

CONTRIBUTION OF ARABIC TO THE CULTURAL HERITAGE OF INDIA

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With the rise of Islam the Arabs became united and emerged as a powerful nation. Within a century after their rise, they became the masters of an empire which extended from the shores of the Atlantic Ocean to the confines of China, an empire greater than that of Rome at its zenith (1).

It was not only an empire which the Arabs built but also a culture. Inspired by the Verses of the Quran and Traditions of Prophet Muhammad (may peace of Allāh be on him) and filled with the spirit of scientific enquiry, they travelled far and wide in search of knowledge (2). They proved painstaking scholars and generous teachers. Their power of observation, assimilation and creative imagination manifested itself in their cultivation of various sciences. They not only preserved the ancient sciences and intellectual legacies of Greece, Iran and India, but made contributions of their own in all branches of human knowledge and learning. As a result, they became the harbingers of the modern scientific investigation. While doing so, they have left their deep mark on all the peoples and cultures of the world; and India is no exception to this. This paper attempts at making an assessment of the part played by the Arabs and their language in preserving and enriching the Indian culture.

The Arab contribution to the commercial prosperity of India may be said to have started

from the very ancient times in the pre-Islamic period, when they, by virtue of being good navigators and enterprising traders, acted as commercial intermediaries between the East and the West. It was mainly through them that Egypt, Syria and the Levantine countries received the Indian and Chinese products like silk, spices, ivory, gems and rare animals etc. And as R. A. Nicholson has observed, "Sea-traffic between the ports of East Arabia and India was very early established, and Indian products, specially spices and rare animals (apes and peacocks) were conveyed to the coast of Oman. Thence apparently even in the tenth century B. C. they went overland to the Arabian Gulf, where they were shipped to Egypt for the use of Pharaohs and grandees." (3).

Here it is remarkable to note that the Indian commodities in those days were highly prized in foreign markets. For example, the swords manufactured in India became proverbial in Arabia. In the following lines Tarafah bin al-'Abd, a renowned pre-Islamic poet prides himself on being in possession of an Indian sword :

وَأَلَيْتَ لَا يَنْفَكُ كَسْحِي بَطَانَةَ
لِعَضْبِ رَقِيقِ الشُّفْرَتَيْنِ مَهْدًا (4)

(I have sworn that a sharp double-edged Indian sword will always remain suspended by my side, and that I will never part with it.)

This clearly shows that India must have had a highly developed technology of tempering steel in ancient times. Besides, the Arabs imported from India cloths, shoes, indigo, muslins, Ivory, coconuts, sandal, camphor, cardamom, pepper and other spices. As for the main commodities which the Arabs brought to India included Iron, gold, silver, lead, wine, rose-water, saffron, date, horses etc. (5).

In this way the Arabs played an important role in trading in Indian commodities with the West. One of the significant results of these Indo-Arab commercial relations was that the Indians and their kings had great regards for these Arab traders, whose trading activities brought them a great deal of wealth which undoubtedly had its share in the flourishing of Indian culture in ancient times. Another direct impact of these relations was that the Arab merchants had made their permanent settlements on the Malabar coast and in the nearby areas which played a laudable role in the diffusion of Arab culture in this country.

The advent of Islam in India marks the emergence of a new epoch in the history of its cultural evolution. And the early Arab traders were the first to carry with them the message of Islam to this country, much earlier than the establishment of the Arab colony in Sind in 712 A.D. They built their houses and mosques and practised their religious rites freely. It was mainly through these traders that a constant stream of Muhammadan influence flowed in upon the Western Coast of India. They, being honest and ideal Muslims, greatly influenced the local people by their pious living, their zeal for the new faith and the principle of universal brotherhood which they preached and practised. They even inter-married giving rise to such communities as the Kokani Muslims of Bombay and Moplas of Malabar. Moreover, they were welcomed and honoured by the local rulers as well as their subjects. The Arab historians are full of praise for the cordial relations which existed between these Arab settlers and the Indian rulers. For exam-

ple, the famous Arab historian, al-Mas'ûdi, paid a high tribute to Raja Bahari (the ruler of Gujarat) for the just and generous treatment meted out to the Muslims. He says :

"There is none among the rulers of Sind and Hind who in his territory respects the Muslims like Raja Bahari. In his territory Islam is honoured and protected. And for them mosques and congregational mosques, which are always full, have been built for offering prayers five times. Every one of these kings rules for fifty years or more. It is the general belief of the people of his kingdom that the lives of these kings are very long, because they administer justice and honour the Muslims" (6).

