verses of the Quran, traditions of the Prophet (peace be upon him), pre-Islamic poems and discourses of Muslim scholars, it can be found that *jāhiliyyah* is a condition or a state of thought, conduct and action which are not restricted to a particular period. The actual sense of the word is narrowed down and complicated by history writings. Abu al-A'la Maududi (1903-1979) was the first scholar who emphasized the significance of the term. Further it was re-interpreted by Sayyid Qutub (1906-1966), the well-known Egyptian scholar. This paper aims at an analytical study of the concept of *jāhiliyyah* with special reference to the ideas of Abu al-A'la Maududi and Sayyid Qutub. This paper also aims at pointing out the similarities and differences between their views on the topic. The methodology adopted in this paper is theoretical and conceptual.

Index Terms – *Jāhiliyyah,* Ignorance, Abu al-A'la Maududi, Sayyid Qutub

I. INTRODUCTION

The term *jāhiliyyah* is derived from the word *jahālah* which means 'to be ignorant or stupid or to act stupidly'.[1] The term *jāhiliyyah* is usually referred to the Arabian Peninsula prior to the commencement of the mission of Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him). According to Ignaz Goldziher the term *jāhiliyyah* implies arrogance, brutality and savagery which were prevalent in pre-Islamic Arabia.[2] Philip K. Hitti, the well-known historian says that the term *jāhiliyyah* usually indicates 'time of ignorance' or 'barbarism' i.e. the period in which Arabia had no privilege, no inspired Prophet and no revealed book.[3] However the term is not limited to a particular period. In fact, the actual meaning of the word is narrowed down and complicated by the history writings.

The word ignorance means lack of knowledge and information. Its antithesis is knowledge and education. However the term is not used in the Quran and the *Sunnah* in the sense of illiteracy. For illiteracy, the Quran uses the word *ummiyy* as the Arabs are described: "It is He Who has sent amongst the unlettered an apostle from among themselves, to rehearse to them His Signs, to sanctify them, and to instruct them in Scripture and Wisdom, although they had been, before, in manifest error".[4]

The Arabs were well-versed in language in pre-Islamic Arabia because the culture of Arabs manifested itself in the eloquence of their language and the brilliance of their poetry. Writing was little known, but they preserved poetry in their memory and freely quoted to embellish their talk. The poets acted as moulders of public opinion. They delivered satires against hostile tribes and motivated people to action. The poems are historical records which provide account of tribal wars of pre-Islamic Arabia. There were several verses on love and code of conduct, both moral and immoral as virtues. Muhalhil (d. 531 C. E.) was famous for his ode about Basus War. Imr al-Qays (d. 540 C. E.), the poet who known as 'the Shakespeare of the Arabic language', composed excellent poems. 'Amr bin Kulthum (d. 600 C. E.) wrote fine odes and 'Antarah bin Shaddad al-'Absi versified love episodes. A fair was held at Ukaz, between al-Nakhlah and Taif, where poets resorted to celebrate their exploits. The poems adjudged best in such poetical symposia were hung on the walls of Ka'bah. Hence the view the ignorance doesn't imply illiteracy, rather it is something different.

Each and every aspect of Islam should primarily be analysed in the light of the authentic sources of Islam, i.e. the Holy Quran and *Sunnah* of the Prophet (peace be upon him). The word *jāhiliyyah* is used in the Quran four times and all of them imply different characters of the people, including Muslims.

II. *JĀHILIYYAH* IN THE QURAN

There are four kinds of *jāhiliyyah* in the Holy Quran. They are: *dhann al-jāhiliyyah* (thought of ignorance),[5] *ḥukum al-jāhiliyyah* (law of ignorance),[6] *ḥamyat al-jāhiliyyah* (the haughty spirit of ignorance)[7] and *tabarruj al-jāhiliyyah* (women exposing their physical charms and beauty).[8]

Analyzing the Battle of Uhud, the Quran says that those who fear to fight in the way of God uphold *dhann al-jāhiliyyah* (ignorant thought).[9] The word *jāhiliyyah* in the verse refers to the fear of Muslims that they may defeat in the battle and will lose everything they have. The well-known Quran exegesis Al-Tabari, Ibn Kathir, al-Baghawy and Al-Qurtubi say that the anxiety was not appropriate for a true believer and hence, that is compared to that of idol worshippers' (*mushriks*).[10]

Ḥukum al-Jāhiliyyah (law of ignorance) in the Quran implies judging by all kinds of laws, except *shari'ah* (Islamic law) in private and public life.[11] The verse refers to un-Islamic norms which are derived from people's assumptions, imaginations and superstitious beliefs, i.e. the designation *jāhiliyyah* is applied to every phase of life which is developed only on people's partial knowledge derived from superstitious fancies, imagination, desires and conjectures, neglecting the commandment of God.

Ḥamyat al-jāhiliyyah (the haughty spirit of ignorance) in the Quran implies willfully doing an improper and unworthy thing only for the sake of honor and prestige. In Makkah, the disbelievers themselves admitted that everyone had a right to perform *ḥajj* and *'umrah*. In spite of acknowledging that they prevented the Prophet (peace be upon him) and his followers from performing *'umrah*. It was only for the sake of honor and prestige. Even the virtuous men of the disbelievers, then, argued that preventing pilgrims who dressed up pilgrim garbs and carried sacrificial animals from visiting Ka'bah was an improper act. Yet the leaders of the Quraish continued their resistance only for the sake of their haughtiness. Analysing the haughty spirit of ignorance the Quran uses the word *ḥamyat al-jāhiliyyah*.

