

Role of Medieval Muslims in the Proliferation of Libraries

Libraries

Libraries have been the depositories of mankind's intellectual and cultural heritage since ancient times. There were temple libraries in Egypt, Iraq, Greece and Rome. In Greece Plato is known to have been a collector. The earliest private collection worthy of the name of *library* was that of Aristotle. Starbo has described him the first man known to have collected a library¹. Shera writes :

The library has been from its beginning, a social instrument. The clay tablets of Ashurbanipal's Royal Library at Nineveh, the Papyrus rolls at Alexandria, the Parchment and Vellum codices at Pergamum were all brought together, organized and preserved because these societies needed recorded information for the maintenance of the state, the preservation and communication of religious belief, the transaction of commerce, the education of youth, bequeathing of the culture to subsequent generations.²

Muslims' Love for Books

When we go through the situation of the library institution in the muslim world we come to know that the early period of Islam was an age of great cultural contacts, which proved of infinite significance for the later history of a large part of the civilised world. Learning (ilm), by which is meant the whole world of intellect, engaged the interest of muslims more than anything else. Dr. Olga Pinto writes "among few peoples, however, has the cult of books and literary tradition had such importance in the spiritual and cultural life as with the Arabs."³

This was due to the great importance given to learning by the Holy Quran and a number of Traditions of the prophet (PBUH). So the search for the knowledge was the duty assigned to every muslim,

man and woman. Therefore muslims love for books is not a question of doubt. They use the same term, Kitab, to denote both a book and any other piece of writing. If they speak of The Book, Al-Kitab, that is the book in its truest sense, they mean the Quran. In no other religion does the book play such a role as it does in Islam. "Enthusiasm for learning was so great and universal that it seemed as if all the muslim world from the Caliph down to the humblest citizen suddenly became students or atleast patrons of literature."⁴

Books were considered to be a great source of learning and learning was intimately bound up with the religion therefore all the activities related to the book production and preservation were performed with the great feelings of respect, pride and attention. They took them as a service to religion and learning so the libraries began to appear and flourish from the early times of Islam. They were considered the sign of high culture. Even in the first century of Hegira "we find the learned men scolded by their wives for possessing great number of books."⁵

Mosque Libraries

In muslim world, at first elementary as well as advanced education came from the mosques, each of which had its own library. Sciences other than medicine were mostly taught in mosques. In early centuries of Islam these were liberally placed at the disposal of scholars. Every important mosque had its library not only of theological, but also of philosophical and scientific works. German professor Joseph Hell writes in his book on Arabic civilization that until the fifth century of the Hegira the mosque was the university of Islam and this fact is due to the most characteristic feature of Islamic culture – perfect freedom to teach.⁶

In those universities the foremost men of learning of their age were the teachers. They were not blind guides, no more fanatics. The professors of those universities were the most enlightened thinkers of their time. In later centuries the advanced studies were no longer confined to the mosques only. The Madrasas also arose in which the instruction had a wider scope and history, grammar, philosophy,

astronomy, medicine, mathematics and metaphysics were taught. All these institutions had their own libraries. Most medieval Muslim libraries were educational Institutions besides performing the functions of modern libraries.⁷

Abbasids – Baghdad

The Libraries received admirable support and interest from the Abbasid Caliphs. The Abbasid dynasty attained its most brilliant period of political and intellectual life soon after its establishment. The Baghdad Caliphate founded by al-Saffah (750 A.D.) and al-Mansur (754 A.D.) reached its prime in the period between the reigns of the third Caliph, al-Mahdi (775 A.D.) and the ninth, al-Wathiq (842 A.D.), more particularly in the days of Harun-al-Rashid (786 A.D.) and his son al-Mamun (813 A.D.). It was chiefly because of these two luminous caliphs that the Abbasid dynasty acquired a halo in popular imagination and became the most celebrated in the history of Islam. The foundation of *Bait-al-Hikmah* played a vital role in enhancing the glory of Baghdad.

