

Holy Quran and the Pursuit of Higher Learning: A Study into the Context of Islamic World

MOHAMMAD ALLAM

Minto Circle
Aligarh Muslim University, Aligarh
India

Abstract:

The holy Quran is the book of God. It is a complete constitution for the Muslim Umma. The holy Quran from the point of view of fulfillment of all spheres of life should have commands from the God.

Education is an important tool of the society for inculcating the desired economic, social, cultural and religious values among the members of the Umma. A static society cannot move ahead to fulfill the inspiration of the humanity and fulfillment of the plan of the God which he laid down for human beings. The society should have a dynamic nature progressing from the first day of Hazrat Adam (PBUH) to the last Day of Judgment. This progress of the society is not possible without the pursuit of higher learning which facilitates the development in various spheres of life. What the holy Quran says about the pursuit of higher learning? What are the ways to advance in pursuit of higher learning? How does the holy Quran promote the pursuit of higher learning? This paper has studied all these questions in detail to understand the pursuit of higher learning in the holy Quran.

This study is important to analysis and understanding of the present status of the Muslim community in higher learning.

Key words: Holy Quran; Higher Learning; Umma; Scientific Method; Critical Thinking; Islamic World

INTRODUCTION

The explosion of knowledge has made education especially higher education important in every sphere of life .The man's mission reaching to the Mars; the divers touching the deepest point-Mariana Trench in the Pacific Ocean; the climbers unfurling flags of the nations on the mount Everest, Himalaya; and the biologists opening the secret of DNA, the world witnessing the unprecedented technological, economic, social, political and cultural developments .The application of the high level of learning(higher learning here means the theoretical and experimental advancement of knowledge of the higher order in every branch) has changed the world. Many nations particularly, Western nations have reached to the optimum point of development in every sphere of life. Seeing the rate of conversion of the people into Islam, it seems to that through their pursuit of higher learning many nations have reached to the point of realization of 'ultimate reality or Truth (an ultimate goal of life found in every religion)' too. There is no doubt that the advancement of higher learning particularly science in the West was meant for the advancement for material comfort. This is further true, that the purpose of the development of higher learning particularly science in the West was never to prove the reality mentioned in the religious books. Muslims whose responsibility was to prove the reality of Quran through the pursuit of higher learning failed to do so. But this is true that the West has made many prophecies of Islam to be true for boosting by Islamic scholars.

There is no doubt that the holy Quran encourages the pursuit of higher learning to realize the 'ultimate reality', to make increase in the belief (Imaan); to advance the society as per the will of God (Allah) from the origin of the world to the last day of judgment; to understand the planning of God (Allah) for the humanity; to sustain the population by exploiting natural resources through technological advancement; to

advance the higher order thinking skills among the people to understand the messages of God (Allah); and to make his Caliph (Deputy of God) on the earth to lead the humanity. Allah has provided all the means which could make and maintain the superiority of human being over other things. This is the duty of human being in general and Muslims in particular to realize the truth of the messages, understand the design of Allah, march for fulfilling the plan of Allah and witness the bounty of Allah. In the context of these purposes, one can ponder over certain questions; Can the attainment of all these goals possible without the pursuit of higher learning? Does the Quran talk about the higher learning? If yes then what are their natures? Has Quran directed Muslims for the pursuit of learning? How does the Quran encourage for higher learning? What are the methodologies for the pursuit of higher learning described by the Quran? These are the questions which this paper has tried to find answer.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

There are following objectives of the present study:

- I. To know the meaning of Higher Learning in context of Holy Quran.
- II. To study the advocacy of the Holy Quran for Higher learning.
- III. To study the Quranic concept of higher learning.
- IV. To study the implementation of the advocacy of Higher learning of the Quran in the Islamic world.

THE QUESTION OF THE STUDY:

The holy Quran has been revealed by the God (Allah) to guide the humanity towards the right path and provide better living in this world and after. A better world notion from the ancient to modern time is dynamic in nature. The present higher living

standard of human beings in the world irrespective of religion is the goal of every community. The present standard of living is the product of the application of higher learning which has given rise to unequal and imbalanced development, facilitated to the subjugation of Islamic world(don't see it in term of religious war only but in quest of resources too).

