

11

Ibn-Khaldun's Contribution to Sociology

Sekh Rahim Mondal

Abstract: *Euro centrism and western domination deeply shaped the domain of knowledge in contemporary world academic disciplines. The same is true about sociology. As a result, the supremacy of western thoughts, ideas and methods are firmly established in the study of society. Against such a backdrop, the contributions of non-western scholars in the field of social sciences are either ignored or neglected for various reasons. However, such a trend is gradually changing in recent times under the influence of post modernity and reflexivity. Consequently, the social thoughts and methods of social inquiry discovered by many nonwestern scholars are getting prominence both in western and nonwestern worlds.*

The present paper is a humble attempt to highlight the life and thoughts of Ibn-Khaldun, which bear significance in understanding the dynamic nature of individual, society, state and civilization even today. The paper is based on a review of some noted publications on Ibn-Khaldun, both by nonwestern and western scholars.

Keywords: Kitab-al-Ibar, Al - Muqaddhimah, Asabiyah, Human nature, Nomadic life, Sedentary life, Social laws, Social epidemiology, Society, Culture, Civilization.

Ibn-Khaldun: Background and creative works

Wali-al-Din Abdal - Rahman Ibn Khaldun – al – Hamari (popularly known as Ibn-Khaldun) was born in Tunis, in May 1332 and died in 17th March 1406. He was the son of a very reputed Arab family, ethnically belonged to a tribe of South Arabia. His family immigrated to Spain but later moved to Morocco. He belonged to a family whose members occupied many important administrative and political positions, both in Spain and some African States.

Ibn-Khaldun was very meritorious and received education under the well-known scholars of his time. His family height enabled him to study under best teachers of Magrib. He acquired vast knowledge on classical Islamic texts, philosophy, logic and mathematics. Following his family tradition, at a very young age he held important official and administrative positions and served several government offices. He was also involved in politics and faced troubles for his political activism. But the most important fact is that in spite of his administrative and political associations he devoted himself to creative works in many fields of science and social sciences. He had an avid reader of books in wide range of subjects. Due to his professional and political affiliations he had access to important official records and literature. His contracts with the higher officials as well as with the common people enabled him gathering experiences and knowledge on societies in Arabia and Africa of that time.

The earliest systematic formulation of history and society is clearly found in the works of the Ibn-Khaldun. He was a philosopher, historian and social thinker. His contributions are much known for his monumental work on history of mankind, known as *Kitab-al-Ibar*. The sociological issues of his interest found mention in the "*Al-Muqaddimah*", i.e. prolegomena or introduction of *Kitab-al-Ibar*. In *Al-Muqaddimah* he noted a wide range of subjects like influence of environmental conditions on society, people and society, human nature and character, various forms of political organizations and governments, differences between remote and urban desert peoples, kinship and social solidarity, health issues and above all the economic conditions and social organizations.

Ibn-Khaldun wrote *Al-Muqaddimah* at a very young age (early 40's) on the basis of his tours, travels, reading of books, official documents and records. His official positions and political association helped him in gathering facts for *Al-Muqaddimah*. His official duties had brought him in close contact with many important persons, such as scholars, administrations, tribal chiefs, and even the commoners from whom he obtained firsthand information regarding social and political events. This book not only dealt with the rise and fall of empires but also addressed issues in geography, history, economy, culture and society. *Al-Muqaddimah* was translated in English by Franz Rosental in 1958 and it was translated in French by De-Slane in 1963.

Kitab-al-Ibar, the history of nomads (Barbers), which is now considered one of the earliest books in universal history. It is the collection of seven books and *Al-Muqaddhama* is the first one. Two to five cover history of

Arab dynasties while six to seven discuss the history of nomadic peoples and societies of Magrib.(Ba-Yunus;1988,2017 ; Mahdi:1957; Schmidt; n.d.)

Khaldun's ideas

Ibn-Khaldun's core interests were in philosophy, theology, and mysticism. He divided science into different categories, namely, religious or moral sciences, non-religious or intellectual sciences and auxiliary sciences. To him the Quran exemplifies religious and moral science. He clubbed subjects like logic, arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, etc. in intellectual sciences. The auxiliary sciences consisted of economy, polity, society, language and literature. He discussed social laws or the norms with great interest. Social laws, for him, are created neither by a single individual or single leader nor even by a small group of individuals but by a large majority of the members of a society. This is an idea that constituted the core of Durkheimian sociology much later. Khaldun's fundamental thoughts are noted below.

