CHAPTER VII

EVALUATION OF IBN AL-ATHIR, AS A HISTORIAN

It is one of the basic responsibilities of a historian to be dispassionate, objective and rational in his approach towards historical material. For a historian, like all men, has his own creed and is involved in certain social political, religious, and racial phenomenous. This he has inherited from history itself. Moreover for the historian, they are the biggest hurdles often come into his way when he handles the contents of history. They influence general approach of a historian towards history and work as a strong factor in the choice and presentation of the material. They may lead him to the distortion of historical facts as well as to the wrong judgement.

If a historian has freed himself from the above and alike notions, he would be able to do justice to his subject and his attempt to reach the historical fact as well as the depth of its causes would be successful.

But here some questions arise; how can one judge the objectivity of a historian? What are the standards which can be applied in the assessment of the attitude and impartiality of a historian? These questions evoke some academic responsibilities which are to be dealt with clear conscious and proper understanding.
First of all the personality of a historian must be deeply studied. It is necessary to know the social background to which he belonged and in which he was brought up. Secondly, religious, political and racial characteristics and propensities of a historian are to be carefully examined in historical perspective. For these inclinations play an important role in shaping the attitude and in determining the way of thinking of a historian. After it, a comparative study of historical literature is essential because the historical information about a particular period and area recorded by a historian can be judged and its validity can be established with the help of other historical works which deal with the same period and area. It will render valuable help in understanding not only also the period with which it deals but it will bring forth the maximum historical truth which will consequently help in determining how far the historian was objective and impartial in his treatment of the historical account.

On the line suggested above we can study and evaluate Ibn al-Athir as a historian. It will explain to us how far he is impartial in producing one of the greatest histories of Islam. It is no doubt, a very difficult one because he has covered not only pre-Islamic portions of world history but he has written the histories of many dynasties appeared during over the six centuries of Islamic history a vast area of the world. He has covered more than six centuries whose study be genuinely considered a very complicated.
I begin first with the pre-Islamic portion. A number of world historians who preceded Ibn al-Athir recorded the historical account pertaining to pre-Islamic period. Their knowledge was transported to Ibn al-Athir. He has copied the information with remarkable balance and honesty. When we read pre-Islamic historical portion in Al-Kamil it expresses an excellent balanced mind of its author. It shows that he has utilized all possible sources and selected the information with a sense of proportion. For example if we take ancient Persian history which was in constant relation with pre-Islamic Arab history we come to know that he has transcribed not only all also the material recorded by Tabari but many sources were consulted by him.

Ibn al-Athir was purely an Arab and racial feeling in these days was very high due to political and cultural strife of the day. Had Ibn al-Athir shown carelessness towards Persian history it would have been quite natural and he would not have been blamed for that. Because some historians seem to have been swept away by racial prejudice. Tabari may be considered pro-Persian because he has utterly omitted Ayyam al-Arab from his great history. Yaqubi and Dinawary have recorded Iranian history in their books in details but Islamic history has been briefly recorded. The biographical portion of the prophet in Yaqubi contains few paragraph but such shortcomings are not traceable in Al-Kamil. The detail description
of Iranian account in Al-Kamil proves that its author did not fall prey of racial feeling. Further, it is to be noted that Greek and Roman accounts were fairely and honestly recorded by the author. It is also to be pointed out that nothing has been added to what was already furnished by Yaqubi, Asfahani and Masudi in this respect. Apart from this fact a brief account pertaining to the later Roman monorchs is recorded by Ibn al-Athir which has not been recorded in other historical works. It seems that Ibn al-Athir has received it from his christian friends of Musul. It shows the historical curiousity of Ibn al-Athir.

From the very beginning of Islamic history differences, based on tribal interests appeared which were gradually deepend and in consequence they exercised tremendous influence upon political and religious thoughts of the Muslims. Therefore, learning and literature could not escape from their grip. Even historical writings were influenced by prejudice, and subjective approach of the early historians who belonged to either Iraqi or Shami schools did not do justice to each other. For instance a historian holding Umayyad inclination has produced biased and incomplete information about the Iraqi affairs, and similarly the Iraqi has not presented a fair and full picture of the Umayyads. Here it is relevant to note that Tabari himself has not recorded generously comprehensive history of the Umayyads. But Ibn al-Athir has furnished more comprehensive
and detailed accounts. Moreover the Umayyads of Spain are given due place in Al-Kamil while Tabari has completely neglected it.

The above points induce us to hold that Ibn al-Athir has succeeded, to a great extent, in adopting an impartial and objective approach towards his subject. Another fact demands our notice that Ibn al-Athir has expressed great annoyance over the petty quarrels among the Shia and Sunni and other different sects of the Muslim community. He thinks it against the spirit of Islamic brotherhood which unite man with man. This tendency alone shows that our historian kept the spirit of tolerance and broad mindedness alive while treating the historical account.

