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## **The Asiatic Society and its Role in Collection and Publishing of Arabic Manuscripts**

**Taslim Ahmad**

*Assistant Professor, Malda College and Research Scholar, University Of Gour Banga*

### **ABSTRACT:**

*Kolkata has always been a great hub of education for ages, not only in West Bengal but in the entire country. The history of Kolkata is reflected by its rich heritage sites as obviously. It was also the birthplace of modern Indian literary and artistic thoughts. Many institutions have emerged in this Kolkata city. Among the various Institutes that arose in Kolkata is "Kolkata Asiatic Society". It was established on 15 January, 1784 by the efforts of Sir William Jhones. He was a famous orientalist, poet and a judge of the Supreme Court at Kolkata. He studied several European languages, knew several Asiatic languages, and had a great curiosity about Asiatic civilizations. The aims of this society are research in history, antiquities, civilization, nature, arts, science and Asian literature. The manuscripts preserved in the Asiatic Society are of special importance because of their antiquity and richness. The manuscript collection has four sections. One of them is Perso-Arabic Section. The Perso-Arabic and Urdu collection of the Asiatic Society is one the best in the country. Some of the manuscripts, it may be recalled, belonged to the Mughal Imperial Library, Tipu Sultan's Library and the Library of the Fort William College. Some of them are indeed very rare, rich and varied in their textual contents and contain beautiful specimens of calligraphy.*

**KEYWORDS:** Asiatic Society, William Jhones, Kolkata, manuscript, Literature, Persian, orientalist,

The city of Kolkata witnessed many institutes that played an effective role in promoting the Arabic language in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. These institutes have collected valuable books, rare manuscripts, newspapers and magazines in different languages from the country and abroad and preserved the heritage of different cultures and civilizations and presented them from generation to generation. It helped to advance culturally, artistically, cognitively and opened up to students' wide fields of knowledge outside the classroom and the text book. The doors of these institutes were opened for those students who love study and reading. All facilities of the study were provided to them. Some institutes have organized accommodation facilities for male and female researchers. Others prepared private housing for the researchers and provided them food at the cheapest possible price. Such as the National Library has established a special housing for researchers who visit it from outside the city and need to stay overnight. In this situation students can have lunch or dinner for less than 20 rupees, even in the year of 2018. They can take tea at only one Indian rupee. Its door was opened throughout the year, except for the national holiday. In addition, the library of Jay Krishna in Ittar Para announced the award of Golden Medal for those who read all the books in library. It was to encourage the students and craft them to study and book reading. Some institutes have been publishing Arabic books for a long time and carry out various cultural activities. Thus, these institutes tried to develop the Arabic language in this city.

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### **Establishment of the Asiatic Society:**

The Asiatic Society was founded about 239 years ago in 1784, by Sir William Jones, the intelligent orientation, famous poet, Philologist and puisne-judge of the Supreme Court at Kolkata, the capital of India and currently the capital of West Bengal. “He was a renowned scholar who knew several languages, and who had an abiding interest in the cultivation of knowledge of Asiatic civilizations”<sup>i</sup>. He imagined a wondrous depiction of the scientific centre which would be repertoire of written works of every subject and art which spread throughout Asia<sup>ii</sup>.

His first production in the field of oriental studies was his book “Grammar of the Persian Language” which was published in 1771. It was considered a notable linguistics study. In the following year published “Poem, consisting from the Asiatic Languages”. He translated into mellifluous English the pre-Islamic Arabic odes called Muallaqat (1782) which gave a lucid description of Beduin life and aesthetic taste before the advent of Hazrat Muhammad (PBUH). He published an English translation of “ A brief on inheritance” according the Shafi’I school of thought, under the title “ Buggyatul Baahith an Jumalil Mawareeth”. He continued his studies of inheritance in Islamic law. Then he published in 1792 a famous text on this subject which is “Al- Faraid Al- Sirajiah” written by Abu Taher bin Abdur Rashid, who belongs a Hanafi Schools of jurisprudence. He also published the Arabic text with English translation and some necessary explanatory notes. He died in Kolkata on April 27, 1794. Dr. R.C. Majumdar, the doyen among Indian had admitted elsewhere that the high ideal of Sir William Jones “ was realized beyond expectation by the publication of learned articles and treatises on the history and antiquities, arts, sciences, and literature of Asia”<sup>iii</sup>.

