

## Concept of *‘Ilm* in Islam: The Insights of Some Prominent Muslim Scholars

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### Abstract

The fundamental concept in the Islamic thought that dominates every other domain of culture and civilization connotes to the word ‘Ilm. This concept has been determinant to other basic concepts like Tawhid, al Din etc and has been highly acknowledged within the intellectual circles as well. While analyzing this concept from the earliest Islamic period to the Modern period, it witnessed to the diversity of interpretation and utility. Some mean by it the cognition, some comprehension, conscience and some prudence (Hikmah). All these multifaceted connotations maintain their legitimacy in the Islamic perspective if viewed within the parameters of the Quran and Prophetic Traditions. Both Quran and the Traditions of the Prophet ﷺ extensively deal with this vital concept with priority and significance. The present paper is a humble attempt to find out the various perspectives of knowledge (‘Ilm) in the light of Quran and Hadith along with the scholarly outlook in terms of its composite characterization in the light of primary sources. The methodology in this paper will be conceptual, analytical and historical in nature so as to present the relevance of this concept in a broader and glorified way.

**Keywords:** ‘Ilm, Concept, Diversity, Iqra’, Priority

### Introduction

As far as the elevation of humanity is concerned it can be clearly explicated that no religion has ever emphasized for the quest of knowledge, its importance, its greatness and source as human welfare as Islam has lamented. From the very beginning of the first revelation it was made mandatory that *‘Ilm* should be acquired with full devotion and dedication irrespective of gender, age, race, religion, caste or any other denomination. Islam puts the disparity on the basis of knowledge that the person who has not knowledge cannot be at par with the person who is knowledgeable and therefore does not qualify for comparison. Knowledge alone can be the source of virtue and piety that directs a man to inculcate good traits and restrain from the vices and flaws. Also Islam makes it incumbent upon the humanity to have respect and regard for the person who is

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possessor of such virtue i.e. knowledge, because he is thought as the direct representative and heir of the Prophets as attested by the traditions of the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ.

### Definitions of ‘*Ilm*’:

Throughout the intellectual history of Islam the Muslim Scholars appreciated the concept of ‘*Ilm* (Knowledge) in its etymological as well as its pragmatic aspect or defining it for its clear and proper understanding the way it deserved. While defining so, there are vast differences and disagreements among the scholars as the definitions given to this concept are numerous. The Scholastics, Mystics, Theologians, Traditionalists, Jurists, Exegetes, Lexicographers and others try to define it in their own way, thereby ending up with diverse perspectives. These scholars took enough pains while having the primary stake to elaborate what the ‘*Ilm* is and to arrive somehow at its consensual and acceptable definition. These definitions have been operative from the beginning to exhibit the constructive way for novelty and creativity.

Scholars like *Imam al Ashari* (d: 900 C.E), *Al Amidi* (d: 1233 C.E), *Imam al Haramayn* (d: 1083 C.E), *Al Baqilani* (d: 1013 C.E) and others came up with the definitions to ‘*Ilm* accordingly. Derived from the letters ‘-l-m, is “to know” opposite to the *j-h-l*, to be ignorant and the scholars speak out on the diversity of definitions due to the difference in viewpoints because it secures the concrete characterization. This difference inculcates in its structure, essence and other aspects and this diversity in terms of definitions concludes to the diversity in types of ‘*Ilm*.<sup>1</sup>

By ‘-l-m (ع-ل-م) we mean to know a thing, to recognize, perceive, certain, to have the cognition of the reality etc. The Arabs call the person who perceives reality, as ‘*Aalim*, and its plural as ‘*Aalimun*, and ‘*Ulama* ,for the ‘*Aleem* i.e. those who have in depth and firm knowledge. Also they mean by ‘*Ilm* that which is beyond *Ma‘arifah* and consciousnesses. That is why for Almighty Allah they use ‘*Ilm* but not the *Ma‘arifah* and also use for Him ‘*Aleem* (عليم) or ‘*Aalim* (عالم) not ‘*Aarif* (عارف).<sup>2</sup>

Education in Arabic comes the actual word *Ta‘lim* تعليم from the Baab *Taf‘eel* (باب تفعيل), as discussed by *Al Asfahani* with diverse connotations. The lexicons define it as:

علم من صفات الله عز وجل العليم والعالم والعلّام ... والعلم نقيض الجهل... يقول علماء من لا يقول إلا عالمًا... وجمع عالم علماء...