But when he comes to his own time the question of impartiality is to be dealt with more care, because most of the informations beginning with the fifth century up to the first quarter of the seventh century A.H. have been taken from oral authorities. It is no doubt that our historian made wide contact with various eminent persons who were eye witnesses or transmitters of the eye witnesses who supplied him most of the information. But for this simple reason we cannot be satisfied with the authenticity of the historical account which Ibn al-Athir has produced in his history. Take the case of the Atabek history which is copiously narrated by Ibn al-Athir. A question
arises in this connection that how the veracity of an account would be determined because Ibn al-Athir had friendly relation with the house of the Atabek. There is every likelihood of producing exaggerative account. The best way to verify the historical account is to study all the contemporary historians and then to compare their statements with the statement of Ibn al-Athir. I have adopted this method which has taken me to various original works among which the most reliable and rich authorities are Tarikh al-Ruzatain of Abu Shama, Nawādir al-Sultāniyah of Ibn Shaddād, Al-Fath al-Qussi of Imād al-Dīn Asfahāni and wafayat al-Alvan of Ibn Khallīkān. A thorough comparative study provides remarkable identity between the statements of Ibn al-Athir and his contemporaries. Though some minor differences come to light during the study. For example Ibn al-Athir reports that Nur al-Dīn Mahmūd founded a splendid hospital in Damascus which carried heavy expenditure and was open to every man without fee. After quoting this statement from Al-Kamil, Abu Shama criticises the last portion of the statement of Ibn al-Athir. He says:

"قد وقفت على كتاب وقد فلم أره مشعاً بذالله وإنما هذ كلام شاع على السنة المائة وثمانون بان يظهر من الإداة الكبار ضره لا يمنع منه من احتاج إليه الأغنياء والقروء".

This criticism apparently brings forth the carelessness of Ibn al-Athir. It means that he has believed in rumour and gossip of the people. But it does not mean that he has inten-
tionally recorded wrong statement and his impartiality has become doubtful in general. It is quite possible that some small errors might have occurred unconsciously in the history of Ibn al-Athir but as a whole his information is based on reliable authorities.

After the Atabeks the house of Salah al-Din comes into power. Salah al-Din established his rule after eliminating the Atabeks who were the greatest benefactor of the family of Ibn al-Athir. In this context it was quite natural for Ibn al-Athir to be distressed with the affair and in consequence to record prejudicial information about Salah al-Din. But after a detailed study of the contemporary documents along with the material furnished in Al-Kamil it can be claimed that our historian remained impartial. He remarks about Salah al-Din: "با الجلة نكان نادر أن عسكره كثير الحاسن والانفعال الجميلة عظيم الجهر في النفر" which indicates the high regard of the historian for Salah al-Din.

Originality in information or presentation:

In the foregone chapters a detail study of the sources of Ibn al-Athir's historical knowledge has been made which reflects how far originality exists in the history of Ibn al-Athir. For the

prophetic and pre-Islamic sections his knowledge is based mainly on Tabari's history but we cannot deny that some earlier works upon which Tabari himself relied were available to the historian. The Sirah of Ibn Ishaq and other original books were in the possession of Ibn al-Athir. His information about the Ayyam depends for the source on the treatises of Abu Ubaida. Moreover, the historical information pertaining to the Umayyads of Andalus and to the later period have been definitely drawn from very original treatises, documents and oral authorities. It is also to be claimed that the account of fifth century Roman Monarchs is entirely original. Further, it is to be noted that the accounts beginning with the sixth century A.H. upto the end of first quarter of the seventh century A.H. which covers the last two volumes of Al-Kamil are must be considered as a very original. He has recorded them relying on his personal investigations and efforts. Especially the information about the Atabeks, the kingdom of Salah al-Din, Crusades and Mangul invasion, completely claims originality. Because he relied upon his friends who held highest rank in government, official documents, secret treatises, travellers, merchants and soldiers. It was due to this fact that Ibn Khallikan, Ibn Kathir, Abu Fida, Dhahabi and other historian's heavily relied on the history of Ibn al-Athir.

Contrary to the material and factual aspect, no remarkable originality is shown by Ibn al-Athir in connection with methodology. He has utilized both the systems the chronological and
the annalistic. These systems have been followed since long before Ibn al-Athir. But some minor changes made by the historian are not to be overlooked by a keen student. For example Ibn al-Athir does not divide an event into many pieces according to its happening which is observed by Tabari but he narrates it completely at one place, so that the total picture of an event may be easily perceived by a reader. Another point which is to be noticed in this connection is that Ibn al-Athir delineates many-sided chain of an event and excellently tries to embody all the different points into a single of an account. It is to be remarked that Ibn al-Athir, at one place, has violated annalistic order while narrating the Mangol's invasion, because he has not recorded the account under annalistic order.