At the first meeting, Governor- General Warren Hastings was elected as Society’s observer and William Jones as its President. Jones said in his speech delivered in 1786 as President of Royal Bengal Asiatic Society: “The aims of this society is research in history, antiquites, civilization, nature, arts, science and Asian literature”<sup>iv</sup>. Memorandum of Articles of Society read as follow: “The bounds of its investigations will be the geographical limits of Asia and within these limits its enquiries will be extended to whatever is performed by MAN or produced by NATURE”<sup>v</sup>.

Despite all his best efforts, William Jones could not even buy a plot of land where he would embody his Asian dream. Within a short time, the association was considered the first institute and the best of its kind in the whole world, but it did not have any permanent address. It has no fixed place to hold its weekly or monthly sessions. Most worried thing was the lack of money and the fund. The activities of the association were established in the country and abroad, but it remained unstable in the first two decades, even it was not possible to hold weekly and monthly hearings according to the original plan. When Sir William Jones died in 1794, the association was an orphan, a tent without roof and funds. The association was moving from place to place and did not have a stable place<sup>vi</sup>.

After long negotiations, the English Government gave a plot of land in 1805 at the corner of Park Street and Chowringhee- the present site of the Asiatic Society. The separate building of the association was established on this piece of land in 1808. Then the valuable books, papers and records of documents that had been accumulating over the years, got permanent shelter. Over the years, the activities of the association increased and there was a feeling of lack of space, but there was no solution even after the independence of India. At the end of 1961,

with the generosity of the Central Indian Government and the Government of West Bengal, the construction of a new four-storey building began at the headquarters of the association to find solutions of the space. Then it was inaugurated by the then Indian President Dr. Radha Krishnan on 22nd February 1965.

The name of Asiatic Society had been changed several times since its founding in 1784 until 1951. This is like “The Asiatic Society” between 1784-1825, and “The Asiatic Society” between 1825-1832, and renamed “The Asiatic Society of Bengal” between 1832-1935, and “The Royal Asiatic Society of Bengal” between 1936-1951. And finally, it was changed as “The Asiatic Society” in 1951, this name is known these days<sup>vii</sup>.

### **A Brief History of the collection of Ancient Books and rare Manuscripts in the Asiatic Society-**

In the beginning the collection of rare books and manuscripts depended on gifts from members of the Asiatic Society. In 1803, Henry Colebrook transformed a section of the Fort William College to the Society. But the first important collection was a gift from the Sripattan Committee in 1806. The collection consisted of many ancient and rare works, including a large number of beautiful manuscripts of the Holy Quran. The Asiatic Society received a valuable collection of books and manuscripts from time to time from Fort William College, and upon closing the college in 1846 the Asiatic Society received 2742 Volumes including 1418 in Persian, 1013 in Arabic and 311 in Urdu<sup>viii</sup>. The regular search for manuscripts, particularly Sanskrit manuscripts, began in 1868 under government order and quite a large number of manuscripts were collected.

After receiving the financial assistance of Government in 1905, the Society began to purchase Arabic and Persian manuscripts of useful volume from various parts of India. At a later time the Society bought a large number of Arabic manuscripts from Arabic book sellers. Thus the number of Arabic, Persian and Urdu manuscripts swelled to more than 6000. The Perso-Arabic and Urdu collection of the Asiatic Society is one of the best in the country. They number several thousands and some are as old as the first quarter of the 12<sup>th</sup> century A.D. Some of the manuscripts, it may be recalled, belonged to the Mughal Imperial Library. Tipu Sultan's Library and the Library of the Fort William College, Calcutta. Some of them are indeed very rare, rich and varied in their textual contents and contain beautiful specimens of calligraphy. Some of the manuscripts have exquisite miniature illustrations<sup>ix</sup>.