Bait-Al-Hikmah, the *House of Wisdom* was founded by Haroon or Mamun. Mostly Historians are agreed on Haroon. Shalby writes, "I feel confident that Haroon was the real founder of its establishment."⁸ To support his argument he cites ibn Nadeem's al-Fahrist according to which Abu Sahl al-Nawbakht was a translator under al-Rashid in Khizanat al-Hikmah.⁹ But this is a fact that the institution gained its fame under the patronage of al-Mamun who was a well qualified and free minded caliph. His rationalist tendencies and his espousal of the Mutazilite cause maintained him that religious text should agree with the judgements of reason. This attitude led him to seek justification for his position in the philosophical works of the Greeks. Ibn Nadeem records that al-Mamun saw in a dream Aristotle seated on a throne, he had conversation with him, which inspired al-Mamun to promote the translation of Greek literature in his Academy.¹⁰

Bait-al-Hikmah consisted of an academy, library and translation bureau. It also had an astronomical observatory. It was a public library on a large scale. It contained valuable books on all the

sciences, and in various languages. It was a very important centre for the intellectual development of medieval muslims.

Mamun tried his best to get the classical works of wisdom by all possible means. He did his best to enrich this library. He sent several men to attain Greek books for translation after correspondence with the Byzantine Emperor. Another request was made to the ruler of Sicily. It got a positive response and he sent a collection of Greek books, which was placed in the library by the librarian Sahl b. Haroon. He also sent for pundits and it was through these pundits that the hitherto concealed treasures of the Hindus became accessible to Muslims. To Persian works special attention was paid as the Barmecides were of Persian extraction.

But Mamun was not the first one who got classical works for translation purposes. There are evidences of such instances before him also. Ibn Abi Usaibiah writes "Harun al-Rashid too obtained Greek works after his victory over the Byzantine troops for the translation."¹¹

Ibn-Khaldun writes, "al-Mansur is said to have received in response to his request from the Byzantine emperor a number of books, including Euclid."¹² One of the pioneer translators from Greek was Abu Yahya ibn-alBatriq (between 796 A.D. and 806 A.D.) who translated for Mansur the major works of Galen and Quadripartitum. Even before al-Mansur according to Ibn-Nadeem, a son of Umayyed Caliph Yazid I, Khalid ibn Yazid ibn Muawiya (d. 704 AD) is said to have preceded al-Mamun in this task.¹³

Al-Mamun's great contribution is that he widened the scope of this activity on a large scale and organised this work in a skillful manner. He hired skilled persons for translation, scribing, copying, binding and so on. Translators were employed regardless of their religion. During this period translation work had been done independently by Christians, Jews and recent converts to Islam. Since most of the translators were Aramaci-speaking many of the Greek were first done in Aramaci (Syriac) before their translation

into Arabic.

Three men are named by the historians as having been head of the library . Yuhanna (Yahya) b . Masawaih, Sahl b. Haroon and Salam. Hunayn ibn-Ishaq , a Nestorian christian from al-Hira, who is known as "the sheikh of translators ," and one of the greatest scholars and noblest characters of the age, also worked in the Academy. His ability as a translator may be attested by the report that al-Mamun paid in gold the weight of books he translated."¹⁴ Distinguished Persian poet al-Khawarizmi, who was the composer of the various astronomical tables based upon Indian writers, also worked there. Thabit ibn-Qurrah lead a group of Sabians of Harran. They were star worshiper and therefore were interested in astronomy and mathematics. They are credited with having translated the bulk of the Greek Mathematical and Astronomical works including those of Archimedes (212 B.C.) and of Appolonious of Perga (262 B.C.) The Abbasid era of translation lasted about a century after 750 A.D.

Within a short space of time after the establishment of Baghdad the Arabic reading world was in possession of the chief philosophical works of Aristotle, of the leading Neo-Platonic commentators, and of most of the medical writings of Galen, as well as of Persian and Indian scientific works.¹⁵ The Muslims possessed excellent translations of the works of Hippocratic, Corpus and of Galen.¹⁶

Although translations were much in demand at that time when muslim literature was in process of being founded, but al-Mamun's library was of course also supplied with other Arabic literature. This was the first instance of an organized and comprehensive collection of books in Muslim world . It contained an enormous quantity of priceless books.

Destruction of Bait al-Hiqmah : Under the rulership of Abbasids the Baghdad emerged as a world centre of power, wealth and international significance, standing alone as the rival of Byzantium. Unluckily different events affected the glory of Bait al-Hiqmah. The first neglect this institute suffered was caused by the

choosing of Samara as the capital of the Muslim Empire instead of Baghdad. Many other incidents had a bad effect upon this intellectual centre but it seems that it survived in spite of all these troubles. Although it lost its significance, it continued to exist for some centuries. Shalby refers ibn-Nadim who in the last quarter of the 4th century A.H. copied Ethiopian characters from it, and al-Qalqashandi, who records that this library existed till the fall of the Baghdad into the hands of Tartars in 656 A.H. and then the library disappeared along with many other things.¹⁷

Personal Collections

However libraries were not confined to the capital of Baghdad only. The example set by the Caliph was eagerly followed by many public spirited nobles and wealthy individuals who founded academies and libraries at Baghdad and elsewhere at their own expenses.