Knowledge is an attribute of Almighty Allah as the All Knowing, The Knower, The All Knower... and the knowledge is antonym of the ignorance, Scholars say, who doesn't say except a scholar, and the plural of Scholar is Scholars.<sup>3</sup>

علم : حَقَّ الْمَعْرِفَةِ... وَالْعِلْمُ عِنْدَهُمْ (مُحَقِّقِينَ) أَعْلَى الْأَوْصَافِ...

Knowledge is the cognition of the truth and knowledge among the investigators connote to the highest attribute.<sup>4</sup>

It is a comprehensive term that inculcates in it teaching (*Tadris*), expertise in skills or art (*Tadrib*), imparting manners (*Ta'dib*) and instruction (*Tarbiyyah*). Infact *Ilm* shapes and directs the deftness and manners into the new progeny.

Coming to the various definitions given by the Muslim Scholars to *Ilm* we can summarize them as: Noted Classical Muslim scholar, *Imam Raghīb al Isfahani* (d: 502 A.H) in his *Mufradat Fi Ghareeb al Quran* defines *Ilm* as:

العلم إدراك الشيء بحقيقته، وذلك ضربان: أحدهما إدراك ذات الشيء. والثاني الحكم على الشيء بوجود شيء هو موجود له أو نفي شيء هو منفي عنه.

To cognize the reality of a thing constitutes the knowledge. The first part of it contains the cognition of essence of a thing and to direct a thing with virtue that is established for it or to negate a thing with other thing that is negative for it.<sup>5</sup>

And he further elaborates it as:

والتعليم اختص بما يكون بتكرير وتكثير حتى يحصل منه أثر في نفس المتعلم...

And the education (*Ta'leem*) connotes to the informing with continuity and repetition until the imagination or mind of the learner gets persuaded. Some say that the education is to oblige consideration of the self for the clarification of concepts. Some of them said: Education is alerting oneself to the perception of meanings and learning to alert oneself to the perception of this as mentioned in Quranic verses.<sup>6</sup>

Another Noted Muslim Scholar, *Imam Saif ud din al Amidi* (d: 1233 C.E) in his famous treatise on the *Usul*, *Abkar al Afkar Fi Usul al Din* defines knowledge as:

لبعض المتكلمين من المعتزلة أنه اعتقاد الشيء على ما هو به

Based on the views of Scholastics from Mu'tazilites, he reflects that knowledge is the belief (*I'tiqad*) of the thing on what it is.<sup>7</sup>

At another place, *Amidi* quoting *al Baqilani* while refuting Mu'tazilites as:

معرفة المعلوم على ما هو به وهو مدخول أيضا لخروج علم الله تعالى إذ لا يسمى معرفة أي إجماعا لا لغة ولا اصطلاحا ولذا المعلوم وهو مشتق من العلم فيكون دورا ولأن معنى على ما هو به هو معنى المعرفة فيكون زائدا .

It is the Cognition (*Ma'arifah*), i.e. Knowing what is known about what is in it, is also an income for the exit of the knowledge of Allah, since it is not called knowledge of any consensus, neither language nor terminology, and to mention the knowledge, which is derived from science, and it is a role, and because a meaning on what is in it is the meaning of knowledge.<sup>8</sup>

Also at other instances *Imam al Ash'ari* views '*Ilm* as the perception (*Idrak*)

هو إدراك المعلوم على ما هو به

It is the perception (*Idrak*) of the object known as it is.<sup>9</sup>

العلم تبيين المعلوم على ما هو به

Knowledge is the clear distinction (*Tabayyun*) of the object known as it is.<sup>10</sup>

العلم إثبات المعلوم على ما هو به

Knowledge is the evidence or the assertion (*Ithbath*) of what is in it.<sup>11</sup>

حصول صورة الشيء في العقل أو الصورة الحاصلة عند العقل وفيه أنه يتناول الظن والجهل المركب والتقليد والشك والوهم.