At present the library has a collection of about 117000 books, 293 maps, microfilm 387003 pages, 182 plate, 2500 pamphlets and 2150 photographs. The library contains a rich collection of 47000 manuscripts. The most important of them are an illustrated manuscript of the Holy Quran, a manuscript of Gulistan text, and a manuscript of the Badsha Nama that bears the signature of Emperor Shah Jahan.

### **Index of Arabic printed books:**

We have understood from the previous paragraph that the Society has started collecting Arabic books since its inception. The Society issued first catalogue of Arabic books and manuscripts in 1899. Then the Society issued an update catalogue for printed books in 1904. After that, the Society felt the need to prepare a complete catalogue of printed books, but

there was not able to prepare it because of the lack of the fund and the budget and the member of the Society approved the draft of the index preparation on the fourth of July 1957. In the same year the work began and these names are chosen for this work:

- 1- Moulovi Mutiur Rahman (Librarian of the Society)
- 2- Professor Abu Mahfooz Al- Karim Al- Masumi
- 3- Professor Keshori Mohan Mitra

### **Some printed Arabic Books in the Society**

#### **Literature books:**

1- Alif Laila Wa Laila (One thousand and One Night) by Ahmad bin Muhammad Al Yamni Al- Shirwani, 2- Maqamat Badiuz Zaman Al Hamadani by Ahmad bin Hosain bin Yahya Al Hamadani, 3- Al Iqdul Fareed by Ibn Abd Rabbehi Al Undolusi, 4- Kitabus Sher was Shoara ( The book of Poems and Poetry) by Ibn Qutaiba. 5- kalila wa Dimna by Abullah Ibn Al Muqaffa.

#### **Diwan (Anthology of poems)**

Diwan of Abul Ala, 2- Diwan of Hassan bin Thabit, 3- Diwan of Abeed bin Abras, 4- Dewan of Al A'sha

#### **Books in History:**

1- Dikr Ahbaril Asfahaan (Remembrance of the news of Isfahaan) by Ahmad bin Abdullah Al Asfahani, 2- Aja'ebel Maqdur fi Akhbar Taimur ( The wonders of the ability in the news of Taimur), 3- Kitab Al Agaani ( The book of songs), 4- Futuhul Buldaan ( Conquest of the coutry) by Balazuri, 5- Tarikhud Dual Al- Islamiah bil Garab ( The history of Islamic countries in the West) by Ibn Khaldun.

#### **Hadeeth Books:**

1- Musnaad Abi Daud by Abu Daud, 2- Taqreeb Al- Tahzeeb, 3- Tahzeebub Tahzeeb, 4- Kitab Al- Jame' Al-Bokhari by Muhammad bin Ismai'l Al Bokhari, 5- Jame Al- Tirmizi by Abu Eesa Muhammad bin Eesa.

#### **Descriptive index of Arabic Manuscripts in the Society:**

The Society started collecting Arabic and Persian manuscripts since its inception. When the number of manuscripts increased, there was a need to prepare an index. The first person who took responsibility was Mr.W.Lvanow, and Moulovi Hedayat Hosain investigated and reviewed it. The first volume of the Descriptive Catalogue of Arabic manuscripts was printed at the Society in 1939. The Society hoped that Moulovi Hedayat Hosain would prepare the second volume of the descriptive catalogue of Arabic manuscripts in 1939, but Hedayat Hosain died in November 1939 and he could not complete it, rather prepared 80 pages of the catalogue before he died.

Then the Society appointed Professor Muhammad Mahfoozul Haque to complete the remaining work, he continued this work and prepared 64 pages from 81-144 until his death in 1947, but he could not accomplish this. Then the Society entrusted the lecturer of Persian and

Arabic at the University of Kolkata Muhammad Ishaq to accomplish this work. The lecturer worked from 145 pages to 233 from the second volume of the index of Arabic Manuscripts, and with it the work of preparing the index ended. The name of the index is “Descriptive Catalogue of Arabic Manuscripts”<sup>x</sup>, it was published in two volumes in 1949.