In recent time, an effort is going on by the Islamic scholars for the "Islamization of Knowledge" to catch the fast moving world by adopting the scientific knowledge of the west. Has the holy Quran not argued for the higher learning in secular term? Is it possible to neglect the pursuit of higher learning in the context of recent world? There is a need to see the Quranic views on the pursuit of higher learning. To understand the propositions of the present paper, many questions have been raised. These questions are:

- I. What is higher learning?
- II. What are the perspectives of higher learning of the Quran?
- III. How does the holy Quran promote the pursuit of higher learning?
- IV. What is the present status of Muslim Umma in the pursuit of higher learning?

These are the questions which have been studied in the present paper to understand the Quran and the pursuit of higher learning.

RELEVANCE OF THE STUDY

This study is important for many reasons. The status of the Muslim Umma (the single notion of community of whole Islamic world) in pursuit of higher learning is very decimal. As a result, she is behind than other religious groups of the world in social, economic, political, cultural and religious development. The society of Umma has been engulfed with poverty, illiteracy, unemployment; lack of wealth creation, lack of technological

development, imperial subjugation, despotic rule of own people etc. In a matter of economy, the Umma is not figured on any standard parameters of the development of the world. No nation of Muslim Umma is in the list of top 15 economies of the world; no nation of Umma is in the top manufacturers of the world; no nation of Umma is among the top 15 rankers of Human Development Report (HDR-2015)¹ of UNO. There are massive unemployment, poverty and unrest in the countries of Muslim Umma producing the “Jasmine Revolution”² in the Middle East.

The present study shows that the Holy Quran has argued for the pursuit of higher learning to understand the design of god, His mission and His plan for humanity. The God (Allah Rabbul Alameen) who has created the world and nurtured the human being from Hazrat Adam to present day, knew the advancement of the society which could not be possible without the advancement of higher learning. The paper has discussed the provisions of the Holy Quran for the pursuit of higher learning, application, and advancement of the knowledge.

METHODOLOGY OF STUDY

The present paper has limited itself to the higher learning in the context of educational discourse only. The term higher learning has been taken in the context of both logical and experimental advancement of knowledge. The term ‘higher learning’ has also been taken into context of ‘higher education’ too, as higher learning in the modern age is seen as a product of ‘higher education’. The term ‘higher learning’ has been taken into broader context which encompassing thinking, skills, knowledge, logic etc. and all branches of knowledge.

The present paper has adopted the Descriptive Analytical Method to study the pursuit of higher learning in the context of Holy Quran. The data and references are from both

primary and secondary sources. The holy Quran has been taken here as a primary source for the higher learning. The secondary sources have been derived from the various studies, Journals, books, reports etc. All other information's, inferences, observations etc from the Quranic verses which are explanatory in nature and done by the second person have been treated as secondary sources for the study.

WHAT IS HIGHER LEARNING?

The 'higher learning' can be defined as 'learning of higher level'. In proper educational study, it is defined as the 'learning of college or university'. According to Oxford Dictionaries, it is "higher order learning involving a higher level of reason and cognitive skill"³. Another definition of higher learning is on the basis of by-product of the educational process when it says "Higher learning includes problem solving, decision making, critical thinking and creative thinking"⁴. This last definition encompasses the broader spectrum of knowledge both in theoretical and practical in nature.

What is the level of learning which can be called 'higher learning'? On this question there are two views; one view is of the holy Quran which emphasizes on the attainment of a particular level of attainment and understanding in sphere of knowledge for higher learning, free from the attainment of any class of study year by year. In this sense, the Quran make the real learning be called higher learning. Any person who attains that real learning is higher learner and called by the Holy Quran as "al albab" (man of mind).