(i) On Human Nature: Ibn-Khalun has discussed dynamics of human nature at length in his monumental work *Al-Muqaddhimah*. For him, man is by nature social by nature and both good and evil elements are ingrained in him. Going by human nature he drew a distinction between man and animal on the following grounds:

- a) Human being has innate capacity of reasoning; man's capacity of reasoning is the root of perception, volition, and ability to think and act. This innate human nature distinguishes man from other animals.
- b) Cooperation, cohesion and competition are the features of human being. Cooperation enables them to satisfy the needs in an efficient manner and protects them from external threat while competition leads to conflict, which, in turn, brings about changes.
- c) Man makes tool and engages in other works to reduce risks and secure a better living in various ways.
- d) Man's ability to think and reflect sets him apart from other animals. The most important ability is his ability to draw knowledge and perceive the feelings like joy, grief, anxiety, patience and gratefulness.
- e) Social cohesion arises spontaneously in all small and large groups and is intensified through ideologies -religious, political, social and cultural.

ii) On Society, State and Civilization: For Ibn-Khaldun, State is an essential institution as laws are necessary to regulate the peoples' deviant behaviors and remove injustices from society. He was prompt in observing that the State itself could be the cause of injustice when the system of governance turns exploitative and oppressive. Civilization, for him, is a social phenomenon which is created by men for their glory and it will last as long as human beings exist. He argued that culture is created for meeting the basic needs and the rules and patterns, thus created, crystallized in a form of civilization. In the beginning, people looked for different means for increasing production to meet their basic needs and this was followed up with expansion of economic and social activities. Ibn-Khaldun was one of the proponents of social transformation and change. In his view, society begins with formation of social groups, or social differentiation, in order to achieve a stable social order. Stability makes social life sedentary and people become lazy; they stop working hard for greater productivity, and stop creating crafts and arts. The ruler fails to initiate appropriate steps to bring in the much-needed dynamism and thus allows the society to roll in a path of decay. When the society faces decadence a new group of rulers comes forward with right kind of initiatives and promise and the society is restored to the path of development and change. Ibn-Khaldun thus formulated his idea of cyclical change. He predicted a life span of a dynasty, which is about 120 years, which cover three generations of rulers, each lasting for a period of 40 years. He observed changes and a pattern within these 120 years of a rule; first generation is generally very strong, maintaining a high degree of group solidarity, the second generation becomes sedentary as the rulers live in luxury and lose control over the collectivity, and in the third generation the decadence is complete and the ground is now ready for the end of the ruling dynasty and the rise of a new one. One can see similarity in Khaldun's and Pareto's interpretation of history as the latter aptly defined history as the "graveyard of aristocracies".

(iii) On Solidarity and Collectivity: Ibn-Khaldun introduced the word *asabiyah*, which means group feeling, or collective consciousness to explain the character of tribalism in desert. (The word *asabiyah* is now taken to mean solidarity by the modern sociologists). The natural and spontaneous formation of social groups is found among tribes and other small communities around the world. Ibn-Khaldun observed that too much of bureaucracy, imposition of high taxes and too much of control of social life through legislation would make people angry and they would, in course of history, revolt against the power hierarchy. Anarchy and instability thus created would ultimately constrain the growth and development of a society. He

asserted that it is absolutely imperative for the bureaucracy to understand the dynamic nature of commerce, market forces and peoples' aspirations in order to work for social stability and progress. Mastery over technology, skills and crafts can also help in establishing social solidarity and progress. Through his concept of *asabyiah* Ibn-Khalun examined and analyzed the growth and development of great Ottoman power.

(iv) On the Role of Language in Society: Ibn-Khaldun's made a significant contribution to the understanding of the relation between language and society. The level and richness of a language finds reflection in the literary and philosophical works, which, in turn, indicates to the level of development of a society. He argued that alongside territoriality and culture a common language helps social interaction and social solidarity. It also marks distinctiveness of a culture and a population.

Ibn-Khaldun observed that the life ways of remote desert lands are marked by much hardship, where bare survival is a great challenge. The urban sedentary life ways in desert lands, on the other hand, are relatively comfortable and facilitate development of art, crafts and other creative fields. His notion of collectivity and solidarity articulated in *asabiyah* and distinction between life ways of non-urban and urban social settings in desert lands are very unique.

(v) On Health and Disease: Ibn-Khaldun made a significant contribution to the field of social epidemiology by classifying diseases based on their distribution among the urban and remote desert dwellers. He examined the linkages between urban life style, especially the food habit, rich diet and diseases. He observed that the city dwellers were lazy and were reluctant to do physical exercise. Hard-work was not a part of their everyday life and this, according to him, was the primary reason behind higher frequency of diseases among the city dwellers, compared to desert dwellers. He also observed greater use of medicines by the city dwellers. The desert dwellers often had scarcity of food grains and had to work very hard for a hand-to-mouth existence. Fighting with adverse nature and for food defined the essence of desert life and culture. Social customs were framed accordingly.

Ibn-Khaldun viewed that preparation of food using spices and fruits were the luxury of the rich and, in the process, they faced a lot of health hazards. The nomadic life, in contrast, required more physical movements and hard work (exercise) when they ride horses or camels for a living. For these reasons, the health of desert dwellers is in general is good; they develop strong digestion system and need very less medicine. This also explains why there were near absence of trained medicine practitioners in the desert

areas. (Ba-Yunus: 1981; Mohammad: 2017; Momin: 2017a; 2017 b, Rosenthal; 1958)

Conclusion

Ibn-Khaldun (1332-1406) is considered a great scholar of 14th century and is widely known for his works in the fields of philosophy, history and sociology. He moved from orthodoxy to an open-minded, logical philosophical inquiry, while preserving the true spirit of Islam. This great man was not only a social thinker but also a political advisor to the political power of his time.