### **Catalogue of Arabic Manuscripts in Tabular Form**

The descriptive index of the Arabic manuscripts was not comprehensive because the names of many Arabic manuscripts were not recorded, so there was a need to prepare the entire catalogue. The Society decided to prepare complete index in the Tabular Form<sup>xi</sup>.

K.M.Maitra was selected for preparing the catalogue of manuscripts in the Asiatic Society in 1949 as Tabular Form. He started work and prepared some of the index, but he could not complete this work before his retirement in 1961 and died in 1968, and the index remains incomplete. In the same year, the Society contacted Dr. M.S.Khan and requested to complete the remaining work. The Dr. accepted this offer and made the catalogue that was counting K.M.Maitra and prepared the catalogue of Arabic manuscripts in volumes. It was published by the Society in August 1980. The first volume contains various subjects and the second volume contains the authors manuscript (handwritten by the authors).

### **Here I present some of the rare and unique Arabic manuscripts that I found in the Society:**

1- **Kitabatul Mutahfaz Fillugah:** (The adequacy of the conservative in the language) written by Ishaq Ibrahim son of Ismail son of Ahmad son of Abdullah. He was a prominent Libyan scholar and linguist. His fields of expertise covered Islamic jurisprudence, Kalam, Arabic language and astronomy. He lived all his life in Tripoli and died in 1077 and buried there<sup>xii</sup>. Some books of him:

Kifayatul Mutahfaz wa Gayatul Mutalfaz (The Learner’s Adequacy and the Speaker’s Aspiration)

Al Aruz Al- Kabir (The Greater Prosody)

Al Ajmanah wal Anwa (Times and the Climate)<sup>xiii</sup>

The author has divided this manuscript into about 40 chapters to explain the names and their attributes, and there are several columns for each chapter. The details of the chapters with some examples are as follows:

1<sup>st</sup> Chapter about the praiseworthy qualities of men, 2<sup>nd</sup> chapter about the praiseworthy qualities of women, 3<sup>rd</sup> chapter about the love and which is described in this regard, 4<sup>th</sup> chapter about the stage of human life, 5<sup>th</sup> chapter about the stage of woman’s life, 6<sup>th</sup> chapter about the Jewellery, 7<sup>th</sup> chapter about the camels, 8<sup>th</sup> chapter about the horses, 9<sup>th</sup> chapter about the weapons and 10<sup>th</sup> chapter about the arrows.

This manuscript has 55 pages, each page has about 21 lines and each line has 11/14 words. It is a good readable copy and it is written in two colours: black and red, and perhaps some important things have been written in the footnotes<sup>xiv</sup>.



2- **Kifayat al-Ma’ani Fi Huruf Al- Ma’ani** (The adequacy of the meanings in the letters of the meanings) written by Abdullah bin Muhammad Al- Kurdi Al- Baitushi. He born at Baitush in Iran. Then migrated to Baghdad and died at Ihsa. He wrote several books, such as “ Hashia Ala Sharhi al Fakehi of Qatar bin Hesham. His famous poem book on Arabic grammar is “Kefayatul Ma’ani”.

The author has expressed the meaning of each letter in this book by the form of poetry. Such as he cleared the meaning of "إ" that it is used for interrogation and for the near call, and the rules for deleting the Hamza before "أ", perhaps the Hamza is used for swearing and other meanings.

The book includes an introduction, five chapters and a conclusion. In the introduction the author mentioned his eagerness about to write a book in this contain. He also mentioned that he presented this book as a gift to Shaikh Ahmad Al Ahsai. At the end of this book, he mentioned that the total number of verses is 673 and the date of its composition is 1191Hijri, and the name of the city where it was composed is “al- Ahsa”<sup>xv</sup>.