The establishment of the Arab rule in Sind and southern Punjab which lasted for about three hundred years (712-1000) further strengthened commercial and cultural contacts between India and the Arab world. The natives were very much impressed by the just and efficient administration as well as religion of the Arab rulers. They embraced Islam en masse, and thus the territory was for ever Islamized. They not only adopted Arabic script, but also took to learn the language of the Quran so diligently that they soon began to understand and speak it. This is evident from the statement of the famous Arab traveller, Ibn Hawqal, who visited Sind in the second quarter of the third century A.H. He has stated that Arabic and Sindhi were the spoken languages of Sind and were generally understood. Therefore, during his stay there, he had no difficulty in making himself intelligible to the natives (7).

Another important source, through which Islam entered into the hearts of the Indian masses was that of the sufis and saints, who moved wherever the Muslim army settled. Abû Hafs, a Traditionist, is said to have been the first Muslim saint and scholar who came to Sind where he died in 160 A.H. (8). In the tenth century A.D. al-Hallaj made a voyage to India and went overland by way of northern India and Turkestan. In the eleventh century

A. D. Baba Riham came to Broach from Baghdad with a company of Derwishes (9).

Similarly after the military campaigns of Mahmūd of Ghaznah (1001-1024) a large number of learned men were attracted to India. Of them the name of al-Birūni is the most illustrious. Other eminent scholars and saints who came to settle here were 'Ali bin 'Uthman al-Hajwiri, author of *كشْفُ الْمَحْجُوبِ* (kashf-ul-mahjub), who came from Ghaznah and settled in Lahore where he died in 465 or 469 A. H. ; Shaikh Fariduddin 'Attar, the celebrated author of *تَذْكِرَةُ الْأَوْلِيَاءِ* (tazkirat-ul-Awliya), who visited India in the twelfth century A. D. ; khwaja Mu'inuddin Chishti, who breathed his last at Ajmer in 1234 A.D. ; Sayyid Shah Mir, son of 'Abdul-Qadir Jilani ; Outbuddin Bakhtiyar Kaki, whose name is associated with Qutub Minar of Delhi ; Baha'uddin Zakariya (d. 1266 A. D.) and many others (10).

The Muslim saints and sufis found the atmosphere for their preachings and activities in India very congenial. They lived in close contact with the masses and greatly influenced them by the spell of their spiritual power. They drew adherents from all communities and classes of people in large numbers. They were honoured and held in high esteem by both the rulers and ordinary men. For instance, Sultan Shamsuddin Iltutmish, who ruled in India in the seventh century A. H., used to visit Shaikh Bakhtiyar Kaki and seek his blessings by massaging his feet (11). In this way Islam spread throughout the length and breadth of the country more through the personal contacts and sacred influence of these Muslim saints and sufis than through Muslim political influence ; and in course of time Islam contributed immensely to the mainstream of Indian culture. In all this Arabic, "being the language of the Court and the Church (i.e. the religion of Islam), of Law and Commerce, of Diplomacy and Literature and Science" (12), naturally played a vital role.

Although the most significant contribution

of the Arabs and their literature to the cultural heritage of India belongs to the period between the eighth and the middle of the thirteenth centuries when Arabic was the lingua-franca of the whole Muslim world, nevertheless their culture continued to exert its influence on the social, cultural and intellectual life of this country even during the reigns of the non-Arab Muslim rulers, because Arabic, being the language of the Quran, is inseparably interwoven with Islam. Muslim children are taught to recite the Book in its original, irrespective of the fact whether they understand the language or not. "in addition to this", as E. G. Browne says, "The prayers which every good Muslim should recite five times a day are in Arabic as are the Confession of Faith and other religious formulæ which are constantly on the tongue of the true believer, be he Persian, Turk, Indian, Afghan or Malay ; so that every Muslim must have some slight acquaintance with the Arabic language, while nothing so greatly raises him in the eyes of his fellows as a more profound knowledge of the sacred tongue of Islam." (13). Because of this exalted position which Arabic continues to occupy in the hearts of the Muslims even the non-Arab Muslim rulers of India continued to encourage and patronize the study of Arabic along with that of Persian which was the official language of Muslim India.

The first direct influence of Arab thought on the cultural growth of India is evident in a number of changes that took place on the social and religious structure of the country. At the time of the advent of the Muslims, the Hindu society was divided into rigid strata of castes and people were dissatisfied with the social order and religious system of that age. But the Islamic outlook upon social life was democratic and its influence quickened in Hinduism the feeling of social justice and brotherhood (14). Similarly, Arab monotheism left a deep impression upon the Indian Bhakti movement which preached the unity of God and

equality of all human beings. Thus the Indian religious philosophy and social thought imbibed the very essence of Arab renaissance and learning.