Second view is the modern method of higher learning based on the classes of study in a time framework with some minimum attainment of knowledge and understands. In other sense, it is independent of the real development of the traits of higher learning among the learners. A person can be called the man of higher learning if he has passed a level of education of

the colleges and universities. This may be in any form. As per the declaration of the World Conference on Higher education, “Higher education includes ‘all types of studies, training or training for research at the post-secondary level, provided by universities or other educational establishments that are approved as institutions of higher education by the competent state authorities”⁵

The Quranic and the modern views have some conformity that higher learning is a higher level of the attainment of critical thinking skills. What is the high level of critical thinking skills? According to King, Goodson &, Rohani “Higher-order thinking skills include critical, logical, reflective, metacognitive, and creative thinking. They are activated when individuals encounter unfamiliar problems, uncertainties, questions, or dilemmas. Successful applications of the skills result in explanations, decisions, performances, and products that are valid within the context of available knowledge and experience and that promote continued growth in these and other intellectual skills.”⁶This definition gives higher thinking skills wider scope by bringing critical, logical, reflective, metacognitive and creative skills together and thus make it an important constituent of higher learning.

Brookhart (2010) identifies the definitions of higher-order thinking into three categories which are a-in term of transfer b-in term of critical thinking and c- in term of problem-solving.⁷ This definition of Brookhart explains three important segments of higher learning; transfer; development and; product.

Bloom’s theory of learning identifies six levels of learning in which analysis, synthesis and evaluation are considered as higher orders of learning while Knowledge, comprehension, and application are considered as the Basic level of learning.⁸ The Bloom taxonomy of six levels has been updated in the context of 21th-century requirement which is

“remembering, understanding, applying, analyzing, evaluating and creating”⁹.

So, on the basis of the various definitions by various educationists, a higher level of learning has been seen in many contexts like thinking skills, problem-solving skills, comprehension skills etc. But all agree that higher learning is high-level critical thinking skills with many others attribute of higher education.

HIGHER LEARNING IN QURANIC PERSPECTIVES

The Holy Quran is a book of God (besides Bible, Torah etc) to humanity to guide her towards the right path which led them to enter the peaceful abode (heaven) forever. To reach the stage of salvation, the humanity in general and Muslims, in particular, have to pass through the material and spiritual advancement in this world. The world is a manifestation of both material and spiritual parts needed for salvation of humanity and needs special care. The world is a dynamic in nature changing from its first day of creation to the present day.

Ascending of the humanity on the earth led the evaluation of the world in difference ways and stages from his previous development. The world has to pass through the various stages of development. The stage-wise development is not possible without the advancement of knowledge particularly the present world which is passing through the explosion of knowledge and specialty of knowledge in each branch. According to Siddiqui (2010), “the re-orientation and re-organization of knowledge should be such that the acquisition and creation of new knowledge which is the sine qua non for the conquest of the forces of Nature are not lost to the human race”¹⁰; and answer is the growth and development of higher learning.

The specialty of knowledge or expertise of knowledge which uses to come from ‘the higher learning’ based on the

syntheses of the know ledges, skills, training etc. The holy Quran has given special emphasis on higher learning. The holy Quran emphasizes on the critical thinking and higher order of reasoning to reach on a conclusion logically and empirically.

The holy Quran gives various degrees of knowledge and their methods which led to the development of various degree of higher order of thinking and skills. Siddiqui (2010) gives three degree of knowledge which are “a-Ilm al Yaqin(knowledge by inference which depends either on the truth of its assumptions (postulates) as in deduction, or on probabilities as in induction)b- Ayn al Yaqin (knowledge by perception and observation which is based on the actual experience of phenomena) and c-Haqq al Yaqin (the knowledge comes from inner experience through Instinct (Jibillah), Intuition (Wijdan), Inspiration (Ilham) and Revelation (wahy)”¹¹. The degree of knowledge by Siddiqui is for various stages of the development of the materialistic and spiritual world. These stages are attained by the people when they progress towards the higher stages of knowledge.

