

## Contribution of the Asiatic Society of Bengal to Arabic Studies

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### ABSTRACT

The Asiatic Society of Bengal is an Institution of National importance which was established by Sir William Jones in 1784 at Calcutta. Its main aim was to promote the study of Asian Studies with special reference to the man and nature within the geographical limits of Asia. It had contributed in various fields of studies. Rare books and manuscripts of Arabic language were collected for its library. It had also given special attention to the publication of Arabic text as well as to the translation of rare books of Arabic language. The contribution of The Asiatic Society of Bengal in publishing the valuable rare books on Arabic which was about to sink into oblivion is really praiseworthy.

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The Asiatic Society of Bengal is an Institution of National Importance declared by an act of Parliament.<sup>1</sup> It was established in January, 1784 at Calcutta. Its main aim "was to promote the study of Asian Studies with special reference to the man and nature within the geographical limits of Asia".<sup>2</sup> The Society which is regarded as a parent of all other Asiatic Societies in the world was an orphan in the beginning with no funds and no permanent address.

The founder of the Asiatic Society of Bengal was Sir William Jones who came to India in 1783 as a puisne Judge<sup>3</sup> of the Old Supreme Court. After getting acquainted with some of the classics of India, he became very much enthusiastic towards Oriental Studies and felt the need of an organized association for promoting Oriental Studies. With this idea in mind, he prepared a memorandum in detail. He was not the first Orientalist to arrive in India. Before him Charles Wilkings in 1770, Nathaniel Brassey Halhed in 1772 and Jonathan Duncan in 1772 had also come to India. He was the first European scholar to look East without a western bias. He realized that the history of mankind could not be written without knowing the history and culture of the East.

The Asiatic Society had made a remarkable contribution in all fields of Studies. But these contributions are not well known to the scholars as it should have been. Rare books and manuscripts of Arabic language were collected for its library. Special attention was paid to the publication of Arabic text as well as to the translation of rare books of Arabic language. The first book of Arabic language which was published in 1854 is *Ash-shamsyyah fil Qawaid al-Mantiqiya* of Najm-al Din Ali bin Umar al-Katibi al-Qazvini, commonly called *Dabiran*. He was a pupil of Nasir al-din at Tusi and was well known for his special merits in philosophy and logic. It was published by the society under the title of *ArRisalah Ash Shamsyyah* along with its English translation by A. Sprenger. It was printed by F. Carbery at the Bengal Military Orphan Press of Calcutta in 1854.

"*ArRisalah Ash Shamsyyah* having, during six hundred years, been the principle text book on logic in all Mohammedan schools, appeared to have the best claims to represent the Logic of the

Mussalmans".<sup>1</sup> It was dedicated to Wazir Shams ad-din Muhammad al-Juwaini (d. 1282 A.D) and consequently it was named *Ash-Shamsiya*. It is divided into a *Muqaddima*, three *Maqalas* and a *Khatima*. Its author was a philosopher and a logician of Shafii School and his *Ash-Shamsiya* is a celebrated treatise on logic. He is also the author of several other works and died according to some in 672 A.H./ 1276 A.D. and according to others in 693 A.H./1294 A.D.<sup>2</sup> The date of his death is recorded in the printed edition as Friday, the 3rd Rajab 675 (11 December 1272).<sup>3</sup> Whereas it is 657 A.H./1276 A.D. in the Encyclopedia of Islam.<sup>4</sup> Its English translation is literal but the "Technical terms of the Arabic language have been rendered by such English words as appeared to the translator by etymology and usage to express most nearly their meaning, and the same representative is used in the translation throughout for the same term of the original".<sup>5</sup>

It is also to be noted that Revd. W. Kay who was then the Principal of Bishop's College had revised the translation rendered into English by Sprenger but Muhammad Wajih and Abdul Haq had corrected the greater part of the original Arabic text which was also edited by Sprenger. Its printed edition consists of five chapters. The first is Introduction and the last is Conclusion. Remaining three is called Books (*Babs*) which are divided into various sections.