The perception of the image of the thing in mind or the image that occurs in the mind and in it deals with suspicion, complex ignorance, imitation, doubt and illusion.<sup>12</sup>

العلم مع سكون النفس اليه...

The knowledge is believing a thing as it is to one's own satisfaction or the rest of the soul.<sup>13</sup>

The Mystics define the '*Ilm* or knowledge according to their understanding as the famous Sufi and early mystic scholar *Sheikh 'Uthman al Hujwiri* defines '*Ilm* as:

و در جمله علم از صفات مدح است و حدش احاطة المعلوم و تبیین المعلوم و نیکوترین حدود وی این است که: العلمُ صفةٌ یصیرُ الحیُّ بها عالماً.

Knowledge is among praise worthy manners and it has been defined as comprehension (*Ihatah*) and Investigation (*Tabayyin*) of the object known (*al M'alum*), but the best attribute of knowledge is that "Knowledge is such an attribute which makes an ignorant wise. He further explains as:

اما علم بنده باید که در امور خداوند تعالی باشد و معرفت وی، و فریضه بر بنده علم وقت باشد و آنچه بر موجب وقت به کار آید

The man's knowledge should be of *Ma'arifah* (Knowledge of Allah) and His commandments and the mandatory knowledge is that which is according to the time and fulfills the demands of the time.<sup>14</sup>

Based on the above mentioned definitions we can say that the Classical scholars defined this important concept through:

Knowing, Cognition (*Marifah*), perception (*Idrak*), comprehension (*Ihatah*), clarification (*Bayyana*), assertion, belief (*I'tiqad*), Trust (*Thiqah*), arrival (*Husul*), certainty (*Tayaqqun*), Remembrance (*Dhikr*), Imagination (*Khayal*), opinion (*Ra'i*), attribute (*Sifah*), attainment (*Tahsil*), concept (*Ma'ani*) and other meanings.

### **Modern Definitions of Knowledge 'Ilm:**

Muslim scholars define education as the teaching, learning and assimilation of knowledge. It has been defined as the arrival of the soul at the meaning of a thing or an object of knowledge. Also it is the recognition of the proper places of things in the order of creation, such that it leads to the recognition of the proper place of God in the order of being and existence.

According to the Dictionary of Education, "Education is a social process, around which an individual gains or recounts social understanding and develops his personality (individuality) and also the process through which a progeny gets the knowledge of past in a systematic and organized way."<sup>15</sup>

Etymologically 'to educate' means 'to lead out' or to bring out. Almighty Allah bestowed a man with numerous capabilities though most of them remain embryonic until something nourishes them, awakens them and brings them out for a full play. So the education stands for bringing out and developing to their full

potential all the faculties that are latent in each individual. Here the word *Tarbiyyah* comes to add more to the above meaning of Education. Among the inherent capabilities of man there are many which if not checked properly, have the tendency to disintegrate human personality. Thus 'Education' means bringing out and directing towards a harmonious flow of all human capabilities for an individually and socially valuable but also to look after, give right proportion, sustain and carry a thing to its desired end successfully.<sup>16</sup>

Renowned Educationist Prof. Khurshid Ahmad defines Education as: It is a process through which an individual as well as a nation gets self acquaintance and this process is a source of reflection of conscience and civic sense to its individuals that makes such nation. It is a system of training and excellence to the new generation that gives it sense and meaning to the way of life and enhances sense of objectivity and responsibility to life. It is the education through which a nation passes on the cultural and intellectual legacy to next generation and imbibes in them the reverence for the meaning of life which they adapt.<sup>17</sup>

