

Birthplace of a Knowledge Revolution

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Tahir ul Qadri studied classical Islamic sciences under eminent scholars around the world, including in Makkah, Madinah, Syria, Baghdad, Lebanon, Morocco, India and Pakistan, and has received around 500 authorities and chains of transmission in the various branches of Islamic knowledge. He is a former Professor of Law and Head of Department of Islamic

Jurisprudence and Legislation at the University of the Punjab. He is founder of Minhaj-ul-Quran International (and Minhaj University, Minhaj Educational Society and Minhaj Welfare Foundation) that has a presence in 90 countries. He has authored around 1,000 books in Arabic, English and Urdu (over 515 of which have so far been published) and delivered over 6,000 lectures around the world.

No religion, culture, or civilisation has placed more emphasis on education than Islam. Through the words and deeds of the Holy Prophet ﷺ of Islam, the early Muslims became seekers, disseminators and pioneers of knowledge and literacy. They imbibed the knowledge of other civilisations, translating and preserving it, developing and evolving it, gifting its fruits to the West, and paving the way for the Age of Enlightenment. The originator of this vast and magnificent educational enterprise is the Holy Prophet himself. It is telling that the first revelation he received was the command to 'Read'. After this, the Holy Prophet delivered the message of this revelation, such that in a very short span of time, the unlettered and illiterate people of his community became the founders and leaders of the greatest culture and civilisation humankind had ever seen.

It is interesting to note that almost all the verses of the Quran in praise of or in connection with learning and writing belong to the Makkah period, while the Madinite verses lay greater emphasis on action and performance, and implementation of formal educational systems. One of the most significant things connected with the Makkah period is that the Prophet had scribes who took down regularly whatever was revealed to him, copies of which multiplied rapidly. He had thus established the

importance of literacy, and would forever ensure its perpetuation. The Prophet would encourage his Companions also to become teachers and educators themselves. As early as the 2nd covenant of 'Aqaba, about two years before the Hegira, when a dozen Madinans embraced Islam, they asked the Prophet to send along with them a teacher who could teach them the Quran and instruct them in Islam and the religious rites. Naturally, teaching at this stage meant only the explanation of the rudiments of the faith and the rituals connected therewith, but the range of subjects and disciplines would eventually multiply.

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On migrating to Madinah, and even while taking the reins of statehood, the Prophet continued to pay due attention to promoting education, and the eradication of illiteracy from his people. For example, he soon appointed Said bin al As to teach the Madinans reading and writing. During the years of military conflict with the Makkans, the Prophet would order the release of prisoners of war who would teach the Madinan Helpers to read and write. After the battle of Badr, for example, he released those prisoners who taught 10 children of Madinah to write if they were unable to pay their ransom for release.

More structured and formal educational systems began during the Madinan period. A regular residential school, *al-Suffa*, was established in an annex of the Prophet's mosque. Catering mainly for the local poor and underprivileged, or for newcomers, lodgings were provided and a wide-ranging set of disciplines and subjects were taught. These included reading, writing, Muslim law, Islamic traditions, languages, memorising of chapters of the Quran, Quranic recitation, and other Islamic sciences. The Prophet would directly supervise their learning, and personally would see to their daily requirements, sharing his food with them. On occasions he would sit in their circle to inculcate a love for learning among the learners. The number of students would vary, but at one time there were 70 students residing in the *al-Suffa*, and a total of 700 to 1,000 students graduated from there, becoming known as *Ashab al-Suffa*.

It should be noted that al-Suffa was not the only educational institute in Madinah at the time of the Prophet. There were at least nine mosques in Madinah, and no doubt, each of them would have served as a school, attended by local people, along with their children. It is recorded by traditionists that a batch of 70 students attended the lectures of a certain teacher in Madinah. According to another report, ten Companions were educated in the Mosque of Quba’.

The Prophet encouraged newly converted tribes to leave their lands and settle in the vicinity of Madinah, not just for strategic reasons, but also for the advancement of their education. The Prophet would also ask those of his Companions who were qualified teachers to accompany visiting tribal delegations on their return journey to organise education in their country – a practice anticipated the modern means of mass education employed by welfare and educational organisations in areas of low literacy. For example, he despatched 70 of his best-trained teachers of the Quran to the large tribal area of Najd for the tribe of Bi’r Ma’una.

The Prophet encouraged a wholesale change in the culture, ensuring that reading and writing became central to the daily lives of citizens and even of the machinery of government itself. He did this by commanding not just the writing down of divine revelations, but also of everyday transactions, big or small, as well as political treaties and conventions, state correspondence, and enlistment of militia, all of which made literacy vital. 229 letters, treaties, and official documents and juristic instructions from him have come down to us over history. We also know that another 255 letters and diplomatic documents have not been preserved. In a like manner, around 1,000 Prophetic collections of traditions were compiled by the Companions, Successors and Followers before the magnificent collections were accomplished by Imam al-Bukari and Imam Muslim.

Through the encouragement of the Prophet, specialisation developed considerably. He would advise, for example, that whoever wanted to learn the Quran must go to such-and-such person, and that whoever wanted to learn *tajwid*, or the mathematics of dividing inheritance, or its law, should have recourse to such-and-such persons. The Prophet, as Head of State, would require the services of foreign language experts and interpreters. Zayd B. Thabit is reputed to have learnt Persian, Greek, Ethiopian and Aramaic. And at the express command of the Prophet he learnt the Hebrew script in just 17 days, becoming the Prophet’s chief letter writer to the Jewish people. Records indicate that the Prophet enjoined instruction in reading, transcribing, law, theology, morality, sociology, besides shooting of arrows, swimming, mathematics of dividing a heritage in the Quranic proportions, the rudiments of medicine, astronomy, genealogy, agriculture, trade and commerce.

The Prophet paid special attention to the education of women. He

set apart a special day when he lectured to women exclusively and replied to their questions. A tradition records that he asked a woman to teach writing to one of his wives – Hafsa. His wife ‘A’isha was so gifted in *fiqh* and Muslim sciences besides letters, poetry and medicine that the Prophet is said to have remarked that she had mastered half of the human sciences. The Quran had also specially enjoined upon the wives of the Prophet to teach others.

Conversions to Islam and the expansion of the Muslim state beyond Madinah and into the Arabian Peninsula necessitated an extensive educational service. Teachers were sent from Madinah to important centres and the provincial governors were made responsible for the organisation and control of local schools. To enhance the standard of provincial education, the Prophet appointed, at least in Yemen, an inspector general of education, who was a touring officer in the various districts and provinces and looked after the schools and other educational institutions.

We may thus conclude without hint of doubt that Islam lays great emphasis on promoting education. We have seen how the original revelation commanded humanity to read, and numerous verses of the Quran exhort humanity to reflect, wonder and seek knowledge, not only sacred, but also to discover the secrets of the nature, as well as the inner and outer dimensions of humanity. In fact, there is no real distinction in Islam between the sacred and the profane. The Prophet’s example is all too clear, of his incessant efforts to eradicate illiteracy and ignorance in society through the systemisation of education, leading to a revolution in education and knowledge which was to change the course of history. **F**

The Quran, revealed initially in Makkah, inspired a long-standing scholarly tradition



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