Ali-bin-Yahya known as al-Munajjim (275 A.H.) collected a large library, called *Khizanat al-Hiqmah*. Many people travelled from distant countries in order to study various sciences there. Abu Nasr Sabar bin Ardshir's library, founded in 383 or 381 AH has been praised by many writers for its beauty and size of more than 10,000 volumes.¹⁸ Another intellectual centre in Baghdad was founded by al-Sharif al-Radi (d . 406 AH). It was called *Dar al-Ilm*. This institution had a very rich and well arranged library.

These are only a few names. There were many institutions with attached libraries which were open to the scholars and learned persons. In the 7th century A.H. there were 36 public libraries in Baghdad. With the passage of time libraries appeared in almost every important cultural centre of Islam. We can say Baghdad set an example for many other individuals and persons in government. Thus we find the Umayyads of Spain, the Fatimids of Egypt, Hamadanids of Aleppo, the Buwayhids of Persia, the Samanids of Bukhara and the Ghaznavid rulers, all collected and established libraries in their respective seats of government. It is not possible to throw light on all of them but there are some names which must be described because of their prestige and contribution to the

organization and dissemination of knowledge.

Fatmids – Cairo

The Fatmids professed to be descended from the Prophet's daughter, Fatima. They established an empire first in North Africa then in Egypt (967-1171 A.D.) to which they gave a vigorous cultural impetus. They founded a completely new Cairo alongside the old, erecting their a magnificent palace and a mosque al-Azhar, which has been a centre of the Islamic world since ever. They established libraries in the palace, and in the mosques as well. Under the 2nd Fatimid ruler al-Aziz (975-996 A.D.) the palace library had already grown very well. There were works of Philology and Lexicography. There were forty rooms filled with books. The ancient sciences, namely Hellenistic Natural Sciences and Philosophy were represented by thousands of books.

Al-Hakim b. Amr Allah (996-1021 A.D.) innovated the library institution on a large scale. He established an academy, *Dar al Ilm* or *Dar al-Hikmah*. It was the second great library after the Mamun's. Shalby records "Saturday, Jamadah 10th of 1005 A.D. was the opening day of Dar al-Ilm. Before the opening day preparations had been in progress to make this institution eclipse the fame of the Abbasid's Bait al-Hiqmah. Special attention was given to the interior of the library building. It was decorated with beautiful and costly curtains, carpets and furniture. He ordered the transeference of books from the palace library into Dar al-Hiqmah.¹⁹ Sh. Inayyat Ullah writes "almost equal in fame and importance to the academy of al-Mamun was that of the Fatimid of Egypt, who collected priceless literary treasures."²⁰

The collection contained works on different subjects, as well as a number of auto graphs. The collection of books on all subject given by the Caliph was unique.²¹ Books were also procured through transcription. There were very rare works in this library. The Quran alone accounted for 2400 illuminated copies. There was a great number of rare manuscripts written by Ibn-Muqlah and other famous calligraphers, the library also contained autographed copies of the works of the most renowned figures in Arabic literature. There were

thirty copies of the History of al-Tabari.²² Similar libraries were established by al-Hakim at various other places such as al-Fustat, old Cairo.

Destruction of Dar-al-Hiqmah : Dar-al-Hiqmah continued to exist with the fluctuating fortune. But in the troublous times of the Fatimid Cliph al-Mustansir when seven years of Famine (1066-1072 A.D.) resulted from the failure of the Nile to flood, library sustained serious losses. Turkish mercenary troops seized power from the feeble Caliph. "In the loot of 1068 A.D. a reporter witnessed twenty five camels carrying away books. Valuable manuscripts were used for lighting the fires in the homes of Turkish officers, and exquisite bindings were used to mend the shoes of their slaves.²³ They affected all the books which were not in the inner rooms of the palace. Nasir al-Dula and a Wazir were responsible for this act of plunder. Books were also stolen from the library, from the academy of science, and from other Egyptian towns also. The paper were burned, while some were thrown in the water. Al-Maqrizi writes that a number of books were Jettisoned in a great heap that the wind gradually filled up with sand so that it turned into a mound, it became known as "the book mound."