The critical thinking skills of the Quran can be called ‘ 5-Ts’ ‘a-Tadabbur (Judge Idea), b-Tafkih (Analyzing), c-Tafakkur (prediction), d-Ta’aqil (Synthesizing) and e-Tadhakkur (Summarizing)”¹² In other words, these 5-Ts with ‘Ijtihad’ are main elements of higher learning of the holy Quran which it directs the believers or human beings. The address of the Quran is not only the Muslims but the whole humanity. But unfortunately, Muslims scholars and Ulema have tried to limit it Muslims only which is very much against the basic teachings of Islam.

If we see the Islamic critical thinking in the context of Bloom taxonomy, then there is also higher and lower order of thinking skills in Islam. Bloom Taxonomy can be used to explain the various level of learning in context of Quran. The lower level of thinking skills are Tadabbur (Judge Idea), Tafqih (Analyzing), Tafakkur (Prediction), Ta’qil (Synthesizing) and Tadhakkur

(Summarizing). The higher order thinking skill has been called 'Ijtihad' which is the combination of all the above-mentioned thinking skills.¹³

INVOKING HIGHER LEARNING: SOME VERSES

The holy Quran is full of such verses which invoke the pursuit of higher learning. Here only a few verses from the holy Quran have been taken to prove the invoking of the pursuit of higher learning. The holy Quran has used numerous methods to invoke the desire for learning. The verse "Do you not see that Allah has subjected to your use all things in the Heavens and on the Earth...."¹⁴ This verse conveys the order of the God for the subjugation of many things to the human beings. Is subjugation possible without controlling the law of nature by the human beings? What are the ways to subjugate the law of nature?

There are certain laws which have made the subjugation possible. The whole system of the universe from an iota to largest particles of the universe, all are under the command of laws created by God (Allah). Allah has mastery over them as Khaliq (creator) and master of the knowledge of the universe. The human being is not the direct master like Allah (as Quran mentions that the pronouncement of the words "Kun fa yak un" by Allah makes the every creation possible) but subjugated them with the mastery of knowledge which is possible through higher order of learning. As a result, this is the duty of the human being in general and the Muslims in particular to have mastery of the higher learning. How Allah has made subjugation possible, could be known through the learning only. And others obeyed the commands of Allah more than Muslims.

There is another aspect which Quran states, is the closest relationship between theory and experiment in sphere of knowledge. There are numerous theories which the Quran has propounded and directed the human being to experiment on

them to find the truth of the world, realize the ‘ultimate reality’ and appreciate the perfection of Allah. These theories are both in logical and experimental in natures i.e. the ‘matter of soul’, ‘nature of God’,’ rising of sun ‘etc which can be proved through logical and experimental inferences. According to Siddiqui (2010) “The Quran, on the other hand, appealed constantly to reason and observation, and thus showed that knowledge was based on experiment and theory” 15 .But the whole Islamic world in general and Ulema particular emphasis on theoretical aspects of only Islamic knowledge than scientific experimental science. After fall of Baghdad and Spain, the Islamic world witnessed a sort of escapism from development of experimental science. In one sentence it can be said that the West followed the experimental aspects of Holy Quran and Islamic world followed the theoretical aspect of theology.

Allah has created everything in the universe for some purposes. And every purpose is related to the disclosing the ‘ultimate truth’ –‘the tauheed (oneness of God)’ ; and for the benefits of the human beings. The Quran directs the human beings to observe the nature to understand the purposes of creation. Allah Says in Quran “Most surely in the creation of the heavens and the earth and the alternation of the night and the day there are signs for men and who understand”. 16 How the changing of days and nights could benefits the human being? Could human being understand the whole process of changing of days and nights without higher order of learning? These are the some verses of which encourage for pursuance of the higher order of learning.

The whole world is full of examples of the creation of Allah. The earth, the mountains, the seas, the oceans, the animals, the stars, the moon, the sun, the planets etc. all have been created by the God. He asks the human being to see all these creation and ponder over their creation. Why all these have been created? Are they useless? The Quran says “See they not how God begins (yabda’u) creation, then He repeats it; truly

that is easy for God! Say: Travel through the earth and see how God did begin creation; so, will God produce at later creation. For God has power over all things”.¹⁷ Through verses the God has directed human beings to roam from place to place and ponder over these creations and also over own creation and find out the purposes and the power of God. Can God create and re-create again without power of knowledge?