The *Futuh Al-Sham* of Abu Ismail Mohammad bin Abd Allah al-Azdi al-Bacri gives an earliest account of the Muslim conquest of Syria. It was edited with a few notes by W.N. Lees and was printed in 1854 by J. Thomas at the Baptist Mission Press of Calcutta. It is very important and reliable work. Its edited text is based on a very valuable manuscript which was found by Dr. Sprenger in 1850 at Delhi. The condition of the manuscript was very bad. It was very old as well as worm-eaten especially the first quarter. The editor tried his best to copy the work as complete as lay in his power. Professor Kabir al-Din Ahmad (Mawlavi) of Fort William College also helped him to decipher the worm-eaten passages. According to the editor, the manuscript was more than 600 years old, and was transcribed by Abu Tahir Ahmad bin Muhammad of Isfahan who was one of the pupils of Al-Hafiz al-Salafi. The editor had added vowel points to the texts very

carefully. It is one of the most valuable works of Arabic history that had ever been published.<sup>6</sup> Author's Isnads are arranged alphabetically which are also very valuable. The editor had endeavored simply to compress his materials and had aimed, only, "at giving the reader what the text contains in precisely the same order, and, when possible, in almost the same words".<sup>7</sup>

The *Kitab al Maghazi* of Abu Abdullah Muhammad bin Umar al-Waqidi is the history of the campaigns of the Prophet of Allah. It was edited by Alferd Von Kremer who was Austrian Consulate General at Alexandria but was printed by J. Thomas at the Baptist Mission Press and was published by the Asiatic Society in 1856.

Abu Abdullah Muhammad bin Umar al-Waqidi was born at Medina in 130 A.H. He professed the Shia doctrine. From Medina he migrated to Baghdad and obtained the post of Qazi. He was very keen to collect books for his personal library and his two slaves were asked to copy manuscripts continuously. He himself is the author of thirty-two works.<sup>8</sup> He died at Baghdad at the age of seventy-seven. Alferd Von Kremer had discovered one original manuscript of *Kitab al Maghazi* at Damascus in 1851 which was considered unique because the existence of no other copy was known at that time.<sup>9</sup> He edited the work which was published by Asiatic Society.

The author of *Kitab al Maghazi* has quoted the names of Umar ibnUthman, Muhammad ibn Moslem az-Zohri, Ibn Muhammad ObaylbnKab, IbnHazm, Hunaif-al-Ansari, AbiZinad, Abu Mashar-ad-Darimy, Abd-al-Hamid-IbnAbi-Abs and several others as his authorities.

The Asiatic Society has also published a very famous and well-known work on the Quran in general entitled *Al-Itqan fi ulumulQuran* which was completed on 13th Shawwal 878. The original author of this work is Jalal ud-Din Suyuti.<sup>10</sup> It was edited by Said ud-Din Khan and Baseerud-Din and was printed by J. Thomas at the Baptist Mission Press of Calcutta in 1857 containing 959 pages.

Maulawi Muhammad Alabin Ali al-Thawi had compiled A Dictionary of The Technical Terms used in the Sciences of the Musalmans under the title of *KashshafIstilahat al-Funun*. It was edited by Mohammad Wajih along with Abdul Haqq and GholamQadir. This edition was completed under the superintendence of Dr. Aloys Sprenger and W. Nassau Lees and was published by the Asiatic Society of Bengal in two parts. Both parts were printed at W.N. Lees Press of Calcutta in 1862 by the Asiatic Society of Bengal. The author of the book had discussed various branches of sciences in its introduction. Its main part is that portion which explains the technical terms used in various sciences by the Muslims in alphabetical orders but section wise.

Another *Futuh al-Sham* but which is ascribed to Abu Abdullah Muhammad bin Umar al-Waqidi (130-207 A.H./747 - 823 A.D.) was also published by the Society. It is a legendary history of the Arab conquest of Syria. It was edited by W. Nassau Lees and was printed in 1858-62 at Calcutta.

W. Nassau Lees had also edited the Arabic texts of

*Nokhbat al-Fikr* and *Nozhat al-Nazr* of Hafiz Shahab-al-Din Ahmad IbnHajar al-Asqalani along with Abd al-Haqq and GholamQadir for the Society which was printed in 1862 at the College Press of Calcutta.

The *Tarikh-ul-Khulafa* is a history of the Caliphs beginning with the first orthodox Caliph Hazrat Abu Bakr to the accession of MustamsikBillah in 903 A.H./1497 A.D. It is written by Jalal-ud-Din Suyuti. It was translated into English by Major H.S. Jarrett which was published in 1881 by the Asiatic Society but was printed by J.W. Thomas at Baptist Mission Press of Calcutta. It is also to be noted that its original Arabic text was edited by W.N. Lees and MaulawiAbd-al-Haq which was published in 1856 A.D. at Calcutta. It was also lithographed in 1870 A.D. at Lahore and was also printed at Cairo in 1305 A.H. /1913 A.D. and in 1914 at Delhi.