However it was not destroyed totally and in the following years it was restored and enlarged. Al-Mustansir's successors built up new collections, it was closed in the year 1119 A.D. by Wazir al-Fadal due to religious bias and political reasons. After his decline academy was re-established by his successor al-Mamun in 1123 A.D. In 1171 A.D. when Saladin came into power in Egypt, the academy and its library was in excellent condition. "The academy was under Shi influence therefore it was closed and the books were sold by auction or were given away. So they passed to the private hands."²⁴

This library also played a vital role in the flourishing of libraries in all over the Egypt. Many famous libraries were founded with madrasahs. Saladin's learned Wazir al-Qadi al-Fadil founded in Cairo, *al-Madrasa al-Fadiliya*. "He deposited 100000 volumes in its library, which he got in the auction of Dar al-Ilm's library. But after some time books were sold by the students and scattered in all

direction .²⁵

Umayyads – Spain

Another great contribution in this respect was made by al-Hakim II (961-976A.D.), the son of Abd-er-Rehman III. He was the great Sultan of Cordova, from the family of Umayyads. He is famous for his love for books. He was really a bookworm. "He was much absorbed in his studies to care about the glories of war. He used to spend more of his time in studying in his librar."²⁶ He was probably the best scholar and enthusiastic bibliophile among muslim caliphs.

Al-Hakim was keenly interested in the matter of building collection in the library. He sent his agents to the all parts of the East to buy rare manuscripts for his library. Agents were also sent to book seller's shops at Cairo, Damascus, Alexandria and Baghdad for the purchase of rare volumes. If the purchase of any particular material was not possible at any price he got it copied. Copyists and bookbinders were employed in the library. "Sometimes he would even hear of a book which was only in the author's brain, and would send him a handsome present, and beg him to send him the first copy to Cordova. By such means and efforts he gathered 400,000 books."²⁷

This was a great achievement at the time when printing was unknown, and this great collection was used by the Caliph himself and for the scholars of his time. The Caliph didn't only collect the material but he is said to have read them all, even he annotated them. His marginal notes were greatly prized by scholars of after time. Another evidence about the richness of library's collection is the statement of it's librarian, Bakiya, which is recorded by Ibn-Hazm. Bakiya told him that the library catalogue of titles and authors' names covered forty-four quires of twenty pages each.

Destruction of the Library : The general state of culture in Andalusia reached at a high level in al-Hakim's time. His son al-Hisham II was a boy of twelve when he ascended to the throne after his father. But due to certain political reasons al-Mansur became very powerful and national leader." To please the orthodox

religious-scholars, he allowed them to remove and burn those books in the library, that were distasteful to them. The books involved were works of philosophy, astronomy and so fourth, namely 'the ancient sciences' the heritage of Hellenism ."²⁸

So the library faced a heavy loss in the name of religion. Then, in 1101 A.D. in battle with Berbers the Minister Wadih sold the major part of the library to obtain money for war and the rest was despoiled by the enemy.

In Spain there was another important library of a Cordovan judge Abu-al-Mutrif, which contained mostly rare books and masterpieces of calligraphy. Six full-time copyists were employed in it. "The library was sold at auction for forty thousand dinars after Mutrif's death in 1011 A.D."²⁹ In spite of them there were more than seventy libraries in Muslim Spain.

Wealthy persons, book lovers, scholars and Wazirs followed the pattern presented by the Abbasids, Umayyads and Fatimid Caliphs. Ibn-Sawwar who was a learned man and a pattern of knowledge established a *Dar-al-Ilm* in Busra with a large library. He also set up a library in Ramhurmuz in the neighbouring region of Persia. These both were probably burned down when the Bedouins invaded the town in 1090 A.D.³⁰

However libraries continued to be established. They were a necessity to scholars and a sign of prestige in the eyes of the powerful and wealthy people. Coming rulers could not neglect their necessity. Spanish Princes who succeeded the Umayyads in 1031 A.D. also became celebrated for their libraries in Saragossa, Granada, Toledo and elsewhere.

Buwayhids – Iran

Buwayhids exercised leadership over Iran and Western Persia for over a hundred years (945-1055 A.D.). They also took in their service men having interest in books. From 940 A.D. the Buwayhid Rukn al-Dawlah hired the services of a Wazir named Ibn al-Amid, who was a celebrated scholar. He was the owner of a large library of

which the historian Miskawayh was librarian. There were thousands of books on all sciences and letters in the library.