Education is the systematic development and cultivation of the natural powers by inculcation, instruction, training, knowledge and skills, science or art pedagogy, resulting from such instruction and training in an institution of learning.<sup>18</sup>

The meaning of Education in Islamic perspective is the combination of the terms like *Tarbiyyah*, *Ta'lim* and *Ta'dib*. *Tarbiyyah*, means to Instruct, *Ta'lim* means educate, *Ta'dib* means imparting manners. These concepts are concerning the multilateral relationship of humans and their society, human and environment, society and environment and in relation to Allah.<sup>19</sup>

Another famous contemporary educationist of the subcontinent, Prof. *Bakhtiyar Hussain Siddiqi* defines education as the deliberate, systematic and coherent effort through which information, concepts, skills, etiquettes, and customs are expressed and fashioned.<sup>20</sup>

### **Concept of 'Ilm in the Qur'an:**

As far as the Quran is concerned there are different derivatives in different forms more than 750 times. However this concept has been reflected in two perspectives.

1. The knowledge (*'Ilm*) as a special attribute of almighty Allah.
2. The knowledge that has been bestowed to creation (including humans) by the Allah.

The first includes the attributes like 'Aleem, 'Aalim and 'Allaam where as the second one include many other words like 'Ilm, Qara', Qalam, ya'lam, Ta'allam, Hikmah, Yafqahu, Ya'qilu, Tadabbaru etc. While analyzing these derivatives of knowledge, one can visualize that its due repetition across the verses of Quran laments this concept as superb and hence lofty position in terms of significance. The Islam puts much emphasis on the acquisition of knowledge and its foremost objective as the cognition of the essence and the attributes of almighty Allah, welfare and the collective felicity of mankind.

### Iqra (اقرأ)

اقرأ باسم ربك الذي خلق.. اقرأ وربك الأكرم.. الذي علم بالقلم.. علم الإنسان ما لم يعلم

*Proclaim! (Or read!) In the name of thy Lord and Cherisher, Who created, Proclaim! And thy Lord is Most Bountiful, He Who taught (the use of) the pen,- Taught man that which he knew not.*<sup>21</sup>

All the Muslim scholars are of the opinion that this chapter is the first that was revealed on to the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ in Makkah. There were many issues round the clock that would have been addressed by the Almighty Allah like Tawhid, Risalah, 'Ibadah etc. But the first commandment that was bestowed upon the humanity through Prophet Muhammad ﷺ was the concept of Knowledge ('Ilm). It was through this concept that the cognition of Allah (Ma'rifah) and the supremacy of humanity in with respect to other creation. That word Iqra is all embracing and meaningful that reflects the importance of the script and writing. It was the first step towards the endeavor of humanity and this thought of enlightenment has centrality in the Islamic creed and ideology. There are only two means of acquisition of knowledge, one is verbal/oral and the other is pen/script or writing, so the first one is observed by the word Iqra and the second through the pen (Bil Qalam).

Renowned exegete, Imam al Qurtubi views this important and the first revealed chapter as:

يعني الخط والكتابة، أي علم الإنسان الخط بالقلم... القلم نعمة من الله تعالى عظيمة... بأنه علم عباده ما لم يعلموا، ونقلهم من ظلمة الجهل إلى نور العلم

That the our Creator taught us script and writing through the means of pen, the pen is a great gift by Almighty Allah because he taught his servants what they

knew not and He transformed them from the curse of ignorance to the blessings of knowledge.<sup>22</sup>

### Knowledge as reflected in the Prophetic Traditions

In the Traditions of the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ there are plethora of references that deal extensively with the concept of 'Ilm in a broader perspective. All most all the Traditionalists (*Muhaddithun*) have dedicated to their respective books with the core chapter Book of Knowledge (*Kitab ul 'Ilm*). These books of Knowledge in different works of scholars bear the due testimony about the special care and emphasis that was laid by the Prophet ﷺ towards learning and education. The pattern of organization to these important traditions regarding 'Ilm is somewhat juristic in nature from the books of *Imam al Bukhari's Al Jamia' al Sahih* to the works by other traditionalists also.