Another significant contribution of Arabic to the cultural heritage of India is evident from the fact that it was mainly through his language that the ancient intellectual legacy of this country was preserved, enriched and made known to the outside world, because preservation of a nation's legacy and its transmission from the standpoint of history of culture is no less essential than origination (15). The names of al-Fazari, al-Kindi, al-Khwarizmi and al-Biruni are well-known in history for bringing about a lively intellectual interchange between what the Indians and the Arabs possessed in different branches of knowledge and learning.

The Arabs were the first to add glory to India by discovering, preserving and transmitting to the West its achievements in various branches of knowledge, especially in the fields of mathematics and astronomy, in which it is credited with having made original contributions. The Arabs first studied and translated into Arabic Siddhanta, a treatise on astronomy in Sanskrit, as a result of which a systematic study of the stars was undertaken by them. The translation was done by Muhammad bin Ibrahim al-Fazari (between 796 and 800 A.D.). He subsequently came to be regarded as the first Muslim astronomer (16).

They also discovered and learned from this book the use of Indian numerals including the zero. The first Arab exponent of the Indian numerals was Muhammad bin Musa al-Khwarizmi. In 813 A.D. he used these numerals in his astronomical tables; and in about 825 A.D. he wrote a separate treatise known in its Latin form as *Algorithmi de numero Indorum* - i.e. Al-Khwarizmi on the Numerals of the Indians (17). When these numerals were introduced in Europe by the Arabs, they were taken as Arabic numerals. But it speaks of the intellectual ho-

nesty of the Arabs that they always referred to them as Indian numerals. It is the same numerals, which when introduced in Europe, marked the beginning of modern European mathematics and brought about a revolution in the science of calculation.

Another important Sanskrit book which was translated into Arabic was *Aryabhatiya* by Aryabhatta (18), the celebrated Indian mathematician who maintained that the earth rotated round its axis, and explained the cause of the eclipse of the sun and the moon (19).

It may also be claimed that the Arabs not only preserved and transmitted the Indian legacy, but also enriched it with fresh contributions of their own, as they did not come to India empty-handed. They brought with them a great deal of wisdom and skill which they had acquired from the Greeks. They, therefore, soon surpassed the Hindus in various sciences, whose disciples they had formerly been. For instance, al-Kindi, who in the ninth century A.D. had written largely upon Indian astronomy and arithmetic, now in turn became an authority in the eyes of the Hindus, who studied and translated his writings and those of his successors (20). The influence of the Arabs on Indian astronomy may be assessed from the fact that the Indian astronomers took from them a number of technical terms, their methods of calculation of latitudes and longitudes and in horoscopy a whole branch called Tajik.

In the field of medicine both the Indians and the Arabs were benefited from each other's knowledge. The famous Indian medical works like *Sharak Sanhita* and *Sushrut Sanhita* were translated into Arabic (21). A number of eminent Indian physicians like Mankah, Salih, Shanaq and Kanakah etc. were invited by Caliph Harun al-Rashid to organise hospitals and medical schools in Baghdad (22). But, as in the case of other sciences, in Medicine also the Arabs were not only the borrowers, but also the givers. The best example of the Arab legacy to India in Medicine, is the Unani Tibb

system of medical diagnosis and treatment. It is practised here even today as one of the main branches of indigenous medicine.

Another great debt which India owes to Arabic is the fact that it was mainly through this language that the ancient wisdom literature of this country was preserved and made known to the West. For example, the animal fables of Sanskrit origin, known as the fables of Bidpai were translated into Arabic by Ibn-ul-Muqffa' under the title of *كَلِيلَةُ وَدَيْبَنَةُ* (Kalilah wa Dimnah) from Pahlawi. And as Hitti writes, India in the reign of Anushirwan (531-78 A. D.). What gives the Arabic version special significance is the fact that the Persian (translation) was lost, as was the Sanskrit original, though the material in an expanded form can still be found in the Pichtantra. The Arabic version, therefore, became the basis of all existing translations into some forty languages, including, besides European tongues, Hebrew, Turkish, Ethiopic, Icelandic and Malay. » (23).