Among the Buwayhids themselves Abud al-Dula (d . 983 A.D.) Baha al-Dula's father founded a library in Shiraz. It was also a big library. Al-Maqdasi who himself visited the library in 985 A.D. and described it as a complex of buildings surrounded by gardens with lakes and waterways. It had 360 rooms. They were furnished with carpets and had a proper ventilation system. They were all equipped with cabinets filled with books. The Samanid Prince Nuh (976-997 A.D.) in Bukhara also gathered learned men around him. One of them was the great philosopher Ibn Sina (Avicenna) who was called upon as a doctor to attend Nuh during his illness. Ibn Sina asked permission to use his library. He records that there was a multitude of books arranged by rooms, with separate room devoted to each subject. He examined the catalogues of the *ancient sciences* and came across books whose names were known to only a few people and which he never encountered anywhere else.

The library of the poet ibn Hamdan (d. 935 A.D.) in Mosul attached to the college which he founded in that city, "contained books on all branches of learning."³¹ There were also libraries in Shiraz, Marve, Mosul, Basr , Ghazna and Nishapur. Besides them there were libraries in colleges and mosques.

The library of al-Nasir-Din Allah was also of great importance. During his long reign (575-622 A.H.) he paid attention to intellectual matter also. The collection of his library was divided into three sections. Two of them formed the libraries of *Dar al-Masnah* and *al-Ribat al-Khatunui al-Saljuqi* and third section was presented to the library of *al-Nizamiyyah*. Another notable library was of al-Mustasim bi Allah. He was not an intellect but just after a year of his caliphate "he ordered a big library to be founded in his residence in 641 A.H. He appointed best scribes in his library."³²

In Muslim world mosques were not merely devoted to religious learning so many people make over their libraries to the mosques. In this way every major mosque acquired a large library that was a

public institution. Ibn Jubair a traveller of the late 12th century gave an account of the libraries in the two great mosques of Mecca and Medina: He also refers Yaqut who stayed in Marv, in Eastern Persia around 1216-1218 A.D., record in his geographical dictionary that the town contained ten wealthy libraries, two in the chief mosque and ten in the madrasahs. Madrasahs also spread in Mesopotamia and Syria under Suljuks.

During the perpetual contention that occupied the golden age of Islam power fell into the hands of a succession of different families and parties but we found among all of them an interest of books and the founding of libraries.

Destruction of Alexandrian Library: Myth and Reality: After hearing so much of early muslims' love for books and contribution in the establishment of libraries one may ask about the library of Alexandria which the Arabs are said to have burned by command of the Caliph Umar when they conquered Egypt. It is said that for six months the numerous bath-furnaces of the city were fed with the volumes of the library. Hitti writes "this story is one of those tales that make good fiction but bad story."³³ The great Ptolemaic library was burnt as early as 48 B.C. by Julius Caesar. A later one referred to as the *Daughter Library* was destroyed about 389 A.D. as a result of an edict by the Emperor Theodosius. Therefore no library of importance existed in Alexandria and no contemporary writer ever brought charge against Hazrat Umar.

Abd al-Latif a physician of Baghdad (d . 1231 A.D.) visited Egypt and later wrote a description of the country. He seems to have been the first to relate the tale about six hundred years after the Arab conquest of Alexandria. Why and on what authority he did it is not known. It may be that he relied upon the folk memory and local tradition of the destruction of the library in ancient times, which was very likely confused as to the real authors of the incident.

The first oriental author to relate the tale is Abu' l-Faraj Ibn al-Ibri also known as Barhebraeus (1226-86 A.D.) a christian writer

who gave it in its current form in the Arabic version of his Universal History entitled *Mukhtasar Tarikh ad-Duwal*. It was through the publication and Latin translation of this history at Oxford in 1663 A.D. that the tale came to the knowledge of Europe and was eagerly followed by later Western writers. It gained a wide publicity and was given as a well ascertained historical fact. Edward Gibbon, the well known English historian and author of *Decline and Fall* (d . 1794 A.D.) was the first notable writer who refused to give credence to the tale and held it to be insufficiently substantiated by evidence and extremely improbable for other reasons.³⁴ Since the Gibbon many historians such as Draper, Krechl, Le Bon, Butler, Caetani and other have shown in their own way the unhistorical character of the tale and relegated it to the scrap-heap of legends.

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