Suyuti was an eminent scholar of his time. He was born on 1st Rajab 849/3rd October 1445 at Cairo and died on 18th June /17th October 1505. It is said that he is author of more than 561 works dealing with tafsir, hadith, fiqh, philology, history, logic, philosophy etc. He was very laborious and learned the Quran by heart even in his childhood. At the age of fourteen or sixteen, he left his hometown and visited various places where he studied under renowned teachers all the branches of Islamic Studies. In 869 A.H./1464 A.D., he went on pilgrimage to Mecca. On his return, he was appointed the professor of fiqh in the Madrasa of Shaikhuniya at Cairo. He had also delivered a series of lectures in the Ahmad b. Tulan mosque. He was also appointed Professor of hadith in the Shaikhunia. He also got the professorship at Baibarsiya.

The present translation of the *Tarikh-u1-Khulafa* is mainly based on the Arabic text which is preserved in the form of manuscript in the Library of the Asiatic Society. The translator had also collated the Arabic text with other two manuscript copies which belonged to Maulawi Muhammad Wajih of the Calcutta Madrasah and MaulawiAbdusShukur of Jounpur respectively. It gives a detailed account of Khulfa-i-Rashidun, Ummayyad and Abbasid caliphs including a chart showing the dates of their accession, deposal of abdication, death. Its translator has given an index of the proper names as well as an introduction which is printed in 21 pages.

*Al-Isaba fi Tamiz as-Sihaba* of ibnHajar al-Asqalani is one of the well-known and most important Arabic books on history as well as a reference book for the Muslim theologian. It deals with the biographies of the companions of the Prophet of Allah. The work is divided into four volumes. Its first volume contains an introduction and begins with the life of Abi-I-lahm, al Ghifari and ends with the life of ar-Rais bin Amir bin Husain al Tai. The second volume begins with the life of az-Zari bin Amir and finishes with the life of Amir binTalq bin Zaid. Its third volume begins with the life of Amr bin al-As and ends with Yunusal-Ansari az-Zafari. The fourth volume commences with the life of Abu Umayyatal-Fazari and ends with that of Abu Yazid bin Abi Maryam. The first volume was edited by Mawlawies Mohammad Wajyh, Abd al Haqq and GholamQadir and Dr. A. Sprenger and printed by T.J. Marthur at the Baptist Mission Press of Calcutta in 1856. The preface of the first volume is written by A. Sprenger in English. Its second

volume was edited by Abdul Hay and printed at the Guide Press of Calcutta in 1893. The third volume of *Al-Isaba* was edited by Maulawi Abdul Hay which was published by the Asiatic Society of Bengal but was printed by G.H. Rouse at the Baptist Mission Press of Calcutta in 1888. The volume four was edited by Maulawi Abdul Hay which was published in 1873 by the Asiatic Society of Bengal and printed at the Mazharool Ujayeb Press of Calcutta.

The *Ahsanu-T-Taqasim fi Ma'rifati-l Aqalim* is an Arabic work of Al-Muqaddasi whose full name was Abu Abdullah Muhammad bin Ahmad. Al-Muqaddasi was born in Jerusalem. He travelled extensively and visited every part of the Muslim world except India and Spain. He had collected data from all parts of the Muslim world but his work is mainly based on his travels and personal observations which are presented in a coherent form for the proper understanding of life, manners and needs of peoples. He had also consulted the geographical works of Ibn Khurdazbih, al-Jaihani, al-Balkhi and al-Hamadani. He had also prepared maps which are very close to the maps of al-Istakhari. He had divided the Muslim world into fourteen divisions and had prepared separate maps for each division. He had used red colour for routes, yellow for sands, green for seas, blue for rivers and drab for mountains in his maps.

According to *al-Muqaddasi*, "The earth is nearly spherical in shape. It lies within the vault of heaven, as the yolk within the egg; and the air, which is all around the earth, attracts it on every side towards the heavens. The reason why living beings retain their stability on the face of the earth is that the air attracts all the light particles of matter in their bodies and the earth the dense particles; for the earth is analogous to the loadstone which attracts iron. An example is given in illustration of the physical facts in connection with the heavens: it is that of a turner revolving a hollow body with a walnut placed inside it; the point of the illustration being that when the hollow body revolves, the walnut stands motionless in the middle".<sup>11</sup> He had given distinctive features of different provinces, their climates and statistical account. Its original Arabic Text was edited and translated into English by G.S.A. Ranking and R.F. Azoo which was published by Asiatic Society of Bengal in 1897-1910 A.D. (Vol-1 FASC I published in 1897, Vol-1 FASC II in 1899, Vol-1 FASC III in 1901, Vol-1 FASC IV in 1910) with useful notes.