And how perfect is the creation of Allah? The Quran put a challenge before the human beings to find any fault in them. This is the sign of the perfection in the creation, mastery over the process of creation and mastery over knowledge. This perfection cannot be possible without mastery of higher learning by the human beings. The Quran says “He who has created (khalaqa) seven heavens in harmony with one another. No fault will you see in the creation of the most Gracious. And turn your vision once more; can you see any flaw? Yea, turn your vision again and yet again; your vision will fall back upon you, dazzled and truly defeated”¹⁸ The Quran further says “Do not you see how God has created seven heavens in full harmony with one another (tibaq), and has set up within them the moon as a light, and set up the sun as a lamp”¹⁹. These verses of the Quran are a clear sign of the perfection of the knowledge which can be attained only through the higher order of learning. Can human being create perfect goods without mastery over the perfect knowledge? Can human being bring perfection without higher order of learning?

How perfectly Allah created the system of the universe, is an invitation to a human being to ponder over them and learn a lesson from the creation of Allah rabbul Alamein? Allah has made the human being to aspire to higher order of thinking to understand Him in better ways by experiment and logic and make own (faith) Imaan stronger by realizing ‘ultimate truth’ of the universe. Here are verses from the Quran, which invoke the human beings “He makes the night grow longer by shortening the day, and He makes the day longer by shortening the night;

and He has made the sun and moon subservient, each running (yajri) for a term set”²⁰.The principles on which all these creation are based is a sign of perfect order which is not possible without a perfect high order of knowledge and human beings cannot make possible without high learning skills.

Numerous verses of Holy Quran directs for pursuance of higher learning. How Muslims follow these commands? What is the condition of higher learning in the Islamic countries?

PRESENT STATUS OF ISLAMIC WORLD IN HIGHER LEARNING

Muslims being the second largest religious group in the world (as per the estimation of PEW Research Centre) ²¹ and in majority in more than 60 countries, is lacking in the pursuit of higher learning. This can be seen from the socio-economic, political and cultural development of the Muslims around the world. The western world is higher in pursuit of higher learning in the world and dominating the creation of knowledge in the world. The seeker of knowledge is much higher in the West which can be seen in their advancement in science and technology, socio-economic, political and cultural development. Table-1 shows the comparative status of higher education seeker in nine leading Islamic countries and other advanced countries of the West.

Table-1 Status of Higher Education in major Islamic countries and other advanced nations of the West-A comparative presentation

S.No	Name of Islamic Country	(% of tertiary school-age population 2008-2014	Name of the Western Country	(% of tertiary school-age population 2008-2014
1	Kuwait	28	USA	86
2	Bangladesh	13	UK	62
3	Saudi Arabia	58	Italy	62
4	Kazakhstan	45	France	58
5	Iran	55	Australia	86

6	Turkey	69	Germany	62
7	Egypt	30	Spain	85
8	Pakistan	10	New Zee Land	80
9	Indonesia	32	Sweden	70

Source:http://hdr.undp.org/sites/default/files/2015_human_development_report.pdf

On the basis of the data taken from Human Development Report 2015, the Table-1 Shows that the countries of the Islamic world are much lower in higher education as compared to the highly advanced countries of the West. Can Muslims be an able deputy of God to lead the world towards right path? Is it not the negligence of Muslims of the Quranic commands for higher learning?

THE QUANTITY AND QUALITY OF HIGHER LEARNING IN THE ISLAMIC WORLD

There are other parameters which determine the quality of higher education. These criteria are; the number of the higher educated persons (discussed in Table-1); the number of the scientists of any branch of knowledge; the publication of research papers; the ranking of the institutions of higher learning etc.

In term of the numbers of scientists, the Islamic world has 300,000(230 per 1 million) scientists as compared to USA and Japan which have 1.1 million (4,099 per million) and 700,000(5,095 per million) 22.