While discussing the cultural give and take between India and the Arab world, we must not fail to pay our special attention to Abu Rayhan Muhammad Ibn Ahmad al-Biruni (973-1048 A. D.) who stayed in India for several years and acquainted himself with the language, philosophy and sciences of this country. He is credited with having translated several Sanskrit works of science into Arabic, of which only the following four books are known to us so far :

(1) Patanjali Sutra ; (2) Laghu Jatkam ; (3) A Book on Solar and Lunar Eclipses ; (4) Rashkat Hind (24).

Similarly, he enriched Indian literature by translating Euclid's Elements and Ptolemy's Almagest into Sanskrit (25). Besides, he has given a very authentic account of the sciences, antiquities and customs of India in his famous book entitled Tarikh-ul-Hind (History of India) (26). In it he has devoted forty-two chapters on Hindu astronomy, and eleven to Hindu re-

ligion (27). The celebrated German Orientalist, E. Sachau, has highly spoken of the importance of the book by commenting that all the books written about India before al-Biruni are nothing but babies' toys in comparison with his scientific researches contained in it (28).

In the light of the facts discussed above it is quite clear that the contribution which Arabic has made to the cultural revival of India can hardly be overestimated.

In more tangible aspects of culture, Arab influences may be traced in Indian architecture, calligraphy and other fine arts. In paper-making book-binding, glass-work, pharmacy and several chemical industries not only India, but also the whole world owes a great deal to the Arabs (29).

But by far the most lasting influence which the Arabs and their literature have made on the culture of India is to be seen in the literature and languages of the country as well as in the cultivation of Arabic and Islamic studies by Indian scholars.

One of the most significant contribution of Arabic literature to India is the introduction of the science of historiography into Indian literature. In the pre-Islamic days the Indians lacked chronological sense in writing history. Only a few biographies were written in Sanskrit and in all of them "facts lie buried under a mass of flowers of rhetoric, tricks of style and round-about expressions." (30). Al-Biruni has pointed out this fact as mentioned below :

"Unfortunately, the Hindus do not pay much attention to the historical order of things. They are very careless in relating the chronological succession of their kings, and when they are pressed for information and are at a loss, not knowing what to say, they invariably take to tale-telling." (31).

But the scientific and fact-finding Arabs kept a regular record of their campaigns and activities. They wrote a number of chronicles and biographies which may be described as models of standard historical writings of that

age. Indian writers imitated their style and thus was introduced, as Sir Jadunath Sarkar has observed, "a new and very useful element into Indian literature." (32).

Besides, for the history of the Middle Ages India is largely dependent on Arabic literature which contains a vast amount of historical and cultural information about it. Here it is remarkable to note that the Arab historians are full of praise for this country. The Arab travellers right from Sulayman, the merchant of the ninth century, to Ibn Batutah of the fourteenth century display the love and sympathy of the Arabs for this country.

While emphasizing the importance of Arabic literature as a source of historical information for India, it may be mentioned that even Hadith literature, which, after the Quran, is the most authentic source of information, contains a number of interesting stories about this country. For instance, the Apostolic Traditions which Sayyid Ghulam 'Ali Azad has compiled in his book, *Subhat-ul-Marjan fi Athar-i-Hindustan*, throw much light on the antiquity of Indo-Arab relations as well as on the ancient glory of the country. On the basis of these traditions the author has concluded that Adam, the father of mankind, being driven out of the Paradise, alighted on the peak of a mountain called Adam's peak in Ceylon. According to this story, India and Arabia have had intercourse with each other from the very beginning of creation on earth. Besides, the author has narrated a number of special blessings which God showered upon India along with the 'fall' of Adam on earth. And lastly, he has maintained that all the dependants of mankind are of Indian origin, because Adam himself was an Indian.

Another important role played by the Arab and Muslim scholars in enriching the Indian culture was in the domain of education. Contrary to the Hindu practice of confining education to the privileged few, the Muslims made it open to all by circulating their works on a large scale. This led to diffusion of knowledge

and learning (34). And as stated above, the study of Arabic and Islamic studies along with that of Persian naturally occupied an important position in the educational curriculum of the Muslims. As a result, a large number of eminent Arabic scholars flourished, who enriched the Indo-Arab literature with valuable contributions to almost all the branches of Arabic literature which cannot be ignored while making an assessment of the impact of Arab culture on India.

