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ISLAM

Usefulness makes us invincible force

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Ibn Khaldun (1332-1406) lived for some time in Spain. But in 1400, when Timur, along with other barbaric Tartar tribes, besieged Damascus, Ibn Khaldun was also present in the city. During the siege, negotiations took place between Timur and the people of Damascus. At that juncture, Timur expressed his desire to see Ibn Khaldun, who had, by that time, earned a reputation as a historian. The people of Damascus understood from this that Timur wanted a truce. Ibn Khaldun was thereupon lowered over the city wall by ropes and spent some seven weeks in the Tartar camp, of which he has given a detailed description in his autobiography. Timur treated him with respect, and also arranged for his safe return to Egypt, as he very much desired.

However, the incentive to honour Ibn Khaldun lay in Timur's own interests. As the Encyclopaedia Britannica says, "Probably dreaming of further conquests, Timur asked for a detailed description of North Africa and got not only a short lecture on that subject, but also an extensive written report" (9/149).

Although Timur was so cruel to the people of Damascus that in spite of their offer to negotiate, he sacked the city and burned the great mosque of Damascus, he accorded full honour to Ibn Khaldun. The reason was that, due to the latter's distinctive geographical and historical knowledge, he had proved that he could be a useful guide to Timur.

If man can prove his usefulness, he becomes honourable in the eyes of the world, even in the eyes of a deadly enemy. The kind of usefulness which offers advantages to others is something which can tame even ferocious, bloodthirsty people; it can even bring a king to bow to a common man.