Ibn-Khaldun was one of the early Islamic scholars who explained historical processes explicitly on the basis of social laws. He recognized the role of human agency in historical processes. As a rationalist and empiricist, Ibn-Khaldun attempted to discover social and historical laws of socio-political change. His ideas and concepts of social and political change are a precursor of modern social theories. He stated that social laws need to be discovered through observation, experience and fact findings. This scientific method to social knowledge marks a clear departure from metaphysical thinking and established him as an important founder of science of history and society. Ibn-Khaldun's writings and visions are distinctly sociological. His ideas and views on society are entirely based on his personal observations, experiences, collection of facts and reading of documents and records. He did intensive works and observations among ethnic groups and small indigenous groups of Arabia, and Northern parts of Africa.

Ibn-Khaldun's major project was to study and understand the conditions prevailing in the Muslim societies of his time, particularly the disintegration and decline of Muslim power, state and society in Spain and North Africa. Ibn-Khaldun was interested to know the process of social change in Muslim societies of Arabia and Africa through macro historical level. To him history was not only a narration of stories of rulers (kings) and dynasties but also an exploration of the internal dynamics of important social, cultural and political events.

Ibn-Khaldun formulated the concept of *asabiyah*, meaning the collective consciousness, has much significance in sociological understanding. He believed that the motor behind the rise and fall of society and civilization is *asabiyah*. *Asabiyah*, for him, is a key analytical tool for understanding the

dynamics of human society and social transformation, the rise and disintegration of human civilization.

Ibn-Khaldun classified the population of desert lands into two groups, nomads and settlers in a chronological order, the former evolving into the latter.

Ibn-Khaldun not only contributed to understanding human history but also to the understanding of society, and many of his ideas, like social solidarity, collective consciousness, social change found reflection in the modern sociology, particularly the ideas of Emile Durkheim and Robert E. Park. His views on individual, society, human nature, social character of man, kinship and social system, social solidarity, urban and non-urban differences, economic condition, political organizations, health, disease and above all the social-political change bear relevance even today.

Contemporary European scholars acknowledged many of the Ibn-Khaldun's works, thoughts and ideas. The modern thinkers consider his *Al - Muqaddhimah* as the first work of its kind that dealt with social science subjects while propounding a view of universal history. Earnest Glenner a well-known British sociologist made a positive evaluation of Ibn-Khaldun's contributions while regarding him as a sociologist and a proponent of the notion of "ideal type". Famous historian F. Toynbee recognized Ibn-Khaldun's view on social process and change as a great contribution in history. Patrim Sorokin described *Al-Muqaddhimah* as the earliest systematic treasure of sociology. H.E. Barnes considered Ibn-Khaldun as the greatest founder of sociology. C. C. Zimmerman considered him as an important person who firmly established sociological thinking (Momin 2017a).

References

Ba-YunusIllyas, 1981. 'Sociology and Muslim Social Realities'. In Ismail R. al Farouqi and Abdullah O Nasif (Eds.) *Sociology and Muslim Social Realities*. London: Hodder and Stoughton.

Ba-Yunus, Illyas 1988. *Islam: Source and Purpose of Knowledge*, (Proceedings and selected papers of the conference and Islamization of Knowledge), Published by IIIT, USA, pp.271-84.

Ba-Yunus, Illyas. 2017. 'Contemporary Sociology: An Islamic Critique'. In A. R. Momin (Ed.) *Sociology in Islamic Perspective*, New Delhi: Genuine Publications & Media Ltd.

- Mahdi, M. 1957. *Ibn Khaldun's Philosophy of History*. London.
- Mohammad, Fida. 2017. 'Ibn Khaldun's Theory of Social Change: A comparison with Hegel, Marx and Durkheim', in A. R. Momin (Ed.) *Sociology in Islamic Perspective Selected Readings*, New Delhi, Genuine Publications and Media Ltd. [Originally published in *The American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences*, 8(1), 1991, pp.45-66.
- Momin, A. R. (Ed.) 2017. *Sociology in Islamic Perspective Selected Readings*, New Delhi, Institute of objective studies [Genuine Publications & Media Pvt. Ltd.]
- Momin A. R. 2007. *Introduction to Sociology: An Islamic Perspective*, New Delhi, Institute of Objective Studies [Genuine Publications & Media Pvt. Ltd.]
- Rosenthal Franz. 1958. *The Muquddimah: San Introduction to History*. New Yrok: Bollin Foundation Inc. (Also published by Princeton University Press, 1980).
- Schmidt Nathaniel. n.d. *Ibn-Khaldun – Historian, Sociologist and Philosopher*. Lahore: Universal Books Ltd.