General view of the history of Islam:

Ibn al-Athir had developed a universal concept of Islam which was working in his mind when he began to write his great history Al-Kamil. He conceived Islam as a message of brotherhood, equality and justice. He thought it a spiritual force to unite peoples of different clours, races and regions. This conception was not so strongly and vividly perceived by any historian who preceded him. It is because of the fact that perhaps, Islam never faced such political crisis which we see during the time of Ibn al-Athir. It cannot be denied that there had been internal strifes, tribal feuds, dynastic
changes and clashes even civil wars since the assassination of Umar, the great pious Caliph, but all of them were of internal character. Now the fate of the entire "Ummat", scattered all over north Africa, west Asia, Central Asia, was at stake. Apart from the external threat the internal dissension was at its worst. A number of small kingdoms sprang up from the mighty kingdom of the Saljuq and though they have been temporarily later consolidated by the Atabeks, and Salah al-Din united all the small states under one power. It was a short lived. Chaos, anarchy and weakness again casted a gloom all over the Islamic world. Not a single power remained capable to resist the anundation of the Mangols. This deplorable condition left two contrary effects in the society. The common and unconscious masses have lost their hope and fell into dismay, but the educated and conscious class derived inspiration from the situation. The dissension, disunity, and the fear of annihilation rekindled the spark of universal Islamic unity which was to act as a formidable and invincible force against the internal and external threat. It appears that at that time, much emphasise is being laid upon common good, common fate and common endeavour. The memory of the ancient glory of the Abbasides, which united not only two third of the physical world under the sway of the universal caliphate but also infused a sense of unity among the different peoples, again due to adverse factors, revived the concept of universal caliphate. It helped the elites to reject all kind of prejudice and narrow mindedness
This point is also stressed by Professor Gibb when he studies the historical forces during the time of Ibn al-Athir. He suggests that it was one of the factors which guided the historical thinking of Ibn al-Athir. This universalism had its root in the religious doctrines which found new environment for its growth. Under the influence of this concept, Ibn al-Athir conceived Islamic history, from the beginning up to his own time, as a single unit. He paid equal importance to all the phases of Islamic history. Not a part of it seems to have been overlooked. The balance and comprehensiveness of his work is mainly due to a strong and deep consciousness of this typical universal outlook. It saved him from falling into petty quarrells, prejudices and narrow-mindedness which otherwise might have influenced the way in which he treated each of the material. He always kept in his mind the total view of Islamic history.

World view of history:

The interest of Arab historians in world history though in a limited sense, was created at the very early of Arab historiography. We know that a number of Arab historians tried to accumulate the informations of the ancient prophets, sages,

saints and nations. But it cannot be said that they had
developed the conception of world history. They were not ins­
pired of historical Quest. Their efforts were instigated by
purely religious purpose, they wanted to know these notions
and peoples which have been vaguely mentioned in the Quran.
This effort combined with the military expansion of the Umayyads
in later period, sparked off the conscience of world history
among the Arabs. Historians started to write not only dynastic;
also
and regional histories, but many of them included the account
of those countries and nations which directly came under the
influence of Islamic power. And the information of the relevant
countries, though not very reliable, found appropriate place
in the works of Arab historians. Al-Tabari, Masudi and
Asfahani distinguished themselves in this field. They have
recorded Persian, Roman, Greek and Indian accounts along with
the information of Islamic peoples. It was a big step towards
the growing consciousness of world history. But it is difficult
to maintain that histories of early Arab historians have
possessed all the characteristics of world history, because what
ever the historians, have recorded pertaining to non-Islamic
peoples is to a great extent, disproportionately brief, fabulous
and seriously defective.

But with the laps of time the consciousness of world
history has gradually grown stronger and it became clear. We
find Ibn al-Athir takes interest into the account of the
Byzantine empire during the fifth and sixth century A.H. He furnishes brief account of the affair which prevailed in the empire. But this very interest points out that the historian is not much curious and acquisitive of having sufficient knowledge about the contemporary world. Therefore, it is safe, to hold that *Al-Kamil* too does not possess all the characteristics of a world historical work. Ibn al-Athir, it seems, to have been inspired by the world view of history but he did not succeed in the acquisition of information about the contemporary whole world.

So far/attitude towards the non-Islamic land is concerned, it is remarkably impartial. Beside the information, which he has honestly copied from the earlier historical works, the original account in connection with the Byzantine empire helps us to hold that the historian treated of the material objectively. Fragmentary information about England, Germany can be noticed in the last volume of *Al-Kamil* which indicates the interest of Ibn al-Athir in non-Islamic lands. He has praised the valiant and brave deeds of the Christian military officers who participated in the crusades.

**Contribution to historiography:**

The contribution of Ibn al-Athir to Arab historiography is very rich and excellent. He provides very important information about the fifth and sixth centuries A.H. of Spain. The
Ik Umayyad and Abbaside periods whose accounts have largely been drawn from Tabari, present some additional information which increases the value of Al-Kamil. Moreover, the richest and most precious contribution which Ibn al-Athir has made to the historiography is the account of the contemporary Muslim world. Had Ibn al-Athir not preserved the happenings of the crusades, the account of the Atabekes and Salah al-Din's family much loss would have occurred to the historical literature of not only the Arabs, but of the world. His Al-Kamil and Tarikh al-Dowlat al-Atabukeya are to be considered the most valuable works because they are mines of rare information. It preserves also not only the important political account of the day but it contains such information which throws light on social, educational and economic conditions of the Muslims. He informs us how princes, kings, nobles, commanders, armymen, artisans, peasants and common men used to live, what was the standard of living, what was the rate of eatable things. In short, as a pious and dedicated historian, he deserves to be placed among the great historians of the world and his historical works are valuable, rich and very useful part of Arab historical literature.