The word *tabarruj* means to appear willingly before others. In Arabic, the word *baraj* is used for every elevated and conspicuous object. A tower (*burj*) is so called due to its distinction and height. A sailing boat is called *barījah* as it become noticeable from a distance. The word *tabarruj* in respect of women implies to appear in an alluring, vain and coquettish manner.[12] Al-Mubarrad affirms that the verse denotes women's expose of her adornments which she must cover.[13] According to Abu Ubaidah the verse denotes women show their physical charms and beauty to attract men.

In all the verses the term *jāhiliyyah* does not imply a particular period. In any of these verses the word is not used by the Quran as an antithesis to knowledge or information, rather it is used for some kind of action, behaviors or thinking.

III. *JĀHILIYYAH* IN *SUNNAH*

Once when Hazrat Abu Darr abused Hazrat Bilal in the heart of a quarrel in respect of his mother, the Prophet (peace be upon him) told him, "You still have *jāhiliyyah* in you". In the tradition, the word *jāhiliyyah* is ascribed to Hazrat Abu Darr who have already acquired the true knowledge, i.e. Islam, and accepted it.[14]

On another occasion the Prophet (peacebe upon him) said: "three things show *jāhiliyyah*: to taunt the lineage of another person, to take sign from the movements of stars and to mourn over the dead" (Muslim).[15] Both these traditions of the Prophet (peace be upon him) show that *jāhiliyyah* is every such beliefs and conduct which goes against Islam.

IV. CONCEPT OF *JĀHILIYYAH* IN PRE-ISLAMIC ARABIA

The word *jāhiliyyah* comes in the poetry of 'Antarah bin Shaddād al-'Absi, the well-known pre-Islamic poet and black slave knight, on account of the attitude of the Arabian tribes towards his color. He says: "Your dishonoring of my black color is *jahālatan* (ignorance), yet without the darkness of night there is no daylight".[16] The poet emphasizes the universal phenomena that the black slave knight brings victory to his master in the battlefield, but does not enjoy recognition during the days of peace as that of war. The attitude towards the black is similar even today. Then why the terminology is not applicable in the contemporary world?!

'Amr Ibn Kulthum, the other pre-Islamic poet proudly says in his odes:

> "Beware violence (*jahl*) against us!
> For our revenge (*jahl*) will surpass
> The folly (*jahl*) of the most foolish (*jahl*)"[17]

In the verses the poet recommends *jahl* to recompense for *jahl*. Here also the word is not used for a period, but for a state of action and reaction.

V. DISCOURSES OF ABU AL-A'LA MAUDUDI AND SAYYID QUTUB ON *JĀHILIYYAH*

Abu al-A'la Maududi (1903-1979) the well-known scholar of the 20th century Indian Subcontinent was the first who attempted to clear up confusions on the term *jāhiliyyah*. In his discourses *jāhiliyyah* seems as an antithesis for Islam which is a complete code of life. Analyzing the modern notions of the West, he affirms that everything in the world will be either Islamic or un-Islamic because every such act, words and thought which goes against Islam are of *jāhiliyyah*.[18] Hence it is not restricted to non-Muslims but is similarly rampant among the contemporary Muslims irrespective of space, time, language, colour and region because it is not a period, but a code of conduct.[19]

Further Sayyid Qutub (1906-1966), the Egyptian scholar, introduces *jāhiliyyah* as an antithesis for sovereignty of Allah because the former is a state of domination of creatures over creatures, contrasting to their submission to God.[20] He re-interpreted the terminology in the light of the prevalent condition of Arabian world during his lifetime. According to him, *jāhiliyyah* is predominant in most of the

Muslim societies because they impose Western governing ideas, traditions and laws instead of Islamic.[21] He affirms that the *jāhiliyyah* which can be called 'religious ignorance' is not confined to the Egyptian Muslim communities, but also to the whole world where Muslims follow the law led-down by fellow beings. Thus Sayyid Qutub proposes *jāhiliyyah* as a condition on which Allah is not believed as the highest legal and governing authority.

Analysing the discourses of Abu al-A'la Maududi and Sayyid Qutub on *jāhiliyyah* several similarities and certain differences are found. Both identify Islam as a complete code life and hence, argue that there can be *jāhiliyyah* in all spheres of life. In both of their views the term is not restricted to the pre-Islamic Arab society, but it binds all thought and conduct which are un-Islamic regardless of time and space. However, Sayyid Qutub affirms that *jāhiliyyah* is the antithesis of Sovereignty of Allah (*ḥākimiyyah* of Allah) because rejection of the sovereignty is the root of all kinds of un-Islamic practices which are prevalent in the world. But for Abu al-A'la Maududi the antithesis of *jāhiliyyah* is Islam itself because the word Islam implies obedience of God in all spheres of life and hence everything in the world either obey or disobey God, i.e. will be included in the category of Islam or non-Islam. Perhaps the small difference between the great scholars of 20th century on the understanding of the concept was due to the difference between their environments.

VI. CONCLUSION

The word *jāhiliyyah* (literary means ignorance) is the actual antithesis of Islam as the latter is the only way of true knowledge (*'illm*). The Pre-Islamic Arabia is labeled as *jāhiliyyah* because everything in the period was decided according to popular desires and superstitious fancies. However the term is not confined to the period. It embraces both individual and collective life of people irrespective of their lifetime. Whenever such a position is adopted, it will be designated as *jāhiliyyah* (ignorance).

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