On account of the virtue of person who acquires the knowledge and let others learn, there are many traditions that maintain the knowledge standards especially the lofty stature of the Teacher. *Al Bukhari* has constituted a chapter on the virtue for the person who learns and let others learn.

باب فضل من علم وعلم

عن أبي موسى، عن النبي قال: مثل ما بعثني الله به من الهدى والعلم، كمثل الغيث الكثير أصاب أرضاً، فكان منها نقية، قبلت الماء، فأنبتت الكلأ والعشب الكثير، ... فذلك مثل من فقه في دين الله، ونفعه ما بعثني الله به فعلم وعلم، ومثل من لم يرفع بذلك رأساً، ولم يقبل هدى الله الذي أرسلت به

Narrated *Abu Musa* (R.A), The Prophet ﷺ said, "The example of guidance and knowledge with which Allah has sent me is like abundant rain falling on the earth, some of which was fertile soil that absorbed rain water and brought forth vegetation and grass in abundance...The first is the example of the person who comprehends Allah's religion and gets benefit (from the knowledge) which Allah has revealed through me (the Prophets) and learns and then teaches others. The last example is that of a person who does not care for it and does not take Allah's guidance revealed through me, he is like that barren land."<sup>23</sup>

إن الله لم يبعثني معنتاً، ولا متعنتاً، ولكن بعثني معلماً ميسراً

On the authority of *Jabir Bin 'Abdullah* (R.A), Prophet ﷺ replied to his beloved wife 'Aisha (R.A) as: God did not send me to be harsh, or cause harm, but He has sent me to teach and make things easy.<sup>24</sup>



Both of the above mentioned traditions of the Prophet ﷺ let us to infer many things such as:

A teacher should always explain through examples, the person who learns and enhance others to learn has been praised, the Prophetic knowledge has been symbolized with the rain as both knowledge and rain are life sustaining, the rain causes the earth to subsist while the knowledge retains the heart and mind to expire due to ignorance. This tradition suffices for the teacher as the Prophet ﷺ was teacher and a teacher who guides towards truth has been titled as the vice-regent of Prophet ﷺ.

### **Conclusion**

It is the progressive standard of Muslim education, in the sense that both the traditional and intellectual sciences were pursued in a scientific manner in the context of institutions designed to further knowledge. The criterion was aimed at the recognition of the importance of both knowledge of God as well as God's creation to study the creation in all its aspects. This was the attitude of the early Muslims. As a result they cultivated practically all of the known sciences during their time and even discovered new ones. Every phenomenon was seen *Ayah*, pointing to its creator and these signs had to be taken seriously, to be read and interpreted. Within a short span of 23 years of Prophetic era, the whole learning scenario changed from the mark of 17 literate men in *Makkah* to the 80 percent literacy rate in post migration era. Achieving the feat of such increase in the ratio of education, the Prophet unceasingly induced in the companions and the futuristic generations, the taste for research, investigation, comprehension and reflection that fostered the creation of specialization in different sciences of various dimensions. For the inquisition to the preaching and expansion of knowledge among humanity, Prophet ﷺ and his companions utilized all those ways and means that served the purpose of enlightenment and betterment in both formal and informal ways of education. The best attribute of the Prophetic education can be viewed through the inducement of knowledge among the women folk as he fixed suitable timetable for their training and advancement. It was through the agency of the Prophetic wives that he opened the gateways for learners that resulted in the creation of great women educators like 'Aishah (R.A) and others. This resulted in the construction of society based upon knowledge and awareness as compared to the pre-Islamic futile pursuits and continuous warfare. In a word, the Arabs and Muslims became the leaders and forerunners of knowledge and tradition.

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