As per the Wiki Islam, there are only 1800 universities in the Islamic world with 312 Journals for publishing article. The Average expenditure on the Research and Development of the OIC members is 0.41 percent, less than EU (1.76) and the World (1.78)23

If one see the Times Higher Ranking(THE) for the world Universities, the institutions of higher learning of the Islamic world do not figure in top 200(World University Rankings-

2016). There are few universities from Saudi Arabia, Turkey etc. in the ranking of 251-300. 24

What about the research publication? As per the available data by WikiIslam “there were 10 countries which published less than 20 (scientist) articles in 2009”, 25 countries produced less than 100 articles while the average articles production for Organization of Islamic countries (OIC) was just 15.26 On the scale of Knowledge Economy Index (KEI) and Knowledge Index (KI) the number of the Islamic countries are half of the bottom countries in KEI and 22 out of 50 bottom countries in KI. 27

On the basis of this condition in higher education, can Muslims be called the true successor of their medieval forefather on whom they are so proud? In reality, the real successor is the west whether the Muslims accept it or not.

CONCLUSION:

The holy Quran is a revealed book of Allah to the human kind. This is a book of guidance for all who want to follow the right path from the day of its revelation to the last Day of Judgment. This is also a book which encourages human beings for higher learning to understand the numerous signs to realize ultimate truth –the Tauheed (oneness of God).

The present study has discussed the various aspects of higher learning both in the context of the modern notion and Quran. Numerous verses of the holy Quran have been studied to prove its sanction for higher learning. There are differences between modern notion and the Quran in aims, methodologies, and subjects of the higher learning. The holy Quran has inspired the human beings for higher learning to prove the worthy deputy of Allah on the earth. The world has to be passed through various stages to reach its culmination point; Social, political, economic, cultural etc changes have to occur. In such cases, higher learning is indispensable. The Quran has

emphasized in the pursuit of higher learning for knowing Allah better, understanding his plan for humanity and making the life better in this world (Rabbana antenna fid dunnia).

Unfortunately, in spite of invoking for so much for the pursuit of higher learning by the Quran, the Islamic world is lagging far behind in the higher education, particularly in science and technology. The research outputs, publication, expenditure all are low as compared to other nations of the world. In practical the west is following the Quranic injection for higher learning more than Muslims and Islamic world.

The good news is that new Islamic world is forming due to the conversion of the highly educated persons who realized their 'ultimate reality' through higher learning in the western world. Surely, a world of Islam would have come into existence which would encourage others to follow the Quranic perspective of higher learning in term of the creation of knowledge and 'Islamization of knowledge'.

SUGGESTIONS

1. There is a need to encourage the study of Quran at institutions of a higher level of learning in the Islamic countries. If possible, then the verses which provoke higher thinking skill should be made part of the curriculum.
2. There is a need to extend the role of Ulema in the field of science both in the theoretical and experimental perspectives. And for this, there is need to extend the scope of Fiqah from personal law to all sphere of knowledge of human beings.
3. The aim of the pursuit of higher learning in Islam should be to prove the 'ultimate reality-the tauheed' for others who believe in scientific result more than 'faith'. There is no doubt that 'faith' becomes stronger with seeing, experiencing and discoursing with own self.
4. There should be a department of higher learning named as 'Quranic Science' in each madaris of the Islamic world where

the students should be trained to pursuit higher learning in Quaranic perspective.

5. There is a need for having a close relationship between Islamic madaris and secular institutions of higher learning. The passed out of madaris should be allowed to pursue the various branches of knowledge. And Madarsas should help secular institutions of higher learning in inculcating of Islamic notion of high learning.

6. There is a need to organize seminars, conferences, workshop etc for scientists to aware them about the Quranic perspective of higher learning. This exchange of ideas would help to mold the opinion of the scientists for the betterment of the humanity. These scientists could bring change for the betterment of the life of the people by not playing in the hands of money making businessmen.

7. There is needed to take help from the Western world in the field of higher learning particularly in science and technology. The Ulema attitude towards the West on religious ground should not be accepted in the fast global world where the world is becoming a family and in Quaranic declaration that the whole humanity is family of Allah.

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