This manuscript is in 26 pages and its scale is 11×16.5 in the script, and each page has about 25 to 32 lines, and each line has about 10/13 words. It is a good copy that can be read. The earthworm ate some places, this manuscript is in black colour, some important things are probably written in the footnotes.

3- **Dasturul Logah al Arabia: (The constitution of the Arabic Language)** I found this manuscript under the title of “ Durusul Logah al Arabic” written by Abu Abdillah Hosain bin Ibrahim al Aspahani, with the acquisition No.11 and the serial No. 98 in Catalogue of Arabic Manuscripts in Tabular Form. This manuscript has 650 pages and each page has about 10/14 words. It is a good copy that can be read. It is affected by water, and there is a water mark on it. The earthworm ate some places, specially the first three pages and the last five pages. The writing has two colours: black and red. The original phrase is in the black, and when it is transferred from one thing to another, then used red colour. For example, to indicate a derivative verb used red colour. He wrote some important things in the footnotes. Composed it in 820H/1417AD.

The author Abu Abdullah Hosain bin Ibrahim wrote several books on Arabic language and literature<sup>xvi</sup>.

4- **Kitabul waqf wal Ibteda (The book of ending and beginning):** this book is written on Quranic recitation by Abu Abdullah Muhammad bin Taifoor al Ghaznawi. The author born in 560 H/ 1165AD. He was a great Imam, researcher, reciter and grammarian. He has written several books, like “ at Tafseer”, “ Al Idhaah fil Waqf wal Ibteda”, “Elalul Qeraat”, “ Gharayebul Qura’n”<sup>xvii</sup>.

The author mentioned in this manuscript the rules of ending and beginning of every verse. He selected all Surah of the holly Quran, from the Sura al Fatiha to Sura al Naas, then putted the indications of ending and beginning. Somewhere he described the grammatical, resody and prosodical views.

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## ENDNOTES:-

- <sup>i</sup> -Time past and time present, 2014, p. xv
- <sup>ii</sup> - Encyclopaedia of Orientalists: Dr. Abdur Rahman Al Badawi, Beirut, 1993, p. 18
- <sup>iii</sup> - Indo-Asian Culture, Indian Council for Cultural Relations, New Delhi, April 1961, pp.452-453
- <sup>iv</sup> - Islamic Studies in Bengal: B.R. Sir, PhD thesis, p-16
- <sup>v</sup> - The Memorandum of Article of Society read as follows: "The bounds of its investigations will be the geographical limits of Asia, and within these limits its enquiries will be extended to whatever is performed by MAN or produced be NSTURE." [Http://www.indev.nic.in/asiatic/History/index.htm](http://www.indev.nic.in/asiatic/History/index.htm)
- <sup>vi</sup> - Ibid
- <sup>vii</sup> - History of the Asiatic Society: <http://www.indev.nic.in/Asiatic/History/index>
- <sup>viii</sup> - Bicentenary Souvenir, The Asiatic Society ( Calcutta, 1984)
- <sup>ix</sup> - Time past and time present, 2014, p.39

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- <sup>x</sup> - Preface of the Catalogue of Arabic Manuscripts, Voll-II, 1949, Bepstist Mission Press
- <sup>xi</sup> - Catalogue of Arabic Manuscripts in Tabular Form, Kolkata: Asiatic Society in Bengal, 1980
- <sup>xii</sup> - Al A'lam: Khairuddin Al Zarkali, p.1/31
- <sup>xiii</sup> -Tabaqat Ulama Africa: Abu Arab Muhammad bin Ahmad, p.102, Lebanon,
- <sup>xiv</sup> - Manuscript of the book Kitab Al Muthafaz fil Logah,
- <sup>xv</sup> - The manuscript of the book “ Kefayatul Maani Fi Hurufil Maani” . p-55
- <sup>xvi</sup> - Al Zarkali, Khairuddin, Al A'lam, Part 2, p-229
- <sup>xvii</sup> - Al Zarkali, Khairuddin, Al A'lam, Part 6, p-187
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