It would not be out of place to mention here that the rich cultivation of Arabic studies in the country owes a great deal to the sacrifices made by the learned Arabic scholars and teachers who looked upon teaching not as a means of earning livelihood but as an act of piety and worship to Allah. They were full of affection and sympathy for their students, and encouraged them in every possible way. In short, the scholars were wholly devoted to the cause of knowledge and learning (35). Similarly, the students on their part were sincerely devoted to their teachers. They loved, respected and honoured them beyond expression. Even the ruling class had a great regard for them. For example, Shahjahan, the Mughal Emperor, weighed Mulla 'Abdul Hakim of Sialkot twice against silver and Qadi Muhammad Aslam, son of the renowned scholar Mirzahid, once against gold. And such was the custom among the early Mughal rulers to respect and honour the scholars (36).

Although a great deal of Arabic literature produced in India could not come down to us, yet the remnants of it, which are preserved in published and unpublished forms, are sufficient enough to prove their spectacular literary achievements (37). They wrote volumes of books on religious as well as secular subjects i.e. Hadith, Tafsir, Jurisprudence and poetry. At the same time purely philological subjects such as Rhetorics, Grammar and Philology did not escape their attention, and they produced some valuable books on these subjects also.

Of them mention may be made of the following writers :

Imam Hassan bin Muhammad (d. 650 A.H.), author of *al-'Ubab-ul-Zakhir*, *Majma-'ul-Bahrayn* and *Kitab-ul-Ad dad* on philology and *Mashariq-ul-Anwar* on Hadith ; Shaikh 'Ali bin Hishamuddin of Burhanpur, author of *Kanz-ul-'Ummal* ; Allamah Mahmud al-Jawnpuri (d. 1062 A.H.), author of *al-Fara'id fi 'Ulum-il-Balaghah* ; Muhibbullah al-Bihari (1119 A.H.), author of *Musalam-ul-Thabut* on Principles of Jurisprudence ; Shah Waliullah of Delhi (d. 11176 A.H.), author of *Hujjatullah-il-Balighah* ; Sayyid Murtada al-Bilgrami (d. 1205 A.H.), author of *Tajul-'Arus fi Sharh-il-Qamus* ; Nawab Siddiq Hassan Khan, author of 222 books, out of which 56 books are in Arabic ; and Shaikh 'Abdul-Hayy of Lucknow, author of 110 books including 86 books in Arabic on various subjects of Islamic learning (38).

In the field of Arabic poetry too our country is proud of having produced some famous poets such as Qadi 'Abdul Muqtadir of Delhi (d. 791 A.H.), Shaikh Ahmad bin Muhammad (d. 830 A.H.), Mufti Sadruddin of Delhi (d. 1285 A.H.), Sayyid Ghulam 'Ali Azad al-Bilgrami (d. 1300 A.H.) and others (39), whose poetical compositions earned them fame and reputation not only in India but also abroad. So far as Arabic style of these authors and poets is concerned, it is of a high standard. This clearly shows that they cultivated Arabic studies with scholarly zeal. In this way, they carried on the traditions of Arabic learning in India, which have no doubt left an indelible impress of Arab culture on Indian society.

And last, but not the least, the great contribution of Arabic to the cultural heritage of India is evident in its languages. On account of the long and close association of the Arabs and Muslims with this country as well as rich cultivation of Arabic studies by Indian scholars, Arabic language has greatly influenced all the major Indian language in a varying degree depending on the nature of the contact. While

Sindhi and Urdu have adopted the Arabic script, other languages like Malayalam, Teugu, Tamil, Gujrati, Punjabi, Hindi, Bengali and Assamese have been greatly enriched by it. Arabic words and phrases incorporated in these languages can be easily determined by critical philological studies of them. So far as the influence of Arabic on Urdu or Hindustani is concerned, Sayyid Sulayman Nadwi has done a commendable work. The collection of his literary and philological articles entitled *Nuqush-e-Sulaymani* in Urdu includes two research papers by him on this subject. They clearly show that the influence of Arabic on Urdu is greater than of any of its remaining three source languages i.e. Persian, Sanskrit and Turkish.

Similarly, Dr. Sami' Sa'id Ahmad has recently published a list of about one hundred such Arabic words which are used not only in Arabic but also in Telugu, a major Indian language spoken along the Eastern Coast of South India, exactly in the same sense as are used in Arabic (40).

Another important point to bear in our mind in this connection is that Arabic influenced the Indian languages both directly and indirectly through Persian, for Persian itself became so thoroughly Arabicised in the course of time that, as E. G. Browne has observed, "without a knowledge of the Arabic language and literature and of the Arabian civilization and culture one could never hope to be more than a stammerer in Persian" (41).

From what has been discussed above it is quite clear that contributions of the Arabs, their language and literature to the cultural heritage of India have been so rich and immense that a correct appreciation of the knowledge and literature of this country is not possible without the aid of Arabic language and literature.

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