*Marhamu'l-Ilali'L-Mudilaof* Al-Imam Abu Muhammad Abdullah bin Asad Al-Yafii was edited by E. Denison Ross which was printed in the forms of fasciculus. Its first fascicule was printed in 1910 A.D. at the Baptist Mission Press of Calcutta. This edition is based only on one manuscript which was preserved in the Asiatic Society of Bengal. It was written in scholarly hand but some pages were damaged by worm and few folios were missing. Entire manuscript comprises 222 folios but only one fascicule was printed which covers 45 folios. The main aim and the scope of this work of Yafii are well summed up in the full Arabic title which is written on the second page of the manuscript which may be translated as follows:

"The Book of the Salve of Baffling Maladies, for the

removal of doubts and the refutation of the Mutazila, by means of detailed proofs and demonstrations, bearing the *imprimatur* of the tenets of the people of the most excellent Sunna; containing also an account of the Seventy-two various Sects opposed to the Sunna and the Heretics".<sup>12</sup> Its author who is known as Imam Yafii was born in Yemen in A.H. 698 (A.D. 1298) but was brought up in Aden. His teacher was Shaikh Masud al-Hawi but under the spiritual guidance of al-Yamani ash-Shafii at Tawashi he was invested with the Khirqah (or robe) of the Sufis. He was follower of the doctrine of the Qadiriyya Sect and founded the Yafiiyya branch of this sect.<sup>13</sup> He was settled at Mecca in the year of A.H. 718 (A.D. 1318) and studied law. He had also attended the lecture of Jamal ud-Din Abu Abdullah Muhammad bin Ahmed adh-Zahabi ash-Shafii. He also visited Jerusalem, Damascus and Cairo. He died in A.H. 768/A.D. 1367 in Mecca. He was buried near the tomb of the Fadail Ayyad, a great sufi saint, in Mazar ul-Malat.<sup>14</sup>

*Tusy's List of Shy'ah Books and 'Alam al-Hoda's*, Notes on Shy'ah Biography of Muhammad b. al Hasan Tusy was edited by A. Sprenger and Maulawi Abdul Haqq and was published by the Asiatic Society in 1853-55. The Shy'ah have four celebrated works on their own bibliography. The earliest one is that of Tusy. The author Muhammad b. al Hasan died in A.H. 460. This book superseded all earlier works of the kind, such as that of Ibn Nohayk, of Ahmad b. al Hosayn, of Ahmad b. Muhammad. Tusy's Fihrist therefore attained even among the Sunnies to a greater celebrity than any other.<sup>15</sup>

According to A. Sprenger "There is no work on Shy'ah bibliography of greater authority than the Fihrist of Tusy or as the Shy'ahs call him, of the Shaykh; and therefore on the whole, it is but right that it should be first published".<sup>16</sup>

Alam al-Hoda a son of the celebrated Mohsin Kashany wrote on Shy'ah biography. The editor A. Sprenger remarks in preface that "It appeared to me that the Fihrist of Tusy would be incomplete unless this title work was added, and we therefore ventured to print it at the bottom of the page though we have only one copy".<sup>17</sup>

*Kitab Faridatu'l'Asr fi Jadawil-i-Yatimatud Dahrof* Maulawi Abu Musa Ahmadul Haqq of Dacca was published in Arabic by the Asiatic Society of Bengal in 1915 A.D. and was printed at the Baptist Mission Press of Calcutta. It is a complete index of Persons, Places, Books etc. mentioned in the famous anthology of contemporary poets entitled *Yatimatud-Dahr fi Mahasin Ahl al-Asr of Tha'alibi Nayasaburi* (A.H. 961 -1038) which was published in four volumes at Damascus in A.H. 1302. The author of the *Faridatu'l'Asr* has divided his work into various sections. The printed edition consists of 18+26+772 pages. Its errata is printed after introduction but the main book is divided into four sections which includes important poets, places, countries, tribes, nations, sects, forts, buildings, mountains, air, water as well as scholars which are arranged alphabetically.

The contribution of The Asiatic Society of Bengal in publishing the valuable rare books on Arabic which was about to sink into oblivion is really praiseworthy. Hope that the society will publish many more such books in this field of knowledge.

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