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Book Review

**Tarikh e Rusul wal Muluk. By Abu Ja'far Muhammad ibn Jarir al-Tabari. Karachi: Nafees Academy, 2004. Seven Volumes, 4967 pages, Urdu Translation by Muhammad Siddiq Hashmi.**

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Many of us are somewhat familiar with history of the Muslims either due to our situatedness in the discourse and/or personal interests. Surely a good number of us are familiar with Abū Ja'far Muḥammad ibn Jarīr al-Ṭabarī (839-923), a Persian scholar of Islam, who wrote a 'universal history' entitled *Tarikh e Rusul-wal-Muluk* (Annals of the Prophets and Kings) also known as *Tarikh e Rusul-wal-Umam* by some. Tabari was unique in many ways. He was a Persian of Amol, Tabaristan and was educated in different cities of the declining Abbasid caliphate of 9<sup>th</sup> century and died in Baghdad during the 3<sup>rd</sup> decade of 10<sup>th</sup> century. He had access to many sources which, unfortunately, are wiped out by the storms of time and hence counterfactual verification is but a whisper of the dead. Still, the stories he narrated can be trusted as similar stories are narrated by other contemporary sources. He has tried to write a comprehensive history of the prophets, kings and caliphs which extends from the story of creation of universe, its objective, the biblical prophets and history of the Islamic world up to his own time (915), i.e., eight years before his death. His work is still one of the most important sources about the early Muslim period including the Umayyad and Abbasid dynasties. One of his uniqueness is evaluation of historical sources that were either available to him in writing or made accessible through correspondence. For narrating the story of Central Asia, especially Khorasan, he has entirely relied on the Arab historian al-Madā'inī (752 - 843). Many earlier works like writings of Abu Mahnaf (d. 744), al-Wāqidī (747-823) and Saif ibn 'Umar (d. 796) were his sources of his proclaimed universal history. During his *ahadith* learning process, he was able to receive the transmission rights from his teachers and was also able to resort to oral traditions. His orientation is entirely theological and hence he has narrated the history of the Sassanid Empire in that context, though from late antique sources. He has divided all people into three categories on the basis of their deeds i.e., pious who are destined to better reward in this World and paradise in hereafter; vice who are further divided into two i.e., those who are punished here and those who will be punished in the hereafter. For the period before the advent of Islam, his centre of history is Prophets. This approach is also very much true about later period when Prophet Muhammad (Peace Be Upon Him), Pious Caliphs, Umayyad and Abbasid caliphs were at centre without any slight discussion of Umayyad in Spain which he has missed to mention probably due to two factors: he did not get access to information which he considered reliable for writing and/or he did not consider them a religiously legal entity worthy of discussion. Furthermore, his methodology of work is indicative of focus on 'great men' with no or rare discussion on those classes and people who were producing wealth which elevated socio-political elite to 'greatness'.

Though for many people his discussion of 'irrelevant' details looks boring but there rests an actual beauty of the work as one comes to know different parameters and trends that were working in society. Such 'irrelevant' facts add to understanding the Arab society that was transmitting due to her interaction with sedentary societies of Persia and Syria. This is indicative of a 'new middle

class' emerging out of the economy of war and booty which consequently not only changed the entire social fabric but also resulted in a long series of fights between the ruling elite and different social classes. I use the term 'social classes' though their slogan was mainly religion. It's job of historians to dig out such social forces from unclear historical treatises and interpret according to new understanding. At least, from my personal understanding I put Kharajites in this category. Narrating poetry in reference to different episodes of time is an added beauty of his work. While referring to few individuals of Arab and Turks aristocracy, he has written the names of four and five generations which indicate that both Umayyad and Abbasid caliphs relied on some families for many generations. These included families of Qutayba bin Muslim Bahili and Muhlib bin Abi Sufrahas as well as a few Turks families who were brought to prominence by Al-Mu'tasim (r. 833-842). The emergence of regional leaders like Tahirids, Safarids, Tulunids and others are though not detailed according to modern trends but their attitude on different times indicates the declining position of central authority of the caliph. The strong Arab *Asabiyyah* or social solidarity which was once core power of Umayyad caliphate declines during their later years and is further accelerated in Abbasid reign. This is evident from role of Abu Muslim Khorasani and his associates in the Abbasid movement. Within a few generations, the Turks got prominence and they not only played the role of king makers but also assassinated a few Abbasid caliphs whom they considered hurdle in their way or less useful for preserving their interests. Though, Tabari does not explain or discuss many issues with details or clear comment but any reader with historical understanding and insight into the time realizes the changing trends of the Abbasid caliphates. Such deep-rooted trends can be inferred from his narrative of Zanj/Zang uprising (869-883) and Qaramtians which covers volume seven of the work. From the rank and file of these movements one can get insight into the social discontent confronted by the then social and political structures. Along that, the development of *fiqh* and squeezing space for Non-Muslims is evident from a variety of restrictions on their dress, movement, festivals and use of animals which they previously enjoyed. Perhaps it was realization on the part of Caliphs that they could sustain their entity with support of theological dogmas after their political decline.

Tabari writes in a chronological order, provides many statements of a single narrative in a descriptive manner without any preference or discussion thus gives variety of options to researcher. An interesting point is his balanced view for most part of his history when he was relying on others for his information. However, he has become a party and has used derogatory language for the opponents of Caliph when he was narrating his own anthropological observations of time. Interestingly, he seems sympathizer of the Alvis if not aligned during first 200 years of their emergence. However, his language changes when he discusses their uprising during his own life time. There might be two reasons: realization of the fact that Alvis did not had strength and resolution to get power and/or his own association with Abbasid Vizier, who employed him to teach his son. The time of his life is also marked with limited details as compared to earlier period of the Muslims. There are two possibilities for lack of details. Since he has written from perspective of power centre and many areas were practically independent of the central authority, he was least interested in writing about those areas. Secondly, perhaps during his lifetime he was more focused on the uprising of Zanji/Zangi and Qarmatians instead of other developments. To sum up, despite the reductionist approach in writing his 'universal' history, he has provided much important material for the researchers to ponder on and interpret that period with new methodologies.

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